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English 110C

14 December 2014

The Impact of the Lorraine Hansberry on American Society

The 20th century can be seen as a dramatic change for American society. The view of women and African Americans in America changed as the years went by. Many people helped in shaping this new society of America in the fight for women’s rights and civil rights for African Americans, but Lorraine Hansberry is an extraordinary woman who did both. The playwright and activist is regarded as one of the most influential women of the 20th century. Some of her best work includes the famous play *A Raisin in the Sun,* written in 1956, and her autobiography *To be Young, Gifted and Black,* written in 1965.Her work as a playwright and early civil rights activist helped lead to the eventual Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s.

Lorraine Hansberry was born in Chicago, Illinois, on May 19th, 1930. Hansberry grew up in a upper-middle class African American family with four older siblings. Her father, Carl Augustus, quit his job as a bank teller to become an entrepreneur. He excelled in real estate during the Great Depression and also was heavily involved in politics, campaigning for a seat in the US Congress in 1940 (Wiener 20). Her mother, Nannie, tried her best to make sure that her children understood their heritage. She often took Hansberry and her siblings to visit “their grandmother in Tennessee, where they heard stories of how their enslaved grandfather had run away and hidden from his master in the very same hills they could see from the homestead” (Wiener 22). Hansberry’s family was very involved in the fight for freedom for blacks. They even hosted famous African Americans, such as sociologist W.E.B. Dubois and singer Paul Robeson. These men would later serve as an inspiration to Hansberry in the way she viewed the world.

Lorraine Hansberry found her interest in theater when she attended the University of Wisconsin in 1948. She was inspired to pursue a career in theater from watching Irish playwright Sean O'Casey's “Juno and the Paycock” (Wiener 23). Due to the social and racial barriers of the time, she was not given the opportunities to succeed academically at Wisconsin. Hansberry commuted because there was no housing for African American students. She took classes in “literature, history, philosophy, art, mathematics, and science and was fascinated by the study of humanities but lacked an interest in science. She became involved in politics and was even the chair of the Young Progressives of America during Henry Wallace’s presidential campaign in 1948. Her love of theater was reflected in the work she did while at Wisconsin, but because she was African American her work was frowned upon. She was given a D in her theater class because her professor did not like the idea of a black woman going into a predominately white profession. Due to the overwhelming discouragement she felt and the negative attitudes of the administration, Hansberry left the University of Wisconsin and moved to New York in 1950 (Wiener 23).

In New York City, Hansberry began to flourish as a writer. She her continued work with the Young Progressives of America and “enrolled at the New School for Social Research, wrote articles for a publication of the Young Progressives of America, and, in 1951, joined the staff of Paul Robeson's magazine *Freedom*” (Wiener 24). She wrote on a variety of topics for the magazine from women to art to the social problems of New York. While doing research for the magazine, she around the United States, and visited Africa, and South America. As she developed into a more polished writer Hansberry became more radical politically. “Lorraine Hansberry *did* sharpen her journalistic tools, She learned to interview easily; she started to sift important figures from mazes of paper ; she began to penetrate the facades of people and events”(Wiener,24) She also developed her verbal skills teaching classes and speaking at the Fredrick Douglass School in Harlem. At a rally in 1951, Hansberry protested the NYU basketball team that refused to allow African American players. There she met literature graduate student Robert Nemiroff. She later worked for Nemiroff’s restaurant in Greenwich Village, developed a close relationship with the family and married Nemiroff in June of 1953.

Robert Nemiroff and Burt D’ugoff wrote a song in 1956 that Hansberry titled “Cindy,Oh, Cindy.” The song became a success allowing Nemiroff and Hansberry to become writers’ full time. During this period, Hansberry began work on her most famous play *A Raisin in the Sun,* which is much more than just your average Broadway play. It is a vivid and accurate depiction of the struggles of the Younger’s, a middle class African American family during the 20th century living in a small house on the South Side of Chicago.

The overall theme of the play is achieving dreams. Hansberry wisely chose Langston Hughes, a very influential Harlem Renaissance poet, to help open her play. Hughes lived during a time when African Americans were inspired to become poets, writers, and musicians and the “American dream” was thought reachable if not for the racial discrimination they faced every day. Hughes wrote his poem “Harlem” in 1951 around twenty years after the Great Depression. In Harlem, Hughes expresses the tension between the creativity that blacks had and their inability to see it through due to the oppression of African Americans in society. He questions if a dream deferred withers up like a raisin in the sun. This poem is what Hansberry based her title on. If a dream is put on hold, it will eventually die.

Hansberry reflects this theme in her play by the different experiences each character goes through throughout the story. One can compare A Raisin in the Sun to Hansberry’s own life by the setting of the play. Set in Chicago, Illinois the Younger’s are a working class African American trying to live out the American dream. After the death of Lena Younger’s husband the family anxiously awaits the arrival of his insurance check for 10,000 dollars. Many different members of the family see the check as an opportunity to accomplish their dreams. Walter, Lena’s son is a self proclaimed entrepreneur and wants to use the money to start his own liquor store and get rich, while Beneatha Younger, a college student looks forward to using the money to pay her way through Medical school and eventually become a doctor. Things become complicated when news of Walter’s wife, Ruth becoming pregnant gets out. Lena Younger is faced with the very difficult choice of putting her children’s dreams on hold for the sake of the newborn coming into the family. Ultimately she decides the best thing to do with the money is to buy a new house in an upper class white suburban neighborhood. This relates to Hansberry because one of the most important events in her childhood which most likely sparked the idea for “A Raisin in the Sun” was her family’s move from South Side Chicago to a predominantly white neighborhood. It caused an uproar around the town as an angry mob formed in front of the new Hansberry household. The neighbors were so upset that they threw a brick into the front window and almost hit Hansberry. This event left an indelible impression upon her and left her with an example of the impact racial tensions can have on a neighborhood.

Lorraine Hansberry uses the experience of her childhood in *A Raisin in the Sun* when she creates the character Karl Linder, a member of the Clybourne Park Home Improvement Association who tries to offer the Younger’s a deal to reconsider moving into the white suburban neighborhood. She made the racial tensions an integral part of the play and the deciding factor in the climax. When the Younger’s are faced with the tough decision to accept the fact that they are not fit to live in a neighborhood because of their race they can no longer go through with the deal. The Younger family decides to move into the new house and start their life over again. This directly relates to Lorraine Hansberry because one can only imagine what she went through in her life dealing with the amount of racism and prejudice that surrounded her life from youth to adulthood. Hansberry used a Raisin in the Sun as a way to fight back and from the success and fame it received she spoke openly about her political views and the problems of society.

Hansberry left theater critics and audiences in shock with amount of realism and drama displayed in *A Raisin in the Sun.* The play was met with such high praise and acclaim, and Hansberry became an overnight sensation. *A Raisin in the Sun* was even adapted into a film by Hansberry. She used the fame she received as a playwright to spread her political views on many issues. “She supported a variety of causes that were very unpopular at the time, and she also had close ties to groups some people considered dangerous to the United States government- groups such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Communist party, and various black nationalist organizations, As a result, she came under the surveillance of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)” (Weiner 27). Hansberry used every chance she got to speak out on important issues. She even spoke in 1962 to say that the House of Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), which led anti- Communist investigations, should be abolished. During a time where there was heavy tension between the United States and communist nation, the Soviet Union, Hansberry stayed true to her views and did not shy away from saying what might not have been popular at the time.

Along with her constant political activism Hansberry also did more writing. In 1959 she began work on her second play *The Sign in Sidney Brustien’s Window*, a play about “a Jewish intellectual who wavers between being politically committed and totally disillusioned” (Weiner 28). It was not successful with critics or received well within the community. Hansberry wrote other plays that were both published and unpublished and even wrote a drama for NBC called *The Drinking Gourd*,but it was deemed too violent for television and never aired. One could say that after the success of *A Raisin in the Sun*, Hansberry’s outlook on life became too radical and extreme for commercial eyes and so her work was disregarded.

In 1963, Hansberry began to suffer from cancer. Although her health deteriorated, she continued to write *The Movement: Documentary of a Struggle for Equality*, which was about the history of the civil rights movement in cooperation with the Students Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Hansberry began to struggle with her sexual identity as the public became aware of her growing lesbianism. Her marriage to Nemiroff ended in March of 1964, but the two still remained close friends, as he visited her in the hospital many times during her battle with cancer. In January 1965, cancer took Hansberry’s life. She decided to leave her ex husband Niemroff with her literary work. Neimroff then devoted the rest of his life to publish her works. He wrote introductions for *A Raisin in the Sun* and arranged for the play’s publication. He also assembled some of Hansberry's writing, plays, and letters to create Hansberry’s autobiography *To Be Young Gifted and Black: Lorraine Hansberry in Her Own Words.*

One could say if Hansberry’s lived today in the modern day 21st century her undeniable love and spirit would still shine bright. With the world in the current state that it is now following the events of Ferguson, Missouri, and Staten Island and Brooklyn, NY racial tensions are still high and very prevalent in today’s society. The topic is a very sensitive one that many entertainers and writers have declined to comment on but Hansberry would not shy away from stating her opinion on the incident in the way that many other political and civil rights activists have. She would be with the millions across the country that have came together in protest of the grand jury decisions in the last weeks and it may impact her to write another play or another television program to help bring awareness to this cause. Hansberry always used experiences in her life, whether it happened to her or someone else, as an inspiration for many of her works and the events of today would perfectly match with the subject matter that Hansberry was trying to explore. It was one that was always tough for some American’s to watch but one that needed to be heard in order to inform those who are ignorant or oblivious to the state of the nation.

Hansberry’s impact on American Theater and society is forever commemorated. Hansberry lived to write and speak and continued to work until she died for her causes. Her play *A Raisin in the Sun* touched the hearts of many people, black, white or any race. To this day *A Raisin in the Sun* is still being reprised and shown on Broadway. The pure power of this woman’s words led to the change in Society. People began to respect the work that African Americans did every day and what they did to get to where they are today. The constant discrimination, prejudice and racism was exemplified in Hansberry’s play and in her life as well. Hansberry shaped the experiences of her life around the play and used her story to inform the public of the wrongs of Society during that time. She was true to herself no matter how popular or unpopular she had become she was not afraid to speak about what she felt inside. So in essence, she was a model to African American’s and women about the power one can hold if they apply themselves correctly. Hansberry wrote in her autobiography *To Be Young Gifted and Black* “I wish to live because life has within it that which is good, that which is beautiful, and that which is love. Therefore, since I have known all of these things, I have found them to be reason enough and--I wish to live. Moreover, because this is so, I wish others to live for generations and generations and generations and generations”(Hansberry 200). Through Hansberry’s written works she will continue live and impact the millions that have and will see her play *A Raisin in the Sun* for generations and generations to come.

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