

# *A Raisin in the Sun: Jim Crow Travels North*

By Jerry Wemple

## Unit Overview

This unit presents activities for a six-week, integrated language arts/social studies unit. Designed for high school students and centering on Lorraine Hansberry's play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, the unit seeks to widen the students' understanding of several key factors of African-American life, including the de facto segregation and discrimination facing African Americans in the North after they had fled the official Jim Crow policies in the South.

## Reading/Activities Overview

### I. Pre-reading activities: Week One

1. In this pre-reading section, students will complete the following activities before they begin reading *A Raisin in the Sun*:
  - Read text and view photographs "Chicago: Destination for the Great Migration" <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/african/chi.html>.
  - **Experience the Simulation on the Exodusters.**
  - Read "The Great Migration, 1910-1920" in *Crossing Danger Water* (Deirdre Mullane, ed. New York: Anchor Books, 1993).
  - Read "Letters from *The Chicago Defender*" in *Crossing Danger Water*
2. Students learn about and discuss the fact that, from 1880 to 1920, the United States experienced a great influx of immigrants, particularly from eastern and southern Europe. Many of these people settled in northern cities, just like African Americans who ventured North during the Great Migration. They then will make a list, and compare and contrast a group of European immigrants with African Americans, answering the following:
  - Why did each group travel to cities in the North?
  - What hardships did each face before they traveled?
  - What hardships did each group face once they arrived in the North?
  - What opportunities were available for them?
  - What did each group add to the American culture?
3. Students view the video *The Promised Land: Sweet Home Chicago* (BBC-TV and Discovery Channel, 1995), then use the letters from *The Chicago Defender* to trace the routes African Americans would have to take to reach Chicago. They will take into account the following questions:
  - What modes of transportation were available then?
  - Assuming you are a young person who traveled North and are writing a letter to a friend you left behind, what would you say about the traveling conditions, about your hopes and fears for the future?

### II.

#### Reading Activities

## Week Two:

1. **Reading Assignment:** Act I of *A Raisin in the Sun*.
2. **Activities:**
  - a. In this activity, students read the Langston Hughes poem "Harlem," which they can find under the title, "Dream Deferred," at <http://www.nku.edu/~diesmanj/hughes.html> at the bottom of the page. They then will write a brief paper discussing why Hansberry may have used an image from this poem as the title for her play? They will also explore why Walter Younger mentions a bomb in the opening lines of the play.
  - b. For this activity, the class divides into three groups, each one assigned one of these three characters: Lena Younger (Mama), Ruth Younger, or Beneatha Younger. Each group then discusses what its character's attributes are, how that character perceives the world, and why that character is important to the family. The groups will share the results of their discussion with the whole class.
  - c. Students in this lesson will read about political and economic situations of Nigeria, Kenya, and other African nations in the 1950s in this activity. As a class, they then will discuss these questions:
    - Why would Hansberry include Joseph Asagai as a suitor for Beneatha?
    - How does the inclusion of Asagai foreshadow the Pan Africanist views of the 1960s?
    - How does his inclusion echo previous Pan Africanist views?

## Week Three:

3. **Reading Assignment:** Act II of *A Raisin in the Sun*.
4. **Activities:**
  - . Students, in this activity, will explore the issue of housing discrimination. For instance, in the late 1950s, the U.S. Civil Rights Commission called Chicago "the most residentially segregated large city in the nation." In 1966, Rev. Dr. Martin L. King Jr. initiated a campaign to end discrimination in housing, employment, and schools in Chicago. The attention King and others drew to the situation led to the Federal Fair Housing Act. Students will read the Department of Justice report at <http://www.usdoj.gov/kidspage/crt/housing.htm>. Then, they will have a class discussion about rights of private groups and property owners, and the rights of people to not be discriminated against. Students should discuss items in the news, such as the lack of women members at the Augusta National Golf Course, home of important annual tournament. After coming up with several topics, students then divide into groups, with each group creating arguments for and against the rights of private individuals and the rights organizations to be exclusive.

- a. In the opening scene of Act II, Beneatha, caught up in fervent Africanism, calls George Murchison an assimilationist when he chides her for her behavior and beliefs. In this activity, students look up word "assimilation" in the dictionary. They also will explore the concept of the United States being a melting pot. Then, students write a brief paper about the idea of assimilation and their views on whether George has the right approach.

#### **Week Four**

5. **Reading Assignment:** Act III of *A Raisin in the Sun*.

6. **Activities:**

- . Students learn that one of the core reasons for migration by African Americans to the North was the hope for better employment opportunities. However, African Americans often found themselves shutout from the most lucrative trades. They will read the articles about industrial jobs at these web sites:

- <http://www.northbysouth.org/2000/Intro/Main%20Page.htm>  
(follow the "Society" link to "Work").
- A. Phillip Randolph and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters  
[http://aphiliprandolphmuseum.com/evo\\_history.html](http://aphiliprandolphmuseum.com/evo_history.html).

Then, they will participate in a class discussion on how these situations may have influenced Walter's thinking about "getting ahead in the world."

- a. In this activity, students explore the approaches to life that various character in the play represent. For instance, Lena Younger (Mama) seems to represent a traditional approach to life. If she were a European immigrant, her views might be called "Old World" by the younger generation. Beneatha Younger seems to represent the possibility, through education, of advancement, although some of her attempts to enter into a different world, such as acting and horseback riding lessons, seem whimsical and short lived. However, Walter Younger, who is 15 years older than his sister, says he feels "trapped" perhaps between the opposing world views of these two women. Students will assume the role of Joseph Asagai or George Murchison and write a letter to Walter offering advice.

### **III. Post-reading Activities**

#### **Week Five**

1. **Viewing Assignment:** Students watch the film version of the play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, 1961, with Sidney Poitier, Claudia McNeil, Ruby Dee. (This version won the Gary Cooper Award at the Cannes film festival.)

2. **Activities:**

- . Several stage and film versions have been produced of *A Raisin in the Sun*. Each director and each actor brings his or her interpretation to the roles. In this activity, students discuss how this film version of *A Raisin in the Sun* met and/or differed from their expectations.
- a. Lorraine Hansberry died in 1965 at the age of 35, leaving a legacy of a few powerful works. In this activity, students read a biography of Hansberry located through the Gateway. [link to hansberry's links] As a class, they then discuss how Hansberry's own experiences may have helped her to write the play and how her life differed from that of the Younger family.

**Week Six**

**Activity:** The play leaves the Younger family in a state of transition. Working in small groups, students develop a one-act play based on the Younger family ten years in the future, about the time Dr. King was protesting continued housing discrimination in Chicago. They will have each character age and be formed by experiences from the past ten years. For example, Travis would be 20, and Beneatha, now 30, might have gone to medical school or might have gone to Africa.

In writing their plays, students consider how the family reacted to changes around them, including the Civil Rights Movement, President Kennedy's assassination, and the escalating war in Vietnam, where many young black men (possibly Travis) were called to serve.

Optionally, groups can focus on one issue, such as King's protest, to provide unity for the script and to keep it concise. Once the groups have completed their plays, they "produce" them for the class.

This lesson was submitted by Jerry Wemple, a teacher at Bloomsburg University in Pennsylvania.