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## UNIT 11: LORRAINE HANSBERRY'S *A RAISIN IN THE SUN* BY AS A REALIST PLAY

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### 11.0 OBJECTIVES

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After reading this unit, you will be able to:

- recognize what is meant by the term 'realism' in arts as well as in literature
- understand the features and themes that constitute a realist play and how they are related to American realism
- realize the important role of Lorraine Hansberry in recording the life of African-Americans and the various issues relating to this
- gain insights into how the African-American people perceive their world and stand together to fight racism
- comprehend *A Raisin in the Sun* as a portrayal of real life issues

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### 11.1 INTRODUCTION

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#### 11.1.1 What is realism?

Realism was an artistic movement that began in France in the 1850s, after the 1848 Revolution. Realists rejected Romanticism, which had dominated French literature and art since the late eighteenth century. A reaction against

romanticism, an interest in scientific method, the systematizing of the study of documentary history, and the influence of rational philosophy all affected the rise of realism. Realism revolted against the exotic subject matter, exaggerated emotionalism and drama of the Romantic Movement. Instead it sought to portray real and typical contemporary people and situations with truth and accuracy, focusing on the unpleasant or sordid aspects of life. Realist works depicted people of all classes in situations that arise in ordinary life, and often reflected the changes brought by the Industrial and Commercial Revolutions. The popularity of realistic works grew with the introduction of photography – a new visual source that created a desire for people to produce representations which look objectively real. Realism eschewed any alteration from reality insisting instead on precise imitation. It attempted fidelity to real life, or “actuality,” in its representation.

### 11.1.2 Realism in Literature

Literary realism is part of the realist art movement beginning with mid nineteenth-century French literature favoured by Stendhal, and Russian literature by Alexander Pushkin, and extending to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Literary realism, in contrast to idealism, attempts to represent familiar things as they are. Broadly defined as “the faithful representation of reality” (Campbell), realism as a literary movement, was based on “objective reality.” It focused on showing everyday activities and life, primarily among the middle or lower class society, without romantic idealization or dramatization. Realism is the attempt to represent subject matter truthfully, without artificiality and avoiding artistic conventions, implausible, exotic and supernatural elements. It may be regarded as the general attempt to depict subjects as they are considered to exist in third person objective reality, without embellishment or interpretation and “in accordance with secular, empirical rules” (Morris 5).

#### Definitions

Realism is difficult to define because it is used differently in different contexts. William Dean Howells defines, “Realism is nothing more and nothing less than the truthful treatment of material” (Editor’s Study 966).

According to William Harmon and Hugh Holman, “realists center their attention to a remarkable degree on the immediate, the here and now, the specific action, and the verifiable consequence” (*A Handbook of Literature* 428).

George Parsons Lathrop opines, “Realism sets itself at work to consider characters and events which are apparently the most ordinary and uninteresting, in order to extract from these their full value and true meaning. It would apprehend in all particulars the connection between the familiar and the extraordinary, and the seen and unseen of human nature. Beneath the deceptive cloak of outwardly uneventful days, it detects and endeavours to trace the outlines of the spirits that are hidden there; to measure the changes in their growth, to watch the symptoms of moral decay or regeneration, to fathom their histories of passionate or intellectual problems. In short, realism reveals. Where we thought nothing worth of notice, it shows everything to be rife with significance” (*The Novel and its Future* 324).

Realism as a literary technique is practiced by many schools of writing. Although realism is a technique, it also denotes a particular kind of subject matter, especially the representation of middle-class life. The realists depict everyday subjects and situations in contemporary settings, and attempt to represent individuals of all social classes in a similar manner. Classical idealism and Romantic emotionalism and drama are avoided by the realists. Treatment of subjects in a heroic or sentimental manner is equally rejected. The avoidance of artificiality, in the treatment of human relations and emotions is also an aim of Realism. The realist concerns himself with the here and now, centering his work in his own time, dealing with commonplace every day events and people, and with the socio-political climate of his day.

Realist writings are varied statements of outrage and opposition to the increasing materialism, disorder and perceived moral decay in the world. Included under the broad umbrella of realism are a diverse set of authors, including Henry James, W.D. Howells, Mark Twain, Bret Harte, Rebecca Harding Davis, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Hamlin Garland. Often categorized as regionalists, many of these writers produced work that emphasized geographically distinct dialects and customs. Others offered satirical fiction or novels of manners that exposed the excesses, hypocrisies, or shortcomings of a culture undergoing radical social change.

### 11.1.3 Common Themes and Elements in Realism

- Pragmatism – emphasis on practicality
- literature of the commonplace
- attempts to represent real life
- ordinary people – poor and middle class
- ordinary speech in dialect – use of vernacular
- recent or contemporary life
- subject matter presented in an unidealized, unsentimentalized way
- democratic function of literature
- social criticism – effect on audience is key
- presents indigenous life
- importance of place – regionalism, “local colour”
- sociology and psychology

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## 11.2 REALISM IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

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### 11.2.1 American realism

American Realism was a style in art, music and literature that depicted contemporary social realities and the lives and everyday activities of ordinary people. The movement began in literature in the mid-nineteenth century, and became an important tendency in visual art in the early twentieth century. American realist works attempted to define what was real, whether it is a cultural portrayal or a scenic view of downtown New York City.

In American literature, the term “realism” encompasses the period of time from the Civil War to the turn of the century during which William

Dean Howells, Rebecca Harding Davis, Henry James, Mark Twain, and others wrote fiction devoted to accurate representation and an exploration of American lives in various contexts. As the United States grew rapidly after the Civil War, the increasing rates of democracy and literacy, the rapid growth in industrialism and urbanization, an expanding population base due to immigration, and a relative rise in middle-class affluence provided a fertile literary environment for readers interested in understanding these rapid shifts in culture. In drawing attention to this connection, Amy Kaplan has called realism a “strategy for imagining and managing the threats of social change” (*Social Construction of American Realism* ix).

### 11.2.2 American realist writers

William Dean Howells [1837–1920] was the first American author to bring a realist aesthetic to the literature of the United States. His stories of middle and upper class life set in the 1880s and 1890s are highly regarded among scholars of American fiction. His most popular novel, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), depicts a man who, ironically, falls from materialistic fortune by his own mistakes. Other early American realists include Samuel Clemens, better known by his pen name Mark Twain, Stephen Crane, and Horatio Alger.

Mark Twain [1835–1910] was an American writer, humourist, entrepreneur, publisher, and lecturer. Among his novels are *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) and its sequel, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885). Twain’s style, based on vigorous, realistic, colloquial American speech, gave American writers a new appreciation of their national voice. Twain was the first major author to come from the interior of the country, and he captured its distinctive, humorous slang and iconoclasm. For Twain and other American writers of the late 19th century, realism was not merely a literary technique; it was a way of speaking truth and challenging worn-out conventions.

Stephen Crane [1871–1900] was primarily a journalist who also wrote fiction, essays, poetry and plays. Crane saw life at its rawest, in slums and on battlefields. His haunting Civil War novel, *The Red Badge of Courage*, was published to great acclaim in 1895, but he barely had time to bask in the attention before he died, at twenty-eight, having neglected his health. He has enjoyed continued success ever since – as a champion of the common man, a realist, and a symbolist. Crane’s *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893) is one of the best, if not the earliest, naturalistic American novel. It is the harrowing story of a poor, sensitive young girl whose uneducated, alcoholic parents utterly fail her. In love, and eager to escape her violent home life, she allows herself to be seduced into living with a young man, who soon deserts her. When her self-righteous mother rejects her, Maggie becomes a prostitute to survive, but soon commits suicide out of despair. Crane’s earthy subject matter and his objective, scientific style, devoid of moralizing, mark *Maggie* as a naturalist work.

Horatio Alger, Jr. [1832–1899] was a prolific nineteenth century American author whose principal output was formulaic rags-to-riches juvenile novels that followed the adventures of bootblacks, newsboys, peddlers, buskers, and other impoverished children in their rise from humble backgrounds to

lives of respectable middle-class security and comfort. His novels, of which *Ragged Dick* is a typical example, were hugely popular in their day. Other later American realists are: John Steinbeck, Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser, Upton Sinclair, Jack London, Edith Wharton and Henry James.

### 11.2.3 Characteristics of American realism

Richard Chase in his book *The American Novel and its Tradition* has put forward the following as the distinct features of realism:

- Realism renders reality closely and in comprehensive detail. It selectively presents reality with an emphasis on verisimilitude, even at the expense of a well-made plot.
- Character is more important than action and plot; complex ethical choices are often the subject.
- Characters appear in their real complexity of temperament and motive; they are in explicable relation to nature, to each other, to their social class, to their own past.
- Class is important: the novel has traditionally served the interests and aspirations of an insurgent middle class.
- Events will usually be plausible. Realistic writings avoid the sensational, dramatic elements of naturalistic novels and romances.
- Diction is natural, vernacular, not heightened or poetic; tone may be comic, satiric or matter-of-fact.
- Objectivity in presentation becomes increasingly important; overt authorial comments or intrusions diminish as the century progresses.
- Interior or psychological realism is a variant form of realism.

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## 11.3 LORRAINE HANSBERRY'S *A RAISIN IN THE SUN*

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### 11.3.1 Lorraine Hansberry's early life

Lorraine Hansberry was born in Chicago on May 19, 1930, the youngest of four children. Her parents were well-educated, successful black citizens who publicly fought discrimination against black people. When Hansberry was a child, she and her family lived in a black neighbourhood on Chicago's South side. During this era, segregation - the enforced separation of whites and blacks - was still legal and widespread throughout the Southern States, including Hansberry's own Illinois, had no official policy of segregation, but they were generally self-segregated along racial and economic lines. Chicago was a striking example of a city carved strictly divided black and white neighbourhood. Hansberry's family became one of the first to move into a white neighbourhood, but Hansberry still attended a segregated public school for blacks. When neighbours struck at them with threats of violence and legal action, the Hansberrys defended themselves. Hansberry's father successfully fought his case all the way to the Supreme Court. He died in 1946, when Lorraine was fifteen years old; "American racism helped kill him," she later said (Anderson 263).

Hansberry graduated from Betsy Ross Elementary in 1944 and from Englewood High School in 1948. She attended the University of Wisconsin-

Madison, where she immediately became politically active and integrated a dormitory. Hansberry's classmate Bob Teague remembered her as ". . . the only girl I knew who could whip together a fresh picket sign with her own hands, at a moment's notice, for any cause or occasion" (Anderson 263).

### 11.3.2 Hansberry's later life and writing career

Hansberry broke her family's tradition of enrolling in Southern black colleges and instead attended the University of Wisconsin in Madison. While at school, she changed her major from painting to writing, and after two years decided to drop out and move to New York City. In New York, Hansberry attended the New School for Social Research and then worked for Paul Robeson's progressive black newspaper, *Freedom*, as a writer and associate editor from 1950 to 1953. She also worked part-time as a waitress and cashier, and wrote in her spare time. By 1956, Hansberry quit her jobs and committed her time to writing. In 1957, she joined the Daughters of Bilitis and contributed letters to their magazine, *The Ladder*, about feminism and homophobia. Her lesbian identity was exposed in the articles, but she wrote under her initials, L.H., for fear of discrimination.

During this time, Hansberry wrote *The Crystal Stair*, a play about a struggling black family in Chicago, which was later, renamed *A Raisin in the Sun*, a line from a Langston Hughes poem. The play opened at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre on March 11, 1959, and was a great success, having a run of 530 performances. It was the first play produced on Broadway by an African-American woman, and Hansberry was the first black playwright and the youngest American to win a New York Drama Critics' Circle award for Best Play of the year. She used her new fame to help bring attention to the American civil rights movement as well as African struggles for independence from colonialism.

In 1963, Hansberry became active in the Civil Rights Movement. Along with other influential people, including Harry Belafonte, Lena Horne and James Baldwin, Hansberry met with the then attorney general Robert Kennedy to test his position on civil rights. According to historian Fanon Che Wilkins, "Hansberry believed that gaining civil rights in the United States and obtaining independence in colonial Africa were two sides of the same coin that presented similar challenges for Africans on both sides of the Atlantic" (199). In 1963, her second play, *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*, opened on Broadway to unenthusiastic reception. Hansberry wrote that she always felt the inclination to record her experiences. However, her promising writing career was cut short when she died from cancer in 1965, at the age of thirty-four.

Hansberry's untimely death at the age of thirty-four on January 12, 1965, left a void in American theatre and in the circle of black writers. Jean Carey Bond, in an article in *Freedomways* magazine, says of Hansberry:

[Her] brief sojourn was, in one of its dimensions, a study in pure style. Born into material comfort, yet baptized in social responsibility; intensely individual in her attitudes and behavior, yet sensitive to the wills and aspirations of a whole people; a lover of life, yet stalked by death -- she deliberately fashioned out of these elements an articulate existence of artistic and political commitment, seasoned with that missionary devotion which often intensifies the labors of the mortally ill.

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

### 11.3.3 Plot of *A Raisin in the Sun*

*A Raisin in the Sun*, Lorraine Hansberry's most celebrated play, is a realistic portrait of a working-class black family struggling to achieve the American Dream of careers and home ownership while gripped by the reality of their lives as African Americans who must survive in a racist society.

Hansberry based her play on her knowledge of life in Chicago's black ghetto and the families to whom her father, a successful real estate broker, rented low-income housing. The action takes place in the cramped, roach-infested apartment of the Youngers, where three generations of the family have resided for years. With the death of her husband, Lena [Mama] becomes the head of the family. She has the right to decide how to use the \$10,000 in life insurance money that has come with her husband's death.

Tensions develop quickly. Mama dreams of using the money to move out of the apartment into a new, large home where her family can breathe the free, clean air outside the ghetto. Her son Walter, seeing himself as the new head of the family, envisions the money as a way to free himself and his family from poverty by investing in a liquor store. Walter's intellectual sister hopes the windfall may be a way for her to break racist and sexist barriers by getting a college education and becoming a doctor.

As the play unfolds, Hansberry explores issues of African American identity, pride, male-female relationships within the black family, and the problems of segregation. Mama makes a down payment on a house in a white neighbourhood. Fearing that her exercise of authority will diminish her son's sense of masculine self-worth and in spite of her opposition to buying a liquor store, she reminds Walter of his sister's right to some of the money for a college education and entrusts him with what is left of the money after the down payment. When he returns despairingly after losing all of it, he considers that the only way to recoup the loss is to humiliate himself and his family by making a deal with the Clybourne Park Association, a group of white homeowners who want to buy back the new home in order to keep their neighbourhood white.

In a dramatic conclusion, the disillusioned Walter enacts the dilemma of the modern African American male. Trapped at the bottom of the economic ladder, he must again submit to matriarchal authority. Mama despairs at having to take control and wield the authority she knows is destroying her son's masculine identity. Walter finally realizes that he cannot accept the degradation he would bring upon himself, his family, and his father's memory by accepting the association's offer. Discovering his manhood and his responsibility to his family and his race, he refuses to sell back the house. When the association's representative appeals to Mama to reverse her son's decision, she poignantly and pridefully says, "I am afraid you don't understand. My son said we was going to move and there ain't nothing left for me to say." The play closes with the family leaving their cramped apartment for their new home and the challenges that surely await them there.

### 11.3.4 List of Characters

**Walter Lee Younger** – In his middle thirties, he is the husband of Ruth, father of Travis, brother of Beneatha, and son of Lena [Mama] Younger. Walter works as a chauffeur and drinks a bit too much at times. When he discovers that his mother will receive a \$10,000 cheque from his father's insurance, he becomes obsessed with his dreams of a business venture which will give him financial independence and will make him a more valuable human being.

**Beneatha Younger** – Beneatha Younger is the twenty-year-old sister of Walter Lee and the daughter of Lena Younger. She is a college student planning to go to medical school. The only family member privileged to have the opportunity for a higher education; she is sometimes a little overbearing in the pride she takes in being an "intellectual."

**Lena Younger** – Lena Younger is the mother of Walter Lee and Beneatha, mother-in-law of Ruth, and grandmother of Travis. Lena's [Mama's] every action is borne out of her abiding love for her family, her deep religious convictions, and her strong will that is surpassed only by her compassion. Mama's selfless spirit is shown in her plans to use her \$10,000 insurance cheque for the good of her family, part of which includes plans to purchase a house in a middle-class white neighbourhood.

**Ruth Younger** – Ruth Younger is the wife of Walter Lee Younger and the mother of Travis, their ten-year-old son. Ruth acts as peacemaker in most of the explosive family situations. Unpretentious and unfussy, Ruth reveals her strongest emotions only when she learns of the possibility of their moving to a better neighbourhood.

**Travis Younger** – Travis Younger is the ten-year-old son of Walter and Ruth Younger. Living in a household with three generations in conflict, Travis skilfully plays each adult against the other and is, as a result, somewhat "spoiled."

**Joseph Asagai** – An African college student from Nigeria, Asagai is one of Beneatha's suitors. Mannerly, good looking, and personable, he is well liked by all members of the Younger household.

**George Murchison** – Beneatha's other boyfriend, he too is a college student. His wealthy background alienates him from the poverty of the Youngers.

**Mrs. Johnson** – Brash and abrasive neighbour of the Youngers, she insensitively points out to the Youngers all the negative repercussions that await them should they decide to move into the white neighbourhood.

**Karl Lindner** – A weak and ineffectual middle-aged white man, Lindner is the spokesman for the white community into which the Youngers plan to move. He has been sent to persuade the Youngers not to move into the white neighbourhood. In fact, he has been authorized by the white community to offer the Youngers a monetary incentive not to move in.

**Bobo** – Bobo is the somewhat dim-witted friend of Walter Lee who, along with another friend, Willy, plans to invest in Walter Lee's business scheme.

**Willy** – Willy is the unscrupulous "friend" of Walter Lee and Bobo who absconds with all the money for the prospective business venture.

### 11.3.5 A Raisin in the Sun as a Realist Play

Lorraine Hansberry was one of the first playwrights to create realistic portraits of African-American life. Her play *A Raisin in the Sun* is arguably the first play to portray black characters, themes, and conflicts in a natural and realistic manner. It is recognizably autobiographical. *A Raisin in the Sun* was a revolutionary work for its time. Hansberry creates in the Younger family one of the first honest depictions of a black family on an American stage, in an age when predominantly black audiences simply did not exist. Before this play, African-American roles, usually small and comedic, largely employed ethnic stereotypes. Hansberry, however, shows an entire black family in a realistic light, one that is unflattering and far from comedic. She uses black vernacular throughout the play and broaches important issues and conflicts, such as poverty, discrimination, and the construction of African-American racial identity.

The play examines such serious generational and racial issues as assimilation and the conflicts between idealism, the pursuit of the American dream, and pride in one's racial and cultural heritage, and for the first time, African Americans' life are being brought out and focused on in a literary form. The public is aware that this was how African Americans were living their lives in the 1950s. The different problems in the story that the characters encounter are similar to how people in real life were facing. For certain individuals of the general public, the story would be more familiar, because they probably faced similar issues or know people who were going through hardships, just like the Younger family.

*A Raisin in the Sun* marked the beginning of a more confrontational era in black theatre. It was the first in a series of "black reactions to black American repression in particular and human issues in general" (Effiong 27). *A Raisin in the Sun* was embraced both for its universal themes and for its specific depiction of the struggles of an African-American family living in a racially discriminated place. The play's universal appeal defies, in retrospect, some of the early critics' views of *A Raisin in the Sun* as being simply "a play about Negroes." Although *Raisin* addresses specific problems of a black family in Southside Chicago, it also mirrors the very real problems of all people. In an interview with social historian Studs Terkel, Hansberry explains, "Well, I hadn't noticed the contradiction because I'd always been under the impression that Negroes are people . . . in order to create the universal, you must pay very close attention to the specific" (Young 113).

The social, economic, and emotional context of the 1950s as well as the perception of blacks during this time period is heavily reflected in the play itself. The entire action of the play takes place in the Southside of Chicago sometime between World War II and present (1958): namely the 1950s. During this era, Chicago was strictly divided by race and segregation. The 1950s are often considered a prosperous time for the United States; a time where blacks were content with their inferior status, and women were happy to stay at home and be housewives. This of course caused great tension in both blacks and women and ultimately led to the great civil rights and feminist movements in the 1960s. *A Raisin in the Sun* predates both of these movements, but provides great insight into life during this time period and how it erupted into the 60s.

Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun* is driven by characterization. Though the events center on Mama's decision over what to do with her \$10,000 insurance cheque, the internal motivations, values and traits of each of the main characters influence their decisions and set the plot in motion. Hansberry's characters are fully developed. The characters are mixture of real persons and stereotypes. All the characters of *A Raisin in the Sun* speak "to the text and are critical to its dramatic tensions and understanding. They are necessarily larger than life – in impact – but crafted meticulously from living social material" (Baraka 20).

Mama is probably the most recognizable and longest perpetuated image of African-American women in American society. Mama initially fits the popular stereotype of the Black Mammy. She rules everyone's life, even making a down payment on a house in an all-white neighbourhood without consulting her son. However, as she begins to comprehend the destructive effect of her actions on Walter, she relinquishes her authority and gives him what remained of the money to invest as he wishes. Walter's happiness does not live for long time, however, because he loses the money by entrusting it to his friend Willy who steals him and disappears. In an effort to recover his loss, Walter tells his family that he will accept money from Karl Linder whose, "characterization is a scathing commentary on white northern racism at the personal level" (Jose 882). He is the supposed neighbour of Walter who would rather buy him off than live next door to him. Walter says: "That white man is going to walk in that door able to write checks for more money than we ever had. It's important to him and I'm going to help him" (*A Raisin*). The decision is a personal test for Walter, for he is sorely tempted to sacrifice his pride and integrity for mercenary values. In a highly dramatic moment, Walter gets down on his knees and shows his mother how he will beg, if necessary, for the white man's money. He bents his head and laughs in the style of the old Uncle Tom. Even with Walter's pitiful display Mama is not angry with him, but rather surrounds him with her circle of love and compassion. She is just as the stereotyped image of the Mammy that "gives way to the caring, understanding mother, historic cornerstone of the black family" (Wilkerson).

Douglas Turner Ward has correctly identified that Hansberry's real triumph is the depiction of Walter Lee as a complex character who thinks and acts not as "an author's marionette, but as a harbinger of all the qualities of character that would soon explode into American reality and consciousness" (Ward Douglas). His personal crisis of pride, brought on by his inability to support his family in his job as a chauffeur, culminates with his decision regarding Karl Lindner's offer to purchase the Youngers' new house. But, in a dramatic reversal at the end of the play, Walter decides to reject Linder's offer and reclaims his personal pride, asserts his family's historical right to be treated fairly in their country, and support his family's dignity.

The character of Mr. Linder makes the theme of racial discrimination prominent in the play as an issue the Youngers cannot avoid. The governing body of the Younger's new neighbourhood, the Clybourne Park Improvement Association, sends Mr. Linder to persuade them not to move into the all-white Clybourne Park neighbourhood. Mr. Linder and the people he represents can only see the colour of the Younger family's skin, and his

offer to bribe the Youngers to keep them from moving threatens to tear apart the Younger family and the values for which it stands. He states:

[Y]ou've got to admit that a man ... has the right to want to have the neighborhood he lives in a certain kind of way... I want you to believe me when I tell you that race prejudice simply doesn't enter into it. It is a matter of the people of Clybourne Park believing ... that for the happiness of all concerned that our Negro families are happier when they live in their own communities. (*A Raisin in the Sun*)

These words of Mr. Lindner bring the issue of racial prejudice under focus. Ultimately, the Youngers respond to this discrimination with defiance and strength. The play powerfully demonstrates that the way to deal with discrimination is to stand up to it and reassert one's dignity in the face of it rather than allow it to pass unchecked.

Hansberry deals with segregation as "a socialist organization of society, as the next great and dearly won universal condition of mankind" ("The Tribute" 17). Locating the Younger family in Chicago's South Side, Hansberry directly engages crises produced by "ghetto economies and dehumanizing living conditions, restricted educational access and literally explosive encounters along urban color lines" (Gordon 125). The concern over money and the kind of resistance and violence the Younger family faces in trying to attain its dreams of going out of the ghetto show how racism has much effect on everything in their daily life.

By explicitly confronting segregation in Chicago, Hansberry's anti-racist aesthetic gives shape to a pragmatic social vision and a "genuine realism," both designed to promote meaningful social change. Genuine realism, Hansberry explained, imposes on a work "not only what is, but what is possible ... because that is part of reality too ... So that you get a much larger potential of what man can do" (*Young* 228). Her conception of genuine realism renders human beings as active agents in their own liberation as well as in the oppression of others, and opens a cultural space in which to imagine alternatives to a truthfully represented, repressive social reality. Equally concerned with present truth and future possibility, Hansberry's genuine realism rejects the deterministic impulses of naturalism; unwilling to succumb to the social constructions of capitalist white supremacy, her genuine realism relies instead upon what she considered an imperative, but in no way naive, idealism.

Hansberry portrays the African American "nostalgia which has been nurtured by the Younger's dream but which remains realistically counterbalanced by the inexorable facts of the Younger's American identity" (Brown). For instance, Beneatha embodies the yearning for a future which is informed by a sense of identity that proudly encompasses a more accurate knowledge of the African past. She attempts to embrace her heritage by changing her hair style to natural, her tribal dress and African dance. Hansberry shows that "the African was much more than the primitive, savage exotic portrayed in American films and novels" (Elam 46). Beneatha searches for her identity "as a mature adult by rebelling against her mother's orthodox Christianity in favour of rational humanism; as a woman by choosing the non-traditional

vocation of doctor; and as a black by rejecting her moneyed assimilationist boyfriend” (Krasner 173). She dismisses the middle-class George Murchison who considers her desire to be a doctor as laughable, and when she tries to talk to him seriously, he advises her “to cut it out.” (*A Raisin*)

Beneatha’s other suitor, the African student Joseph Asagai, is somewhat complex and highly appealing. He is a charming “mixture of idealism and sophistication” (Carter 161). He is a romantic hero who is the spokesman for many of Hansberry’s political and philosophical views. Hansberry uses Asagai, to challenge the notions of both realism and idealism: “it is very odd,” he muses, “but those who see the changes – who dream, who will not give up – are called idealists . . . and those who see only the circle we call them the ‘realists’!” (*A Raisin*). Brown argues that Hansberry’s dramatic insight of the “romanticization of Africa, in the person of Asagai, goes hand in hand with the emphasis on the Youngers’ American commitment” (Brown). Asagai is both “inheritor and exponent of the ancestral and human impulse for freedom” (Elam 47). He expresses in philosophical and political terms “the long-desired reuniting of Africans and Afro-Americans through shared beliefs, not colour alone” (Wilkerson).

Hansberry’s evaluation of assimilation and identity is expressed through the characters of George and Asagai. Beneatha’s two suitors embody the dichotomy between the conflicting identities available to blacks: the identity that seeks assimilation and the identity that rejects assimilation. George represents a black person assimilating into the white world, while Asagai, stands for the new Africanist culture that those who oppose assimilation pursue. Through the character of Joseph Asagai, Hansberry reveals a trend toward celebrating African heritage. As he calls for a native revolt in his homeland, she seems to predict the anti-colonial struggles in African countries of the upcoming decades, as well as the inevitability and necessity of integration.

Almost all the characters in *A Raisin in the Sun* have unfulfilled dreams. These dreams mostly involve money. Although the Younger family seems alienated from white middle-class culture, they have the same materialistic dreams as the rest of American society. In the 1950s the stereotypical American dream was to have a house with a yard, a big car, and a happy family. The Youngers also seem to want to live this dream, though their struggle to attain any semblance of it is dramatically different from the struggle of a similar suburban family might encounter, because the Youngers are not a stereotypical middle-class family. Rather, they live in a world in which being middle class is also a dream.

The entire play centers around dreams, as each character and the Younger family, as a whole, have a dream they struggle to achieve in their oppressive environment. Even the title of the play refers to a poem written by Langston Hughes, which talks about “dreams deferred.” This highlights the importance of dreams in *A Raisin in the Sun* and the struggle that the characters face to realize their individual dreams, a struggle inextricably tied to the more fundamental black dream of equality in America.

Every member of the Younger family has a separate, individual dream. Beneatha’s dream is to become a doctor. Further, Beneatha wants to break

free of conforming to the white ideal. She does not want to assimilate into the dominant white culture and give in to what other people expect of her. Walter wants to have money so that he can afford things for his family. In Act II Scene II, Walter's conversation with Travis expresses his ambition and hope for the future of the family, "your daddy's gonna make a transaction . . . a business transaction that's going to change our lives." (*A Raisin*) Mama's dream is for Walter to grow up and be the head of the family. She wants him to take responsibility and for Beneatha to pursue her dream. Ruth's dream is to have a bigger house to fit and unite the family together.

The Youngers struggle to attain these dreams throughout the play, and much of their happiness and depression is directly related to their attainment of, or failure to attain, these dreams. Despite the several hardships the Younger family is forced to endure, the family exemplifies love and strength in their relationships with each other. In the end, the family decides to chase the dream of owning a house, since it will benefit and unite the family most. However, the desire for and efforts put into each person's dreams are what make up the play, and the integrity of each character. This of course ties into the great American Dream and the African families who struggle to attain their own version of it.

Lorraine Hansberry's use of the black vernacular adds to the realistic aspect of the play. Clearly, Hansberry understood that the dialects of black communities were distinctly different from the dialects of other communities for she has her characters speak in the very real language of their community. Although Hansberry's own immediate family were all college educated and spoke Standard English all the time at home, Hansberry herself spent a lot of time in poor Southside households that were similar to that of the Younger family in *A Raisin in the Sun*. Naturally Mama's speech is different from Beneatha's; however, there are even subtle differences between the speech patterns of Mama and Walter and Ruth and Bobo.

The language of many of the characters of *A Raisin in the Sun* is unconventionally non-Standard English; the black characters are not merely speaking English that is ungrammatical; rather, they are speaking a dialect common in the black communities that are heavily populated by migrants from the South. Their dialect, although similar to the white southern dialect, is distinctly different in that it is mostly an outgrowth of the period of slavery. At that time, slaves were forbidden a formal education and therefore mimicked whatever English they heard, ending up with a "Pidgin English" not unlike the English spoken by many of the American population. Since Hansberry is familiar with the non-Standard English spoken in Southside Chicago, she employs black dialect throughout her play to highlight the very realities faced by the "plain working folks" (*A Raisin*).

Anchored in the traditions of radical black American art, organized activism and thought, Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* provides not only instructive social critique but also prophetic inquiry. This prophetic inquiry operates as an integral part of her genuine realism, urging her readers, as *Raisin's* title suggests, to consider seriously both what happens to millions of dreams deferred, and the trials that those who fight for independence must face.

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## 11.4 SUM UP

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*A Raisin in the Sun* explores not only the tension between white and black society but also the strain within the black community over how to react to an oppressive white community. The play deals with everyday situations and is written from a third person objective point of view with the 'narrator' giving stage directions to what the characters are doing. Almost all the characters are black and they speak in African American dialect. Hansberry tries to show that black are no less human than white. The Youngers have the right to live and hope for better life but unfortunately Youngers can do that only through insurance of their father's death. The problem of Walter and his mother is similar to those which may appear in any other family. They depict families which approve their similarities to those who are around them. Even though, towards the end, the Youngers move to their new house, they are aware of their future in a white neighbourhood. The play is not so hopeful of the future but the hope lies in the strength and endurance of black people.

Hansberry did more than document which was the most limited form of realism. She depicted the realistic image of the Black people with – “greater realism and complexity” (Carter) but this did not “obscure her awareness of and sensitivity to African-American hardships and neither did it estrange her from the ordeals shared by most blacks” (Effiong 29). Hansberry's aesthetic is distinctly black, egalitarian and radical – placing, in the words of Amiri Baraka, “real life under the lights and speaking with the sharp eruptive force of black everyday everywhere” (Baraka “Sweet Lorraine” 526). Her art reflects her own “sense of tactical reality,” and her firm belief that “the world is political and that political power, in one form or another, will be the ultimate key to the liberation of American Negroes and, indeed, black folk throughout the world” (*Young* 212, 213).

Despite being placed in 1950s, many of the racial, familial or financial struggles presented in the play are still real today for a lot of people. Hansberry's portrayal of how an African American family strives to accomplish this dream poses many more conflicts than it typically perceived, forcing readers to redefine the American Dream for people like the Younger family. *A Raisin in the Sun*, therefore, can be read as a realist play which reflects the social realities of African-American people.

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## 11.5 SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

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## 11.6 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (POSSIBLE QUESTIONS)

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- Q1. Define realism.
- Q2. Discuss the importance of Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*.
- Q3. Discuss racism with reference to the text discussed in the unit.
- Q4. Comment on the plot of '*A Raisin in the Sun*'.