



Lorraine Hansberry

“

TSHEMBE: (Closing his eyes, wearily) I said racism is a device that, of itself, explains nothing. It is simply a means. An invention to justify the rule of some men over others. CHARLIE: (Pleased to have at last found common ground) But I agree with you entirely! Race hasn't a thing to do with it actually. TSHEMBE: Ah -- but it has! CHARLIE: (Throwing up his hands) Oh, come on, Matoseh. Stop playing games! Which is it, my friend? TSHEMBE: I am not playing games. (He sighs and now, drawn out of himself at last, proceeds with the maximum precision and clarity he can muster) I am simply saying that a device is a device, but that it also has consequences: once invented it takes on a life, a reality of its own. So, in one century, men invoke the device of religion to cloak their conquests. In another, race. Now, in both cases you and I may recognize the fraudulence of the device, but the fact remains that a man who has a sword run through him because he refuses to become a Moslem or a Christian -- or who is shot in Zatembe or Mississippi because he is black -- is suffering the reality of the device. And it is pointless to pretend that it doesn't exist -- merely because it is a lie!

— Les Blancs: The Collected Last Plays

”

Quick Facts

- * 1930-1964
- * African-American playwright and activist
- * *A Raisin in the Sun* was based on her childhood experiences with desegregation



Lorraine Hansberry

Biography continued

“I was born black and female,” Lorraine Hansberry said. These twin identities would dominate her life and her work. Rejecting the limits placed on her race and her gender, she employed her writing and her life as a social activist to expand the meaning of what it meant to be a black woman.

Her first play, *A Raisin In the Sun*, is based on her childhood experiences of desegregating a white neighborhood. It won the New York Drama Critic’s Circle Award as Best Play of the Year. She was the youngest American, the fifth woman and the first black to win the award. Her success opened the floodgates for a generation of modern black actors and writers who were influenced and encouraged by her writing.

Hansberry was born in 1930, the youngest of four children of Carl and Nannie Hansberry, a respected and successful black family in Chicago, Illinois. Nannie was the college educated daughter of an African Methodist Episcopal minister, and Carl was a successful real estate businessman, an inventor and a politician who ran for congress in 1940. Both parents were activists challenging discriminating Jim Crow Laws. Because of their stature in the black community such important black leaders as Paul Robeson, W.E.B. DuBois, and Langston Hughes frequented the Hansberry home as Lorraine was growing up.

Although they could afford good private schools, Lorraine was educated in the segregated public schools as her family worked within the system to change the laws governing segregation. After high school Hansberry briefly attended the University of Wisconsin at Madison before moving to New York for “an education of another kind.” She married Robert Nemiroff, a white Jewish intellectual who she met on a picket line protesting the exclusion of black athletes from university sports. She worked as editor for Paul Robeson’s radical black newspaper *Freedom* until her husband’s songwriting success allowed her to devote herself to her playwriting.

Hansberry used the success of *A Raisin In the Sun* as a platform to speak out for the American Civil Rights Movement and for the African struggle to free itself from white rule. She helped raise money, gave impassioned speeches and took part in panels and interviews to further these causes.



Lorraine Hansberry

Biography continued

After her initial success she lived only six years and was able to complete only one more play, a movie and a television script which was too racially controversial to be aired. Her second play, *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*, was received with mixed reviews and kept open for 101 performances only by the contributions and support of the theatre community. It closed the night she died at 34 from cancer. After her death Nemiroff finished and produced her final work, *Les Blancs*, a play about African liberation.

Hansberry had begun to claim her identity as a lesbian in a 1957 letter to a lesbian periodical, *The Ladder*. This information and her 1964 divorce from Nemiroff was not widely known at the time of her death. In 1965 the Gay Liberation Movement did not exist and a woman could not claim such an identity without major reprisals. It was not until the 1980s that feminist scholars began connecting her feminist vision with a lesbian identity.

Hansberry's work was a preview of the African-American spirit that engulfed the nation in the historic changes of the Civil Rights Movement. Her writing foresaw feminism, the Gay Liberation Movement and the demise of colonialism. She was a spearhead of the future, a woman who refused to be confined by the categories of race and gender.



Lorraine Hansberry

Selected Bibliography

Works by the author

To Be Young, Gifted and Black: An Informal Autobiography (1970).

The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window (1964).

The Movement: Documentary of a Struggle for Equality (1964).

The Drinking Gourd (1960).

A Raisin in the Sun, screenplay (1960).

A Raisin in the Sun (1957).

Works about the author

Bond, Jean Carey. *Lorraine Hansberry: Art of Thunder, Vision of Light* (Freedomways, 1979).

Carter, Steven. *Hansberry's Drama*. New York: Penguin Books, 1993.

Cheney, Anne. *Lorraine Hansberry* (Twayne Publishers, 1984).

Gilbert, Sandra M. and Susan Grubar, eds. *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women: The Tradition in English* (W.W. Norton and Company, 1985).

Hughes, Langston and Milton Meltzer, eds. *Black Magic: A Pictorial History of Black Entertainers in America* (Bonanza Books, 1967).

Phillips, Elizabeth C. *The Works of Lorraine Hansberry: A Critical Commentary* (Monarch Press, 1973).

Scheader, Catherine. *They Found a Way: Lorraine Hansberry* (Campus Publications, 1978).

Wilkerson, Margaret, ed. *Nine Plays By Black Women* (New American Library, 1986).