

LORRAINE HANSBERRY

Lesbian U.S. Feminist, Activist, and Author
(1930-1965)



Born the daughter of a middle class Chicago businessman, Lorraine Hansberry's life in many ways mirrored her art and dedication to social justice. After moving into an all-white Chicago suburb in 1937, the family was met with physical violence. Rather than give into the hostility they sued and, in 1940, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled they had a right to remain in their home. In 1950 Hansberry moved to New York City, where she eventually married Jewish songwriter Robert Nemiroff, whom she quietly divorced in 1964. Her play 'A Raisin in the Sun' (1959) was the first play written by an African American to be produced on Broadway. It would go on to win the New York Drama Critics Circle Award – an honor which Hansberry was both the first African American – and the youngest person – to receive. The play, which dealt in human terms with the serious and comic problems of a black family in modern America, was a major stimulus to the 1960s African-American Theater movement. A civil rights activist her entire life, Hansberry began identifying herself as a feminist and lesbian in the 1950s. She applauded the growing West Coast homophile movement and was one of the first members of the New York chapter of the groundbreaking lesbian organization, the Daughters of Bilitis. She wrote several essays for its newsletter *The Ladder* under the pen-name "L.H.N." proffering that "...homosexual persecution and condemnation has at its roots not only social ignorance, but a philosophically active anti-feminist dogma." Hansberry linked the struggle for gay rights, rights for people of color, and rights for women long before such terms as 'homophobia' and 'feminism' had come into the vernacular. She died from cancer in 1965 at the age of 34. Her ex-husband assembled posthumous collections of her unfinished works, letters, and diary entries – most notably *To Be Young Gifted and Black* (1969), whose title was drawn from the last speech Hansberry made to young winners of a United Negro College Fund writing contest.

Lesson Plan

LEVEL 1: CONTRIBUTIONS APPROACH

1. Activate prior experience: How has Lorraine Hansberry been remembered in her creation of the play, "A Raisin in the Sun" in 1961?
2. What have you learned about Hansberry's play? View the notes at <http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/raisin/>
3. Read the biographical information found at this link: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lorraine_Hansberry.
4. Group Discussion: Describe how she portrayed her family's battle against race and housing discrimination in Chicago.

LEVEL 2: ADDITIVE APPROACH

1. Hansberry's family was prohibited because of race in living in a subdivision in Chicago. Describe the legal actions that were taken to protect their rights in the Hansberry v. Lee case. Read about this case at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hansberry_v._Lee
2. In what ways did Hansberry continue the quest for justice by joining the Daughters of Bilitis? Describe the history of the social activism in this group. The link is http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daughters_of_Bilitis
3. Website Investigation: How did other theater contributors uncover social issues as Hansberry did in her life. Choose one activist from <http://www.legacyprojectchicago.org/Theater.html>

LEVEL 3: TRANSFORMATIONAL APPROACH

1. Describe how Hansberry experienced racial hostility in her early life. View this link at <http://www.gradesaver.com/author/lorraine-hansberry/>
2. As Hansberry discovered education and theater in New York, what were contributing factors to her understanding of civil rights?
3. Examine the guide and essays for "A Raisin in the Sun" at this link: <http://www.gradesaver.com/a-raisin-in-the-sun/>. Why was this considered a landmark for African American people as a whole?
4. In her life, Hansberry came out as a Lesbian, how did this impact her life? View the link at <http://voices.cla.umn.edu/artistpages/hansberryLorraine.php>

LEVEL 4: SOCIAL ACTION APPROACH

1. Hansberry wrote about the struggles of being a lesbian in a male dominated world. How did Hansberry interpret how lesbians confronted gender roles? View this link at <http://www.theroot.com/views/lorraine-hansberrys-gay-politics>
2. How did Hansberry pave the way for activism for feminism and gay rights? <http://www.tolerance.org/lesson/lorraine-hansberry-lgbt-politics-and-civil-rights>
3. What advocacy groups have directly provided social justice resources to break the disparity between males and females in society today? http://socialjustice.ccnmtl.columbia.edu/index.php/Hansberry_as_a_Social_Activist