(ACT1)

In novels, as we have seen, much of the work of communicating circumstance and meaning is accomplished through narration. There can be a **shout** [Alger] or a **nudge** [Fitzgerald] to the reader, letting us know how we should be reacting to the various characters and incidents.

In plays, on the other hand, the author’s ability to “narrate” is pretty much limited to whatever can be suggested in the stage directions. Hansberry smuggles a **lot** of narrative information into her stage directions, so be sure to pay attention to them. The greatest weight of meaning must be carried by dialogue, which allows us to make judgments concerning the characters: their virtues, flaws, inspirations, and aspirations. In turn, we are introduced to specific situations that engender what I hope you will consider satisfying dramatic conflict.

**SETTING**: The late 1950s—the temporal setting of *Raisin*—is the period in which the modern Civil Rights movement in America achieved irreversible momentum. The Supreme Court has declared school segregation unconstitutional (*Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, KS, 1954*), and the states are moving, albeit slowly, to comply. Rosa Parks has refused to move to the back of the bus. A young, relatively unknown minister [MLK] has come to Montgomery, Alabama to lead a boycott of public transportation.

The great societal transformation ignited by the modern Civil Rights movement, **a full century after the Civil War**, a movement that would bring about profound changes in every aspect of American culture, is just beginning. It is, simultaneously, an exciting and terrifying time for African-Americans. This is the social and cultural backdrop for Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*.

The best way to begin is to examine honestly your impressions of the characters and their situations, as you can discern them in Act 1. We're so used to seeing black people through the lenses of nobility or criminality that you might be surprised to find here ordinary people very much caught up in life's circumstances and looking for the way forward.

Act 1 appears to be an accurate depiction of an African American family fleshed out with real, intense, problematic issues (not “who gets to drive the Lexus today?”). Each individual has specific hopes and dreams, and (sadly) these do not bring them into harmony. The Youngers are a family who share a conjoined apartment with a neighboring family—this was at a time when America was supposed to be the one worldly paradise for ordinary people.

The family members are very relatable and believable characters that we have seen produced in parallel times of poverty—with similarity and difference--in "Gatsby" and "Ragged Dick". Although the family members' dream of a life of common betterment, their familial bonds are strained by the turmoil surrounding their present financial situation, and the conflicting aspirations concerning how to better their shared-bathroom lives.

Someone—it seems likely—is going to discover at close range “What happen to a dream deferred?”

Hansberry has created a world that is rife with conflict, both within the family and within the society: these characters feel that they are fighting for their lives. I would hope to see lively discussions, since it seems likely that we will have differing sympathies for specific characters. Express your honest opinion, and let the discussion begin. (**Not** a spoiler: both Walter and Beneatha have detractors.)

[I am attaching a link to a brief, attenuated chronology of the Civil Rights movement, from 1954: the *Brown* Supreme Court decision, to 1968: the assassination of the Rev Martin Luther King. By that time, Malcolm X, Robert Kennedy—and **Lorraine Hansberry**-- were all also dead. The brightest lights of their time were going out, with what nobody at the time would guess would be earthshaking consequences for liberal democracy in America. As you will see, there was a social revolution occurring, one which Lorraine Hansberry’s classic play **anticipated**, **reflected**, and **contributed** to.]

I would encourage you to do even more research in this area. Find a good historian—like **Taylor Branch**, for example—and you’ll hardly be able to finish a chapter without closing the book, setting it to the side, and thinking long and hard about our heartbreaking national epic, stretching over four centuries, from the first slave ships to the #BlackLivesMatter movement.

Unlike the dead, heroic figures mentioned above, the best of us have too often lacked conviction, and the worst were reliably full of passionate intensity. In the ascendance of Trump, and acknowledging the emergence of a black middle class, we still have to admit that for multitude of poor urban blacks, not so much has changed—at least not for the better.

The poet Langston Hughes has provided the title for this classic play; in another if his poems, after going through of litany of the horrific treatment of African-Americans, he has his speaker say, simply, "But I 'm still here." Think about it.

[***Civil Rights Movement Timeline* (14th Amendment, 1964 Act …**](http://www.infoplease.com/spot/civilrightstimeline1.html)

**Mama is old enough that she probably knew, when she was a girl, survivors of the slavery experience. At the very least, as a child of the South, she heard many gruesome stories of those days—and of the savage KKK days that followed the southern defeat in the Civil War. The terrorism practiced by southern whites against essentially defenseless African Americans is one of the ugliest and most cowardly chapters in any country’s national history; there is no way to edit this out of a discussion of American cultural values. Because we brag ceaselessly about our unique virtue as a culture (*American Exceptionalism*) we have been blind to the many atrocities we have committed. We are fooled by our own propaganda.**

**Walter is a long generation away from Mama’s southern experience: he is a child of a booming, bustling, capitalist-materialist metropolis (in the post-WW II economic boom that basically created the American middle class.) Every day, he is bombarded by images of what a real man should be. Like the young Gatsby, he attends to a rich man’s needs, but only in the most menial, servile manner—there is never a chance (as with Gatsby) that he will ever be a real part of this world. The very nature if his job shoves his face in all the possibilities of conventional American success and prosperity that will never be available to him, no matter how smart he is or how hard he works.**

**Beneatha is still, effectively, another generation along the American path—she is 15 years younger than Walter, which signals a tidal shift in terms of how she will view the world. She doesn’t disdain money as much as she sometimes claims to, but she has reached the point of looking beyond surviving (Mama) and getting ahead in the materialistic rat race (Walter,) to the expectation of fulfillment in a career: moving on up the hierarchy of needs. And despite what seem like long odds, she has somehow made it to college, and with the cultural changes just around the corner, she has better chance of becoming a doctor than many in the original audience would have imagined. As for Travis: if he can survive his brutal new neighborhood, colleges will be lining up to recruit him in the affirmative action boom days of the late 60s and 70s.**

**Given the “male as designated breadwinner” cultural expectation of the time, I can appreciate Walter’s wild rage, but by the standards of the culture we demand today, he needs to be called out for his lack of sensitivity and outright sexism in relation to the women in his life. His treatment of his pregnant wife—no matter how he may justify it to himself—is for me the lowest moment in a play that is full of low moments. And the way he talks to Beneatha re: her aspiration to be a doctor is indicative of a man who has been driven nearly mad –deranged--by the dynamic of too little $$$ chasing too many needs and wants. And still: how does a family that can’t spare 50 cents for a kid going to school come up with 55 bucks for horseback riding lessons for Princess B.? Real life can get pretty complicated.**

**Walter twice proclaims that he is thirty-five and has never had a chance to be someone. We might think this is over-dramatizing: after all, we all know people who only really get started at the age of 35. But given who and where he is (not to mention his rage and how he medicates it with booze) he will be very lucky to reach the age of 65.**

**Currency equivalency conversion is a more difficult, imprecise activity than you might suppose, esp. over the period of almost 60 years. The three working members of the Younger family were probably making in the vicinity of $1 -$1.50 per hour—maybe less for Mama. We would all, even today, be thrilled to get a check for $10K—for them, its actual value was closer to what $100K would be in our world. This will give you some idea of the excitement in the Younger family as the check is on the way.**

**But in Chicago, in the post WW2 economic boom, opportunities for economic and social status advancement can be seen everywhere—but Negroes need not apply. For an ambitious man with some intelligence and imagination, it is the sort of thing that could—no hyperbole—drive him literally crazy (the diagnosis “black rage” was widely accepted by psychologists within the next ten years, as the cumulative psychic trauma of the black experience in the usa was belatedly recognized.) You can see how this dynamic of the post WWII economic boom played out for blacks in the slightly less racist Los Angeles, in the novels of Walter Mosley and the exploits of his main protagonist, Easy Rawlings.**

**It’s an interesting question how much info about, and access to, birth control the Youngers (or any American family) might have had. It is amazing to realize that It wasn’t until the Supreme Court’s *Griswold* decision of 1965 [!] that laws prohibiting the use of contraceptives by married couples were declared unconstitutional; and it wasn’t until 1972 [!!] that this right was extended to unmarried couples. The first birth control pills (an important early victory of the pre-Feminist movement) were not publicly available until the 1960s—after the events of this play. It’s a wonder that Travis doesn’t have a bunch of siblings. I have lived in an African-American community, and it is extremely rare for a family to have only one child.**

**A recent movie dramatizes effort to legalize interracial marriages (remember, when B. Obama was born, here in Honolulu, in 1961, his birth would have been illegal in roughly half the states. This taboo is briefly referenced in *Raisin--* after Lindner has departed the first time-- in Ruth’s comment that the Clybourne Park residents were afraid of miscegenation, the technical term for interracial sexual contact, and, by extension, marriage; and, by further extension, “mixed race” children. For people like Tom Buchanan, this could be seen as another strategy in the rise of the colored empires: every “mixed” birth would “dilute” the superior Nordic race. As we unfortunately know, such thinking is very much alive today.**

**The Supreme Court case that righted this affront to human dignity and freedom is dramatized in a recent film (the family who prevailed in the case was surnamed *Loving*.) And it is ironic, given that so much of the white hysteria concerned the unspeakable prospect of black men getting together with white women –remember E. Till—that the case involved a white man-black woman marriage):**

[**Review: *'Loving'* and the Ordinary Love That Made History - The Atlantic**](http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/11/loving-film-review/506459/)

**On the issue of abortion: it was considered abhorrent throughout all levels of society, though (predictably) rich and poor dealt with its reality in different ways (a trip to Switzerland for the rich vs the “back alley’’ for the poor.) There was no feminist “woman’s right to choose” argument being circulated—even a proud, defiant feminist like Hansberry would have considered it a calamity, if understandable under the circumstances. Ruth’s life is already limited, in a harsh, unrelenting, and final way by the color of her skin. Just as Walter’s is. Having—or not having—another child will not change her mobility prospects—to the extent that she has any—at all. Except in a negative way.**

ACT2

**Pay special attention to the issues surrounding the concepts of identity and assimilation(ism). ["I am not an assimilationist Negro!"] As in so many other ways, Hansberry's drama anticipates, by several years, an issue that will come to dominate the discourse within the African-American community, and also with other immigrant ethnic groups. The slogans “black pride” and “black is beautiful” plus the emerging popularity of “Afro” hair styling are only a few examples of this trend. ["conking" or processing African American hair to make it resemble the Anglo style hair is a powerful visual and thematic motif in Spike Lee's brilliant film *Malcolm X*. It is also the subject of Chris Rock's funny/sad documentary *Good Hair*}**

**Even today, none of us would be indifferent to the prospect of a ten thousand dollar addition to our bank accounts. In the 1950s, it represented a considerably larger windfall. The minimum wage was around fifty cents an hour. Ten thousand dollars was undoubtedly more than the Younger family total income for two years—probably three. Note that Lena was able to make a down payment on a house in a "nice" neighborhood for $3500.**

**The minimum wage in Hawaii has now grown to the princely sum $10.10, which is shockingly low when you consider what an actual person needs to shell out for basic necessities. (thankfully, there is--finally-- considerable momentum to revise it upward, epitomized by the "fight for fifteen" movement. Amazon, which has been known for ruthlessly exploiting its workers while making Jeff Bezos a multi-billionaire, recently earned itself some positive PR by raising *its* minimum wage to $15. per hour.)**

**If the Youngers were a black family living in the South, all of their joy and sorrow in life would come from the strength and love of their family, and to a lesser extent their neighbors and their church. If Walter were to “forget his place” and let go with one of his tirades, we’d find him swinging from a tree the next morning—the “strange fruit” memorialized by blues singer and American legend Billie Holiday.**

**(Required:**

[**Tragic Story Behind Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit ...**](https://www.biography.com/news/billie-holiday-strange-fruit) )

**ALSO**: **One of the most brutal lynchings did not involve a tree. The Emmett Till case ignited public opinion against the most brutal racism still being practiced in the 1950s. Till was a Chicago boy, a little older than Travis, and he was certainly on Hansberry’s mind as she composed *Raisin*.**

[**Emmett Till – Wikipedia**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emmett_Till)

**Although it is not central to the main theme of the play, the conversation between Beneatha and George (Act 2, Scene 2) on why students go to college should be of interest to us.**

**Asagai is an important character we should not neglect to focus on. B's conversations with Asagai are of more immediate interpretive concern for us, as we examine issues of identity and assimilation from the Younger family perspective. (Who would have imagined that Walter Lee has, for all these years, been harboring his own African dreams?) The contrast between George and Asagai, Beneatha’s two suitors, illustrates the different threads in the tapestry of the African-American experience. (Also, remember how eager James Gatz was to assimilate to the Anglo-Saxon elite culture typified by his name change to Jay Gatsby? And how eager Alger was to exclude Mickey Maguire, Johnny Nolan, and other Irish-American characters from the status of a true, assimilated American?)**

**A crucial component of *Raisin’s* cultural context was the then slowly but powerfully igniting Civil Rights movement. The following link will provide some help in capturing this mood:** [**Civil Rights Movement Timeline**](http://www.infoplease.com/spot/civilrightstimeline1.html#Wn?mail-02-28)**. This timeline is accurate and helpful, but it inevitably oversimplifies a complex reality. The organizational structure, strategies, and even origins of what we call the Civil Rights movement are still hotly debated topics among historians and activists today, some fifty years later.**

**I would propose that two factors proved decisive in this outcome:**

**1 the assassination of Pres Kennedy in 1963. His successor, Pres Johnson, used Kennedy's martyred status as a lever to move a reluctant Congress to pass the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act into law in 1964 and 1965. (You'll notice there is nothing here about housing rights or racial segregation in housing).**

**2. the brutality with which non-violent Negro protestors (and their many, many white allies) were abused in the South, "massacres" that were televised on the evening news. White Northerners could no longer pretend that they had “no idea” of the racial terrorism practiced by their fellow citizens in the South: support for civil rights, however grudging, at last had its tipping point.**

**One of the great things about Hansberry’s writing is her ability to create complex situations involving intense character conflicts, and open to varying interpretations, depending on the sympathies of the reader. Someone might look at the scene where Mama slaps Beneatha and sympathize with Beneatha, who is ridiculed and disciplined for expressing her recently learned opinions, which are far from unreasonable. Others will be more sympathetic to the ways Mama’s religious beliefs have probably sustained her through horrendously difficult times—and they will understand. (Mama’s slap is also an indicator of how acceptable parental standards of discipline have evolved over the last half century). And some will sympathize with Walter’s desire to be the man of the house, even as he treats the women so badly to get to that point.**

**This generational conflict is not limited to the African-American experience. There are many stories of immigrant families who are delighted that their kids have made it into college (the magic mobility elevator, so they’ve been told), only to be angry and frustrated that the things their kids are learning are often at odds with the parents’ traditional cultural values. And as a contrary example: James Gatz rejects his family’s culture when he is very young, but his father, Henry Gatz, is full of admiration at his son’s success, which comes through the “assimilation to American values” process.**

**“I am not an assimilationist Negro” proclaims Beneatha, but that’s not how it looks through the eyes of her African friend, Asagai. George M. does not deeply object to her sentimental Africanism—that’s an honest disagreement, although expressed rudely. What George really objects to the fact that she comes alive when discussing matters of the mind and spirit, the things she has learned and the things she wants to learn. George wants what many American men wanted then in their wives—a beautiful ornament to his own successful life, someone who will provide him with beautiful, intelligent children.**

**In the first part of the play**, **B. adopts a very casual attitude about money; she doesn’t care if Mama just hangs the check on the wall. But when the money is gone, she shrieks a different tune: Walter has lost her money, and the world is nothing but darkness and depression. Asagai reminds her of what she once professed to know: that it is not her money, and that important things remain to be accomplished despite the loss. “Don’t they use money where you come from?” shows how much she is a child of where she comes from.**

**The Younger family member--even Mama--can talk a good anti-assimilation game at specific moment of the play. But if we look at what they want out of life: a detached house with a yard; a small business along the entrepreneurship model; college education--we see that their aspirations are in line with those of their fellow citizens. The main problem they encounter is a lack of integration and assimilation.**

**I need hardly add that cultural identity, ethnicity, and assimilation are among the most urgent issues in our cultural conversation in the usa today.**

**Let us review some of the factors pertaining to Beneath, assimilationism, and cultural identity:**

* **Asagai is African—Nigerian, more precisely. There is no identity conflict for him. He will study in the usa and take his learning back home; ideally, this will be of some help to them. We know that he from an “upper” family because he has this opportunity. He is NOT African-American, as so many mistakenly identify him.**
* **George M. is an African-American who is as assimilated to the American value system as he is allowed to be. You can call him a traitor to his race, but the simple fact is that his family has done well, and that’s fine by him. Africa is just not a concept he can honestly relate to.**
* **Beneatha is an African-American who is going through a process—a phase, perhaps-- in which she is exploring her link to African-ness. Africa, of course, is not a country or a culture, which makes it seem unlikely that she will ultimately settle there—unless it is as Asagai’s wife. Asagai, of course, has many observations on the extent of her assimilation, including her hair. This is a constant motif in African American discourse, including Spike Lee’s brilliant film *Malcolm X*, and Chris Rock’s *Good Hair*—some of which is available on YouTube.**
* **As we know, B is famous for exploring many things, and I think this could be one more on her list. Also, it seems to have come into her life at a time—happy coincidence! -- that she is being courted by a handsome, outspoken African man.**
* **“Come with me and be a doctor in Nigeria.” She has yet to be accepted into a medical school, let alone matriculated. Asagai is going to have a long wait, if that is the plan.**
* **Walter surprises us by being aware of current events in Africa, and identifying with an heroic African archetype "flaming spear", but we should never doubt that he is an assimilated American—“money is life.” Like many black Americans, Walter has a vaguely romantic idea of “Africa,” but no desire to be African. This pattern also exists for other ethnic groups in America.**
* **Mama and Ruth seem to me to be the most level headed in the family on this issue: both of them are aware of how much African- American identity reaches back not to the distant African veldt but to the six generations who have survived the holocaust of slavery and its aftermath in the land of the free.; as the Negro poet Langston Hughes simply and profoundly put it, speaking for generations of oppressed African-Americans, “I’m still here.”**

**African students were welcomed to study in US universities, while American Negros are subjected to a regime in housing, employment, etc. that looks a lot like the South African experience of *apartheid* before Nelson Mandela (though you won’t find any American history book making that comparison). The answer is first hinted at early in Act 1, Scene 2, when Beneatha responds to Mama’s hope for African salvation: “I’m afraid they need more salvation from the British and the French.” Colonialism! The 50s and 60s were the time in which African countries were declaring their independence from the Europeans who had brutally** **colonized them. It is no exaggeration to say that Africans are still recovering from the colonial experience, in a way similar to the recovery of African-Americans from the horrors of the slavery, KKK, and the Jim Crow experience. We can see how upside down the “rise of the colored empires” idea proved to be in the 20th century.**

**It was also a time when the so-called Cold War was heating up. Both the United States and the Soviet Union were looking to the newly independent African countries to align with them in the worldwide international struggle. They both tried to recruit the student generation—men in their twenties and thirties—who would be ascending to power in their countries. A real life example (as mentioned) of this is the father of B Obama, who was studying about five miles from our campus at the same time Asagai was in Chicago.**

**One of the most persuasive arguments of politicians who wanted a vigorous Civil Rights law: most of the countries we are trying to influence—in Africa and Asia—are not white (it seems there is just no getting away from T Buchanan’s hysteria at “the rise of the colored empires?!); they will view us less favorably if we continue to run our society and culture in such blatantly racist manner**