IV

THE LAST PLAYS: THE BLACK EXPERIENCE AND THE THEME OF HUMAN RELEVANCE


*Les Blancs* and *The Drinking Gourd* have obvious parallels in the tensions they depict between blacks and whites and in the urgency for action, tendency toward violence, necessity for freedom they inscribe. *What Use Are Flowers?* depicts Hansberry's vision of what lies in store if freedom and tolerance
are denied. Moving away from the personal point of view of Raisin and Sidney Brustein, these plays are Hansberry's warning to despots — benevolent and otherwise.

Les Blancs is the first major work by a black American playwright to focus on Africa and to pose this question in the context of an African liberation struggle. Tshembe Matoseh, a black African, has returned to his homeland for his father's funeral. During his visit, he is caught up in his country's struggle to oust the white colonizers after many years of peaceful efforts to negotiate their freedom. His family's tribe urges him to lead the violent struggle, while his brother, Abioseh, who was converted to the Catholic priesthood, abhors the native effort and in fact betrays one of the leaders to the local police.

Tshembe's dilemma parallels Hamlet's. But, Hansberry, recognizes the inappropriateness of relying only on a Western literary analogy. She provides a metaphor from African lore, from Modingo, the wise hyena who lived between the lands
of the elephants and the hyenas. 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) The hyenas symbolize the black man and the elephant with its usurping strength the white man. Hansberry does not shrink from depicting the desperation implicit in this theme.

There is the original sin of the whites who raped, pillaged, and colonized the country. Is their guilt expiated by the Christian missionaries
and others of good will who build clinics and treat the sick? There are the years of torture, indignities, and enslavement suffered by the oppressed. Does their suffering justify their brutal murder of white settlers, including "innocent" women and children? Charlie smugly reaches for easy answers, while Tshembe ruthlessly grapples with the complexity of truth. When Charlie tries to reduce Tshembe's views by accusing him of hating all white men, Tshembe laughs:

Oh dear God. Why? ... Why do you all need it so?! This absolute lo-o-o-onging for my hatred! I shall be honest with you, Mr. Morris. I do not "hate" all white men — but I desperately wish that I did. It would make everything infinitely easier! (78)

When Charlie tries to retreat into that other facile myth which declares race as unimportant because all men are alike under the skin, Tshembe patiently demolishes the innocuous generalization. Through the eloquent words of this character, Hansberry unmasks the myth of race, showing the
political struggles of this century in a new light.

As Tshembe says:

Race — racism — is a device.
No more. No less. It explains nothing at all ... It is simply a means. An invention to justify the rule of some men over others ... I am simply saying that a device is a device, but that it also has consequences: once invented it takes on a life, a reality of its own. So, in one century, men invoke the device of religion to cloak their conquests. In another, race. Now, in both cases you and I may recognize the fraudulence of the device, but the fact remains that a man who has a sword run through him because he refuses to become a Moslem or a Christian — or who is shot in Zatembe or Mississippi because he is black — is suffering the utter reality of the device. And it is pointless to pretend that it doesn't exist — merely because it is a lie! (92)

Tshembe is Sidney Brustein's counterpart. But the fact that he is black compounds the intellectual's disease of alienation. He oscillates
between the part of him rooted in Africa and the part of him which has set down roots, personal and cultural, in Europe. And as an intellectual, he resents history's imposing itself on him. He demands that his life should be judged in terms of the African liberation movement. But Tshembe knows that he cannot stand outside history without mutilating himself, and his own sensibility will not allow him to do that. Like Sidney, he knows that it hurts too much "not to care." There is no way out of the dilemma. He exists in the chasm between despair and joy. He refuses leadership in the rebellion, saying quite simply, "... there are men in this world ... who see too much to take sides" (95). But he has no choice but to take sides. In fact, the decision was made for him long before he was born. History picked his side. Events will force him to acknowledge it.

Like the inevitability of change predicted by Asagai in *A Raisin in the Sun*, the moment comes when Tshembe must embrace his destiny and fight the historical intruders. The decision is fraught with pain because he must begin by murdering his own brother who has turned traitor. Thereby he sets off
the attack which kills the gentle white woman, his surrogate mother, who has nurtured him from birth. As the play ends, a hyena-like sobbing laughter breaks forth from Tshembe. Throughout the play, Tshembe's understanding of the complexities, his ability to see both sides and to love genuinely across colour lines is at war with his native history. His psyche which is tied to the spirit of Africa is personified by a woman dancer who constantly calls him to action, back to the struggle of his people.

Just as Modingo wishes to settle the dispute by reason, Tshembe, like Jomo Kenyatta, desperately hopes to solve the problems of his people with petitions, delegations, and discussion. But that time has passed. Like the hyena, the black man was there first and was used to running free. When the white man, like the elephant, gathers his herds or armies, the hyenas must revolt or be destroyed.

In Les Blancs, the revolutionaries are those who know what must be done. Charlie Morris who tries to understand is the essence of the earnest
white liberal. He sympathizes with the black Africa, but he feels no personal responsibility. He tells Tshembe, as the African smiles ironically at the British helicopters overhead: "I didn't put those things up there! I'm me — Charlie Morris — not "the White Man."!" (123).

The lie of racism blinds Charlie to the real causes of revolution as well as to his own culpability. From one encounter with Tshembe to the next, he stumbles through the morass of his ignorance. He means well, but in this play, it is too late for good will. The wheels of violent revolution have already been set in motion by the very first contact between colonizer and native. One mistake has been compounded by another, leading irresistibly to a bloody holocaust. But Charlie is the White Man, for he shares in the collective white guilt of oppressing the black people. Further, he naively hopes that change can occur without bloodshed. For all his good intentions, Charlie remains merely a liberal, not a revolutionary.

For Hansberry, a revolutionary is someone willing to die for the cause of total African self-rule.
and freedom. Yet she was a perceptive judge of human behaviour and did not limit greatness to blacks. Dr. Willy Dekoven is a striking example of the white sympathizer. He tells Charlie that Africa "saved his life," but he became an alcoholic largely because of the injustice he has seen the white man mete out to the black man. He tells Charlie of Reverend Neilson's patronizing his black African "children," and of the European's passive refusal to bring modern health care and education to the African mission. When Dr. Dekoven says, "They will murder us here one day — isn't that so, Tshembe?" (116), he is not speaking in an accusing tone. He is calmly accepting his lot. He is prepared to die so that others will live in freedom.

Even more complex than Willy Dekoven, Madame Neilson is a white sympathizer who loves her husband but sees the destruction he has wreaked on the black African. He believed the white races superior to the black. He allowed Tshembe's mother, Aquah, to die. He called the black Africans his "children." To atone for her husband's ignorance, Madame Neilson consciously risks her life. She urges
Tshembe to become committed, to fight for freedom in the land she has come to love: "Our country needs warriors, Tshembe Matoseh. Africa needs warriors" (126).

Young Abioseh does not die the death of a hero. He is perhaps less aware of the real price of freedom than Charlie Morris. The tragedy of Abioseh's death lies in fratricide: the nation has triumphed over family. Having taken the oath early, Peter dies the death of a martyr to a dream. Tshembe becomes a black Hamlet, torn between thought and action. Had he remained a man of thought, he would eventually have inherited his earth. But he chose the painful path of action and freedom.

Lorraine Hansberry and her characters reveal that a sense of history is vital for an understanding of the present and the future. Until forced into the violence of the Mau Mau Revolt, the Kikuyu people were basically peaceful and democratic. Aware of the rich and varied old African myths, folk tales, and religious ceremonies, even the sophisticated Tshembe Matoseh dons traditional robes for his father's funeral. Kenya, like Janus, looks both forward and
backward searching for the freedom of New Africa
but peering backward at Old Africa — a land of
lizards and lions, of hyenas and elephants.

In the play, old African myths add depth
and meaning to at least 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, lizard symbolizes the messenger who brings
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. 2

Having travelled more than a thousand miles
to see his dying father, Tshembe has no desire to
become involved in Africa's problems. The woman
appears reminding him of his heritage and wordlessly
urging him to fight for his people. The unearthly
"laughter" of a hyena is heard (41). In the African
myth, the hyena represents God's means of showing his
intentions. In the present play, the hyena urges
Tshembe to forego his own desires and to dedicate himself to the African cause.

When the woman appears a second time, Tshembe is stricken by her power, beauty, and sensuality. She circles in movements symbolic of life, the slaughter and enslavement. She becomes the "sleeping lioness" (81). In African myth, the lion symbolizes the punishment and protection of God in his most terrifying form. As the woman joins the lion, they become archetypes of the initiation rite of man's coming into maturity. The sensuous woman signifies sexual initiation. The lion represents either the blessing or condemnation of God. For Tshembe, initiation and capture of God (the lion) are modernized. He must commit himself to the Kwis, to Africa, to freedom. But Tshembe recoils, screaming, "I HAVE RENOUNCED ALL SPEARS!" (81).

Not only does Lorraine Hansberry use African myths to suggest the idea of rites of passage, but she employs old folk tales to heighten the drama of the revolution. In his folk tale, Peter 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 is both the victim and the embodiment of evil men, and 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 sacrifices to God. The hyena which is associated with the noble black man, represents God's means of showing his intentions, but it also signifies God's gift to men. Tshembe becomes Modingo, the wise hyena.

In the play, Dr. Amos Kumalo (who resembles Jomo Kenyatta) is as crucial a touchstone to black and white Africans as Charles Parnell is a test of conscience for Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Kumalo is mentioned at eight critical stages in the play and he has a different meaning for each character. Charlie Morris worships him as the "The man of peace" (90). While Major Rice dismisses him as a savage (66) and a "half-demented darky prophet" (101), to Peter (Ntali), Kumalo is a British puppet, who will merely "trade white overseers
for black." (97) Madame Neilsen deplores his arrest (106), but Dr. Willy Dekoven implies that Kumalo is no longer "the Great White Hope" (112).

For Tshembe, coming to terms with Amos Kumalo is no easy matter. In many ways Tshembe is a younger version of Kumalo/Kenyatta. He alternately sees Kumalo as a "scholar, a patriot, a dreamer and a crazy old man" (75), someone who should be given a chance (97), and a man who "wanders around in the cold in his thin suits and ... talks" (56).

In short, there are two Kenyattas in the play: Kumalo, the returned expatriate, and Tshembe Matoseh, who seeks a peaceful resolution of the conflict, but who finally recognizes and then welcomes revolution as Africa's only hope. He becomes one of Hansberry's celebrated revolutionaries.

The Drinking Gourd is an incisive analysis and indictment of American slavery as a self-perpetuating system based on the exploitation of cheap labour. More than a historical piece, this provocative work identifies the slave system as the basis for the country's economic philosophy and capitalistic
development. It dramatizes the devastating psychological and physical impact of the slave institution on both master and slave. As in *A Raisin in the Sun*, the message is not delivered in a heavy-handed manner, but is filtered through the characters and actions of the drama.

Three distinct classes of people are a part of this world of slavery: the master, the slave, and the poor white. During the course of the play set at the beginning of the Civil War, the impact of the slave system on each class is starkly portrayed, with each becoming a victim of its economic realities. Hiram Sweet is the ailing master of a slave plantation which is losing money, in part because Hiram's relatively humane policies do not produce enough to compete favourably with larger, less liberal plantations. The slave, Hannibal, son of Rissa, Hiram's confidant, is contemptuous of his situation and is preparing to escape. Zeb, a poor white farmer, finds that he is being squeezed out by the larger plantations and so agrees to become an overseer on Hiram's land against the advice of his friend.
This compelling drama is an indictment against slavery and capitalism. Margaret Wilkerson poignantly comments on Hansberry's political statements in this provocative drama. She says,

"The Drinking Gourd explores the brutalizing effect of the U.S. slave system on all who were a part of it—master, mistress, overseer, slave. Hansberry shows how that system, set in relentless motion by greed and exploitation, is a leaderless, irresistible force that is unresponsive even to those in power who would mediate its terrifying effects."  

This costume drama centres around an ineffectual slave master, Hiram Sweet, who is powerless to prevent his avaricious son, Everett Sweet, from destroying what it has taken Hiram his whole life to build: a profitable plantation peopled by slaves who are supposedly treated humanely. Maria, the slave master's wife, sides with her son and helps Everett to rule without his father's knowledge and permission. An exceptional piece of drama, The Drinking Gourd is unique and controversial because
of Hansberry's view of the slave South as dehumanizing both black and white with its capitalistic infrastructures.

Interestingly, _The Drinking Gourd_ took 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" were ingenious examples of the "signal" songs employed by the slaves to pass on secret messages and double meanings concealed in "innocent" imagery.

Hiram Sweet is certainly not an evil man. But the system of slavery has given him the delusion, at times the reality of grandeur. To his neighbours, to his slaves, and most dangerously to himself, Hiram Sweet is master and god. One of the problems with a mortal becoming a god is that he begins to think himself infallible, a blindness which ultimately leads to destruction. Unlike many masters, Hiram does have
moments of self-doubt. He questions the institution of slavery, but he does not dispute his role in this system.

Although Hiram is sensitive enough to be uneasy about the morality of slavery, he is not perceptive enough to recognize his ultimate powerlessness as a master. In an angry speech justifying a special favour he is granting to Rissa's son, Hiram says to his wife: "I am master of this plantation and every soul on it. I am master of this house as well ... There are some men born into this world who make their own destiny. Men who do not tolerate the rules of other men or other forces" (188).

However, as Hiram's health fails, the control of the plantation is taken over by his immature simple-minded son, Everett. Each character succumbs to the economic realities of an exploitative system. Hansberry drives her point home in a climactic moment near the end of the play. The dying Hiram goes to Rissa's cabin in the slave quarters where she is caring for her blinded son, and says:
I — I wanted to tell you, Rissa —
I wanted to tell you and ask you
to believe me that I had nothing
to do with this. I — some things
do seem to be out of the power of
my hands after all ... Other men's
rules are a part of my life ... (215)

Hiram's death marks the demise of this
world, but Hansberry intimates that the insidious
effects of slavery will be far-reaching. In the
final words of the play, the Soldier/Narrator says:

Slavery is beginning to cost this
nation a lot. It has become a drag
on the great industrial nation we
are determined to become; it lags
a full century behind the great
American notion of one strong federal
union which our eighteenth-century
founders knew was the only way we
could eventually become one of the
powerful nations of the world. And,
now, in the nineteenth century, we
are determined to hold on to that
dream ... And so — ... we must fight.
There is no alternative. It is possible
that slavery might destroy itself —
but it is more possible that it would
destroy these United States first.
That it would cost us our political
and economic future ... It has already
cost us, as a nation, too much of
our soul. (217)

For many years, Rissa has seemed an obedient
child, praising her master for his kindness, seemingly
sharing his friendship and garnering privileges as
house servant and cook. She has made peace with her
lot. She yearns for no wages or education. But
even model children have limits of tolerance. When
her own child is wounded, she refuses Hiram Sweet's
offer to send for Dr. Bullet: "He put his eyes back?"
(214). Dismissing her master's ethics, she too becomes
a revolutionary.

Rissa moves from mammy to militant in
The Drinking Gourd, placing her family's needs above
all others. She breaks the mold shaped by Southern
attitudes and manages to bring a new life to the worn
portrayal of "the black mother." Her slave master,
respects and trusts the docile Rissa who is like part
of the family. He, however, deludes himself, into
thinking that Rissa can be pacified when her family's
well-being is at stake.
Rissa destroys the myth of the black mammy when she rebels against the institution of slavery that has separated her from her son and inflicted physical abuse upon the second son. She blames Hiram when Hannibal, her son, comes to her sightless. When Hiram comes to beg Rissa's forgiveness and to tell her that he had nothing to do with Hannibal's injury, she furiously turns on him unlike any stereotypical mammy: "Why? Ain't you Marster? How can a man be marster of some men and not at all of others —" (215). Surprised by Rissa's brazenness, Hiram cautions her to know her place. Rissa, however, has transformed into a rebellious black mother who says,

"Oh — ? What will you have done to me? Will your overseer gouge out my eyes too? I don't spect blindness would matter to me. I done seen all there was worth seein' in this world — and it didn't 'mount to much." (215)

Shortly after Rissa's victory over her master, he falls outside near her door with a heart attack. Hearing Hiram's call for help, Rissa flagrantly turns her back and continues ministering to her blind son. Robert Nemiroff contends that
Hansberry reverses the sacred image and that she intends Rissa to be the counter part to Lena Younger in *A Raisin in the Sun.* Hansberry apparently believed that not all slaves were content and chose to portray a black mother whose devotion to her family and whose simple, human, motherly act of vengeance set her apart from the archetypal black mother figure.

What is merely implicit in Mama becomes explicit in *The Drinking Gourd.* For Rissa unmistakably completes the journey that Lena had started on, and thereby reverses the sacred image. She ministers to her own son and lets the white man — the good white man who has cared for and treated her almost as an equal — die pleading for her help. In effect, she murders him, and, what is more, steals his gun and places it in the black hands of her children. It is a simple human, motherly act of vengeance for a son wronged which, in any other context but America's, should have been anticipated as entirely natural and inevitable.

Hannibal, is very much like Asagai in his aggressiveness and rebelliousness. The play reflects
Hansberry's personal commitment to equal rights and embodies the spirit of the revolutionary 1960s. An activist, Hannibal tries to convince those around him that it is not normal for one group of people to enslave another. He attempts to motivate his girlfriend, Sarah, to become rebellious. He berates his mother for her contentedness in a slavocracy. At another point, he ridicules the black assistant to the overseer, Coffin, who takes great pride in helping to keep blacks suppressed. When Hannibal fails to draw those nearest him into the revolutionary spirit, he does not drift into passivity. Instead, he steps up his own retaliatory tactics. He reacts violently against his master's possessions. He takes great pleasure in devising machinations to keep from working.

Refusing to accept his place as a slave, Hannibal tricks his master's young son into teaching him to read and write. His plan is first to free himself of illiteracy in order that he might successfully extricate himself from the physical and emotional chains of slavery. When he shares with Sarah that he can read and is planning to escape, she tries to
persuade him to abandon such thoughts. She cautions him about the difficulty he will encounter as a wandering fugitive. Imbued with the 1960s consciousness, Hannibal boldly tells her that he refuses to dwell on what freedom might bring. In short, he reminds Sarah that to be a slave means automatically and irrevocably to be denied recognition as a human being. His message to Sarah is that every slave ought to run off before he dies.

That's slave-owner talk, Sarah. Whatever you hear Marster say 'bout slavery — you always believe the opposite. There ain't nothin' hurt slave marster so much — (Savoring the notion) — as when his property walk away from him. Guess that's the worst blow of all. Way I look at it, ever' slave ought to run off 'fore he die (176).

Far removed from the docile, contented slave stereotype, Hannibal is bold and proud. He shames and angers Coffin by telling him that the more the master is pained by his rebelliousness, the more he will feel like a man.
Hansberry captures the revolutionary spirit of the 1950s and 1960s in the defiant and courageous Hannibal, who resembles the legendary African general of the same time. Hannibal’s life changes when he finds freedom in literacy. He becomes contemptuous of the world he sees. Dispelling the myth of the contented slave, he tells his mother that the only kind of slave he could stand to be is a bad one. When the son of the plantation owner, Everett, discovers that Hannibal has learned to read and to write, he says to him, "There is only one thing I have ever heard of that was proper for an "educated" slave ... When a part is corrupted by disease — one cuts out the disease" (210). The overseer is ordered to use the bull end of his whip to hollow out Hannibal’s eyes.

Everett attempts to bar Hannibal from the free world that lies outside the parameters of slavery. Furthermore, Everett takes away Hannibal’s sight for fear that this insurrectionist’s vision will corrupt other slaves. Though Hannibal’s body is broken, his spirit is not. The play ends with Hannibal escaping to freedom with the aid of his girl friend, Sarah.
This blinding of Hannibal represents the inhumanity heaped upon blacks in the struggle for freedom. Wilkerson contends that the gouging out of Hannibal's eyes suggests the moral bankruptcy of slavery. Hansberry's feeling heart led her to encourage blacks not to accept quietly the injustices that began during slavery.

Zeb Dudley is the prototype of the "poor white," hated by whites and blacks alike. Proclaiming "I'm a white man, preacher," (196), Zeb Dudley knows that the caste system and the colour barrier place him above the slave. Many overseers were members of the poor-white class and used their power to persecute slaves. Zeb is horrified at being ordered to put out Hannibal's eyes, but the system will not allow him to refuse. The poor white never engages the total sympathy of the audience. He is not a tragic figure. He is merely a pathetic footnote in an evil history.

I'm a White man, Preacher! And I'm goin' to drive slaves for Everett Sweet and he's goin' to pay me for it and this time next year, Zeb Dudley aims to own himself some slaves and be a man — you hear!" (196)
Lorraine Hansberry illustrates that evil institutions or systems may try to consume the individual, but he or she can triumph through personal strength and courage. Hiram Sweet must die. He cannot fully see the evil inherent in the system of slavery. Hannibal sees only too clearly, as did Frederick Douglass, that the white man's power to enslave the black man lay in the denial of literacy. Hannibal "saw" that education equalled freedom. His horrendous penalty for learning to read, his blinding, becomes both a literal and symbolic punishment. He will still prevail, for young Joshua, the biblical namesake of the leader of the Promised Land, guides Hannibal and Sarah to freedom.

Hansberry's most experimental piece, *What Use Are Flowers?* completed in 1962, is a fantasy play about nuclear holocaust and the possibilities for survival. In a letter to a Peking University Professor, Lorraine Hansberry refers to this play by saying that it deals with an old hermit who emerges from the woods, after man has destroyed the world, and comes upon a group of children. Hansberry wrote, "The action of the play hangs upon
his effort to impart to them his knowledge of the remnants of civilization which once ... he had renounced." Nemiroff argues that What Use Are Flowers? was Hansberry's answer to the questions of life and death, war and peace.

What Use Are Flowers? was conceived as a fantasy for television, in response to contemporary debates about the destruction or survival of the human race. What survives is the draft of a short play about a hermit who returns from a self-imposed exile only to find wild children orphaned by a nuclear holocaust. As he decides to civilize the children and chooses those aspects of civilization worthy of repeating and necessary to their spiritual and intellectual growth, the audience gains a fascinating insight into the priorities of Western culture.

Hansberry has a talent for asking the evocative question which goes to the heart of the matter. After teaching the children the meaning of such words as clay, pot, and sun, the Hermit attempts to explain the importance of beauty, using a bouquet of flowers as an example. One of the children asks,
"What use are flowers?". And the Hermit is momentarily stymied in his effort to explain this intangible but crucial aspect of civilized and humanistic view. He finally answers that the uses of flowers are infinite. In that exchange is the crux of the play: the Hermit's real challenge is to teach these pre-literate to control and overcome their habit of violence so that they can learn the uses of love and compassion, cornerstones of civilization.

In response to Beckett's depressing yet compelling questions about life, Lorraine Hansberry might be said to have conceived What Use Are Flowers?. Just as she cried out against trying not to care in The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window, she replaces despair with hope, death with life, destruction with rejuvenation in this fable. The play is an illustration of her romantic realism, her conviction that the human race will survive and prevail. It reflects her vision that if man abandons hope, he will surely destroy himself and his world.

Sounding like a futuristic Henry David Thoreau, the Hermit tells the baffled children that
"one of the reasons I left is because I could no longer stand the dominion of time in the lives of men..." (232). When he left society twenty years earlier, he had thrown away his watch but soon "longed to know the hour of the day!". He made rock calendars, but animals knocked them down. To the Hermit, time has an intrinsic value, but "...men invent timepieces, they do not invent time" (232-33). His time has come to die, so he has returned to bid society a final farewell.

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 here. 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, 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 primal shock of the explosion erased all capacity of speech. Outwardly they share none of the innate goodness of Rousseau's "noble savage," but they also lack the meanness and cruelty of William Golding's schoolboys. They eat raw meat, for they cannot cook. They push each other about, for they must survive. They are naked, for they are ignorant of clothes. But, they do not torture animals or each other for sport. Most crucially, they have endured. 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.

Physically frail but mentally hearty and emotionally tough, the Hermit becomes Hansberry's Godot who does come. While the children do not expect the old man to arrive, they are receptive of his lessons, of food, pottery, work, beauty and
grief. They giggle at his scratchy version of "Greensleeves," the laughter of delight, not the lifeless hysteria of Vladimír, Estragon, and the servant. Unlike the two tramps' empty charade of exchanging hats, the children's games are related to survival, to life, even to their bitter struggle over poverty. Much of the tragedy of *Waiting for Godot* lies in men's liability to feel, to care. When the children have offended the Hermit, they feel grief and beg his forgiveness with flowers.

Hansberry's intention and basic concept in *What Use Are Flowers?* are nonetheless admirable. The play 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 beginnings 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 somewhat 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.

That *The Drinking Gourd* depicts the Black experience in America during slavery is apparent. But the drama also reveals that some white people were caught up in the evils of slavery by virtue
of their existence, but they refused to permit
the system to destroy their humanity.\(^9\)

**What Use Are Flowers?** is a brave venture
into philosophical drama, which, although it added
variety to its author's works, left her reputation
as a noteworthy playwright resting on the other
four plays she completed.\(^10\)

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 future: the importance
that African politics and styles would assume, the
regeneration of commitment among American intel-
lectuals, the seductiveness of mercenary values
of black Americans, 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:


