Lorraine Hansberry, the first African-American and the youngest woman to win the New York Drama Critics Circle Award, is best known for her play, *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959). The play centres around a black working-class family and their decision to move into a white neighbourhood. It provoked extensive debate during the early years of the Civil Rights Movement. Although dismissed by some militant black critics as assimilationist, *A Raisin in the Sun* has nevertheless been praised for its sensitive and revealing portraits of the African-American family and its multi-generational struggle for equality. Anne Cheney observes thus:

A moving testament to the strength and endurance of the human spirit, *A Raisin in the Sun* is a quiet celebration of the black family, the importance of African roots, the equality of women, the vulnerability of marriage, the true value of money, the survival of the individual, and the nature of man's dreams. A well-made play, *Raisin* at first seems
a plea for racial tolerance or a fable of man's overcoming an insensitive society, but the simple eloquence of the characters elevates the play into a universal representation of all people's hopes, fears and dreams. ¹

Hansberry originally named her play "The Crystal Stair,"² after a line in Langston Hughes' poem "Mother to Son."³ But later she changed its title to A Raisin in the Sun, an image taken from yet another poem by Hughes, "A Dream Deferred." The bitterness and urgency pervading the play, reflect the poem's statement: "What happens to a dream deferred?/Does it dry up/like a raisin in the Sun?/. . . Or does it explode?"⁴

The opening scene takes place on a Friday with Ruth rousing her family early in the morning. Hansberry describes her as "a settled woman," whose disappointment in life clearly shows in her demeanour. Walter is described as a lean, intense man whose voice always contains, "a quality of indictment." His second question of the morning — "Check coming today?" — immediately reveals the central conflict of the play. Walter's father has died, leaving a
ten thousand dollar insurance policy to Lena. Walter plans to persuade his mother to give him the money so that he, along with two other men, can invest in a liquor store. Over breakfast, his wife dismisses the idea as one more impractical scheme. But still, Walter reveals the extreme importance of his plan as he vents his frustration over Ruth's unwillingness to understand. "Man say: I got to change my life, I'm choking to death, baby! And his woman say ... Your eggs is getting cold!"5

Some black critics feel that A Raisin in the Sun is a play whose time has passed — a simplistic treatment of race relations. Some are confused by Hansberry's professed nationalism, when she seems to favour integration. Far from being a stereotyped or romanticized treatment of black life, the play embodies ideas that have been uncommon on the Broadway stage. Resurrecting the ideas of the Harlem Renaissance and anticipating the new thinking of the 1960s, Hansberry examines the importance of African roots, traditional versus innovative women, the nature of marriage, the real
meaning of money and the search for human dignity. Further, she addresses the sensitive question of to what extent should people, in liberating themselves from the burdens of discrimination, aspire to a white middle-class way of life.

A Raisin in the Sun is the most appropriate title for Hansberry's play. This epithet suggests the tensions and frustrations of the black man's as well as the black woman's existence. The central images of Hughes's poem — raisins, sores, rotten meat, crusted sugar — are images of inevitable decay, if dreams are deferred.

While the play has the structure and substance of social drama, the emphasis is on character. The Youngers are not guinea pigs manipulated to illustrate economic or racial inequity, although they are victims of both. They are interesting people, each invested with a distinctive personality. The family seems to be embroiled in an apparently interminable intramural quarrel. Doubting that family loyalty can hold them together, the audience breathe easier when they close ranks against an
outside enemy. That is when the play, as social drama, reaches its crisis.

The real and decisive crisis in the play, however, is Walter's spiritual ordeal, when he has to make a decision for the family. Here is a study of Negro character under pressure. Indeed, Negroes are seen to be under pressure throughout the play. They often bend but never break. The furnishings build up an image of the struggle and deferred dreams and thus contribute to the tonal form. The message that Hansberry conveys through this drama is that Negroes have to be tough to survive.

Walter Lee Younger is a black male in search of manhood. Living in a cramped, rundown apartment with his mother Lena, he allows himself to be ordered around by his mother as though he were a child. He is frustrated because he cannot provide for his family the luxuries that are to him a sign of manhood. Walter Lee diminishes the importance of genuine human values by believing that his manhood hinges upon securing large sums of money. When it appears that he will not be able to use his mother's ten-thousand-dollar insurance cheque to invest in a
liquor store business, Walter Lee throws a tantrum in which he accuses his family and white America of preventing him from being a man. Like Bigger Thomas in Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940), Walter Lee shifts blame for his failure on to others without accepting responsibility for the errors in judgement that he has made in life. He castigates blacks and implies that whites are to be emulated for their shrewdness in business matters. He suggests that black men cannot be men "'cause we all tied up in a race of people that don't know how to do nothing but moan pray and have babies!" (78)

Gerald Weales in *Commentary* compares Walter Lee Younger with Arthur Miller's Willy Loman. The family so overwhelms the play that Walter Lee necessarily fails as the true symbol he should be, even though his ambitions, his frustrations, and his decisions are those which decisively drive the play on.

There is a story by Richard Wright called "Man of all Work" in which a Negro man dresses up as a woman in order to get work as a cook. His action emphasises the demoralisation of the Negro male when his position as breadwinner is necessarily usurped
by the woman. It is this agony with which Walter Younger lives. He has been desexualised and his dignity has been crushed. It is this knowledge which underlies his bitter disgust and self-contempt.

I'm thirty five years old:
I been married eleven years and
I got a boy who sleeps in the living room — and all I got to give him is stories about how rich white people live... (15)

When a ten thousand dollar insurance matures on his father's death, he has to watch the money pass into his mother's hands — a final blow to both his dreams and his manhood.

You the head of this family.
You run our lives like you want to. (87)

Though it is evident that he loves the women in his family, Walter Lee is a chauvinist. He openly acknowledges that his sister's notions about becoming a doctor are outlandish and masculine. His chauvinism is apparent when he blurts out,

If you so crazy 'bout messing 'round with sick people — then go be a nurse like other women — or just get married and be quiet... (20)
Walter Lee's notion is that women should not aspire to positions of authority and prestige. Throughout the play, Walter Lee tries to intimidate Beneatha into giving up her dreams of going to medical school, thereby increasing his chances of getting the insurance money for achieving his goals.

Walter Lee does not trust his mother's judgement and finds her downpayment on a house in a white neighbourhood utterly feminine and foolish. His opinion of his wife is in keeping with how he perceives most black women: as emasculators. He is particularly brutal to Ruth when she insists that she will not try to convince Mama to turn over the money to him. His prejudice against black women is most apparent when he comments, "That is just what is wrong with the colored women in this world... Don't understand about building their men up and making 'em feel like they somebody. Like they can do something" (16). The implication is that black women have joined forces with white racists to destroy black men. Later, Walter Lee insults Ruth by telling her that black men are tied to a race of women with small minds. As against his partial, anti-feminist
view of black women as emasculators and as agents of subversion to promote, implicitly, the white racist cause, there is the portrayal of Beneatha.

Beneatha's personal odyssey toward wholeness culminates in an African folk dance into which she draws Walter Lee. She tells Walter Lee that the dance is from Nigeria and that it is a dance of welcome. The dance is a symbol of the establishment of kinship and identity. This magical, therapeutic dance allows her momentarily to reach out to a brother she apparently despises. Like Irene in Childress' Mojo, Walter Lee dances feverishly when he hears the African drums, the heart beat of Africa in America. It is this dance that urges Walter Lee to fight to make life better for his family. Transformed, Walter Lee shouts, "YEAH...AND ETHIOPIA STRETCH FORTH HER HANDS AGAIN!... Do you hear the singing of the women, singing the war songs of our fathers to the babies in the great houses ... singing the sweet war songs? OH, DO YOU HEAR, MY BLACK BROTHERS!" (68-70). Walter Lee's plea is to black brothers around the world to recognize their connectedness, to group together in the war against worldwide oppression.
Ironically, Walter takes his cue on manhood from the white men whom he sees through the windows of expensive restaurants "turning deals worth millions of dollars..." (61). Having bought their values, he blames his economic disenfranchisement on the women of the household, whose "small minds" prevent them from understanding and supporting his dreams. Walter wants to set up a shadow world parallel to the white one he observes, complete with its empty status, sexist and classist standards.

An analogue to Walter's ambition to build an imitative world parallel to the one the whites have built, there is the scene in which Karl Linder offers an inducement. The Youngers soon realize his intent. Though never explicitly stated, it is clear that Karl Linder wishes to persuade the Youngers to abandon their plans by offering to buy their new home at a profit. He speaks of how his hard working white neighbours "dream of a kind of community they want to raise their children in" (103) — an ironic reflection of the Youngers own aspirations.

One of the most moving statements in the play is made by Mama when she says to Walter in response to his decision:
Son — I come from five generations of people who was slaves and sharecroppers — but ain't nobody in my family never let nobody pay 'em no money that was a way of telling us we wasn't fit to walk the earth. We ain't never been that poor ... that dead inside. (133)

By the time Linder arrives, Walter has had time to consider his mother's words and his own humiliation, and he tells the astonished white man thus:

We have all thought about your offer and we have decided to move into our house because my father — my father — he earned it ... We don't want to make no trouble for nobody or fight no causes — but we will try to be good neighbours..... We don't want your money. (138)

The old world of Lena and the new world of Beneatha are separated by more than forty years of social and political change. The old world looks inward to the kitchen, the family, the home. The new world stares outward at college, medical school, Africa. Since the Younger family is searching for a centre, a nucleus, the old and the new worlds, straying as they are, collide.
Lena and Beneatha clash sometimes violently. Lena typifies traditional blacks who found personal fulfilment and courage for political and social action in God. Beneatha, however, does not find solace in God, believing instead that man deserves credit for his own efforts. In Act I, Lena says, "You going to be a doctor, honey, God willing." Beneatha replies, "God hasn't got a thing to do with it." Silent and incensed Lena and Ruth listen, as Beneatha continues:

God is just one idea I don't accept...
I get tired of Him getting credit for all the things the human race achieves through its own stubborn effort. There simply is no blasted God — there is only man and it is he who makes miracles! (35-36).

Mama initially fits the popular stereotype of the Black Mammy. In the stage directions, Hansberry writes that Lena has "the noble bearing of the women of the Hereros of South West Africa" (22) who were essentially a pastoral people. Thus Hansberry identifies Lena as an "earth mother," one who nurtures both her family and her plant as well as she can. But Lena reveals her total ignorance of
African history by parroting Beneatha's remarks in her politely naive speech to Joseph Asagai, the young Nigerian visitor:

I think it's so sad the way our American Negroes don't know nothing about Africa 'cept Tarzan and all that. And all that money they pour into these churches when they ought to be helping you people over there drive out them French and Englishmen done taken away your land. (50)

Although she does not know much about Africa, Mrs. Younger does know how to be compassionate to a young man away from home. As Asagai prepares to leave, Mama invites him to dinner sometime soon. Both Beneatha and the audience are being shown that there is more to being a decent person than having intellectual knowledge.

In Act II when the family has decided to move to Clybourne Park, Mama is "Fixing (her) plant so it won't get hurt none on the way." Her nurturing of the plant reflects the caring associated with both mothers and agrarians. When Beneatha asks why she is taking "that raggedy looking old thing" to the new home, Mama says, "It expresses me" (108).
Having grown up in a south that was racist, Lena is fairly content to live simply in Chicago. She is disturbed by Walter Lee's dream of owning liquor store, because she has seen too many southern black men drown their troubles in bottles of beer or Bourbon. They were frustrated by their "invisibility" in a white society, their inability to succeed because of racial prejudice, their failure to support their women financially. Deeply religious, Lena cannot shake the emotional fundamentalist conviction that alcohol — regardless of the occasion — is evil. She then avoids the deeper issue when she says, "we ain't no business people, Ruth. We just plain working folks" (25). At the same time, Lena takes pride in Beneatha's plans for medical school. Doctors, preachers, and teachers make the world a better place, from her viewpoint.

The overpowering personality of Lena Younger, particularly her moral rectitude and selfless nature, tends to overshadow Walter, and this accounts in part for the tendency of many readers and audiences to focus their attention entirely on her. Unfortunately, this violates the equal balance
or proportionate share of the spotlight which each deserves and which the structure of the play calls for.

Ruth and Mama prefer George Murchison as a husband for Beneatha because he is rich, handsome, and comes from a "good" family. But Beneatha is not overwhelmed by these appeals. That she is able to reject such an eligible suitor because she neither loves him nor feels a need to be married is both romantically and rationally attractive. The audience are thus led not only to commend her but also to consider the possibility that marriage is not the only answer for women. During this scene, the fact that the people onstage are black is subordinate to the fact that they are female. If the audience miss the intended blurring of racial distinctions, Beneatha finally proclaims it:

Beneatha: Oh, Mama — the Murchisons are honest-to-God-real-live-rich colored people, and the only people in the world who are more snobbish than rich white people are rich colored people. I thought everybody knew that. I've met Mrs. Murchison. She's a scene!
Mama : You must not dislike people 'cause they well off, honey.

Beneatha : Why not? It makes just as much sense as disliking people 'cause they are poor, and lots of people do that (34).

Beneatha's lines appeal because of their honesty. She is not trying to hide anything about black people or to set them up as better than white people. The message is clear: We should not dislike people because they are rich or poor, black or white. Such scenes as these are crucial in an explication of Hansberry's play in terms of its universality of appeal rather than a partial orchestration of meaning.

The scene between Beneatha and Asagai is meant to both amuse and inform the audience. Beneatha behaves as an adolescent as she revels in her new African robes. When Asagai gently mocks her "mutilated" straightened hair, she makes assertions of her search for identity. The African robes which Beneatha wears introduces yet another tonal quality in the play — racial identity. Detecting Asagai's romantic intentions, she tells him that more than one kind of feeling can exist between a man and a woman. Beneatha goes on
to make emphatic Hansberry's intention to disturb the audience's assumptions about sex roles:

Asagai: For a woman it should be enough.

Beneatha: I know — because that's what it says in all the novels that men write... Go ahead and laugh — but I'm not interested in being someone's little episode in America or — (With feminine vengeance) — one of them! (49).

Beneatha has a strong sense of racial pride compounded with humanistic commitment. Intensely aware of her racial origins, she associates herself with Asagai, and steeps herself in the culture of her forbears. When Asagai gives her the nickname "Alaiyo," 'one who needs more than bread,' it is an indication that Hansberry's concern is less with the poverty of the Youngers than with the need for spiritual replenishment which can only come with a return of dignity. Yet when Walter squanders the money which was to have been paid for her medical training, Beneatha lapses into despair, and the compassion which she has shown evaporates as had Ruth's hope and Walter's ambitions. Like Sidney
Brustein in Hansberry's second play forced to confront present reality, she slips into the cant of nihilism. She projects her personal disappointments on to a universal scale and Asagai identifies the questions which obsess her. 'What good is struggle: What good is anything? Where are we all going? And why are we bothering?' (123).

Hansberry makes Beneatha grapple with key controversies of the period, some of them yet to clearly surface: the relationship of the intellectual to the masses, the relationship of African-Americans to Africanness, the liberation movement itself, and the necessity of black self-respect in its many guises.

Asagai, a young, Nigerian activist studying in America, is the catalyst for Beneatha's growing awareness of a need to fight for black people's rights and women's rights. He is a proud young man who teaches Beneatha about the beauty of blackness, a concept that gained momentum during Marcus Garvey's back to Africa Movement and reached a climax during the 1960s.
Hansberry uses Asagai as a symbol of black struggle and freedom. He supplies the model to Beneatha for the attitudes and commitment needed in order to secure for blacks full citizenship in America and the world. Hansberry sets him up as a link between Africans and African Americans. Asagai tells Beneatha that he would like to take her back to their ancestral home, Nigeria. Hansberry makes it clear that African Americans and their counterparts in other parts of the world are family members who must unite in order to reconstruct a world that looks upon people of colour with hostile eyes. Accepting the call, Beneatha grows into a low-level activist, one of the few black females to be designated as such in the literature of the period by black women dramatists.

Asagai views himself as a liberator, a militant. He is consumed with thoughts of independence. He insists that he plans to return to his country where he will lead a revolution against an oppressive white government. He argues that there must be a revolution to rid his country of illiteracy, disease and ignorance, which by the way are the same ailments that plague blacks and poor people in America.
It is in this fusion of the suffering of blacks in America and Africa that Hansberry sees Asagai as the symbol of humanity's oneness in its isolation. Asagai becomes the instrument that facilitates change in society. With plans to overthrow his country's government, Asagai predicts the inevitable bloodshed: "Guns, murder, revolution. And I even will have moments when I wonder if the quiet was not better than all that death and hatred (124).

Asagai, serving as a cultural conduit, baptizes Beneatha in African history and mores, including teaching her about Africa's struggle for freedom in the ongoing battle with the French and the British colonizers about African dress, customs, songs, dance, and spirit of survival. Harold Isaacs in "Five writers and their Ancestors," suggests that Asagai is "the most literate, the most self-possessed, the most sophisticated, most purposive, I-know-where-I'm going character in the play. He offers the girl (Beneatha) a life of dedication, work and self-realization in emergent Africa." But Asagai, ironically, for all his talk about oppression in his country, cannot see that he is a male supremacist.
The introduction of the play's only white character is set up with humour and deliberately ironic juxtaposition. Karl Lindner, Chairperson of the Clybourne Park Improvement Association, represents white supremacy and all that is entailed in this mentality. Lindner becomes the gatekeeper whose function is to bar blacks out of white neighbourhoods. Lindner does not come to the Youngers robed in Klansman's hood nor does he overtly threaten violence. Instead, he speaks softly and talks about the need for blacks and whites to work together peacefully. But only Beneatha among the characters seems immediately wary of this "friendly" white man.

Hansberry makes Lindner's presentation of his mission dramatically ironic because everything that is seen of the Younger family defeats the "rational" core of Lindner's argument. His central point is that people are happier when they live in a community in which the residents share "a common background." From this viewpoint, "Negroes" and Whites obviously do not have that common background. But just before he articulates this conclusion, Hansberry has Lindner describe his community in a
way that appears as a striking parallel to what it knows of the behaviour and desires of the Youngers.

They’re not rich and fancy people; just hard-working, honest people who don’t really have much but those little homes and a dream of the kind of community they want to raise their children in (103).

Lindner’s convincing dishonesty provokes disgust at his behaviour and applause for Walter’s unhesitant refusal. Hansberry’s purpose, however, seems less to arouse fear in the blacks, than to provoke a recognition in the whites.

*A Raisin in the Sun* attempts a portrait of the aspirations, anxieties, ambitions and contradictory pressures affecting humble Negro folk in an American big city — in this instance Chicago. It is not intended as an appeal to whites or as a preaching for Negroes. It is a felt response to a situation that has been lived through. The play incidentally throws light in this scene between the Youngers and Lindner on aspects of American life outside the area of race as well.
A Raisin in the Sun is essentially a social drama. The play avoids belligerence of attitude in the dramatizing of racial relations and inequality and presents a "home-spun saga of the working class people pursuing the American dream in their own fashion." In fact, it is this quite American aspect of the play that has made many whites not consider it a Negro play. Though the values of the white society have warped Walter Lee, there is no overt protest in the play which confers upon it the title, protest play. In a sense, A Raisin in the Sun could be described as a play about a family in the throes of integrating into a white community. This raises the question whether the play could be described as a piece of "glorified soap opera." That is, from the anti-integrationist side, the play appears a second rate one about blacks who "mouth middle-class ideology." It is important to see that Hansberry in this play offers no easy promise that the frustrations and weariness of old will be left behind, "or that there will be inevitable change in terms of socio-economic achievement and complete human reconciliation."
The centre piece of the play is Walter Lee. His problem however is that he has accepted the American myth of success at its face value. In so doing, he transcends his being a Negro. He is like Willy Loman in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* in being entrapped by the false dream. In projecting this kind of an American image, "Miss Hansberry has come as close as possible to what she intended - a play about Negroes which is not simply a Negro play." 13

A crucial phrase Hansberry uses in representing Mama's speech is "measure him right" which means in a sense to avoid stereotyping. It is in this sense that *A Raisin in the Sun* makes universal appeal.

The Youngers' dream neither dries up nor explodes. It takes forms that were widely accepted by the American society in 1959. A house in the suburbs is a part of the American dream. But the more important part of the dream is freedom for the individual, for the family. The Youngers are indeed a "young" family for they are beginning to grow spiritually and socially. To varying extents, each
of the Youngers changes during the course of the play, thus beginning the painful, yet creative, act of examination — of heritage, of values, of self.

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