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Literature Teaching Unit

Chapter-by-Chapter Study Guide



A Raisin in the Sun

by Lorraine Hansberry

- Learning objectives
- Study Guide with short-answer questions
- Background information
- Vocabulary in context
- Multiple-choice test
- Essay questions
- Literary terms



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A Raisin in the Sun

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. identify the dramatic protagonist in this play and state in detail why he or she is the protagonist.
2. prove by citing comments and incidents from the play that the following are themes in this play:
 - Racial intolerance exists in society.
 - Dreams are necessary and important for people.
 - A strong and loving family can endure setbacks.
3. prove or disprove the following thesis by referring to comments or incidents in the play:

“This is a story about the pursuit of the American Dream. Even though Walter’s dream was valid, he pursued it poorly.”
4. write a short character analysis of the major characters in the play: Walter, Mama, and Beneatha.
5. recognize how conflict is an essential element in the play, and identify and discuss the conflict in these relationships:
 - Walter and Mama
 - Walter and Beneatha
 - The Younger family and society
6. recognize the emotional power of this play by identifying a forceful scene, stating who is involved in it, what the conflict is, and what, specifically, makes it an emotionally gripping scene.
7. discuss what elements of this play give it a universal appeal that makes it as meaningful and relevant today as when it was written in the late 1950s.
8. identify and cite examples of different types of literary devices used by the author, and explain their significance.
9. Describe how figurative language presents images in a reader’s mind similar to what is experienced by an audience in a theater.
10. Make decisions about personal values through careful observation of the actions of the characters.

A Raisin in the Sun

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Which character is the protagonist of the play? What makes this character the protagonist?
2. *A Raisin in the Sun* is about racial intolerance in Chicago in the late 1950s. Are the issues that are addressed in the play still relevant today? Why or why not?
3. How can Walter be considered a victim of society and a victim of his own shortcomings?
4. Central to a drama is conflict. Identify and discuss the various conflicts in the play and how they are resolved.
5. To engage people in a drama, the characters and plot must be believable, and the reader must care about the characters. Discuss how Walter, Mama, and Beneatha can be seen as representing real people experiencing actual life situations. Explain what makes the characters interesting.
6. Why does the author go to such lengths to describe the Younger family's furnishings in their apartment? What do these furnishings and the state they are in say about the family?
7. What does the absence of light in the Younger family's apartment symbolize? Why does Ruth desperately hope for sunlight in the new house? How does this idea relate to the title of the play?
8. Describe the relationship between Ruth and Walter at the beginning of the play. How does it change during the course of the play?
9. Compare and contrast Asagai and Murchison. Which boyfriend does Beneatha choose and why?
10. What does Hansberry mean by the term "assimilationist Negro"? Which character is called by this name? Why?
11. When an adult does something wrong, is it acceptable to blame society or one's parents for the behavior? Why?
12. Why is Mama's little plant so important to her? What does it symbolize? When is it seen for the last time?
13. In the opening scene of Act II, by what means does the author take the reader into the Younger apartment and present a "play within a play"?
14. Considering the year this play was written, how can Beneatha and Asagai's discussion in Act III be qualified as being prophetic?

A Raisin in the Sun

INTRODUCTION

A Raisin in the Sun was Lorraine Hansberry's first and most successful work in her short career. The play opened in 1959, and won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award as best play for that year. Langston Hughes was one of the most important figures of the Harlem Renaissance, the revolution in African American Arts during the 1920s. His poem, "Harlem [2]" (also known as "A Dream Deferred"), is the basis of the title of this play by Lorraine Hansberry. In the poem, Hughes asks, "What happens to a dream deferred? Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?" Hansberry uses the metaphor of a raisin left to dry up in the sun to describe what happens to the dreams of the characters in the play. In *A Raisin in the Sun*, the Youngers, an African American family, attempt to claim their own piece of the American Dream. In the white neighborhood where they buy a house, the Youngers are met with threats and danger. Their dreams are crushed when Walter Lee Younger and his family realize that the American Dream or advancing in society and owning a house, is closed to African American families.

A Raisin in the Sun

Act I, Scene One

Vocabulary

exasperated – irritated; fed up

furtively – secretly; sneakily

futile – useless

proposition – a suggested plan

tentatively – uncertainly; with hesitation

tyrant – a ruler who uses power in a harsh, cruel manner; a dictator

undistinguished – common; not unique

vengeance – the act of getting back at someone; retribution

viciously – with hatred; cruelly

vindicated – cleared of an accusation, blame, suspicion, or doubt

1. What does the author's use of Langston Hughes's poem "Harlem [2]" to open the play suggest that the play will be about?

2. Where and when does the play take place? What clues tell us this?

3. The opening stage directions state that the furnishings of the Younger living room are "tired." What literary device is being used? What details does the author use to back up the claim?

Act I, Scene Two

Vocabulary

arrogant – self-important; overconfident
assimilation – integration; absorption
cliché – overused word or phrase
coquettishly – coyly
eccentric – unusual; peculiar
forlornly – sadly; hopelessly
haphazardly – without balance or carefulness
heathenism – term used to describe religions considered primitive (especially those outside Christianity)
inappropriately – wrongly; improperly
insinuatingly – suggestively
menacingly – threateningly
oppressive – cruel; unfair
plaintively – sorrowfully
sarcastically – ironically; mockingly

1. When and where does this scene take place?

2. What are the Youngers doing at the beginning of this scene?

3. Why is Ruth upset when she returns home?

4. What is Travis excited about? Why does it upset Ruth so much?
