

A raisin in the sun:
reflections on
segregation and
poverty essay sample



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A Raisin in the Sun was writing by Lorraine Hansberry. It was the first play that appeared on Broadway that was written by a black woman. Hansberry explains “ this is a play that tells the truth about people, Negroes and life and I think it will help a lot of people to understand how we are just as complicated as they are,” in a letter written to her mother. The play centers around a poor black family, The Youngers. The family members waver between cruel reality and daydreaming about the future. It is a powerful character study about the effects of discrimination and racism on the human soul, and the buoyancy of the human spirit. *In A Raisin in the Sun* , segregation induced poverty is the driving force behind all the decisions and dreams of the Younger Family.

Segregation refers to the practice of separating the races. It was a common practice in the American South until the late 1960s to have separate race facilities for washrooms, theaters, schools, neighborhoods, and subsequently limited professions. Segregated schools offered notoriously poor education because the schools for African Americans were not well funded. Lack of a solid primary education left very little hope of having the qualifications to attend university, and even if students were qualified the positions available were limited. Black Colleges were scarce and other higher learning institutions that were integrated worked on a quota system for the admittance of black students. Inadequate education coupled with the societal limits of what jobs for blacks were acceptable or not, African Americans struggled to make career advancements past blue collar and domestic help positions (Polednak 45). This left the bulk of the black population in America below the poverty line and just barely surviving.

Discrimination and segregation by the white community was a major factor in not only causing the poverty suffered by minorities in the 20th century but also maintaining that race related poverty into the 21st century.

The Younger's frustration with segregation and the poverty which it causes is the single determining factor in each family member's decisions and dreams. Many of the problems the Younger's suffer through are caused by segregation. The actual attention given to the topic in the play is minimal but the consequences drive the plot. Walter, the oldest son, is married and has a child. He works for a white family as a chauffeur. Being a chauffeur is one of the only jobs that is available to young black men. He takes the job because his family needs the money (Abell). His mother assures him that it is a good job but understands that he has been "forced to function as a white man's servant." (Domina 10). His family shares a small apartment with his mother and sister, Beneatha. Walter laments about his discontent of his current living situation and the need to provide better for his family. He states "I got a boy who sleeps in the living room and all I got to give him is stories about how rich white people live" (34). Walter often seems like he has given up on his dreams. He wants badly to be an independent man and own a business. Walter also wants to be able to send his son to college and hopes that someday he will be able to "hand him the world!" (109).

Walter's discontent with poverty and his dream of becoming a successful businessman is the reason that Mama gives some of the insurance money to him.

Beneatha is not quite old enough to have experienced the crushing nature of failed dreams. She is optimistic and hopeful that her future is bright.
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Beneatha currently attends college at a segregated university but aspires to become a doctor. In Act Two, Scene One, she recounts a childhood memory to her boyfriend, Joseph Asagai, about observing a bad sledding accident when she was younger. When her friend returned home healed, it formed the inspiration to become a doctor in her mind. She, too, does not want to spend the rest of her life in the small apartment. She even considers going to Africa with Asagai. Her unhappiness with being poor, and her desire to become financially prosperous on her own drives both her decision to strive to become a doctor, and her decision to not consider marriage to Asagai.

Mama has struggled greatly in life, giving up her own wants for those of her family. Even now, after her children are grown, and her husband has passed, she still worries about the effects of poverty and discrimination have had on her children's outlook on life. Poverty has deeply wounded Mama but she works hard to make the best of her situation. Mama remembers when they first moved into the apartment, it was supposed to only be temporary. However, she spent her whole married life living there. Her husband and herself had never been able to save the money to buy a house with a yard big enough for a garden. Unfortunately, her husband had to die for her to be able to make her dream of owning a home come true. Her decision to spend her husband's insurance money and her dream of owning a house are driven forcefully by her poverty stricken past. Mama also chooses to buy a house in a white neighborhood. While she might never admit it out loud, this is certainly a her own way of 'putting it to the man' for the years of washing their floors and adhering to their societal rules.

Part of the difference in the ways these characters respond to frustration may simply be a result of temperament. Mama and Ruth, for example, are apparently more able to accept life as it comes than is Walter. However, another explanation is that frustration accumulates not only over lifetimes but also across generations. Mama retains her hope for as long as she does because she converts hope for her own better life into hope for her children's better lives. Walter sees his life as little different from his father's, and as he looks down a long road into the future he envisions few changes. The dreams of his ancestors become weights on his own shoulders, too heavy to bear. He erupts, having smoldered not for years but for generations.

Although some readers interpret the conclusion to *A Raisin in the Sun* as unequivocally positive, there is reason to believe that the Youngers' life in their new home will be tense, even dangerous. They are clearly unwelcome, and they have been warned to stay away. Given the context of contemporaneous U. S. historical events, they may have to tolerate racial slurs, vandalism to their property, even personal violence. Nevertheless, this conclusion to the play is more optimistic than if Walter, Mama, and the others had remained in a state of psychological surrender. As the play ends, Walter especially has assumed agency; that is, he has realized that in the face of injustice—even injustice supported by much of his culture—he is capable of fighting back.

While *A Raisin in the Sun* is not autobiographical, Hansberry's life was tainted with the stains of discrimination, and segregation. Her family was not poor and employed several students. However, her family lived and worked in an affluent white neighborhood. Her family suffered racial slurs, <https://assignbuster.com/a-raisin-in-the-sun-reflections-on-segregation-and-poverty-essay-sample/>

and physical attacks while trying to integrate into a white community. While Hansberry may not have been financially poor, segregation did deprive her of a safe and a happy childhood (Williams 437). Hansberry skillfully delivers a play which breathes life and blood into the societal problems of segregation, racism, and poverty. They become solid, strong, tangible characters which forcefully direct, shape, and attempt to crush the Younger Family. In the end the Younger's survive and live on. *A Raisin in the Sun* is a classic piece of literature. A beautifully written, and strikingly realistic story of societal ills and the truly devastating effects they can have on the human psyche.