A Raisin in the Sun
By Lorraine Hansberry

Lorraine Hansberry

- A Chicago native, active in the Civil Rights movement.
- Her family integrated a white neighborhood under court order when she was 8; violence followed.

Lorraine Hansberry

- "25 years ago, [my father] 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 our family to occupy disputed property in a hellishly hostile “white neighborhood” in which literally howling mobs surrounded our house... 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 household all night with a loaded German Luger, doggedly guarding her four children, while my father fought the respectable part of the battle in the Washington court."
  – Hansberry, To be Young, Gifted, and Black

Lorraine Hansberry

- Attended the University of Wisconsin as a painting major, but soon discovered her talent for writing.
- She left after 2 years to move to New York City.
- Worked at a black newspaper, while writing her play.

A Raisin in the Sun

- Opened on Broadway in 1959.
- First black female playwright to have a play on Broadway.
- Ran for 530 performances.
- Hansberry won the New York Critics Circle Award, the first black and youngest American ever to win.

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- Hansberry (right, at a party celebrating the play’s opening) was named “the most promising playwright” of the season by Variety magazine in a poll of drama critics.
- Sadly, she died of cancer 6 years later at age 34.
A Raisin in the Sun

- Has been produced on stage hundreds of times since 1959, including a 2004 Broadway Revival starring Sean “P. Diddy” Combs and Phylicia Rashad (“The Cosby Show”).
- The play won a Tony for “Best Revival”; Rashad won for “Best Leading Actress”; Sanaa Lathan and Audra McDonald won for “Best Featured Actress”; Combs won much critical acclaim for his performance.
- Was also made into a Broadway musical in 1974, “Raisin,” which won the Tony for “Best Musical.”

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- Was made into a critically acclaimed film in 1961 starring Sidney Poitier and Ruby Dee.

A Raisin in the Sun

- Takes place on the South Side of Chicago, sometime just before Civil Rights were enacted.
- Tells the story of a family — Mama (Lena), her son Walter, his wife Ruth, his college-age sister Beneatha, and Walter and Ruth’s young son Travis — and their struggle to achieve “The American Dream.”

A Raisin in the Sun

- Hansberry’s working title for the play was “Crystal Stair,” taken from a Langston Hughes poem, *Mother to Son.*
Mother to Son
– Langston Hughes, 1922

Well, son, I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
It's had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor—
Bare.
But all the time
I've been a-climbin' on,
And reachin' landin's,
And turnin' corners,
And sometimes goin' in the dark
Where there ain't been no light.
So, boy, don't you turn back.
Don't you set down on the steps.
'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.
Don't you fall now—
For I'se still goin', honey,
I'se still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

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• But she later changed the title, which she also got from a Langston Hughes poem, “Dream Deferred” (poem also known as called “Harlem”).

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
Like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore--
And run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over--
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

Harlem: A Dream Deferred
– Langston Hughes, 1951

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• Looking at the two Hughes poems, what do you imagine will be some of the major themes of this play?