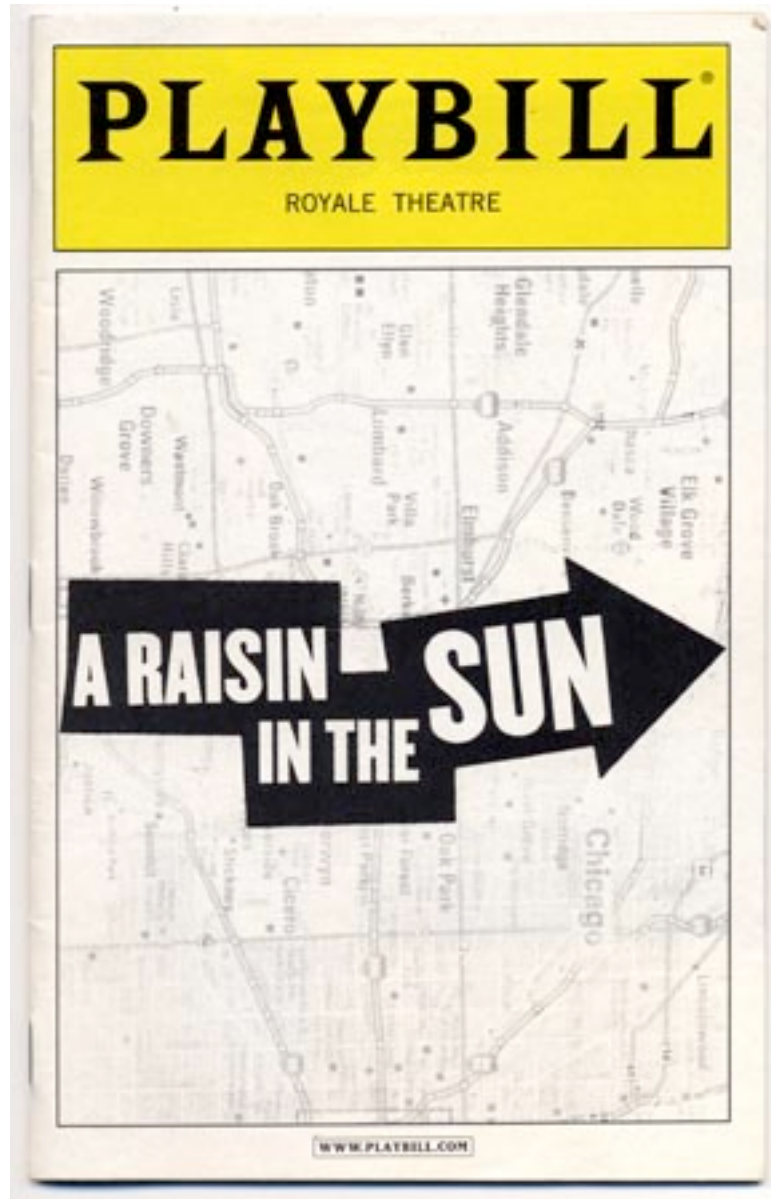


Character Studies Conversations



character studies Teacher's Guide

Character Studies Conversations –“A Raisin in the Sun” Teacher’s Guide

Introduction

Character Studies Conversations is a guide to be used as a supplement to the assigned reading of the play or viewing of the production live or on tape. The conversations with artists involved with the productions of “A Raisin in the Sun” will give a deeper understanding of the themes contained within the story.

Learning Objectives

After watching our video the students will be able to explore different views of the action in “A Raisin in the Sun” through the eyes of the characters in the play. The guide is divided into two categories: Arts and Humanities. By relating the action and themes in the play to history, art, theatre and even science, students will gain a greater understanding and appreciation of these topics. The pre and post discussion questions serve as conversation starters or essay questions that can be assigned.

Program overview

This video will focus on the relationships created by the characters in “*A Raisin in the Sun*.” It is through these relationships that teachers and students will explore the art and humanities topics listed in this guide.

In this program, viewers meet professionals who cover the concepts addressed in Lorraine Hansberry’s “*A Raisin in the Sun*.” They cite their personal experiences bringing this play to life. This program points viewers toward the greater cultural, social and economic forces at work that shaped the play, playwright and various productions of “*A Raisin in the Sun*.” Using this guide, you can address topics including language arts, social studies, women’s studies, science and technology, politics and media.

Tony Vellela
Executive Producer
Character Studies

Abigail Gullo
Special Consultant
Education Project
Editor and Writer

Main Topics

The main topics covered in this Character Studies Conversation are:

Topic 1: Introduction – the basics of this American play.

This section discusses the story and the characters that inhabit Lorraine Hansberry's play.

Topic 2: How do all these characters relate to each other?

Who are the people we are introduced to and what is their relationship to each other? This section discusses the nature of the relationships that hold the people in this story together.

Topic 3: Where does this story fit within this era?

This section looks at the implications of setting this story on the cusp of the Civil Rights Movement in the middle of the 20th century.

Topic 4: What impact did this play have on the world of theatre and how did Lorraine Hansberry's visceral work change the nature of American theatre?

This section relates the time period in which the play was written to the impact it had on theatre and society.



The Author at her typewriter

FAST FACTS

- Lorraine Hansberry was born May 19, 1930, in Chicago, Illinois and died January 12, 1965, in New York City.
- A Raisin in the Sun was the first Broadway play to be written by an African-American woman.
- A Raisin in the Sun opened in New York on March 11, 1959 to critical acclaim. The production won the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for Best Play of the year.
- In 1940 the U.S. Supreme Court ruled restrictive covenants unconstitutional in a case that came to be known as *Hansberry v. Lee*
- *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) overturned the "separate but equal" legal doctrine derived from *Plessy v. Ferguson* and made segregation legally impermissible, but provided few practical remedies.
- One of the most powerful protest songs of the 20th century, "Strange Fruit" is part of a long tradition of American protest music as old as the nation itself.
- Some random facts about costs in the 1950's
 - House: \$14,500
 - Average income: \$3,216
 - Ford car: \$1339-\$2262
 - Philco model 1403 TV: \$199
 - Admiral "home entertainment" TV system: \$549.50
 - 12" records: \$4.85
 - 10" records: \$2.85
 - Milk: \$.82 /gallon
 - Gas: \$.20 /gallon
 - Bread \$.14 /loaf
 - Postage stamp: \$.03
 - Pumpkins : \$.02 cents a lb
 - Campbell's Pork & Beans - (2) 1 lb. cans: \$.25
 - Sirloin steak: \$.77 lb
 - Kraft Mayonnaise - quart jar: \$.62



VOCABULARY TERMS

assimilation: The merging of cultural traits from previously distinct cultural groups, not involving biological amalgamation.

beseech: To implore urgently; to beg eagerly for; solicit.

clinical: Extremely objective and realistic; dispassionately analytic; unemotionally critical.

dogged: Persistent in effort; stubbornly tenacious.

dusky: Somewhat dark; having little light; dim; shadowy. Having dark skin. Gloomy; sad.

exasperate: To irritate or provoke to a high degree; annoy extremely.

furtive: Taken, done, used, etc., surreptitiously or by stealth; secret

futile: Incapable of producing any result; ineffective; useless; not successful; frivolous; unimportant.

grudge: A feeling of ill will or resentment; to resent the good fortune of (another); begrudge.

indictment: Any charge, accusation, serious criticism, or cause for blame.

insinuate: To suggest or hint slyly

stereotype: A conventional, oversimplified conception, opinion, or image. – an adverse judgment or opinion formed beforehand, without knowledge of the facts.

bias: A preference or inclination that inhibits impartiality; prejudice

racism: The belief that race accounts for differences in human character or ability and that a particular race is superior to others; discrimination or prejudice based on race.

PRE-PROGRAM DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1) What insight are you given about the central theme of the play based on Langston Hughes's poem "Dream Deferred" and play title "A Raisin in the Sun?"
- 2) Whose dream has dried up "like a raisin in the sun?" Explain why.
- 3) Explain the dreams of each character in the play as you see them.
- 4) Themes in the play include poverty, race relations, and gender roles and domesticity, and overall differences of character and attitude within the family nucleus. How are these issues similar to, and how are they different from today?
- 5) Zora Neale Hurston wrote, "Black women are the mules of the earth." In describing the African-American woman's social status during the time. What did she mean?

POST-PROGRAM DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1) Do you now have a different opinion as to whose dream has been deferred in the course of the play?
- 2) How is a house a dream come true?
- 3) Why do you think Mama gave Walter the responsibility for the money? Do you think she expected him to put the money where she asked him to? Did Mama make a wise decision?
- 4) Being gullible means that a person tends to trust people to the point of being tricked or cheated. Do you think Walter was gullible? How does his dream play a part in this?
- 5) Ruth feels compelled to decide whether or not to have an abortion. She felt so, in a time when such an act was frowned upon by society with many arguments. For example, Mama argues against it for religious reasons. Today the controversy continues, influenced by political, socio-economical, ethnic, and cultural factors as a result of changing attitudes over time. Is there still a stigma against women who have abortions or has society become neutral and accepting of the practice?

GROUP ACTIVITIES

Improv.

Students work together to act out a number of fictional scenes. Afterwards discuss why they made the choices they made based on what they read in the play.

Examples:

- Walter Lee & Ruth on a date
- Walter Lee confronts Willy Harris
- What happens when Mama goes to buy the house
- What happens right after the play ends
- Travis talks to his father about a career
- Any scene played as if the Youngers were from different ethnic groups

Langston Hughes

Divide the class into groups and assign them each a Langston Hughes poem. Have the group read the poem and then interpret its meaning. Then the group elects a performer to read the poem to the whole class and an interpreter who will explain the group's views of the meaning of the poem.

Jazz

Play some 1950's Jazz for the class. Divide the class into groups and assign them each a piece to analyze and interpret. Relate each song back to "A Raisin in the Sun." Which character would like Miles Davis? Who would prefer Billie Holiday? What kind of Jazz is your favorite?

INDIVIDUAL STUDENT PROJECTS

African-American Heritage

Heritage plays an interesting role in the play. Why is it important for Beneatha to know her African-American heritage? Does anyone else in the family appreciate her feelings regarding this topic? What heritage is important in your life?

How do we achieve success?

The play's subplot explores dreams or desires of the characters versus the needs and/or sacrifice the characters must go through in order to achieve growth. What do you think the wants/needs would have been for a poor family in the 1950's versus a similar family today? How has access to education and other means of gaining financial security changed those wants and needs for members of minority communities? How does "society" decide who to label as a minority?

Ruth's Journal

Lloyd Richards says about Ruth, "She is, as a character, as she would be in life, not fully appreciated". Take a moment from your own life when you did not feel appreciated and compare it to Ruth. Then write a journal entry as Ruth, expressing why and how you feel under-appreciated.

20th Century Changes

Using examples from the play, or from your notes watching *Character Studies Conversations*, find instances where the following events of the mid 20th century have or will affect the specific characters in "A Raisin in the Sun."

Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I have a Dream Speech"

Industrialization and Globalization

Science and Technology

The Civil Rights Movement and Political Influence

African-Americans who have run for President

The Vietnam War

Essay Questions/Research Ideas

- Do you think Walter could be happy with Ruth if he wasn't allowed to reach for his dream? Support your answer with content from the play.
- Each of the family members is expecting the new house to represent something. What does the new home mean to each character and why are they excited about moving?
- Describe Beneatha and George's relationship. Who do you think Beneatha has more feelings for, George or Asagai? What makes you think this? Would her views about relationships and the female role still be the same today?
- Some people have commented that the play is not just about a Black poor family, but a poor family that happens to be Black. What role do you think race plays in creating, destroying, or deferring each character's dream? Discuss whether socio-economic status and race had any correlation in 1950's and if they still exist today. How have they changed if at all?

INTERNET ACTIVITIES

Life in the 1950's for African-Americans

Describe the setting of the play. Does it compare to the average life of most African-Americans during the 1950s? Support your belief with historical information found on the Internet.

Langston Hughes

Research Langston Hughes on the Internet. Find his poems and learn about his life. Discuss how the importance of dreams is a theme in the play. Use information from the play and Langston Hughes' poem to support your answer.

Music

Use the Internet to look up the pop songs of the era for the play. What music was popular? Who was making the pop music of the 1950's? Who were the writers? The musicians? Relate the migration of the African-American forms of music (Jazz, Soul, Blues) to the pop charts played by white artists (Elvis Presley; Pat Boone)

Student work sheets/self tests

The following pages contain a set of worksheets that students can use as a self-test or to enhance the student and teacher projects after viewing the video. Sets may be copied for the students as needed. The worksheets are designed to reinforce information already presented in the video and to provide new information not found in the video. A set of worksheets with the answers provided is included for the teacher.



ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

- Q1). Why was Ruth upset when Walter gave Travis the money?
- Q2). Who are Willy and Bobo?
- Q3). Walter said, "Damn my eggs . . . damn all the eggs that ever was!"
Why?
- Q4). Why did Beneatha say she wouldn't marry George?
- Q5). What was Beneatha's attitude towards God?
- Q6). Who is Joseph Asagai?
- Q7). Is Asagai's present to Beneatha appropriate? Is Asagai's nickname for Beneatha appropriate?
- Q8). What does Mama say is "dangerous?"
- Q9). Where did Ruth actually go instead of the doctor's office?
- Q10). Why did Mama call Walter a disgrace to his father's memory?



ASSESSMENT QUESTION Answers

- Q1). Why was Ruth upset when Walter gave Travis the money? A1) Because he undermined her authority and gave him the money even though she said no. Because it gave Travis a false sense of the value of money in their family.
- Q2). Who are Willy and Bobo? A2) They are Walter's future business associates, who will eventually play a part in his loss of the money
- Q3). Walter said, "Damn my eggs . . . damn all the eggs that ever was!" Why? A3) He has been telling Ruth about his dream and she tells him to eat his eggs. He wants to talk and dream of a better life; she wants him to face reality and deal with his present world. This makes him frustrated, like she doesn't support him.
- Q4). Why did Beneatha say she wouldn't marry George? A4) She knew that he was rich, but she thought he was shallow. She liked him well enough to go out with him, but she didn't love him
- Q5). What was Beneatha's attitude towards God? A5) She said she did not accept the idea of God -- "there is only man and it is he who makes miracles."
- Q6). Who is Joseph Asagai? A6) He is a school friend of Beneatha and an African intellectual.
- Q7). Is Asagai's present to Beneatha appropriate? Is Asagai's nickname for Beneatha appropriate? A7) He gave her clothing from Nigeria. She literally gets wrapped up in her current fad. It also foreshadows her putting on a new life. 7a. It means "One for Whom Bread - Food - Is Not Enough." It is appropriate because he as well as Beneatha and Walter want more from life than just survival. They want a better quality of life.
- Q8). What does Mama say is "dangerous?" A8) She says it is dangerous "when a man goes outside his home to look for peace."
- Q9). Where did Ruth actually go instead of the doctor's office? A9) She went to see a woman about having an abortion.
- Q10). Why did Mama call Walter a disgrace to his father's memory? A10) He had become overly concerned with money and had lost his traditional family values, so much so that he didn't try to convince Ruth not to have an abortion.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

THE AETNA FOUNDATION

<http://www.aetna.com/foundation/aahcalendar/fastfacts.html>

African-American Civil Rights Movement on Answers.com

<http://www.answers.com/topic/african-american-civil-rights-movement>

NPR special on "A Raisin in the Sun"

<http://www.npr.org/programs/morning/features/patc/raisin/>

50's Web- Prices during the 1950's

<http://www.fiftiesweb.com/pop/prices-1950.htm>

Langston Hughes

<http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/83>

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/ihas/poet/hughes.html>

<http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/lhughes.htm>

Jazz Music

<http://www.pbs.org/jazz/>

<http://www.apassion4jazz.net/>

Additional resources at www.films.com

Character Studies – *Our Town*

Character Studies – *The Glass Menagerie*

Much More Information, Including Lesson Plans, Student Activities, Historical Background about Plays, Playwrights and Characters, Relevance to the Teaching of a Variety of Subjects and Comprehensive, Exclusive Interview Segments Are All Available from Character Studies Productions, [a 501 (c) 3 non-profit education organization] for Educational and Classroom Use.

Character Studies Productions has now created a new division, to develop and distribute expansive **Classroom Guides** [forty pages or more, which include resources, activities & materials that can be selected for use for middle and high school subjects through university level], **Play Guides** [for drama, theatre, performing arts and regional theatre use, as well as for dramaturgs working with any production of a play or musical - professional, university, high school or amateur], complete transcripts from our PBS episodes, from our Character Studies Conversations series for Films Media Group, and with America's leading playwrights, actors, directors, lyricists, choreographers and composers, and other exciting, exclusive theatre-related educational materials.

Visit www.characterstudies.net for all the details!

Character Studies would like to acknowledge our appreciation to the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, the Ford Foundation, the Snowdon Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Gladys Krieble Delmas Foundation, Newman's Own [Paul Newman], Susan Stroman, Ann Reinking and Theatermania for their financial support of this project.

Special Thanks to Maurice Robinson

Educational Project Editor and Writer: Abigail Gullo

