

## A RAISIN IN THE SUN READING GUIDE

### Act I, Scene 1

(1) In what city does the play take place?

*The play takes place in Chicago's south side.*

(2) The living room setting seems overtaken by weariness. Name two details that suggest this.

*-Crocheted doilies and couch covers hide the worn upholstery.*

*-Tables or chairs are placed over the frayed carpet.*

*-Carpet is dull and faded.*

*One small window allows in the only light in the small apartment.*

(3) Two references are made to a check early on in the play, one by Walter and one by Travis. How does Ruth react to each of these references?

*When Walter asks if the check has come yet, Ruth is annoyed with the question and tells him that it is not supposed to come until the next day. Travis then asks if the check is coming the next day, and Ruth tells him to get his mind off the money.*

(4) According to his mother, why is Travis getting so little sleep?

*Travis gets little sleep because Walter is hanging out all night in the living room with his friends, and the living room is also Travis's bedroom.*

(5) What plan has Walter, Willy Harris and Bobo been figuring out?

*They would like to buy a liquor store for \$75,000. Each would contribute \$10,000 to the down payment of \$30,000.*

(6) Why is Walter upset with his wife's reaction to the plan?

*He says that Ruth ignores him and his dreams and pays little attention to what he says.*

(7) What does Walter want from Ruth?

*He wants her to support him and his dreams, listen to him, encourage him, and make him feel like a man.*

(8) What does Walter mean when he says, "We one group of men tied to a race of women with small minds?"

*He feels that African-American women do little to stand up for and support African-American men.*

(9) What is Walter's job?

*He is a chauffeur for a rich white man.*

(10) How would you describe the tone that Beneatha uses with her brother?

*She is sarcastic and nasty when she speaks to him.*

(11) Why is Walter upset with Beneatha's plan to go to medical school?

*He is afraid that his mother will use the \$10,000 check to pay for Beneatha's college tuition, which would eliminate Walter's chances for using the money to buy his share of the liquor store.*

- (12) What does Beneatha really mean when she says, “forgive me for ever wanting to be anything at all”?  
*She is angry that her brother does not recognize her dreams and feels that he is selfish for denying her right to want to be a success.*
- (13) What does Walter tell Beneatha she should do with her life? In reality, he has a deeper, underlying conflict. What is Walter’s hidden fear?  
*Walter says that Beneatha should be a nurse or get married. He believes that women shouldn’t do “men’s” jobs, and being a doctor is overstepping the boundaries of her gender. Walter is afraid that if the women in his family are able to take care of themselves, they won’t need him. He also feels inferior to the women in his life because he must always depend on them for financial and emotional support. Feeling dependent makes Walter angry, frustrated and less manly.*
- (14) Where is this check coming from that Mama will receive on Saturday? How much is it worth?  
*The check is the payment of a life insurance policy for her husband who recently died. It is worth \$10,000.*
- (15) How does Beneatha feel about the liquor store?  
*She thinks buying a liquor store is a waste of money. She doesn’t feel that Walter has the ambition or ability to make a success of such a business and is thankful that her mother will not agree to the plan.*
- (16) How does Ruth say Mama should spend the money? How does Mama intend to use it? What does this say about the differences in their characters?  
*Mama is practical and thrifty. She has lived a life of poverty and sees the money both as a burden and a blessing. She intends to use some of the money for Beneatha’s tuition and some for a payment on a house. Ruth is a dreamer who thinks Mama should use the money to take a trip to Europe or South America. She thinks money is a way out of depression, frustration and obligation.*
- (17) Beneatha thinks deeply and is frustrated with her life. What does she say she wants to do that makes her mother and Ruth laugh loudly?  
*Beneatha says that she needs to express herself. Mama and Ruth believe that there are much more important things to do, and they feel that Beneatha is immature and silly.*
- (18) Why does Beneatha really not want to marry George Murchison?  
*He doesn’t believe in her dream of becoming a doctor. She says that he is shallow and could never understand what is important to her.*

## Act I, Scene 2

- (1) At the beginning of this scene, the family is cleaning the apartment, and several details further explain the Youngers’ living conditions. Which detail offers a complete picture of the environment in which the Youngers live and explain why is does so.  
*The women are spraying for bugs and cleaning the apartment, but no matter how much they clean, they’ll never be rid of the bugs because the building in which they live is old and neglected.*
- (2) Why is Ruth upset when she returns home? Why do you suppose this makes her so unhappy?  
*She tells the family that she is two months pregnant. This makes her upset because the apartment is already overcrowded; she is overworked, and there is not enough money to provide for her family now.*

(3) When Travis enters, he too is upset. Explain why.

*Travis comes in from playing outside to announce that he has just seen a rat "as big as a cat" and that the janitor beat it to death with a stick.*

(4) Who is Joseph Asagai? What is implied about the relationship between him and Beneatha?

*He is an African from Nigeria. He is a fellow student and in love with Beneatha. He is devoted to the study of his Nigerian heritage, an interest that he shares with Beneatha.*

(5) What does Asagai give to Beneatha as a gift? Why is Beneatha pleased with it? How does Asagai react?

*He gives her some records and a robe for Nigerian women. Beneatha is pleased because she is searching for her identity and wants to know all she can about her African heritage. He admires how she looks in it but criticizes her for changing her hair. He believes that African-American women should wear their hair naturally. Straightening it like she does, according to him, suggests a denial of her heritage and an attempt to fit in with the white culture.*

(6) What stereotypes about women does Asagai reveal? What is Beneatha's opinion about a relationship with Asagai?

*He believes that women should seek marriage rather than identity. He says that American women talk too much about liberation. Beneatha believes that there should be more to a relationship than physical attraction. She desires a man who will be her equal, take the time to listen to her dreams, and provide emotional support for her. Asagai disagrees and says that his feelings for Beneatha are all that matter.*

(7) What is Asagai's Nigerian nickname for Beneatha? What does the name mean in English?

*The name is "Alaijo," which means, "one for whom ... food is not enough."*

(8) Why does Beneatha thank Asagai for the nickname?

*She thanks him because the name tells her that he has listened to her desire to search for herself.*

(9) When the postman brings the check for \$10,000, Mama is overjoyed and then worried. Explain her conflicting feelings.

*She is overjoyed when the money arrives, but she is also scared. She has never had so much money, and she is worried that she will not do the right thing with it. The idea of so much money worries her because she fears that it will ruin her family. Mama is also sad that the money came to her because her husband died, and she is alone to make decisions.*

(10) What does Walter ask as soon as he comes in the door? Why does he shout? What is his reaction to Mama's refusal to invest in a liquor store?

*As soon as he walks in, he wants to know if the check has come in. He shouts because he is excited and hopeful that he will get the money to fulfill his dream. He becomes angry when Mama refuses to even consider his plan to invest the money in the liquor store. He shouts and says that Mama didn't even listen to his plans and isn't considering the rest of his family in her refusal to give him the money.*

(11) What concern does Mama have about Walter's frequent times away from home?

*She believes that Walter is having an affair because he goes outside to look for peace.*

(12) How does Walter explain his discontent about his job and his future?

*Walter is discontent because he has a trivial job and a boss who treats him like a slave. He feels that there is no future for him, that he will never advance his career or make a better life for himself. He is also frustrated because he sees an opportunity, knows that he can make it work, but is unable to grab his dream because he lacks the money to invest in his future.*

(13) Why is Mama “proud of ... what we done”? Who is “we” in her statement?

*She is telling Walter that African-Americans no longer had to live in fear of being lynched and that they had gained freedom and dignity that was not possible in earlier times. She is proud that she and Big Walter were able to give their family a home, that they kept their kids out of trouble, and that they no longer have to ride in the back of the bus. They have finally achieved equal rights in society.*

(14) Why does Walter crumple his papers, make an angry speech, and head out of the apartment?

*Mama tells him that she will not invest the money in his plan to buy the liquor store.*

(15) What news does Mama tell Walter about Ruth? What is Walter’s initial reaction?

*Mama tells Walter that Ruth is pregnant and thinking of having an abortion? Walter does not believe her at first. She orders him to stand up and be a man like his father was. Mama directs Walter to tell his wife that he will not allow an abortion and that they will welcome this baby into the family. Walter is stunned and angry and leaves.*

(16) To what does Mama refer when she says, “You are a disgrace to the memory of your father.”?

*Mama feels that Walter will not stand up to Ruth and for his family as Big Walter had. She is disappointed that Walter is more committed to money than he is to his family.*

(17) Describe Walter. What are his dreams, his frustrations, his problems?

*Walter is a dreamer. He makes lots of plans, but he does nothing to make them happen. Walter relies on the women in his life to provide for most of his needs, both financial and emotional. There is a void in Walter’s life that has caused him to lose hope, and he resorts to self-pity. Because of his inaction and selfishness, he appears doomed to a disappointing future.*

(18) By the end of Act I, what have we learned about Ruth?

*Ruth is frustrated with her life in the crowded apartment, their poverty, and her husband’s dependence on her and his mother. She feels that she must provide all of the financial and emotional support to a family who doesn’t respect her or her decisions. As she deals with another crisis, she has reached the end of her ability to cope and favors an abortion so that she will not have yet one more person to drain away her life and resources.*

(19) By the end of Act I, what have we learned about Beneatha?

*Beneatha does not seem to fit in with her family. She reaches higher and works harder at her dreams. Unlike others in the family, she is not just a dreamer. She is a doer, setting goals and working to make them come true. She is confident and unfazed by society’s expectations of her as an African-American woman. Beneatha is largely self-sufficient, relying on no one else to get her where she wants to be. Her attitude about money is limited to its use to help her get to her dreams. Knowledge is one character trait that defines Beneatha: she cannot get enough of it. She wants to learn all that she can about herself and her ancestry so that she might fulfill her potential as a person.*

(20) Which of Mama’s values are revealed in Act I?

*Mama’s character is rooted in family values. She sees the world and defines success by her family’s character. Mama is loyal, sensible, and strong. Most of all, she is proud.*

(21) What negative situations in the Youngers' lives are making their conflicts worse? What positive aspects may help them resolve their problems?

*NEGATIVES: They live in poverty and in cramped quarters. They are the victims of racism and the society that traps them where they are. Walter's lack of work ethic and his dependence on other family members prevents him from achieving self-sufficiency. Beneatha is a woman with intellect and curiosity, traits that she finds endlessly frustrating as she attempts to make her way in a white male world. Mama must deal with all of her family's problems, for as the matriarch, she must hold them together. Additionally, Mama must now face the world alone and find solutions to problems that once were Big Walter's responsibility.*

*POSITIVES: Family love and responsibility make all of the Youngers' problems manageable. As long as they have each other, no problem is insurmountable.*

## Act II, Scene 1

(1) What is the setting at the beginning of this scene? How is it different from the end of Act I?

*Ruth is ironing, and Beneatha bursts from her room wearing the Nigerian costume that Asagai gave her. She is dancing and the mood is light-hearted. It stands in contrast to the tension at the end of Act I following the argument with Walter Lee and Mama.*

(2) What does Beneatha mean when she says, "Enough of this assimilationist junk!"?

*She is tired of trying to blend in with white society. She wants to distinguish herself and represent her culture. She is tired of attempting to style her hair, dress in conservative clothing, and being what she is not. Now, she is ready to proudly display her African-American heritage.*

(3) What is Walter's reaction to Beneatha's mood?

*He appears intoxicated, but he joins Beneatha in her dance and tribute to African culture. He is spirited and plays the part of an African chief in this impromptu play.*

(4) What is George's reaction to Walter and Beneatha performing their African dance?

*He is rattled by Beneatha's appearance and embarrassed by the dance. It is clear that George wants this "ridiculous" display to end.*

(5) George says: "We're going to the theatre – we're not going to be in it." What does he mean?

*Walter Lee and Beneatha are dancing, singing, talking loudly and otherwise appear out of place in their apartment. It looks as if they should be on stage performing. Beneatha's dress looks like a costume to George, and the whole scene makes him very nervous. He wonders what others will say.*

(6) What is Beneatha's definition of assimilationism? How does this definition present conflict for Beneatha?

*She says that "assimilation" means giving up your culture and heritage in order to submerge oneself within the dominant culture. She feels that to do so is to become oppressed and held back by that dominant culture.*

*At the same time, Beneatha wishes to become a doctor and reap the financial and societal rewards of that position. Her dreams represent the dreams of the dominant culture and set her apart from African-American society.*

(7) What does Walter say about George's father? Why does Walter feel that he and George's father have much in common?

*Walter reveals that George's father is a highly successful investor. He thinks big and is not afraid to act on his ideas. George's dad is rumored to be buying a big hotel in a shrewd business move. Walter considers himself a businessman like George's father. He, too, has dreams and is an "operator" who would like to talk with George's father so that he might share his ideas.*

(8) What does Walter say that reveals his search for something important or impressive to do?

*Walter's dreams are stated with these words: "Man, I got me some ideas," "I got some plans that could turn this city upside down."*

*Walter's frustrations are evident when he states, "Man, I'm a volcano. Here I am a giant, surrounded by ants ... Ants that can't even understand what the giant is talking about."*

(9) How do Walter and Ruth describe their relationship?

*Walter says that they have become so negative with each other that they can no longer speak "softly" or with affection. He questions how that could have happened. Ruth says that because Walter does not come to her to talk and laughs that she feels neglected and afraid. She would like to return to the days when they were close, but says that she doesn't know how to do that.*

(10) What news does Mama bring home, and why do Ruth and Walter react as they do? Why is this both good news and bad news?

*Mama tells Walter and Ruth that she has bought a house with the money from the insurance settlement. Walter explodes in anger, but Ruth is thrilled. She will now have the space she has dreamed of having. It is a mixed blessing though, for the home is in an all-white neighborhood, and that is a frightening prospect for the family. They fear rejection and sense danger in moving to this neighborhood.*

(11) Do you think that Walter's closing comments to Mama beginning "What do you need me..." are justified? Explain.

*The comments are unjustified because it is Mama's money, and Walter is still living under his mother's care. Walter is unwilling to find the way to his dreams himself, so the loss of the money is a blow for him.*

## **Act II, Scene 2**

(1) Explain the disagreement between Beneatha and George regarding studying or education. How does the argument end?

*George feels that education is a way to a degree, and therefore, a path to financial success and acceptance into mainstream society. He feels that the books and learning are necessary to pass the tests to earn the degree, but they are otherwise inconsequential.*

*Beneatha reads to learn more about the world and about herself. Her reason for going to school is to learn all that she can. The degree that she will earn is just a bonus.*

*The argument ends when Beneatha says, "I see," and leaves. She now sees that there is nothing between George and her.*



(2) Beneatha thanks her mother for understanding her. Specifically what understanding does Beneatha mean?

*Beneatha is thankful that her mother understands that she thinks George is a "fool" and that she shouldn't waste anymore time on him.*

(3) Explain Walter's attitude about his job. As a result, what does Walter try to do?

*He hates his job and considers it menial work. He despises feeling like a slave to his white boss. He escapes by drinking and having a good time.*

(4) What Walter returns, what does Mama learn?

*She finds out that he hasn't worked in three days. Instead, he borrowed a car, drove all over the city and beyond, and spent a great deal of time drinking and talking to some musicians in a bar. He seems to have been chasing his dreams.*

(5) What does Mama do after she hears about Walter's three days?

*She blames herself for Walter's unhappiness. Mama says that she, like everyone else, has ignored her son and his problems. She failed to recognize Walter's potential and treated him like a child.*

(6) Explain what Mama means when she talks to Walter about dreams again.

*She wants Walter to know that there is nothing more important to her than her son's happiness. She wants Walter to know that he means more to her than the money.*

(7) Walter says, "You trust me like that?" To what is he referring?

*Mama tells Walter that she wants him to take the remaining money and put one half in Beneatha's account. She then says that the remaining money is his to put in his account and spend as he wishes.*

(8) Describe the fantasy world that Walter paints to Travis when he tells him of his plans for the future.

*Walter sees himself as an executive with many important meetings and lots of people working for him. In that world, there is more money than the family can spend, a huge home with a gardener, and nice cars for everyone. In the fantasy, Walter has become the family caretaker and is respected not only by society but also by his family.*

### **Act II, Scene 3**

(1) What is the atmosphere at the opening of the scene?

*Ruth is busy packing for the move. She is excited and has bought some curtains for the new home. There is an atmosphere of anticipation for the changes to come.*

(2) How has the Younger family changed at the end of the week?

*Ruth is happy because of the move and because she and Walter have been doing things together. Walter is deeply happy and asks Ruth to dance with him. All are joking and laughing.*

(3) Identify Walter's change in attitude towards Beneatha.

*He is no longer angry with her. He teases her, and they laugh.*

(4) What dream does Mr. Lindner mention?

*He mentions that he would like to see the time when all people of all races could sit down together and work out their differences.*

- (5) Explain the irony in Beneatha's statement: "This, friends, is a Welcoming Committee!"  
*The irony is that although Lindner represents a welcoming committee, his purpose is actually to convince the Youngers to stay out of the neighborhood.*
- (6) Where is the irony in Lindner's statement: "People can get awful worked up when they feel that their whole way of life and everything they've ever worked for is threatened."  
*He congratulates the Youngers for being hard-working, honest people the same way he describes the people in his neighborhood. Yet, he feels threatened by their move and is making a subtle threat to the Younger family.*
- (7) Why does Lindner claim to want them not to live there?  
*He says that Negroes are much happier when they live in their own communities.*
- (8) Why does Walter throw Mr. Lindner out of the house?  
*He throws Mr. Lindner out when he realizes that the man has been sent to threaten him.*
- (9) When she is asked about her plant, Mama replies, "It expresses me." Explain the significance of the wording that she chooses. Also, explain the symbolism in what she states.  
*Mama uses the word expresses because she knows that Beneatha uses that word to show what she is searching for. The plant represents the move to the white neighborhood and the danger they face. The Youngers are fragile too, and Mama is always the one who "fixes" what goes on in the family. She is the nurturer, and she cares for the plant as she cares for her family.*
- (10) What does Mama receive from her family after she returns home?  
*The family presents her with a set of gardening tools.*
- (11) How is the gift appropriate for Mama?  
*A garden is a permanent statement of the family's intention to stay in their new home.*
- (12) Explain the allusions to Scarlett O'Hara.  
*The allusions refer to Mama's spunk and determination. Mama, like Scarlett O'Hara, stands by her home and her family no matter what consequences arise.*
- (13) Why does Ruth look "as though somehow she senses death"?  
*She recognizes the terrified look on Bobo's face, and she knows that Walter has done something terrible.*
- (14) What news does Bobo bring to Walter?  
*He tells Walter that their money is gone. Willie took off with all of it.*
- (15) Why does Walter say, "That money is made out of my father's flesh"?  
*The money came to the family with the death of Walter's father and the arrival of the insurance money.*
- (16) Besides the money, what else will the loss mean for the family?  
*Beneatha will have no money for school, and Walter's dream is lost. Walter will also have to face the pain that he has brought to Mama.*
- (17) Why is the ending scene appropriate to the Younger family and to Mama in particular?  
*The family never gives up, and they never lose faith in God. Mama calls upon God to help them.*



## Act III

(1) Why is the lighting in Act III different from the lighting in Act I?

*“The sole natural light the family may enjoy in the course of a day is only that which fights its way through this window.” This description helps to describe the Youngers’ apartment in Act I. It symbolizes the lack of hope and dreams that have faded with time and failed attempts to reach their dreams.*

*In Act III, “there is a sullen light of gloom in the living room, gray; light not unlike that which began the first scene of Act I.” Now, the lack of light has become more severe, for now there is no hope; the dreams have been within reach and are now shattered. The Youngers have given up all hope of moving forward.*

(2) Why has Beneatha lost a hold on her dream? Why does she no longer care about making the world a better place?

*Because Walter has lost the money, she feels that medical school for her is out of the question now. She has become sour and pessimistic about life and people due to this disappointment.*

(3) Explain Beneatha’s “life as a circle” speech. What is the symbolism of her idea?

*Beneatha feels that life is just a continuous march toward a dream that has no end. We hold the picture of our dreams as we march around endlessly in that search. Beneatha says that the circle is the lack of progress in the world of minorities and women. The people tell us that things will change and there will be freedom, but in the end, the promises are false and the progress is minimal.*

(4) According to Asagai, Beneatha should be grateful to Walter. Why?

*Asagai believes that the only goals worth reaching are the ones that we work for. He tells Beneatha that had Walter not lost the money, she would have been cheated out of the opportunity of reaching her dreams independently. Beneatha could feel pride in her achievements only if she did it on her own.*

(5) What does Ruth say to Mama when Mama starts talking about calling to cancel the moving van?

*She says that they still should go ahead and buy the house. If they work at it, they can make the monthly payments.*

(6) Walter comes in and says that he called “the man.” What does Walter say that he has learned? Why did he call Lindner?

*He says that he has learned that you have to be a “taker” in life. He is going to sell the property to Lindner so the family can make a profit on it.*

(9) Why does his sister say, “He’s no brother of mine”?

*She thinks he has betrayed his race to sell that property to the association of homeowners since the association wants to buy it just to keep blacks out.*

(10) When Lindner arrives, what does Walter tell him?

*Walter says that they are a proud family and that his father earned the house “brick by brick.” Walter tells him that they will be moving into the house and that they want to be good neighbors. He refuses the money, and in so doing, regains his pride and his family’s respect.*

(11) What causes Walter to say what he does to Lindner?

*Travis, his son, is standing right next to him, and Walter realizes that he really is debasing himself if he goes through with the sale.*

(12) What does Mama mean when she says, "He finally come into his manhood today, didn't he? Kind of like a rainbow after the rain"? What literary term is used?

*He stood up and took on a man's responsibilities. A simile is the term. It implies a better future for them after their difficulties.*