ENCYCLOPEDIA OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN LITERATURE

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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Hansberry, Lorraine (1930–1965)

Despite the brevity of playwright, activist, and feminist Lorraine Hansberry's theatrical life, and although only two of her plays were produced during her lifetime, she remains one of the most celebrated black playwrights in America. Breaking the color barrier in the theater, protesting and validating the unfortunate circumstances of blacks in the United States, Hansberry became the voice of the people during the most critical era of racial segregation and the fight for civil rights in America. She used the stage as her platform to ignite the social and political consciousness of her audiences, both black and white.

The youngest of four children, Carl Jr., Perry, and Mamie, Hansberry was born on May 19, 1930, in Chicago, Illinois. Her father, Carl A. Hansberry, Sr., was a prominent real estate broker and the founder of one of Chicago's first black banks; her mother, Nannie Perry Hansberry, was a schoolteacher. Both were activists and natives of the South. In 1938, when Hansberry was eight years old, her family purchased a home in one of Chicago's restricted white, middle-class neighborhoods.

In 1952 she became an associate editor, taught classes at the Frederick Douglass School, and traveled extensively. That same year, she met Robert B. Nemiroff, a Jewish writer and activist, while covering a picket line at New York University, where he was a graduate student. They were married on June 20, 1953, in Chicago, and moved to Greenwich Village.

Hansberry left the Freedom staff in 1953 and devoted herself to her personal writing, working odd jobs, studying African history with DuBois and teaching black literature at the Marxist-oriented Jefferson School for Social Sciences. These experiences further heightened her awareness of social injustice. In 1956 she began writing A Raisin in the Sun, which was published in 1959 by her music publisher and friend Philip Rose. Debuting at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre and running for 530 performances, the emotionally charged play chronicles the plight of the poor, black younger family, who, though trapped in Chicago's South Side, find spiritual and social ways to overcome their personal weaknesses and the barriers erected by the dominant culture.

A Raisin in the Sun was named best play of the year (1959). Hansberry received the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award and was hailed as the youngest playwright, the fifth woman, and the first black to win such a prestigious drama award. The 1961 film version of the play, starring Sidney Poitier, Claudia McNeil, Ruby Dee, and Diana Sands, brought Hansberry a special award at the Cannes Film Festival and a nomination for a Screen Writer's Guild Award for her screenplay. Now an American classic, A Raisin in the Sun has also been adapted for television. One adaptation starred Danny Glover, Esther Rolle, and Kim Yancey.

After completing the screenplay of A Raisin and Drinking Gourd, Hansberry began work on several plays in the early 1960s, including Les Blancs; she completed What Use Are Flowers? in 1962. Although she became ill in April 1963, Hansberry continued to write and to be politically active. Although Nemiroff and Hansberry were quietly divorced in Mexico on March 10, 1964, they continued to collaborate on projects. She completed her second staged "play of ideas," The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window (1964). Recognized as a play that was ahead of its time, it examines family relationships, marriage, prostitution, homosexuality, politics, dramatic absurdity, abstract art, anti-Semitism, and racism (Cheney, 72). The show closed on the evening of her death.

At the time of her death from cancer of the pancreas on January 12, 1965, Hansberry left behind several unfinished works. After her death, Nemiroff, the executor of her estate, adapted from Hansberry's writings and posthumously published To Be Young, Gifted and Black (1969), which appeared in book form a year later. Also, he completed Les Blancs (1970) and Les Blancs: The Collected Last Plays of Lorraine Hansberry (1972). In 1973, A Raisin in the Sun was adapted into a musical titled Raisin (1973) by Nemiroff and Charlotte Zaltzer. This Tony Award-winning musical was revived in 1981.

Hansberry's life and significance as a major 20th-century African-American dramatist, social and political activist, and pioneer of the woman's movement have been well documented, for example, in "Lorraine Hansberry," a 1976 documentary written and produced by Ralph J. Tangney, and also in a special Freedomways magazine retrospective issue, Lorraine Hansberry: Art of Thunder, Vision of Light (1979). Two plays based on Hansberry's life and works have appeared on stage: Lovingly Yours, Langston and Lorraine (1994) and Love to All, Lorraine (1995). Today, Hansberry is still considered a phenomenal contemporary playwright who paved the way for other African-American performers and dramatists, including James Baldwin, Charles Gordon, Amiri Baraka, Ed Bullins, and August Wilson.

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