Lorraine Hansberry dedicates her second play *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* to the committed everywhere. In doing so, she expresses her conception of the purpose of art. From the play it is evident that commitment does not mean for her what it meant for Brecht or even Rice and Odets. It does not also mean strong alignment with sectional interests which undermines the drama of LeRoi Jones. The commitment of which Hansberry speaks is to hope rather than despair and to human potential rather than human failure. Her enemy is thus neither the rich industrialist nor the racial bigot but rather the indifferent and the self-deceived.

*The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* is a more mature play than *A Raisin in the Sun*. The play offers a statement of artistic responsibilities as also of social inadequacies. The obligation to limit one's scope to the immediate but parochial injustices of racial intolerance has for long sapped the creative energy of the Negro writer. Having paid her debt to this tradition with *A Raisin in the Sun*, Hansberry achieves a significant break-through with
The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window which is clearly in the mainstream of contemporary drama. The Negro is no longer seen as the victim of a savage social situation. He becomes an endemic part of a society desperately searching for a valid response to the human condition.

The play is remarkable for not engaging in any direct fashion with the question of race and "difference," when such questions were uppermost in the minds of blacks. The play does have one black character, Alton Scales. But his presence seems only to foreground the absence, as it were, of blackness as a motif. The play's unusualness is partly due to the dominance of white characters like Sidney Brustein, Sidney's wife, Iris, Iris's sisters, Mavis and Gloria, the playwright, David Ragin, and the politician, Wally. In addition, the chief character, Sidney is a jew. Hansberry's sympathetic treatment of a jew, the traditional enemy of the Black, is again a radical departure for a Black playwright. The play implicitly questions the methods of LeRoi Jones and Ed Bullins whose forceful and aggressive negation of White America is partly answered. In this play Hansberry is caught between her concept of drama as a means of a social statement and drama as an examination of character.
Sidney is a "big fat character" and he "monumentally" commands the play so that "we rise or fall" with him. John Braine affirms that "the play becomes Sidney Brustein's personal odyssey of discovery, confrontation with others in the process of which he discovers himself." As Braine's remark about Sidney's "personal odyssey" implies, Sidney grows both in self-awareness and moral stature during the course of the play. However, what he learns and the decision he makes on the basis of this knowledge is the primary ethical content of the play.

Sidney is also the cultural centre of the play. Many cultures collide in Greenwhich village. The people who enter Sidney's apartment represent an astonishingly wide variety of ethnic backgrounds. Sidney himself is Jewish. His wife Iris is "the only Greco-Gaelic-Indian hillbilly in captivity." His friends and acquaintances include Alton Scales (described by one character as a "cream-colored" black), Wally O'Hara (an Irish-American "reform" politician who needs to be reformed), and Sal Peretti (an Italian-American juvenile junkie who worked for Sidney as a janitor and who died of an overdose of American oppression). The range of social backgrounds is similarly striking: Iris's sister, Mavis, is "The Mother Middle-class itself" (63). Her other sister Gloria is a call girl. Sidney's brother Manny is a successful
businessman. Brustein's upstairs neighbour is a struggling, sponging, homosexual bohemian playwright, David Ragin, and their friend Max, "by all odds an original" (33), is an abstract but rather primitive painter who is not quite sure whether he prefers food or sex.

The range of the characters' cultural attitudes varies as widely as that of their backgrounds. Max insists on art for art's sake, whereas Alton, an ex-communist who retains his belief in the ideals of Marxism, insists on art exclusively as an instrument of class struggle. Mavis believes that there is too much pain in real life and wants art to offer a peaceful escape, while David strives for an art that presents only the agonizing part of life. Iris, although vocally "tolerant" of everybody, offers all sexual deviants, outcasts, radicals and weirdoes (in reality a single category for her) little compassion and even less understanding.

Sidney is the chief connection among all these cultural interests. One fundamental reason for Sidney's ability to perform this linking role is suggested by Ellen Schiff: "In making Brustein the axis of her play Hansberry draws on the historical experience of the jew. Her protagonist personifies an alien factor that has earned a degree of acceptance in society. Having accomplished that, he tends
to regard race, creed and previous conditions of servitude largely as bothersome cliches and to devote himself to other pressing concerns." Schiff also argues that Sidney is "one of the most successful characterizations of the jew on the post-1945 stage." And further, "a notably sensitive concept of the Jewish experience as archetypal furnishes the subtext of Hansberry's play."

In effect this is an accurate picture of Sidney Brustein, as indeed it is of Arthur Miller's Quentin. For Sidney, in clutching naively at what he imagines to be innocence, becomes insensitive, blind alike to the crumbling of his marriage and the despair of his sister-in-law. His relationship with his wife, Iris, is strained because he refuses to recognise the reality of the world. But rather he chooses to remould it, and her, to suit his own personal vision. On the one hand he tends to lapse into a romantic dream of man as innocent and free spirit removed from the conventional corruption of the city. In this mood he takes Huck Finn as an archetype of noble dissociation and sees Iris as a mountain nymph. On the other hand he throws himself with naive faith into political activism. There is a bitter desperation in Iris's demand to know which role she should play — Margaret Mead or Barbara Allen—for her life is lived as a counterpart to her husband's. His sudden and
impractical enthusiasms throw an increasing strain on their relationship. The crisis between Sidney and his wife is ultimately a crisis of Sidney's liberalism. For Iris rebels against the sterility of a life which gravitates around idealistic dreams—a life of philosophical speculation and meaningless activity entirely lacking in a sense of commitment.

At the beginning of the play Sidney, who has just admitted to the failure of one of his impractical schemes, is prevailed upon to use a newspaper which he has bought to support a reform candidate in a local election. He accepts the campaign as a further diversion and the sign which he puts in his window (a sign pledging support for the reform candidate) is less evidence of his faith in the possibility of change than evidence of a self-justifying sense of the righteousness of protest. The Sign which hangs in Sidney Brustein's window is not an ironical comment on the impossibility of achieving anything in what Iris sees as this "dirty world."

There are things talked about ... laughed about while you stand there framed by that sign ... that make me wonder how I ever thought you knew anything about this world at all ... This world, Sidney! It's so dirty. (116)

The Sign represents the public face of a man whose vision of
the world is radically simplified. Until he is brought to the point of confrontation, he fails to understand what Hansberry conceives as the nature of commitment. The sign becomes, as Iris puts it to Sidney, "It's like spit in your face" (117)—a significant phrase carrying overtones of Miller's *All My Sons*.

Sidney tells Mavis, his sister-in-law, that changing one politician for another "is to participate in some expression of the people about the way things are" (60). The act of protest is sufficient and when his candidate is elected he is genuinely amazed. For, as Hansberry suggests, Sidney's liberalism is the exercise of conscience "without attendant responsibility. Indeed, he remains unaware, until informed by his wife, that he has secured the election of a candidate who has sold out to the machine.

Lorraine Hansberry was acutely aware of the temper of the decade in which she was writing. In the 1930's, the theatres gave expression to a popular and vital social drama in which there was no apparent conflict between the demands of drama and those of the practical idealist. The theatre of the fifties was dominated by the absurd. Social concern was at best irrelevant and at worst a symptom of man's self-destructive optimism. When Sidney rages in the second act against a world in which anger and passion have been transmuted into neurosis and unconcern, he voices the bewilderment of his age:
Yes, by all means hand me the chloroform of my passions; the sweetening of my conscience; the blam of my glands... Oh blessed age! That has provided that I need never live again in the full temper of rage ... Wrath has become a poisoned gastric juice in the intestine. (96)

If Lorraine Hansberry is critical of liberalism which is nothing more than naive self-expression, she is equally critical of apathy under the guise of liberal tolerance. Iris epitomises this attitude which constitutes the other side of the liberal coin. It takes Mavis to point out the implications of this moral disengagement, when Iris takes as her maxim, "Live and let live, that's all."

Mavis retorts, "That's just a shoddy little way of trying to avoid responsibility in the world" (57). This desire of non-involvement is further emphasised by Iris's surname, Parodus, an implication which Mavis again underlines. Parodus, as she points out, is the Greek word for chorus, "... the chorus is always there, commenting, watching ... and being" (107).

Iris's name suggests a flower of delicacy, beauty, and femininity. Mavis's name suggests lack of imagination. Mavis was the name of a popular, sweet chocolate soft drink
of the time as well as the brand name of a cheap, scented talcum powder. Both of them are emblems of depressing conventionality. Gloria's name has vague religious overtones which may suggest her essential innocence.

Since hair is an ageless symbol of fertility, Iris with her long, flowing, dark hair may be considered the most sexual. Gloria, with medium-length blonde hair, appears sexual, but hers is a cold, often twisted, sexuality. Mavis's short, sculptured red hair denies sexuality, although she is the only sister with children. Iris's blue jeaned style suggests a free spirit, Mavis's simple elegant clothes reflect the control she imposes on her life, and Gloria's girl-next-door clothes reflect the person she would like to be.

Each of these women seems to feel that her life was predestined by her father. Considering her father crude and stupid, Iris thinks that she is not very bright, which leads to a feeling of real insecurity. The only sister who admired her father was Mavis who sees spontaneity of a "backwoods poet" as an impossible goal. Gloria is perhaps affected most deeply. Her father called her a tramp. She became a prostitute. Even though she quits prostitution, she feels branded for life. David tells her, "Trying to live with your father's values can kill you ..." Gloria replies, "No, Sweetie,
Sidney's friend, Alton Scales, epitomizes black identity and pride. When Iris playfully accuses him of being a "white boy playing black boy," he replies, "I am a black boy ... I am going to make a point out of being one" (41). Alton is an ex-communist. He talks about revolution, but he turns out to be as bound by his prejudices as the rest of the presumably emancipated characters in the play. Although he is instrumental in Sidney's first-act decision to turn political, his primary function in the play lies in his relationship with Gloria. A better scene about racial sensitivity is the one in which Iris and Sidney learn, in a letter from Gloria, that Alton has proposed to her. Their response to the news is an embarrassed silence that comes from their knowledge of Gloria's profession. That uneasy moment reveals the latent suspicion likely to lie at the heart of interracial friendship. Unfortunately the scene is effective only in retrospect, for the audience, not yet possessing the secret about Gloria, can only share Alton's doubts about Sidney and Iris.

When Alton is offended by what he takes to be prejudice on their part, Iris attacks him. He assumes that his commitment is of the same nature as Sidney's; "You and the causes all the time. It's phoney as hell! ... The country
Lorraine Hansberry's involvement with the plight of the Negro is subsumed here in a more general concern. The human failure which is evidenced in the hardening of prejudice in racial matters is for her indicative of a more fundamental failure which underlies the capricious enthusiasm of Sidney Brustein as well as the disaffiliation of Iris. The commitment which she urges, and in which all the play's characters fail, is a devotion to humanity which goes beyond a desire for political and moral freedom. Gloria Parodus, Iris's sister, becomes the focus of Hansberry's call for compassion -- a compassion which, like that identified by Albee and Miller, does not shy away from reality but rejects complacency and despair.

Gloria Parodus, like Wally O'Hara, the corrupt politician, has accepted the need for compromise -- "If you want to survive you've got to swing the way the world swings!" (138). At the age of nineteen she came to the city from the country. She has become a "high fashion whore" (50). After seven years and three attempted suicides, she sees a chance to save herself. Alton Scales, Sidney's Negro friend, proposes to her and she decides to accept the proposal. When Alton
discovers that she is a call-girl, his own racial past combined with his physical disgust form his reaction. Gloria becomes for him a commodity which has been used by white men. In revulsion against this past, he sacrifices compassion to pride: "I don't want white man's leavings, Sidney. I couldn't marry her" (102).

Alton himself is guilty of racism when he admits that he could accept and forgive a past of prostitution, if the woman he loved were black. Their love was a casualty of the white man's oppression of the black - a history which Alton could not forgive. On the sketch she gives of Alton, Lorraine Hansberry goes back to the theme of black identity but examines it in a perspective which sees not only black assertiveness about racial dignity but also the black prejudice against the white. It is in this comprehensiveness of vision that Lorraine Hansberry's universality can be seen. When Sidney underlines the racial nature of Alton's failure, his concession is equally an admission of the fatuity of an intellectual commitment unsupported by emotional engagement: "I know it (Touching his head) here!" (102). His liberalism thus stands revealed as an irrelevant pose. The expensive humanity of his principles is subverted by his inability to transform it into political action. This gulf between commitment and genuine
involvement rooted in passion lies at the heart of this play and also of Baldwin's Blues for Mr. Charlie.

The extent of this gulf is demonstrated by the fact that Gloria is failed not only by Alton but equally by Sidney, Iris, and Mavis as well. When Mavis hears of the proposed marriage, she is horrified. While aware of the therapeutic value to her sister, the idea of miscegenation seems worse to her than prostitution. Unaware that Gloria's last chance has been destroyed, she mouths the empty slogans of conservatism which seem now only slightly more obscene than those of a hypocritical liberalism: "Look, the world's not ready ... You have to think about children, ... You can't expect people to change that fast" (110). When Sidney replies, it is, as Hansberry points out, "more with wonder than assertion" for he is on the edge of a new perception which does not become evident until after Gloria's death, "Mavis, the world is about to crack right down the middle. We've gotta change - or fall in the crack" (110).

Yet for all this partial enlightenment, Sidney is too wrapped up in his own disillusionment to offer any help or consolation to Gloria. Having been forced to confront the true nature of his liberalism he lapses into despair and trades absurdist aphorisms with David, his playwright neighbour, while his sister-in-law's own despair deepens into suicide.
Although Hansberry feels herself at odds with some of the implications of Miller's *After the Fall*, she has Sidney mock that sense of universal guilt which Miller derived from Camus: "We are all guilty, therefore all guilt is equal. Therefore none are innocent, therefore - none are guilty" (132). This scene is reminiscent of that in which Quentin in Miller's play watches Maggie's attempted suicide. For Sidney's drunken nihilism is as surely an attempt to deny the reality of his guilt as was Quentin's refusal to accept sleeping pills from his wife's hand. Both are offered the opportunity of accepting responsibility in the act of accepting the need for compassion. In *After the Fall*, Quentin comes to an understanding of himself and the nature of human relationships through his experience with Maggie. Gloria's death brings Sidney to a similar understanding. This, together with his realisation of the true nature of his liberalism, constitutes that moment of "momentous enlightenment" which Albee and Miller portray. Like Quentin, Sidney comes to accept that commitment means responsibility and that freedom is circumscribed by a knowledge of the ineluctable connection between action and consequence.

Sidney has a strong sense of the richness of his Jewish heritage and its links to the struggle against all forms of oppression. In a key speech to Wally O'Hara, he vigorously affirms thus:
In the ancient times, the good men among my ancestors, when they heard of evil, strapped a sword to their loins and strode into the desert; and when they found it, they cut it down - or were cut down and bloodied the earth with purifying death.

While freely admitting that in the face of "these thousand nameless faceless vapors that are the evil of our time," he can only internalize them and then take a pill to narcotize them, he longs "to take up the sword of the Maccabees again!" (96). Thus, when Sidney is finally able to take a heroic stance and fight the evil around him, he becomes inextricably linked to the tradition of these Jewish ancestors. Also, he is willing to face up to the second alternative of being cut down in a purifying death.

Sidney's Jewishness, in spite of the many weaknesses he displays, enables Hansberry to express through him her admiration for the Jews' historical resilience in the face of oppression and adversity, and for the sensitivity, courage, and insight that many derived from this. For all his various blind spots and waverings, Sidney is clearly a worthy descendant of the Maccabees - sensitive, concerned, and ultimately deeply committed to eliminating the injustice he sees immediately before him.
In the play, Sidney often appears to exhibit a special feeling for Alton Scales based on a close identification of jews and blacks. He fails to see his sister-in-law, Mavis Parodus, as anything other than "the Mother Middle class itself" (63). Indeed he fails to discover any positive traits in her in his righteous anger at her obvious prejudice against both blacks and jews, especially against the blacks. Sidney plays upon her well-known prejudice by telling Mavis about a new suitor for her call-girl sister, Gloria. He does not reveal the suitor's race until Mavis is greatly excited over the prospective groom. Mavis's racism deserves such a blow. However, when Sidney introduces her to Alton, the suitor who appears to be white, and then carefully chooses the most embarrassing movement to reveal his race, is clearly portrayed as having gone too far. As Sidney makes his embarrassing revelation to Mavis, the stage directions inform us that he and Alton and Iris Brustein "variously concentrate on the food and exchange superior and rather childish glances; letting her live through the moment of discomfort" (62-63). Almost immediately afterwards, when Sidney calls Mavis "the Mother Middle class itself standing there revealed in all its towering courage" to the "snickers of delight from the diners," Hansberry's directions note that this is stated "swiftly, with open-hearted malice" (63). Mavis's response is one of the most moving speeches
in the play. It is an indication of how much Sidney has over­looked her:

I am standing here and I am thinking: how smug it is in bohemia. I was taught to believe that - (Near tears) creativity and great intelligence ought to make one expansive and understanding. That if ordinary people, among whom I have the sense at least to count myself, could not expect understanding from artists and - whatever it is that you are, Sidney - then where indeed might we look for it at all - in this quite dreadful world. (She almost starts out, but thinks of the cap) Since you have all so busily got rid of God for us. (64)

Ironically, Sidney is only "somewhat" moved "by this eloquence," whereas Alton, the target of her strongest prejudice, is "the most affected" by what she has said.

Hansberry vehemently attacks the theatre of the absurd for cutting itself off from any particular culture or cultures as well as the problems faced by individuals or groups within them for the sake of a spurious universality. Samuel Beckett's play Waiting for Godot takes place vaguely on "a country road" near "a tree" and his Endgame takes place in a room with a "bare interior ... two small windows ... an
armchair on castors," and "two ashbins" in which an old man and woman live."7 Similarly, Hansberry's absurdist playwright David Ragin's play is set in "a refrigerator," where two characters live who "are both male and married to each other" (58). Moreover, Sidney criticizes David for writing "fourteen plays about not caring, about the isolation of the soul of man, the alienation of the human spirit, the desolation of all love." These are popular themes of absurdist playwrights. What David has really wanted to make all along is that he is "ravaged by a society that will not sanctify (his) particular sexuality!" (66).

Even though Sidney makes this criticism in an appropriate context, it does seem to reflect Hansberry's considered view that the most meaningful writing deals with specific problems presented by a specific culture. Clearly, she herself pays as much attention to the multicultural dimensions of her Greenwich village setting in The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window as she did to the multilevelled cultural dimensions of the African-American family in A Raisin in the Sun.

In addition to bridging ethnic and world cultures, Sidney bridges aesthetic and social concerns in a manner similar to Hansberry's. In setting up his newspaper, he pays attention to both Alton, whose bleeding heart will tolerate no concern apart from message, and Max, whose monomaniacal interest is the effect of print on the eye, never the mind or the heart.
Without Sidney between them, it seems probable that Alton and Max will never be able to work on the same project. In defending the humanistic tradition in drama against David Ragin's absurdism, Sidney also expresses his admiration not only for the message that preoccupied playwrights like Ibsen and Shaw but also, more significantly, for his "stars", Euripides and Shakespeare. Wally O'Hara is a successful lawyer with a sense of humour. Furthermore, he can quote Thoreau as well as Sidney. Aware of the women's movement, he engages in a little coterie wit: "woman's place is in the oven" (24). Sidney mistakes his glibness for sincerity and devotes himself without reservation to the campaign. After learning of Wally's deception, Sidney easily reverts to his apathetic cynical state. Wally enters making direct threats, telling Sidney to ignore the narcotics traffic and warning him that his newspaper will be destroyed. But Sidney can no longer accept corruption or the cruelties of man against man. Hansberry is endowed with a mythological sense, and perhaps saw Sidney Brustein as a modern-day version of the Fisher King myth. In essence, the Fisher King society of Wally is sterile and corrupt. It will prevail only as long as its members are spiritually dead. To Hansberry, spiritual decay is tantamount to lack of commitment. With commitment comes renewal of both self and society. Hansberry thought it possible to make
the water pure again. In the final scene, having been sensitized and enlarged by the complex experiences he has had in the play, Sidney can even reach out to the man who has betrayed him, Wally O'Hara, and say, "I love you - I should like to see you redeemed," although he immediately modifies this by saying, "But in the context in which we presently stand here I doubt any of this is possible" (141). The context to which he refers is the oppressive society that has "warped and distorted all of us" (141), in part by trying to eliminate ethnicity, individuality, and above all, the vitalizing variety of life that has meant so much to Sidney. This variety, the essence of a truly multi-ethnic society, is worth fighting for and is one of the things that Sidney is so staunchly ready to defend.

Lorraine Hansberry's commitment transcends the merely parochial. For her rebellion is directed less against intransigent racialism than against the sterility of the absurd and the inconsequence of a theatre founded on distraction. Like Miller and Albee, she clearly sees the dramatists' function as consisting in a compassionate statement of the need for human contact in an unattractive world. Indeed her faith in the need to face reality effectively bridges the gap between confrontation and commitment.
At the time Hansberry wrote, the early sixties, drugs had become a national problem reaching all levels of society. Drugs touch Sidney on a personal level that he can no longer ignore. When a seventeen-year-old employee overdoses, Sidney laments both the boy's tragedy and the continuing sale of drugs. When his sister-in-law deliberately overdoses on pills in his own home, Sidney, acutely aware of his failure to offer Gloria the assistance she so desperately needs, is compelled to take an active stance against drugs. His decision to stand up to Wally O'Hara and the drug merchants who control him thus springs both from strong personal conviction based on bitter experience and from a desire to expiate a personal failure.

Apart from the urgent and serious ethical and social dilemmas drugs pose, it is clear that they also serve a symbolic function in the play. When his marriage is breaking down and he has just tried to sell his honour to save it, only to have his corrupt offer rejected, Sidney has an ulcer and is reluctantly induced (with ironic appropriateness) by Wally O'Hara to take a tranquillizer. As he prepares to take the pill, he proclaims to Wally:

Yes, by all means hand me the chloroform of my passions; the sweetening of my conscience, the balm of my glands. (Lifting the pills like poor Yorick's skull) Oh blessed age! That has provided that
I need never live again in the full temper of my rage. (96)

The reference to Yorick in the stage directions emphasizes the role of drugs in delaying Sidney from taking meaningful and effective action. This function is further emphasized by Sidney's reference immediately afterwards to the "sword of the Maccabees" he has set aside to take the pill. The sword and the pill thereby become symbolic opponents. Gloria took pills for nearly the same reason as Sidney, to ease the emotional pain in her life. They enabled her to continue to compromise and remain a prostitute until finally they destroyed her completely. Moreover, drugs have long kept blacks and other victims of poverty and oppression from rising against their conditions. For all these reasons, when Sidney takes his stand against drugs at the play's end, he also symbolically declares that he will no longer compromise with oppression and injustice, no matter what he may have to suffer.

Despite his sporadic emotional torture, David is committed and therefore a fulfilled being who gives more than he takes. Iris and Sidney search for fulfilment, sometimes at cross purposes, and sometimes, meeting with failure. Yet the search for commitment continues, because they care. Gloria could not recognize her own power. And Max, shallow as he is, does not deserve a last name.
The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window is a play by a Black woman writer about intellectual commitment and human dignity. It contains within itself the complex response of a very mature writer to the human condition.

Hansberry negates Absurd drama and the intellectual position behind it by giving her play a fairly clear plot, a design, and well delineated and realized characters. What she does in the play is to negate the absurdity of the worldview of her fellow Black writers who overturn the value system in their quest for a "Black aesthetic." With her firm intellectual grasp of the problem of existence, Hansberry contributes a fine play to the American dramatic tradition.
REFERENCES


5. Ellen Schiff, 156.
