

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for A Raisin in the Sun (Unfilmed Original Screenplay)

by  
Lorraine Hansberry

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## Book Information

Lorraine Hansberry, A Raisin in the Sun (Unfilmed Original Screenplay)

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206 Pages

Book Level: 4.9

Interest Level: UG

A black family encounters numerous obstacles while trying to use a \$10,000 insurance settlement to fulfill their dreams. Includes flashbacks from the unfilmed original screenplay.

**Topics:** Arts, Theater/Plays; Classics, Classics (All); Continents, Africa; Family Life, Misc./Other; History, Misc./Other; People, African American; Popular Groupings, College Bound

## Main Characters

Beneatha Younger the younger daughter of Lena, who is a bright medical student

Big Walter the deceased husband of Lena, who is often remembered and referred to by the other characters

Bobo a man with whom Walter hopes to go into business

George Murchison the son of a well-to-do man who is one of Beneatha's suitors

Herman the owner of a liquor store whom Walter asks for advice

Joseph Asagai the exchange student from Nigeria, who is a friend and suitor of Beneatha

Karl Lindner the head of a community organization who asks the Youngers to leave his neighborhood

Lena Younger the recently widowed mother of Walter, who comes into a large insurance settlement when her husband dies

Mrs. Holiday Lena's domestic employer

Ruth Younger Walter's frustrated wife

Travis Younger Walter and Ruth's only son

Walter Lee Younger the main character of the book, who is an unhappy man struggling to succeed against numerous obstacles

Willy Harris a shady character with whom Walter hopes to go into business

## Vocabulary

**"cat"** slang term for another individual

**assimilation** the process of becoming a part of the prevailing culture

**bourgeois** the middle class segment of society; in Marxist terms, the class that exploits the "working class" as a commodity

**colonialism** control by one power or government over a dependent group of people; in this book, referring to the situation in Africa at the time

**NAACP** National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; an organization that supports the civil rights of minority groups in America

**tenement** typically poor or low-income rented apartments that are divided into several apartments

## Synopsis

This story begins by presenting the building where the Younger family lives. The camera pans through their small apartment, carefully showing the Younger's cramped and thread-bare living conditions. They consider themselves working-class and not poor. Early in the story we learn that Lena Younger, the matriarch of the Younger family, is expecting an insurance check for a substantial amount of money. Her husband, Big Walter, has died and they will soon receive a \$10,000 settlement. This money becomes the cause of great stress and complications for the Younger family because each character feels entitled to some of that money, and they all have their own ideas of what should be done with it.

There is a definite struggle occurring in Lena's only son, Walter Lee. He works as a chauffeur for a wealthy white man and is continuously exposed to wealth that he cannot obtain. It is even difficult for him to provide book money for his son, Travis, and in doing so, he sacrifices cab money for himself. He claims that he wants so many things that it drives him crazy. His unrealistic dreams for the future

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result in much tension between him and his wife, Ruth. He wants his mother's money to open a liquor store with a couple of other men. Ruth and Walter Lee often argue, and Walter Lee tells her that she is responsible for his lack of success because she does not support or encourage him.

Beneatha is Lena's daughter and Walter Lee's younger sister. She is a bright girl who is in college studying to become a doctor. Lena has definite plans to set aside a portion of the money to pay for Beneatha's college education. Beneatha is an idealistic and intelligent young woman who longs for more than her present situation. She is dating a wealthy but narrow-minded man named George and a Nigerian exchange student named Asagai.

Meanwhile, Ruth learns that she is pregnant with a baby they can little afford. She contemplates abortion. Lena intervenes and tells Walter Lee that he must defend his unborn child. Walter Lee seems little affected by Lena's pleading, and he goes off drinking.

Lena surprises the family by placing a down payment on a nice house in an all-white neighborhood. The only really happy scenes involving the family as a whole occur at this house. It is much better than they could have expected, and they are excited to move in because they will finally have rooms that are not "dual purpose." The picture does not stay so happy when the Youngers learn that their white neighbors reject them because they are black. Mr. Lindner, representing the community, attempts to bribe the Youngers into leaving by offering to buy back their house for more money than what they paid.

Walter Lee is unhappy that his mother did not give him any money to start his own business. He pleads with her, and she finally relents. Lena does stipulate, however, that a portion of the remaining money be used for Beneatha's education and the rest be placed into a checking account for Walter Lee to do with as he sees fit. Walter Lee naively gives the entire sum of \$6,500 to Willy Harris, whom he trusts to go into business with him. Willy absconds with the

money, and the Youngers are left defeated.

Walter Lee decides to take Mr. Lindner up on his offer, figuring he will beat him at his own game, and thus regain the money that he lost to Willy. His family is shattered. If he does this, then he is degrading his dead father's money, his family, and his race. Walter decides to make a stand, and he tells Mr. Lindner that his family will be staying in their house after all. Everyone who can will work, and somehow they will make enough to pay their mortgage.

## Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

### Initial Understanding

How does Walter act when he is frustrated?

*Walter tends to take out his frustration on the other characters in the story. He blames his wife for his lack of success. He complains that she does not give him enough support, when really he should be taking responsibility for his own life and actions. He also attempts to make his mother feel guilty when she does not give him her money. He reacts in anger toward George because of his frustration. He also behaves in a similar way toward his fellow chauffeur. Also, he tends to drink and act irresponsibly when he is frustrated.*

### Literary Analysis

What does the title, *A Raisin in the Sun*, mean?

*A raisin is a withered grape and calls to mind the image of wasting away. As the Langston Hughes's poem points out, it probably refers to dreams that are never realized. It also refers to the lives of the characters and how they are affected by their unfulfilled dreams. This is what seems to happen to Walter for most of his life, as he can visualize success but cannot obtain it.*

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## Inferential Comprehension

Why does Lena give Walter her money?

*She realizes just how desperate and defeated her son is. In all likelihood, she knows it is a bad idea. But in her heart, she sees it as a chance for Walter to redeem himself and be happy. As a mother, she is just hoping that things will be different and that everything will turn out all right.*

## Constructing Meaning

Who or what is responsible for Walter's problems?

*Some students may say that Walter's troubles stem from the way he values money and equates material possessions with success. His materialistic values lead him to make irresponsible decisions which harm his family. Walter is a misguided and unhappy man, but he does not have the sense to realize that many of his problems are his own fault. Other students may argue that society and its prejudices are responsible for Walter's problems. Walter has been oppressed for many years, and many obstacles exist in a society that prevents him from achieving the same success as whites.*

## Teachable Skills

**Understanding Characterization** Who is this story about? It has been said that both Lena and Walter are equally main characters. Have students take sides, choosing either Lena or Walter as the main character. Then divide students into two teams to debate whether Lena or Walter is the main character. Draw conclusions together.

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** Because of Asagai, this novel contains many references to Africa, particularly to Nigeria. There are a few phrases, philosophical ideas, political problems, and traditional clothing and dance that are mentioned. Using books, videos, and the Internet, assign each student to choose a topic about Africa or Nigeria to research and discuss with the class. One student might teach the class a few basic Nigerian words and expressions. Another student might bring in a Nigerian recipe for the

class to try. Still others might talk about climate, education, religious beliefs or politics.

**Comparing and Contrasting** After arguing with George about being bitter, George says to Walter, "Good night, Prometheus." The characters ponder who Prometheus is and whether George has just insulted Walter. Have students learn about the mythological Prometheus and find out who he was and what he did. Then have the students write a short essay comparing the two literary figures and asserting whether or not Walter is a modern Prometheus.

**Responding to Literature** After reading the novel, show students the 1961 film version of *A Raisin in the Sun* starring Sidney Poitier. The film has been criticized for leaving out some critical scenes. Which scenes have been cut? Why do you think they were not included in the film? Might the reasons be racially motivated, or purely artistic? Have the class discuss these and similar questions.