



**KÖNIGS ERLÄUTERUNGEN**

**SPEZIAL**

Lorraine Hansberry

# **A RAISIN IN THE SUN**

**ANALYSE | INTERPRETATION  
IN ENGLISCHER SPRACHE**

TITLE	YEAR	NOTES
<i>A Raisin in the Sun</i>	1959	A stage play. Her first published work and her greatest success.
<i>A Raisin in the Sun</i> (screenplay)	1961	The screenplay to the film adaptation of her play.
<i>The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window</i>	1964	Her second play and the last to be staged during her lifetime.
<i>To Be Young, Gifted and Black: Lorraine Hansberry in her own words</i>	1969	A posthumous (after her death) collection of her writing in various forms which was adapted by her ex-husband Nemiroff into a stage play and, later, a kind of autobiography.
<i>Les Blancs</i>	1970	A play, put together by Nemiroff.

### 1961 The screenplay of *A Raisin in the Sun*

The film adaptation is examined more closely in the chapter on Interpretations later in this study guide (see p. 100). The screenplay which Hansberry wrote herself is **almost identical to the original stage version**. A few newly integrated scenes focus on Walter Lee sitting in his favourite bar, the family visiting the house they want to buy in Clybourne Park, and Mama Lena coming to find Walter Lee in the bar. Some of these scenes are mute: there is no new dialogue for them. The family's visit to the house and Mama's visit to the bar both adapt existing material and content to a new situation. The film is as a whole quite theatrical; it sticks to the limited settings of the stage, and, in particular when contrasted with modern films, has a lot of monologues and talking. Put very basically, the film communicates with language to the near-exclusion of expressive camera work or music or other cinematic tools.

### 1964 *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*

The second play Hansberry wrote, and the last to be performed during her lifetime was less successful, commercially and critically, than *Raisin*. It deals with issues related to race, but also looks at **gender equality, homosexuality, drug use and generally non-conformist lifestyles** – in a much less focussed form than *Raisin*.

Sidney is an intellectual living in New York who is unhappily married to struggling actress Iris. A black friend of Sidney's, Alton, is in a relationship with Iris' sister Gloria. Alton also introduces Sidney to a politician called Wally. It turns out that Wally is corrupt and Gloria is actually a prostitute; when Alton leaves her she kills herself. The tragedies and conflicts appear to bring Sidney and Iris closer to one another.

The play was not a success on stage – it ran for only ten days. The critical reception was also less than enthusiastic.

## 1969 *To Be Young, Gifted and Black*

Robert Nemiroff created this autobiographical play *To Be Young, Gifted and Black: Lorraine Hansberry in her own words* using **Lorraine Hansberry's letters, diaries, interviews and notes**. It was very popular and critically successful when it was first staged in 1968–1969 on Broadway, and is still published and performed to this day.

The play describes Hansberry's childhood in a Chicago ghetto, her time at university, the inspiration for and writing of *A Raisin in the Sun*, and her personal life, including her illness and eventual death from cancer.

Nemiroff adapted the material into an autobiography of the same title (1969), which was also popular and successful. One review of a 2013 stage production writes that it is “not so much a traditional play as a collage of Lorraine Hansberry's writings, memories, and statements”, and describes it as being “more literary than theatrical”[3].

## 1970 *Les Blancs*

This ambitious play is about **colonialism**. It was written in response to Jean Genet's play *The Blacks* (1959).

**Jean Genet** (1910–1986) was a French writer and activist. He wrote five major novels in a burst of activity in the 1940s, including the largely autobiographical *The Thief's Journal* (1949) and *The Miracle of the Rose* (1946) and the nightmarish *Funeral Rites* (1948), written for his dead lover, and set during the Nazi occupation of France during World War 2. Throughout the 40s, 50s and 60s he also wrote several plays, including *The Blacks* (1959), to which Lorraine Hansberry was responding when she wrote *Les Blancs* (*The Whites*). In addition, he wrote essays and articles for various newspapers and magazines, conducted interviews with many literary, artistic and political figures, and became increasingly politically active throughout his life. He spent time living with the Palestinian Fedayeen and with the revolutionary Black Panther Party in the US, and an account of these experiences was published posthumously as *Prisoner of Love* in 1986.

None of the above can really prepare anyone for the unique and genuinely disturbing quality of Genet's work. His novels are **hallucinatory excursions into fantastic visions of degradation, violence and sexuality**; his plays are highly stylised, almost ritualistic explorations of power and control dynamics in various contexts. Genet was championed very early in his career by the famous **French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre**, who wrote a huge book (in size and scope) about him in 1952, called *Saint Genet, Actor and Martyr*, which argued that Genet had created genius out of the desperation and horrors of his life.

### **Genet's Life**

His personal life was extreme by any standards: his mother was a prostitute and he



grew up in adopted homes and state institutions. He was a convicted thief and prostitute who could find no environment in which he felt able to settle; a man who could find no peace, and was maybe not even looking for anything resembling peace, comfort or stability; who was imprisoned by the Nazi occupying forces and spent his later life living out of a suitcase in squalid hostels near train stations.

### **Homosexuality**

Genet's homosexuality was a key factor in his life and work, and his troublingly complex relationships to beauty, romanticism and desire are what have most fascinated readers. His political and social activism and writing grows out of his deeply personal feelings, experiences and convictions. Throughout his life he felt closest to outsiders, to the oppressed, marginalised, disenfranchised and rejected elements of society. It was this that drew him to rebellious, revolutionary groups like the Black Panthers, and vice versa.

Genet's legacy is one of the most substantial, lasting literary expressions of a true outsider and iconoclast that we have. And far from having faded over time, his reputation and influence have only grown as society continues to grapple with the dark and painful depths of human nature and behaviour he explored in his writing.

### **Genet's *The Blacks: A Clown Show***

Genet's play was written in 1958 and first performed on stage in 1959. It was produced on Broadway in 1961 and ran for 1,408 performances. It was here that Lorraine Hansberry would have seen it: The play was much discussed at the time and shared cast members with the earlier staging of *A Raisin in the Sun*. In a play-within-a-play, a group of black actors, five of them in "whiteface" (made up to appear white), act out the sham trial and murder of a white woman.

*The Blacks* was successful and controversial. Contemporary reviewers "stressed the difficulty of understanding the enigmatic play [...] whereas the characters in [Genet's earlier plays] *The Maids* and *The Balcony* perform a ritual, in *The Blacks* the entire evening is a ceremony"<sup>[4]</sup>.

The play led to an intellectual battle between the white novelist, journalist and liberal activist **Norman Mailer** (1923–2007) on the one side and **Lorraine Hansberry and James Baldwin** (1924–1987), the famous African-American novelist, activist and playwright on the other (Baldwin was also openly gay and had been friends with Genet when they had both been living in Paris in the 1950s). Baldwin accused Mailer of viewing Blacks as "romantic black symbols"<sup>[5]</sup> and Hansberry joined Baldwin in condemning Mailer for his explosive and influential essay *The White Negro* (1957) and what they saw as his (and liberal white America's) co-opting of black struggles for their own benefit. The play's brutal but complex symbolism and themes made a strong impression on Hansberry.

*Les Blancs* is Hansberry's most ambitious work. It has a large cast, a complex plot, it incorporates dance and music, it covers a large period of time and it is set in Africa. It is interesting to consider this work when studying *A Raisin in the Sun* because it appears to have been the focussed of themes which were most important to Hansberry personally, and as a writer. She allegedly referred to it at her most important work, and Nemiroff describes her initial inspiration to write it as having been her "visceral" (meaning resulting from strong feelings rather than careful thought) response to having seen a production of Genet's *The Blacks*. These details and the finished product suggest that this was where Hansberrys creative attention lay at the time of her death. *Raisin* was her best-loved and most successful work, but it may have been only the first display of her full potential.

**The plot of the play is too complex and lengthy** to be described here: it concerns the armed resistance to a colonial power in a fictional African country called Zhembe. Characters in the play represent or are associated with colonial powers or indigenous culture, and the presence of Christianity and its symbiotic relationship with colonialism and exploitation is also a big theme. The issue of gender equality is tackled indirectly: the only black woman in the play says nothing and has no name, being called only "the woman".



Scene from Genet's *The Blacks* (1959)  
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The play as it exists was **put together by Nemiroff** from fragments and drafts Hansberry had been working on. While the initial inspiration for the play came from her response to the Genet play, the themes – **colonialism, African cultures, racism** – were already playing a big role in her life before she had even written *Raisin*. As discussed in the chapter on origins and sources in this study guide (see p. 35), Hansberry had already encountered the great W.E.B. Du Bois in New York, and she was not only the child of politically active parents, she had herself inherited their keen **sense of justice and civil rights**.

The themes of racism and power which we see in *A Raisin in the Sun* are handled in a tight environment: black-white relations and racially segregated housing in Chicago. *Les Blancs* explores these themes on a much bigger canvas – Western colonialism in Africa – and with a larger cast of characters, but racism and the abuse of power gained by historical exploitation remain the core issues.