

Lorraine Hansberry: Portrait of a Revolutionary Artist

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Dedicated to Lorraine . . . with love

For a Young Negro I Have Met, a Love Song

How can I explain?
But you
Remind me of our blues...
My blues – your blues-
Ours
Singing out in a Harlem afternoon...

Of your own-
You carry your head a certain way
And laugh a certain way-
“Reserved”...

You
Are the kind who stands up to speak in church
About the housing conditions
The price of living or
In protest of the latest lynching
And wise old ladies in the front rows
All starched and holy in their white uniforms

Look so proud at you and their eyes shine:
“Our youth,” they say
Our beautiful youth!”
And that is *you*

You who neither look nor sound the blues
You who bear no scars of slavery
Have never shouted out in redemption and – never will
You

You remind me of Africa
There is little that is Africa about you
Neither color nor speech nor ways of dress...
Yet as our people remind me of Africa
So do you

I would dream of draping you in our robes
Put an ancient chant upon your lips.
It is that so much – without being so-
You are so very much *us*
And that is why I love you.

- Hansberry, *To Be Young* 80

INTRODUCTION

This curriculum unit is the result of my association with the Houston Teachers Institute’s seminar course “Eye on America: Twentieth-Century Playwrights and American Life and Times.” This course afforded me the opportunity to revisit several classic American plays. One of which was Lorraine Hansberry’s, *A Raisin in the Sun*. The major benefits of time, which are age and wisdom, enabled me to study this play with a more sincere and heartfelt appreciation than I had several years prior. I was now immediately captivated by the passionate raw truth of the play’s characters. My spirit was intensely struck with gratitude for a writer who could capture the hidden cries buried deep within the shadows of my soul with such graceful dignity and unsurpassed creativity. This overwhelmingly awesome feeling led me on a quest to discover who Lorraine Hansberry truly was. I wanted to know what elements, circumstances, and experiences came together to influence such a monumental artistic human being:

I suppose that I think that the highest gift that man has is art, and I am audacious enough to think of myself as an artist – that there is both joy and beauty and illumination and communion between people to be achieved through the dissection of personality. That’s what I want to do. I want to reach a little closer to the world, which is to say to people, and see if we can share some illuminations together about each other. I happen to believe that most people –and this is where I differ from many of my contemporaries, or at least as they express themselves –I think that virtually every human being is dramatically interesting. Not only is he dramatically interesting, he is a creature of stature whoever he is... (Hansberry, *To Be Young* 4)

I must admit that the evening my seminar class discussed Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* was, by far, the most memorable of each of the semester’s seminar sessions. Despite the fact that seminar participants were all from various racial, cultural and religious backgrounds, everyone seemed to find mirrored reflections of themselves within this play. This reaction created, within the seminar, some of the most passionate and sincere responses on identity, race relations in America, poverty and survival - which I am certain most participants have never shared in public before a mixed audience. Participants energetically began referring to current events in support of the importance and pertinence of the themes and ideas Hansberry discusses in her play to today’s societal struggles.

Witnessing this passionately daring exchange of personal experiences and opinions, I realized just how necessary Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* is to the healing of our American society. The truths brought forth in this play cannot be denied or relegated to chance occurrence. Hansberry has crafted one of the best technically written plays of the twentieth century which forces its' audiences to reflect upon themselves and the roles that are played within every community. Though seminar participants were delicately cautious with themselves at the onset of this discussion, each person shared a common eagerness to discuss what has become a major conversational taboo in American society – race relations. Discussing American racial injustices honestly will surely leave someone with a negative label or as a complete outcast. Although America is a country whose wealth and power have been completely built upon the idea of a superior race over an inferior race (decided upon, of course, by those that consider themselves superior), she is now at a moment in her history where she would have her citizens to believe that all is indeed well. Racial prejudice is a thing of the distant past and discussing its injustices merely prolongs it. One achieves and strives in American society when racial prejudice is not discussed at all –this is the underlining rule of the new post civil-rights Americanism. ... Yet, if this *imagined* image of American society and culture were a reality, Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* would not have ignited such an intense and emotionally exhaustive response – 47 years after it was written:

One factor stands out: they were young artists. Young adults, to be sure, but actually *so very young!* In the end, I believe, it is the spirit of youth itself – and all that should go along with it –the vitality and lyricism and beauty, the youthful arrogance, the sense of their own worth and promise and of concern for others – that most characterized those days for Hansberry and Baldwin. ... In the nineties, as new productions of *YGB* continue to be presented, a new generation of artists and students is discovering Hansberry. For young African Americans in the theatre, still seeking ways and means of developing and affirming their own identities and contributing to their world, she offers as beacon of light. (Hansberry, *To Be Young* xiv)

“Lorraine Hansberry: Portrait of a Revolutionary Artist” is a curriculum unit designed to inspire and revitalize the rebirth of the artist with a passionate purpose and vision for not only himself but for his entire community. This curriculum will dissect the particular influences and circumstances that together created the politically revolutionary artist and writer Lorraine Hansberry. She was revolutionary in that her art was a significant tool in forging political and social change during the Civil Rights Era of the 1950s and 1960s. Currently the “artists” that my students witness and herald have little to no political or social consciousness. Their “art” is created without any artistic responsibility for their communities. Specifically, the current hip-hop rap artists whose primary medium—like Lorraine Hansberry—is writing. Many rappers comment on the harsh realities of urban life in America using, oftentimes, beautifully creative poetic rhythms, while, at the same time, glamorizing and profiting monetarily from the stereotyped negative images of their communities. Therefore, they become the sellers and perpetrators of the problems that

exist and are destroying their communities. These are definitely not artists consciously using their craft to shed light on issues in search of solutions. These poetic rappers are not the caliber of a politically revolutionary artist as Lorraine Hansberry.

As a performing artist and arts educator, I am constantly asking myself the dubious questions: “Why are they not responsible artists? Do they not see the persistent negative ripple affects their work has on the people within their communities?” Searching for hopeful answers, I am left with awareness of a major undeniable difference between our modern artists of today and those artists who exemplified more social relevance in their work – education. Unfortunately, most hip-hop rap artists have little to no formal arts education! This leaves them without what is, in my opinion, the most invaluable course to any artist – art history. Art history empowers artists with the necessary knowledge of where they stand in the world as creative beings. This awesome knowledge enables artists to make creative decisions from a more global perspective – definitely from a much wider perspective than their egos and pocketbooks!

The words of Langston Hughes, renowned African-American poet and thinker, illustrate this point:

The Negro writer in the United States has always had – has been forced to have in spite of himself – two audiences, one black, one white. And, as long as has been America’s dilemma, seldom “the twain shall meet.” The fence between the two audiences is the color bar, which in reality stretches around the world. Writers, who feel they must straddle this fence, perforce acquire a split personality. Writers who do not care whether they straddle the fence of color or not, are usually the best writers, attempting at least to let their art leap the barriers of color, poverty or whatever other roadblocks to artistic truth there maybe. Unfortunately, some writers get artistic truth and financial success mixed up, get critical acclaim and personal integrity confused. Such are the dilemmas which the double audience creates. Which set of readers to please – the white, the black, or both at once?

The best writers are those who possess enough self-integrity to wish first and foremost to please themselves, only themselves, and nobody else. But this, when one is young and one’s thinking is unclear – and one’s ability to analyze this world about one is uncertain – is not easy. (Hughes 476)

“Lorraine Hansberry: Portrait of a Revolutionary Artist” will strengthen my teaching practices and techniques through an in-depth study of one of American Theatre’s greatest and most respected storytellers – Lorraine Hansberry. Her stories and themes will breathe new life and energy into my theatre arts curriculum by teaching my students that the most memorable and noteworthy theatrical experiences begin with a fundamental thought about our society and its’ norms and practices. This curriculum is designed to validate Lorraine Hansberry as an historian, political and social activist, as well as a

moral surveyor of American and world culture. The literary art of playwriting will also be examined as a form of storytelling. Students will ultimately experience this in-depth study of storytelling as an acting style and be able to critically analyze the role of artists in their community and its' relation to the larger world community.

Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* and *To Be Young, Gifted and Black* will be the primary basis for exploration and study for this exciting and unique curriculum. The common themes inherent in each play such as God versus humanity, oppression, persecution, morality, the struggle for identity, the role of men and women in society, prejudice, values and traditions, and the pains of the poor and disenfranchised will be explored for their revolutionary protest relevance. These plays have been deliberately chosen for both their literary, political and societal value to my student's lifestyles and experiences.

TEACHING STORIES

I had an extremely interesting experience as a teacher a few weeks ago. A bright, young, sixth grade student came excitedly to my classroom one evening proudly announcing that she'd finally received the schedule change she requested – to be in my theatre arts class. Just as she was on her way out of my classroom, she turned around suddenly with the most curiously serious look about her. She wanted me to describe my teaching methods to her. Having never had a student ask what methods I use, my first reaction was to laugh at the shock of such a mature question from such a young child. Yet, the student wasn't laughing. I realized that I must quickly gather myself and answer her before all respect is lost. I told her that I teach through storytelling - that all my students have to do is listen to my stories and they will be highly successful in my classes. She immediately smiled and said that that her father always says that is the very best way to teach. ... It turns out her father is an educational psychologist.

I am the sum total of stories. I have been raised on stories – both good and bad. My childhood was filled with the mystery tales of my family and how I came to be. My adolescence was exhausted with numerous horror stories of teens whose decision-making abilities were not strong enough to carry them on through adulthood. These stories have fueled my passion for life, learning and teaching.

As a theatre arts teacher, I have an incredible opportunity to positively impact the personal development of my students. My ultimate goal as an educator is to make my students aware of their humanity and the inherent responsibility that they have to themselves and others. In the course of my teaching, if I happen to mold an incredible young artist – great. Yet, this is in no way the fundamental, or realistic, goal of my teaching efforts. I teach theatre arts to middle school students, grades 6-8, in the inner city of Houston, Texas. Well over 75% of my students are assigned to my classes as a mandatory component in fulfilling elective class credits. With this, the majority of my students enter into my classes with no desire for stage performance (and they are eager to

inform me of such). This being said, my challenge is to encourage students to learn this new and creative art form in a comfortable, relaxed, and safe environment.

My theatre arts classroom environment can best be described as a structured free place. I have spent years delicately finding the balance between an “acting for young actors” class and an “acting for non-actors” class. Thus far, this search has led me to realize and focus on the brilliance that is inherent in a true theatre arts curriculum. The benefits of a theatre arts education are immeasurable. My students learn vocal, breathing, and relaxation techniques that increase their public speaking skills. Through various and continuous theatre games, students learn to work cooperatively with others in challenging group activities. These activities offer students the opportunity for immediate self-reflection, which is a necessary component in positive character development. I want my students to become greater human beings as a result of my classroom environment. My theatre arts class encourages students to question not only themselves but also their society and its’ norms and practices.

“Lorraine Hansberry: Portrait of a Revolutionary Artist” is designed to inspire students to effectively reflect upon themselves and their communities in terms of their political and social existence. Designed to courageously confront the racial taboos of American society by providing a platform for honest discussion and discourse, I am certain that as my students mature into adulthood, they will have been properly armed with the honest experiences of others to guard them from continuing the hurtful racial and societal practices, which are so much a terrible part of our American culture. To achieve this monumental (and romantic) goal, I realize the tremendous responsibility that I have as the teacher. I must actively create a safe environment for all opinions and perspectives—especially those for which I do not agree. I must become the face of tolerance for my students. Doing so does not require me to change my own personal theories or ideologies, it merely requires that I sincerely listen and conscientiously attempt to understand another perspective from my own.

LORRAINE HANSBERRY

I think you could find the tempo of my people on their back porches. The honesty of their living is there in the shabbiness. Scrubbed porches that sag and look their danger. Dirty gray wood steps. And always a line of white and pink clothes scrubbed so well, waving in the dirty wind of the city. My people are poor. And they are tired. And they are determined to live.

Our Southside is a place apart: each piece of our living is a protest. (Hansberry, *To Be Young* 17)

On May 19, 1930, Lorraine Hansberry was born in Chicago, Illinois, as the fourth child of Mr. and Mrs. Carl Hansberry. Raised on Calumet Avenue in Chicago’s notorious Southside, Hansberry recalls being raised in a “utilitarian household.” Her parents were hard working, intelligent and responsible providers for their children—ensuring that each

child had every necessity and many desired extras. This was possible because the Hansberry household had more money than most of the families in their Southside neighborhood, due to her father's successful real-estate investments. Young Lorraine and her siblings enjoyed the benefits of this additional money in way of fun accessories and stylish clothes. Yet, utilitarian minded, the Hansberrys raised their children in a fairly strict household with clear expectations:

We were also vaguely taught certain vague absolutes: that we were better than no one but infinitely superior to everyone; that we were the products of the proudest and most mistreated of the races of man; that there was nothing enormously difficult about life; that one *succeeded* as a matter of course. (Hansberry, *To Be Young* 17)

The early influence of Hansberry's family had a tremendous impact on her development as a political artist. In sharp contrast to many young people growing up within challenging ghettos who surrender themselves to the loss of hope and the continuous daily struggle for inspiration and motivation, Hansberry was raised to understand that her neighborhood is the result of a deliberately constructed racist attack against Blacks in America. In response to this, the Hansberry household was purposefully filled with political and social commentary as vast and specific as their immediate neighborhood to America's influence and relationship with other countries. This being said, Hansberry was raised and taught at a very early age be her own thinker. Her parents strongly encouraged and expected intelligent opinions regarding even the minutest matters of importance. As a result, the critical thinking and reasoning skills gained soon became the foundation of Hansberry's work as a writer and artist:

Life was not a struggle-it was something that one *did*. One won an argument because, if facts gave out, one invented them-with color! The only sinful people in the world were dull people. And, above all, there were two things which were never to be betrayed: the family and the race. (Hansberry, *To Be Young* 18)

Despite the fact that Lorraine Hansberry's parents were financially capable of educating their children in private schools, they deliberately chose the experience of public education in their Southside ghetto neighborhood for their children. They wanted their children to know – first hand – the harsh realities of poverty. One of which is drastically poor education:

I was given, during the grade school years, one-half the amount of education prescribed by the Board of Education of my city. This was so because the children of the Chicago ghetto were jammed into a segregated school system. I am a product of that system and one result is that - to this day - I cannot count properly. I do not add, subtract or multiply with ease. Our teachers, devoted and indifferent alike, had to sacrifice something to make the system work at all-and in my case it was arithmetic that got put aside most often. Thus, the mind, which

was able to grasp university level reading materials in the sixth and seventh grades, had not been sufficiently exposed to elementary arithmetic to make even simple change in a grocery store.

This is what is meant when we speak of the scars, the marks that the ghettoized child carries through life. To be imprisoned in the ghetto is to be forgotten-or deliberately cheated of one's birthright-at best. (Hansberry, *To Be Young* 35)

Lorraine Hansberry clearly understood that the education she received from Chicago Public Schools was tempered by the racist overture of segregation and less-than standards. Valuing education as a means to an end, Hansberry strongly felt that the education of below-standard schools was not the answer for children in the ghetto. Her journal writings prove that, at an early age, she yearned for an education from a more global perspective. In 1937, the Hansberrys made a dramatic move to an all-white neighborhood near the University of Chicago. Here Lorraine witnessed violent attacks towards her family from racist whites that were venomously against integration. The contrasting experiences of each neighborhood provided for Lorraine's forthcoming claim to fame – *A Raisin in the Sun*.

After graduating from Englewood High School, Hansberry entered the University of Wisconsin in 1948 as an art student. Her struggles with being uninspired by institutionalized educational standards and expectations continued until the brilliant architect Frank Lloyd Wright came and spoke at the University:

Later, addressing the packed hall, he attacked almost everything-and, foremost among them, the building he was standing in for its violation of the organic principles of architecture; he attacked babbity and the nature of education saying that we put in so many fine plums and get out so many fine prunes. Everyone laughed—the faculty nervously I guess; but the students cheered.

I left the University shortly after to pursue an education of another kind . . .
(Hansberry, *To Be Young* 71)

In 1950 Lorraine Hansberry left the University of Wisconsin and moved to New York in search of artistic and social relevance. New York provided the energy, enthusiasm and political activism that Hansberry yearned for both intellectually and artistically. Sparking her career as a political writer and social rights activist, Hansberry met and befriended two international writers and activists who would prove to have an invaluable affect upon her life and truly shape her thoughts and ideals as a great writer of international importance – W.E.B. Du Bois and Paul Robeson.

THE THREE WISE MEN

MAMA: Yes-I taught you that. Me and your daddy. But I thought I taught you something else too ... I thought I taught you to love him.

BENEATHA: Love him? There is nothing left to love.

MAMA: There is always something left to love. And if you ain't learned that, you ain't learned nothing. (Looking at her) Have you cried for that boy today? I don't mean for yourself and for the family 'cause we lost the money. I mean for him: what he been through and what it done to him. Child, when do you think is the time to love somebody the most? When they done good and made things easy for everybody? Well then, you ain't through learning –because that ain't the time at all. It's when he's at his lowest and can't believe in hisself 'cause the world done whipped him so! *When you starts measuring somebody, measure him right, child, measure him right. Make sure you done taken into account what hills and valleys he come through before he got to wherever he is.*" (Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun* Act III)

The role of the Black Man in America is unarguably one filled with struggle and turmoil. American racism has chosen him as its target for fear, hatred and all that is wrong in society. Black Men must find daily internal strength to combat the marketed images and relied upon beliefs of his being less equaled and valuable than everyone else in society is. Though these marketed images and beliefs have been propagated since American slavery, this is not the reality of Black Men. Lorraine Hansberry, heralded by scholars as one of the greatest writers of the twentieth century, is the magnificent product of three incredibly wise, courageous and intelligent BLACK MEN – her father, Carl Hansberry; writer and political activist, W.E.B. Du Bois; and actor and civil rights activist, Paul Robeson. Each of these men had strikingly similar characteristics, which led them to work passionately to change the racist nature of American society.

This being said, it is must also be noted that they each became American expatriates as a direct result of racism in America.

Carl Hansberry

The man that I remember was an educated soul, though I think now, looking back, that it was as much a matter of the physical bearing of my father as his command of information and of thought that left that impression on me. I know nothing of the "assurance of kings" and will not use that metaphor on account of it. Suffice it to say that my father's enduring image in my mind is that of a man whom kings might have imitated and properly created their own flattering descriptions of. A man who always seemed to be doing something brilliant and/or unusual was the way I assumed fathers behaved.

He digested the laws of the State of Illinois and put them into little booklets. He invented complicated pumps and railroad devices. He could talk at length on American history and private enterprise (to which he utterly subscribed). And he carried his head in such a way that I was quite certain that there was nothing he

was afraid of. Even writing this, how profoundly it shocks my inner senses to realize suddenly that *my* father, like all men, must have known *fear*. . .
(Hansberry, *To Be Young* 20)

One of the most powerful forces in Lorraine Hansberry's life was her father Carl Hansberry. As his youngest daughter Lorraine learned the value of truth, education, perseverance and the necessity of family from him. Carl Hansberry had a passionate entrepreneurial spirit which led him to have a successful business in real estate. At a time when many Americans were finding their way towards the "American Dream," Carl Hansberry had amassed a considerable fortune. As one of the dominant figures behind the founding of Chicago's first black bank, Carl Hansberry controlled property for housing for four thousand families and was worth over \$200,000:

As one who "believed that the 'American Way' could be made to work," Hansberry pursued political reform as one of the few remaining black Republican candidates for Congress in an era that found African-Americans turning to the Democratic Party; he also sought legal redress under the auspices of the Hansberry Foundation. At its helm, Hansberry invested much of his wealth in a campaign to "encourage and promote respect for all laws, especially those related to the civil rights of American citizens. (Keppel 23)

Carl Hansberry was a prominent political figure in Chicago politics. After purchasing property in Chicago's exclusive Hyde Park neighborhood for his family, Carl Hansberry and his family immediately became the object of racial violence, including slurs, damage to property and constant harassment. In 1943, he led a groundbreaking Supreme Court victory in *Hansberry vs. Lee*. The Supreme Court declared in favor of the Hansberrys' living in Hyde Park. Despite this incredible desegregation decision, there was no security for his family in this new and hostile neighborhood.

Carl Hansberry truly believed in the American Dream. Originally from Mississippi, he moved to Chicago during the Great Migration of blacks from the South in search of work in the North. Carl Hansberry worked extremely hard for himself, his family and his community. As a result of moving his family to the all-white neighborhood of Hyde Park, Carl Hansberry soon realized that he could no longer fight American racism. His successful Supreme Court case would not protect his family from the unspeakable racist horrors they were now receiving in this neighborhood. This being said, Carl Hansberry soon moved to Mexico to make a home for his family. His plan was for them to relocate there after he had completed everything. Unfortunately, in 1945, Carl Hansberry died of a cerebral hemorrhage while in Mexico:

. . . My father was typical of a generation of Negroes who believed that the "American way" could successfully be made to work to democratize the United States. Thus, twenty-five years ago, he spent a small personal fortune, his considerable talents, and many years of his life fighting, in association with

NAACP attorneys, Chicago's "restrictive covenants" in one of this nation's ugliest ghettos.

That fight also required that our family occupy the disputed property in a hellishly hostile "white neighborhood" in which, literally, howling mobs surrounded our house. One of their missiles almost took the life of the then eight-year-old signer of this letter. My memories of this "correct" way of fighting white supremacy in America include being spat at, cursed and pummeled in the daily trek to and from school. And I also remember my desperate and courageous mother, patrolling our house all night with a loaded German luger, doggedly guarding her four children, while my father fought the respectable battle in the Washington court.

The fact that my father and the NAACP "won" a Supreme Court decision, in a now famous case which bears his name in the law books, is-ironically-the sort of "progress" our satisfied friends allude to when they presume to deride the more radical means of struggle. The cost, in emotional turmoil, time and money, which led to my father's early death as a permanently embittered exile in a foreign country when he saw that after such sacrificial efforts the Negroes of Chicago were as ghetto-locked as ever, does not seem to figure in their calculations. (Hansberry, *To Be Young* 20)

It is obvious that Lorraine Hansberry's political and social drive is inherited from the wealth of memories that she has of her father. Having a parent with such a passionate drive and belief in the possibilities of this country, while, at the same time, being slowly killed by the country's horrifying realities has molded Lorraine Hansberry's socially conscious drive for freedom and equality for all. Lorraine Hansberry learned the value of hard work, real-life experiences, dignity, self-respect and to act without fear from her noble father – Carl Hansberry.

W.E.B. Du Bois

W.E.B. Du Bois was a pioneer intellectual. Born in 1868 in Massachusetts, William Edward Burghardt Du Bois soon became an internationally respected scholar, speaker and historian. W.E.B. Du Bois wrote sixteen groundbreaking books of history, politics, and race relations. He was the first African-American to receive a Harvard doctorate and a Lenin Peace Prize. It is also worthy to note that his birthday was once a national holiday celebrated in China.

W.E.B. Du Bois was one of the primary founders of the NAACP and courageously published the monthly magazine, *The Crisis*, highlighting racial issues for the masses. This fearless writer, editor, scholar, historian and educator died at the age of ninety-five years old in Ghana, Africa. He also died as an American expatriate. The following is an excerpt of the article, "Returning Soldiers" which appeared in *The Crisis*:

We are returning from war! *The Crisis* and tens of thousands of black men were drafted into a great struggle. For bleeding France and what she means and has meant and will mean to us and humanity and against the threat of German race arrogance . . .

This is the country to which we Soldiers of Democracy return. This is the fatherland for which we fought! But it is *our* fatherland. It was right for us to fight again. The faults of *our* country are *our* faults. Under similar circumstances, we would fight again. But by the God of Heaven, we are cowards and jackasses if now that the war is over, we do not marshal every ounce of our brain and brawn to fight a sterner, longer, more unbending battle against the forces of hell in our own land. (Lewis 578)

Lorraine Hansberry grew up hearing W.E.B. Du Bois' name often mentioned in her home for his politics and writings. This great man dramatically influenced her life when she took a class from him in Pan-Africanism once she moved to New York. W.E.B. Du Bois' ideologies were the same as Lorraine's father, Carl Hansberry, in regards to blacks embracing other nations for empowerment and support. Du Bois' influence upon Lorraine's writing can best be appreciated in her play, *Les Blancs*. Set in Africa, *Les Blancs* dramatizes a racial uprising as a result of continued colonial occupation.

Paul Robeson

Every artist, every scientist, must decide now where he stands. He has no alternative. There is no standing above the conflict on Olympian heights. There are no impartial observers. Through the destruction, in certain countries, of the greatest of man's literary heritage, through the propagation of false ideas of racial and national superiority, the artist, the scientist, the writer is challenged. . . . The artist must elect to fight for Freedom or for Slavery. I have made my choice. I had no alternative. (Robeson, *Here I Stand* 52)

It is often said that imitation is the highest form of flattery. Young artists of every genre begin their crafts-imitating artists whom they have the greatest respect for while continuously searching for their own artistic identity. This being said, a direct parallel of influence, artistic integrity, and use of international recognition (fame) is clearly obvious between Lorraine Hansberry and Paul Robeson.

Born the son of an ex-slave and preacher, Paul Robeson began breaking racial barriers and setting new standards in excellence at a young age. In 1915, Robeson was admitted to Rutgers University as a result of an academic competition on a four-year scholarship. With his strong athletic talents, Robeson tried out for varsity football and, despite continuous racist attacks from white players, Robeson not only became the first Negro to integrate their football team but he also was the first player chosen for the All-American team.

After graduating from Rutgers University, receiving both the highest academic and athletic honors, Robeson moved to New York to attend Columbia University Law School. During this same time, Robeson makes his acting debut with the Provincetown Players at Harlem YMCA. He also married Eslanda Cardoza Goode, a chemistry student at Columbia University, who soon became the first black woman to head a pathology laboratory.

By the time Robeson graduated from Columbia University School of Law, he had already traveled abroad to England to perform in select theatre productions by invitation. The conflict of which career path to fully pursue was solidified when, while working as an attorney, his racist assistant refused to take notes from a black man. Robeson realized then that as an artist he held a greater power in exploding the racist, stereotyped images of blacks and thereby, ultimately, improving the living conditions and opportunities of blacks in America and around the world.

With his purpose and goals clearly set before, Paul Robeson soon became an international icon. Performing in classical theatre and opera productions throughout the world, Robeson was greeted with awesome enthusiasm in every country. Fluent in over fifteen languages, audiences and interviewers were eager to speak to Robeson about more personal issues; namely the political and social status of blacks in America. Robeson always clarified that he is but one black man who does not exemplify the millions of black people who are working as sharecroppers for very little pay and under unspeakably harsh conditions. The American government's response towards Robeson was minimal until his full power on the international stage-both politically and artistically- became apparent. Robeson's political concerns and opinions were printed almost daily in newspapers throughout the world. The American political regime regarded Robeson as a very dangerous man and soon began a full attack in silencing his voice by canceling concert tour dates:

And I defied-and today I defy-any part of an insolent, dominating America, however powerful; I defy any errand boys, Uncle Toms of the Negro people, to challenge my Americanism, because by word and deed I challenge this vicious system to death; because I refuse to let my personal success, as part of a fraction of one per cent of the Negro people, explain away the injustices to fourteen million of my people; because with all the energy at my command, I fight for the right of the Negro people and other oppressed labor-driven Americans to have decent homes, decent jobs, and the dignity that belongs to human beings! ...

Well, they can have their concerts! I'll go back to their cities to sing for the people whom I love, for the Negro and white workers whose freedom will ensure my freedom. I'll help, together with many other progressive artists, whenever I can get the time from freedom's struggle, to show how culture can be brought back to the people. We created it in the first place, and it's about time it came back to us! (Robeson, *Paul Robeson Speaks* 202)

Paul Robeson continued to use his fame to fight racist thought and practices in America and abroad. In doing so, Robeson began publishing a monthly newspaper, *Freedom*, in 1950, in which he authored a column. *Freedom* soon became the voice for the Negro Protest Movement in America. Ironically, it was through *Freedom* that young Lorraine Hansberry found her first continuous work as a writer and began satisfying her desire to blend her political and social interests with naturally keen artistic desires:

I am living in New York now, since last November, and I can't remember when I wrote you last or how much I told you when I did write. Probably a lot of nonsense about Greenwich Village. Fact is, I have finally stopped going to school and started working. Which means a lot of things. I work for the new Negro paper, FREEDOM, which in its time in history ought to be the journal of Negro liberation ... in fact, it will be. (Hansberry, *To Be Young* 77)

Freedom brought Hansberry directly to the forefront of the Negro Protest Movement. Her articles chronicled the struggles and challenges of the Negro race in America. Through *Freedom*, Hansberry developed a personal relationship of admiration and respect with Paul Robeson. Hansberry found Robeson to be the unique blending of all the characteristics and ideals that has influenced her. She admired his strong will and intense intellect. When America revoked Robeson's passport denying him international travel in retaliation for his political comments against the government, Hansberry represented Robeson abroad and spoke on his behalf. Her development as a protest writer and artist was solidified. Hansberry proudly continued the courageous responsibility of the revolutionary protest artist personally inspired by the greatest example of all time – Paul Robeson.

A RAISIN IN THE SUN: THE GREAT PROTEST DRAMA

In the theatre, one must note, ninety percent of the plays about Negroes drop their final curtain on defeat – usually death. A serious drama about Negroes simply cannot end happily it seems ... The stereotype of the Negro drama is the unhappy ending – spiritually and physically defeated, lynched, dead – gotten rid of to the relief of the dramatist and the audience, in time for a late supper ... But on Broadway Negro characters do not shoot first. They merely get shot. (Hughes 452)

Lorraine Hansberry's monumental *A Raisin in the Sun* is the greatest protest play of the twentieth century. A protest drama is dramatic literature designed as declaration or demonstration for political and/or social reasons. Hansberry has intelligently woven each of the ideals and characteristics of each of her 'three wise men' (Carl Hansberry, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Paul Robeson) in an attempt to give America a reflection of itself through honest and sincere artistic expression. In *A Raisin in the Sun*, Hansberry has specifically chosen a low-economic, black family—the Younger family—in Chicago's Southside as the foundation of this American story. In doing so, the audience is able to more readily empathize and accept Hansberry's themes of oppression, struggle and desperation. Each

member of the Younger family is an honest, hard-working individual striving to make contributions to the advancement of the whole family. This is a clear representation of the ideals and values Carl Hansberry raised his family upon.

The plot of *A Raisin in the Sun* centers around the question of just how exactly should the Younger family advance when presented with a large insurance settlement from the elder father's death. Through her choice of plot, Hansberry creatively questions the definitions of success and advancement for African-Americans, realizing that *dreams* cannot begin to be made real without, first and foremost, a large sum of money coming from a source other than the daily toil of honest hard work. This is itself a strong and vital protest statement to the reality of poor and substandard pay for American labor workers and the continuous cycle of poverty.

As the plot advances, Hansberry challenges the solutions offered to low economic, underpaid people as answers to their struggle for success and elusive happiness. The character Beneatha exemplifies the answer of education. The insurance money will provide the means for her to attend medical school and become a doctor, a situation which will give the family the status they have long hoped for.

The character Walter Lee, Beneatha's older brother, represents economic empowerment through entrepreneurialism; a businessperson who attempts to make a profit by taking risk and initiative. In doing so, the character Walter Lee is most like Lorraine Hansberry's father, Carl Hansberry, who himself became financially wealthy through successful entrepreneurial efforts and not the traditional form of extended post education. By creatively challenging these two 'solutions' against each other, Hansberry presents the ultimate horror of American oppression - the disintegration of the family and community unit. Surely this is one of Hansberry's strongest and most passionate declarations of protests. The very act of struggling *for* something outside of one self or one's neighborhood, exemplified by the Younger family and personally experienced by Hansberry as a child, is creating barriers within families and communities that are destroying the black race:

Of course, whatever is said must be said through the living arguments of human beings in conflict with other human beings, with themselves, with the abstractions, which seem to them to be "their society." Of course! But that narrows nothing and enlarges everything. The more swiftly that American drama comes to believe that my dramatic experience will be larger when I know *why* the pathetic chap has turned to alcohol and not merely that he has; *why* to heroin; *why* to prostitution, despair, decadent preoccupations-the more swiftly, I insist, our drama will gain more meaningful stature. The fact of the matter is that we are all surrounded by the elements of profound tragedy in contemporary life, no less than were Shakespeare and the Greeks, but that thus far we (the dramatists, all of us, I think) are still confounded by its elusive properties and colossal dimensions. In certain peculiar ways we have been conditioned to think not small – but tiny. And the thing, I think, which has strangled us most is the tendency to turn away from

the world in the search of the universe. That is chaos in science; can it be anything else in art? (Hansberry, *To Be Young* 119)

Interpreting Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* with complete disregard to her political and social ideologies would be a travesty to the drama itself. This is said realizing that this monumental literary artwork is too often discussed and interpreted in academic arenas only superficially. It is not digested for its' depth of purpose and intention. This lack of digestion is akin to merely spreading one's finger across the icing of a delicious seven-layered cake. One has not taken the time to get a fork and plate, cut a generous piece, and calmly sit down to savor each bite for what it is. When educators and critics interpret *Raisin*, it should go far deeper than superficially pitting one character against another. Doing so continues the disintegration of the family unit, which Hansberry is wholly and completely against as an activist. Instead, interpret the points of protest in the literature and celebrate the fact that Hansberry deliberately defies the stereotype of the Negro drama as earlier noted by Langston Hughes. Hansberry's characters did not get shot nor did they have the traditionally unsavory unhappy ending – they survived and the family unit was made whole despite the struggles.

LESSON PLANS

Lesson Plan One: Who Really Cares About the World Today?

Topics

Theatre Arts, Performance, Dance, and Social Studies

Sub Topics

Creative Writing, English, and History

Procedure

Begin this lesson by asking students several probing questions such as, “What issues are important to you – your family – your community?” “Do you see these issues addressed in our society?” “How influential are artists or ‘stars’ in American society?” After an in-depth discussion of the important issues addressed by the students as an introduction to “Lorraine Hansberry: Portrait of a Revolutionary Artist,” have each student create a pictorial collage of the artist and performers who are most influential to them. A collage is an art form in which various materials or objects are glued onto a surface. Students truly enjoy creating collages and I have found this activity to be a great device to gain their attention at the onset of a curriculum because it employs every learning style.

1. Students are to present their collages to the class with autobiographical information on the artist or performer exhibited.
2. Inspired from the societal issued addressed previously through discussion by the class, the teacher creates various questions for the “artist” the students have presented.

3. Students are to perform the answer to the questions asked by the teacher, inspired through class discussion, as if they were the artists or performer previously presented.

Lesson Plan Two: Where Is My Voice?

Topics

Theatre Arts, Performance, Social Studies and Creative Writing

Sub Topics

English, History, Public Speaking and Science

Procedure

The basis for this lesson lies in the effective presentation of “Lorraine Hansberry: Portrait of a Revolutionary Artist.” Through lecture and discussion, students should understand the role of artistic responsibility in comparison and contrast to art for art’s sake. Students should understand the politics of art as evidenced through films, music and plays. Paul Robeson’s speeches will be studied as well as his theatrical and musical performances. In this lesson, students will begin to read and study excerpts of Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*.

Activities

1. Inspired by the writings of Paul Robeson and Lorraine Hansberry, write a journal entry on your voice as an artist. Challenge yourself to decide the choice you would make in your craft. Would you represent the important issues in your community despite the struggles doing might bring? Or, would you simply focus on yourself? Write your detailed opinion.
2. In a collaborative group of three, create a short, 3-minute performance highlighting your journal response. If the group is in conflict in regard to represent community issues or not, show this conflict in your work.
3. After each performance, students are to make journal entries chronicling their opinion of each group’s political and social artistic choices.

Lesson Plan Three: To Lorraine ... With Love

I believe this lesson is a natural progression from those previously presented. Students will read *A Raisin in the Sun* in its entirety and perform either selected scenes for classroom study or produce the entire play. While reading the play, the teacher should guide students through discussions of setting, plot, character, voice and the development of each. Various students should be allowed to perform characters as the class reads along collectively. With regard to time and resources, the teacher should elect the performance length of the play. An option is to have students choose and perform monologues from the play or select scenes. Either choice would make a great source for character and scene study.

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