

Block

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## **BLOCK 3: NATURALISM/REALISM**

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This block discusses the following points:

- inculcate the knowledge of realism and naturalism among the readers
- know the reasons behind origin of the realism and naturalism movement and its effects on literature specially drama
- be able to differentiate between realism and naturalism.

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## UNIT 10: NATURALISM/REALISM: THE CONCEPT

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### Structure

#### 10.0 Objectives

#### 10.1 Realism: An Introduction

##### 10.1.1 Characteristics

###### 10.1.1.1 Definitions

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### 10.0 OBJECTIVES

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The main objective of the chapter is

- to inculcate the knowledge of realism and naturalism among the readers
- to know the reasons behind origin of the realism and naturalism movement and their effects on literature specially drama
- to be able to differentiate between realism and naturalism.

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### 10.1 REALISM: AN INTRODUCTION

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Realism is an artistic movement which began in France in the nineteenth century. It came as a reaction to romanticism and idealism. Writers and artists started getting away from romanticism. They started looking forward to real or factual description of things. So, they tried to represent the things in real way as they are. Writers of realism painted the routine life without any fabrication or omitting anything which may be ugly or sordid aspect of life. Realists believed in showing the true picture of things without idealizing them. So, the realism movement came as an opposing idea to Nominalism and idealism. The followers of idealism theory presented the things in their ideal form. They were not true rather shrouded with an ideal cover. The followers of Nominalism believe that ideas are only names and do not have practical application. Reality is also a matter of verisimilitude: how

characters are determined by their environment, chronological narratives, psychological dimension of the characters, and presence of an omniscient narrator.

Realism stressed on the truthful treatment of the common and everyday life. Realism seeks a one-to-one relationship between representation and the subject. Realists are concerned with the effect of the work on their reader and the reader's life, a pragmatic view. It can be said that Realism is nothing but the reaction of the past, a true picture of life against the rosy picture of Romanticists.

### 10.1.1 Characteristics

- Emphasis on psychological, optimistic tone, details, pragmatic, practical, slow-moving plot
- Characters are more complex than that of real fictions
- Characters control their own destinies- they act on environment, rather than environment controlling characters
- Rounded, dynamic characters who serve purpose in plot
- Settings are more ordinary
- Themes are less obvious
- World as it is created in novel impinges upon characters. Characters dictate plot; ending usually open.
- Time marches inevitably on; small things build up. Climax is not a crisis, but just one more unimportant fact.
- Causality built into text (why something happens foreshadowed). Foreshadowing in everyday events.
- Realists—show us rather than tell us
- Depiction of local colour of regionalism
- Events make story plausible
- Insistence on experience of the commonplace
- Emphasis on morality, usually intrinsic, relativistic between people and society
- Scenic representation important
- Humans are in control of their own destiny and are superior to their circumstances
- Stresses the real over the fantastic
- Seeks to treat the commonplace truthfully and used characters from everyday life.
- Aims to interpret the actualities of any aspect of life, free from subjective prejudice, idealism, or romantic color.

(by: Carol Scheidenhelm, Ph.D - Loyola University Chicago)

#### 10.1.1.1 Definitions Of Realism According To Various Scholars

- According to Lillian Furst, Realism is “as an artistic movement realism is the product and expression of the dominant mood of its time (the

mid-to late nineteenth century): a pervasive rationalist epistemology that turned its back on the fantasies of romanticism and was shaped instead by the impact of the political and social changes as well as the scientific and industrial advances of its day.”

- According to M.H. Abraham, Realism is used by literary critics (1) to identify a literary movement of the nineteenth century, especially in prose fiction (beginning with Balzac in France, George Eliot in England, and William Dean Howells in America); and (2) to designate a recurrent mode, in various eras, of representing human life and experience in literature, which was especially exemplified by the writers of this historical movement.
- According to William Harmon and Hugh Holman, “Where romanticists transcend the immediate to find the ideal, and naturalists plumb the actual or superficial to find the scientific laws that control its actions, realists center their attention to a remarkable degree on the immediate, the here and now, the specific action, and the verifiable consequence” (*A Handbook to Literature* 428)
- Realism, in literature, is a manner and method of picturing life as it really is, untouched by idealism or romanticism. As a manner of writing, realism relies on the use of specific details to interpret life faithfully and objectively. In contrast to romance, this concerned with the bizarre and psychological in its approach to character, presenting the individual rather than the type. Often, fate plays a major role in the action. Realism became prominent in the English novel with such writers as Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson, Henry Fielding, Tobias Smollett, Laurence Sterne, Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte, Anthony Trollope and William Makepeace Thackeray. (Cole)
- Realism is not an object, to be identified, pinned down, and appropriated. It is rather a way of describing certain methods and attitudes, and the descriptions, quite naturally, have varied in the ordinary exchange and development of experience. (Raymond Williams)
- Edmund Duranty says that Realism bans the historical in painting, the novel, and the theatre so that no lie may creep in and the artist cannot borrow knowledge from others; Realism demands of artists only the study of their period.
- George Parsons Lathrop: “Realism sets itself at work to consider characters and events which are apparently the most ordinary and uninteresting, in order to extract from these their full value and true meaning. In short, realism reveals. Where we thought nothing worthy of notice, it shows everything to be rife with significance.” (*Atlantic Monthly* 34 (Sept. 1874): 313-324)

### 10.1.2 Reasons for Growth of Realism

- Advancement in science and technological field
- Growth in industry and commerce
- Exploding urban population base—immigration, removal from family farms/agrarian ways of life (partly because of Northern victory in Civil War)

## Naturalism/Realism

- Need of accurate and scientific documentation
- Increasing desire of artists and readers for a realistic understanding of different social problems
- Rise in middle class influence and leisure time
- Increasing democracy and literacy
- Explosive rise of mass-circulation magazines and newspapers creates an unprecedented mass audience for authors
- Growth of investigative journalism, muckraking
- Rising influence of Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, Herbert Spencer
- Rise of social sciences in academia—psychology, sociology, economics, anthropology
- Faith in human progress and the perfectibility of human institutions—schemes to solve social problems.

### 10.1.3 Dimensions of Realism

Realism is three dimensional – an independent life, characters and human relationships. There is no place for emotions and intellectual. All it opposes is the destruction of the completeness of the human personality and of the objective typicality of men and situations through an excessive cult of the momentary mood. The struggle against such tendencies acquired a critical importance in the realist literature.

### 10.1.4 History of Realism Movement

The beginning of realism movement can be considered from 1700 onwards. By the mid 1800, it was developed into a dominant art form. A painter, Gustave Courbet from France conducted a show titled *Du Realisme*. Courbet led the realism movement in France which spread across the Europe. The chief exponents of Realism in France are Gustave Courbet, Jean-Francois Millet, Honore Daumier and Corot. Courbet challenged the traditional history painting and depicted a real picture of ordinary people from his naive place. Later, Champfleury published some critical essays titled *Le Realism* in which he stated that realism should be democratic without any idealization. Later on, Emile Zola led this movement in France. He published a series titled *Les Rougan-Macquart*, appeared between 1871 to 1893 which is basically the social history of a French family. This series contained twenty novels which depicted fifth generation of a French family in detailed manner. Zola depicted the true picture of lives of farmers, labourers, miners and others in his novels. The other prominent supporter of Realism from France was Balzac who published *La Comedie Humaine* which is a collection of hundred novels. Balzac's works are considered the most representative works of realist literature. In Italy, Ignazio Silone and Alberto Moravia led the movement of Realism. They depicted the sordid aspects of lives in their novels. The 18th-century works of Daniel Defoe, Henry Fielding, and Tobias Smollett are among the earliest examples of realism in English literature.

George Eliot led the realist movement in England. Her pioneer work *Adam Bede* presents a true depiction of real picture of peasants of England and their problems. The interest in realism was sparked by a significant

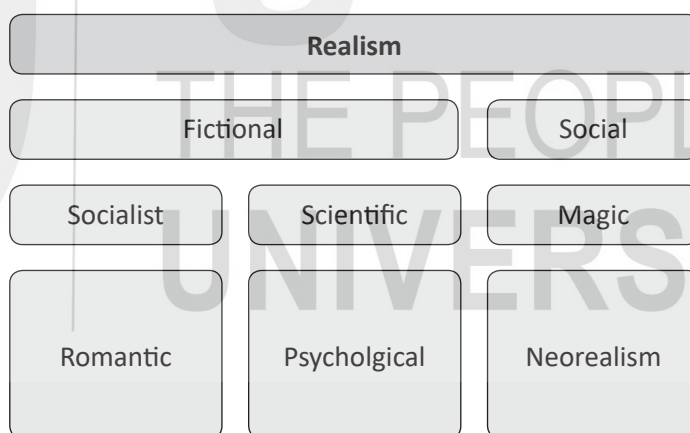
book, *Mimesis* by Erich Auerbach, subtitled as *Represented Reality* in 1946. He puts forward the assumption that the essence of realism lies in its completeness and truthfulness. In America, the realist movement was pioneered by William Dean Howells. Howells describes American lives in a true sense in his novels like *Their Wedding Journey*, *A Traveller from Altruria* etc. Other writer such as Rebecca Harding Davis also depicts the story of everyday trials and tribulations of lives in his works.

### 10.1.5 Types of Realism

1. **Fictional realism:** This is combination of fiction and reality. The writer suffuses fiction into reality but it looks like real not as an imaginary character. The writer gives a comprehensive and candid portrayal of reality which is combined with imaginativeness. The work becomes more stirring and expressive by combining fact with fantasy. Thus facts are portrayed in an artistic manner. Indian novelist R.K. Narayan has used fictional realism in his novels.
2. **Social realism:** in this type of realism, ugly and painful realities of life are depicted. Problems prevailing in societies like poverty, sickness, disabilities, financial crunches and injustices related to caste, class and gender are depicted in social realism. For example, French novelist Balzac portrayed social problems prevailing among French society in his novel collection titled *La Comedie Humaine*. Flaubert also paints the sordid realities of French middle class family in his novel *Madame Bovary*. Indian novelist Mulk Raj Anand also voices the agony and pain of downtrodden people.
3. **Socialist realism:** It basically deals with lives and problems of working class people. The novels of socialist realism depict the glorified communist values. Problems faced by workers and their struggle to get their rights through strikes are shown in these novels. Socialist realism means the depiction of the social reality not as it is but as it should be idealized. Maxim Gorky, Nexo, Fyodor Gladkov etc have centred their novels to depict the revolutionary aspects of the struggle of the labourers.
4. **Scientific realism:** it is related to the scientific theory which states the facts of life. It is a pragmatic approach to explain the visible and the invisible aspects of the universe or the physical matter. It holds a logical viewpoint with regard to the various speculations about matter. There is the existence of a body of ideas that regards scientific investigation of the seen and the unseen aspects of the universe. The phenomena that could be examined with or without the help of certain techniques and the phenomena that has to be perceived only with the aid of techniques. The facts that are based on scientific theories is scientific realism. Any scientific theory involves the facts of life.
5. **Magic realism:** It incorporates fantastical or mythical elements into realistic fiction. It paints the realistic view of the world with magical elements. It is also known as fabulism. The noted writers of magic realism are Gabriel García Márquez, Miguel Angel Asturias, Jorge Luis Borges, Elena Garro, Juan Rulfo, Rómulo Gallegos, and Isabel

Allende. In English literature, its chief exponents include Salman Rushdie, Alice Hoffman, and Nick Joaquin.

6. **Romantic realism:** It combines elements of romanticism and realism both. Fyodor Dostoyevsky could be said to be a romantic realist. Novelist and philosopher Ayn Rand described herself as a romantic realist, and many followers of Objectivism who work in the arts apply this term to themselves. As part of her aesthetics, Rand defined romantic realism as a portrayal of life “as it could be and should be.” She wrote: “The method of romantic realism is to make life more beautiful and interesting than it actually is, yet give it all the reality, and even a more convincing reality than that of our everyday existence.” (Wikipedia)
7. **Psychological Realism:** it works on the mental process and interior motives of the characters. It does not only tell the story rather includes characters’ mental narratives. The authors who use psychological Realism are Henry James, Arthur Miller and Fyodor Dostoevsky.
8. **Neo-Realism:** - Any revival of REALISM in fiction, especially in novels and stories describing the lives of the poor in a contemporary setting. The term is associated especially with the dominant trend of Italian fiction in the 1940s and 1950s, led by Cesare Pavese, Alberto Moravia, and Elio Vittorini, and with the parallel movement in Italian cinema of the same period, led by Roberto Rossellini and Vittorio de Sica. (The Concise Oxford *Dictionary of Literary Terms*)



### 10.1.6 Realism in Theatre

By the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Realism entered in theatre. Many dramatists like Henrik Ibsen, Bernard Shaw started using realism in theatre and now it remains a standard convention of cinema. Henrik Ibsen staged social plays in which he showed the external reality of the society. Later on, Henry James used psychological realism in which he examined the complex working of the mind.

Realist dramatists portray real life on stage. Characters and events are presented in such a way which depicts a real human experience unlike conventional drama and sentimental comedies of the previous era. Societal values, attitudes and morals are shown in realist drama. Henrik Ibsen and Anton Chekhov were highly influenced by realism. Their plays mirrored the real society. People from all walks of life were given proper space be it the

poor, the rich and all. The beginning of social realism plays is considered from 1930s. They depicted the harsh reality of poor people. GB Shaw, Arthur Miller presented problems and solutions of the poor people.

American Dramatists imitated British writers until the early twentieth century. So the effect of realism was seen on American drama and they were moving towards realism, illuminating the rough or seamy side of life and creating more believable characters. The most prolific of pre-war playwrights with a social agenda was Rachel Crothers, who addressed such issues as society's double standards for men and women in *A Man's World* (1909). *The New York Idea* (1906), a social satire by Langdon Mitchell managed to entertain while commenting meaningfully on divorce. The American family and its development and disintegration was a recurring theme of playwrights at this time and it would dominate much of American playwriting for the rest of the twentieth century.

More detail can be found on the following link. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zrIsTzcq5O8>.



Scene from Doll's House, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Realism\\_\(theatre\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Realism_(theatre))

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## 10.2 NATURALISM

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Naturalism is an imperative movement of late 19 century which continues to influence the literary scene of early 20 century. It has been designated as having close paradoxical relationship with Realism. Naturalism is an extreme form of literary realism, based on the belief that science could explain all social phenomena, and was to provide the method for the creation of literature. In literature, 'naturalism' is an approach that attempts to apply scientific principles of objectivity and detachment to its study of human beings. It is a theory which believes that literary composition should be based on an objective empirical composition of human beings. The naturalistic writers regard human behaviour as controlled by instinct, emotion and a social and economic condition, and reject free will. It adopts in large measure, the biological determinism of Charles Darwin and the economic determinism of Karl Marx. This affinity to science becomes clear from the definition offered by Paul Alexis, Emile Zola's closet ally, who summed up naturalism as: "A way of thinking, of seeing , of reflecting, of

studying, of making experiments, a need to analyse in order to know, rather than a particular style of writing.”

Contrary to realism, which was a rather loose movement, it constituted a real school of thought around its founder, the Frenchman Emile Zola. The foremost spokesman of the naturalist school was Émile Zola, who expressed these ideas in two works, *The Experimental Novel* (1880) and *Naturalism in the Theatre* (1882).

According to Zola, the artist must bring the scientist’s objectivity to the depiction of his subjects. The motives and behaviour of characters are determined by heredity and environment. The artists’ task is to reveal the role of these factors in the lives of the characters. The basic effort of naturalism lay in the attempt to produce a scientifically accurate depiction of life even at the cost of representing ugliness and discord. He had published his novel *Thérèse Èse Raquin* in 1867, which was highly criticized to which he replied “The group of writers *Naturalists*, To which I have the honor of belonging, has the courage and the activity to publish strong works, carrying with them their defense.” Naturalism is preceded by Romanticism and realism and followed by symbolism.

“Naturalism is sometimes claimed to give an even more accurate depiction of life than realism. But naturalism is not only, like realism, a special selection of subject matter and a special way of rendering those materials; it is a mode of fiction that was developed by a school of writers in accordance with a particular philosophical thesis...that a human being exists entirely in the order of nature and does not have a soul nor any mode of participating in a religious or spiritual world beyond the natural world; and therefore, that such a being is merely a higher order animal whose character and behavior are entirely determined by two kinds of forces, heredity and environment.” (Abrams: 2003,261).

### 10.2.1 Characteristics of Naturalism

- **Determinism:** The naturalists were remarkably influenced by Darwin’s theory of Evolution, as they believed that self of being is determined by one’s heredity and social environment determine one’s character. According to it, all events in human history are determined by the conditions that produce them. People have the power to choose and make decisions. In 19<sup>th</sup> century, scientific determinism played a key role in the formulation of naturalism.
- **Pessimism:** The naturalists tend to depict the darkest or negative aspects of human life such as vices, follies, violence, disease, disability etc. Though, naturalist writers try to keep a balanced degree of scientific objectivity in their work but they cannot escape from pessimism.
- **Rejection of Romanticism:** The naturalists portray situations as they occur not as they could not be. Romanticists focused on ideals, the best of everything whereas naturalists portrayed as it is not in ideal form.
- **Darwinism:** Charles Darwin’s book *The Origin of Species* was published in 1868 which propounds a theory that the population evolve over course of generations and their evolution is determined for struggle for the survival.

- **Belief in heredity and human nature:** Naturalists had a strong belief in heredity and human nature. They explored that how heredity determined the future of one.

#### Naturalism according to various scholars

- Naturalism is sometimes claimed to give an even more accurate depiction of life than realism. But naturalism is not only, like realism, a special selection of subject matter and a special way of rendering those materials; it is a mode of fiction that was developed by a school of writers in accordance with a particular philosophical thesis. (M.H. Abraham)
- Naturalism is a more deliberate kind of \* REALISM in novels, stories, and plays, usually involving a view of human beings as passive victims of natural forces and social environment..... The term naturalistic in drama usually has a broader application, denoting a very detailed illusion of real life on the stage, especially in speech, costume, and sets. (Oxford Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms)
- NATURALISM, writing that depicts events as rigidly determined by the forces of heredity and environment. Stephen Crane has been called a naturalist because his writing expounds the philosophy that the world can be understood by examining cause – and -effect relationships and that all events are determined by antecedent causes.

#### 10.2.2 Naturalism in USA

In U.S.A. ‘naturalism’ is closely linked to social and economic problems. The struggles of the poor and the machinations of the capitalists are the theme of naturalistic writing. For instance, such a world is reflected in the novels of Dreiser or the short stories of Stephen Crane, or in Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath* which shows how the large powerful combines took over the small holdings, leaving the tenants destitute and homeless. American naturalism owes more to local factors than to outside influences. Darwin, Marx, Comte and Spencer made an impact, but not with the same immediacy as across the Atlantic. The effect of Zola in U.S.A. is not easy to assess partly because of the conflicting statements made by some of the American naturalists such as Dreiser and Crane. As American naturalism arose out of social and economic problems, it presented a different aspect from the European Naturalist movement. There were no groups united by common aims and manifestos. It was more a matter of successive waves of writers which are as follows:

1. The First wave: it spanned from mid 1880s to the closing of the century. The prominent writers from this group are Hamlin Garland, Stephen Crane and Frank Norris.
2. The second wave: It started after the 1900 included an assorted group of writers such as Theodore Dreiser, Jack London, John Steinbeck, Sinclair Lewis, Upton Sinclair, Sherwood Anderson and James T. Farrell.

Naturalism in the U.S.A. was a view of man in society and a style of writing in consonance with the age and this is why it appears in so many diverse writers over such a long period.

### 10.2.3 Naturalism in Drama

The founder of the naturalism movement, Emile Zola, though was a novelist but emphasized the use of Naturalism in theatre too. Naturalism brought revolution in the field of theatre. Zola was not in favour of distortion of psychology which was necessary to create sympathy for a character in the well-made arrangement of exposition, intrigue, complications and satisfying resolution. Instead, he advocated plays without any complications which existed in plays of that time.

We have studied that the naturalists dealt mainly with darker aspects of life, including poverty, disease, racism, sex, prostitution and impurity. They dealt with uncouth or sordid subject matter. In naturalist theatre, attempts were made to create a perfect illusion of reality through a range of dramatic and theatrical strategies like comprehensive settings, rejection of metaphysical action, an exclusive focus on subjects that are contemporary and native, the emphasis on characters from relatively common class, and a realistic acting style against that of the popular melodramatic one. Zola urged that theatre be brought closer to social reality- and called for the creation of individualized, lifelike characters. To support such an objective of naturalism, Styan says

“The scientific naturalist tried to show that powerful forces governed human lives, forces of which we might not be fully aware and over which we might have little control...His play bore witness to the instinctive behavior of men and women, and his characters and their situations had to seem representative of their class or age group, sex or economic group, with the consequent loss of that essential individuality we know to be characteristic of life.” (Styan: 1981,6).

The most prominent representatives of naturalism, except Zola, were Ludwig Anzengruber, Henri Becque, August Strindberg and Gerhart Hauptmann. Anzengruber's plays were (are) considered important forerunners of Naturalism. His famous naturalistic plays are *The Kirchjield Priest* and *The Fourth Commandment*. Strindberg produced some naturalistic tragedies like *The Father*, *Miss Julie*, *The Creditors*.

In drama, naturalist classics include Zola's *Thérèse Raquin* (1873), Maxim Gorky's *The Lower Depths* (1902), and Eugene O'Neill's early plays, such as *The Long Voyage Home* (1917).



(The Long Voyage Home (1917) - <https://screengrabsaz.wordpress.com/2014/08/31/the-long-voyage-home/> )

### 10.3 REALIST AND NATURALISTIC THEATRE

	Realist Theatre	Naturalistic Theatre
<b>Characters</b>	Believable	Believable (working class or lower class)
<b>Style</b>		Extreme and heightened form of realism
<b>Stage settings and props</b>	Indoors and believable (ordinary)	Historically accurate and documented
<b>Dialogues</b>	Everyday speech, not heightened (use of vernacular)	—
<b>Playwrights were influenced by</b>	Henrik Ibsen	Emile Zola

### 10.4 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (QUESTIONS)

Q1. Differentiate between classicism and realism.

Ans. Classicism shows life as being more rational and orderly than it really is while Romanticism shows life as being more emotionally exciting and satisfying than it normally is. While it was an attempt through realism to present life as it is. This 'life as it is' is what realism is.

Q2. Differentiate between romanticism and realism.

Ans. Realism is nothing but the reaction of Romanticism and Classicism. It is a kind of presentation of life as it is. The difference between Romanticism and Realism is like the difference between painting and photography.

Q3. Why Realism became so popular?

Ans. Realism became popular as it presents the emotion of mass and every member of the mass relate the subject matter with himself. Realist writers in fiction always take the most important burning problems of the community for their starting point; their pathos as writers is always stimulated by those sufferings of the people which are the most acute at the time; it is these sufferings that determine the objects and direction of their love and hate and through these emotions determine also what they see in their poetic vision.

Q4. What are the major traits of Naturalism?

- Ans. ● Naturalism was highly influenced by Darwin's natural selection and Freud's psychological theory.
- Life is presented as deterministic and mechanistic since heredity and environment control human actions rather free will.
  - Characters belong to lower socioeconomic classes.
  - Characters exhibit strong animal drives such as greed and sex drives.
  - The tone is mostly non-judgemental, emotionless and scientific.
  - Diction may be offensive.

## Naturalism/Realism

- Lack of artificial or optimistic plot structures
- Naturalistic works are mostly character driven rather than plot driven.
- They present their subject with scientific objectivity and with elaborate documentation.

Q5. Differentiate between Realism and Naturalism.

- Ans.
- Realism sought to be a faithful representation of life, while naturalism was more like a “chronicle of despair.” In a way, naturalism proceeded from realism, and can be seen as an exaggerated form of realism; it shows humans as being determined by environment, heredity, and social conditions beyond their control, and thus rather helpless to escape their circumstances.
  - While in realism the main focus was on the middle class and its problems, naturalism often focused on poorly educated or lower-class characters, and on themes involving violence and taboo activities.
  - While in realism, faithful representation of reality including the details of nature is important, in Naturalism, nature itself is a force, generally a powerful, indifferent mechanism.
  - Naturalism tends to have a rather bleak and pessimistic view of the human condition, which is by a large absent in realism.

Q6. What difference does naturalist plays have than that of realist play?

- Ans. Against the traditional methods of portraying imaginative and romantic aesthetic visions of life on the stage, these naturalists preferred the use of naked facts of life to be performed in non-romantic manner. However, this type of theatre poorly revealed the social character of phenomena. Naturalism was also projected in theatre as antirealist, biological approach to life. Its most typical features were a biological interpretation of actions and a heightened interest in the morbid phenomena of the human mind. The term “naturalism” also became associated with a fondness for excessively detailed depiction of extreme reality, especially scenes of cruelty, violence, and the repulsive details of sexuality. Such excessiveness can be justified in a concluding manner as a derivative of transforming aesthetic romanticism into realistic stagecraft.

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## 10.5 SUMMING UP

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Realism and Naturalism have both affected the literature, art and cinema of each country. Both the movements have brought about changes in every genre of literature be it poetry, drama or novel. It has paved the way for the writers to express their emotions/feelings freely or independently.

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## 10.6 SELECTED READING LIST

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  - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lcNgPIAQUME>
  - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KMVnscTctqI>

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## UNIT 11: LORRAINE HANSBERRY'S *A RAISIN IN THE SUN* BY AS A REALIST PLAY

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### Structure

#### 11.0 Objectives

#### 11.1 Introduction

##### 11.1.1 What Is Realism?

##### 11.1.2 Realism In Literature

##### 11.1.3 Common Themes And Elements In Realism

#### 11.2 Realism In American Literature

##### 11.2.1 American Realism

##### 11.2.2 American Realist Writers

##### 11.2.3 Characteristics Of American Realism

#### 11.3 Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin In The Sun*

##### 11.3.1 Lorraine Hansberry's Early Life

##### 11.3.2 Hansberry's Later Life And Writing Career

##### 11.3.3 Plot Of *A Raisin In The Sun*

##### 11.3.4 List Of Characters

##### 11.3.5 *A Raisin In The Sun* As A Realist Play

#### 11.4 Sum Up

#### 11.5 References And Further Reading

#### 11.6 Check Your Progress (Possible Questions)

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### 11.0 OBJECTIVES

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After reading this unit, you will be able to:

- recognize what is meant by the term 'realism' in arts as well as in literature
- understand the features and themes that constitute a realist play and how they are related to American realism
- realize the important role of Lorraine Hansberry in recording the life of African-Americans and the various issues relating to this
- gain insights into how the African-American people perceive their world and stand together to fight racism
- comprehend *A Raisin in the Sun* as a portrayal of real life issues

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### 11.1 INTRODUCTION

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#### 11.1.1 What is realism?

Realism was an artistic movement that began in France in the 1850s, after the 1848 Revolution. Realists rejected Romanticism, which had dominated French literature and art since the late eighteenth century. A reaction against

romanticism, an interest in scientific method, the systematizing of the study of documentary history, and the influence of rational philosophy all affected the rise of realism. Realism revolted against the exotic subject matter, exaggerated emotionalism and drama of the Romantic Movement. Instead it sought to portray real and typical contemporary people and situations with truth and accuracy, focusing on the unpleasant or sordid aspects of life. Realist works depicted people of all classes in situations that arise in ordinary life, and often reflected the changes brought by the Industrial and Commercial Revolutions. The popularity of realistic works grew with the introduction of photography – a new visual source that created a desire for people to produce representations which look objectively real. Realism eschewed any alteration from reality insisting instead on precise imitation. It attempted fidelity to real life, or “actuality,” in its representation.

### 11.1.2 Realism in Literature

Literary realism is part of the realist art movement beginning with mid nineteenth-century French literature favoured by Stendhal, and Russian literature by Alexander Pushkin, and extending to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Literary realism, in contrast to idealism, attempts to represent familiar things as they are. Broadly defined as “the faithful representation of reality” (Campbell), realism as a literary movement, was based on “objective reality.” It focused on showing everyday activities and life, primarily among the middle or lower class society, without romantic idealization or dramatization. Realism is the attempt to represent subject matter truthfully, without artificiality and avoiding artistic conventions, implausible, exotic and supernatural elements. It may be regarded as the general attempt to depict subjects as they are considered to exist in third person objective reality, without embellishment or interpretation and “in accordance with secular, empirical rules” (Morris 5).

#### Definitions

Realism is difficult to define because it is used differently in different contexts. William Dean Howells defines, “Realism is nothing more and nothing less than the truthful treatment of material” (Editor’s Study 966).

According to William Harmon and Hugh Holman, “realists center their attention to a remarkable degree on the immediate, the here and now, the specific action, and the verifiable consequence” (*A Handbook of Literature* 428).

George Parsons Lathrop opines, “Realism sets itself at work to consider characters and events which are apparently the most ordinary and uninteresting, in order to extract from these their full value and true meaning. It would apprehend in all particulars the connection between the familiar and the extraordinary, and the seen and unseen of human nature. Beneath the deceptive cloak of outwardly uneventful days, it detects and endeavours to trace the outlines of the spirits that are hidden there; to measure the changes in their growth, to watch the symptoms of moral decay or regeneration, to fathom their histories of passionate or intellectual problems. In short, realism reveals. Where we thought nothing worth of notice, it shows everything to be rife with significance” (*The Novel and its Future* 324).

Realism as a literary technique is practiced by many schools of writing. Although realism is a technique, it also denotes a particular kind of subject matter, especially the representation of middle-class life. The realists depict everyday subjects and situations in contemporary settings, and attempt to represent individuals of all social classes in a similar manner. Classical idealism and Romantic emotionalism and drama are avoided by the realists. Treatment of subjects in a heroic or sentimental manner is equally rejected. The avoidance of artificiality, in the treatment of human relations and emotions is also an aim of Realism. The realist concerns himself with the here and now, centering his work in his own time, dealing with commonplace every day events and people, and with the socio-political climate of his day.

Realist writings are varied statements of outrage and opposition to the increasing materialism, disorder and perceived moral decay in the world. Included under the broad umbrella of realism are a diverse set of authors, including Henry James, W.D. Howells, Mark Twain, Bret Harte, Rebecca Harding Davis, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Hamlin Garland. Often categorized as regionalists, many of these writers produced work that emphasized geographically distinct dialects and customs. Others offered satirical fiction or novels of manners that exposed the excesses, hypocrisies, or shortcomings of a culture undergoing radical social change.

### 11.1.3 Common Themes and Elements in Realism

- Pragmatism – emphasis on practicality
- literature of the commonplace
- attempts to represent real life
- ordinary people – poor and middle class
- ordinary speech in dialect – use of vernacular
- recent or contemporary life
- subject matter presented in an unidealized, unsentimentalized way
- democratic function of literature
- social criticism – effect on audience is key
- presents indigenous life
- importance of place – regionalism, “local colour”
- sociology and psychology

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## 11.2 REALISM IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

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### 11.2.1 American realism

American Realism was a style in art, music and literature that depicted contemporary social realities and the lives and everyday activities of ordinary people. The movement began in literature in the mid-nineteenth century, and became an important tendency in visual art in the early twentieth century. American realist works attempted to define what was real, whether it is a cultural portrayal or a scenic view of downtown New York City.

In American literature, the term “realism” encompasses the period of time from the Civil War to the turn of the century during which William

Dean Howells, Rebecca Harding Davis, Henry James, Mark Twain, and others wrote fiction devoted to accurate representation and an exploration of American lives in various contexts. As the United States grew rapidly after the Civil War, the increasing rates of democracy and literacy, the rapid growth in industrialism and urbanization, an expanding population base due to immigration, and a relative rise in middle-class affluence provided a fertile literary environment for readers interested in understanding these rapid shifts in culture. In drawing attention to this connection, Amy Kaplan has called realism a “strategy for imagining and managing the threats of social change” (*Social Construction of American Realism* ix).

### 11.2.2 American realist writers

William Dean Howells [1837–1920] was the first American author to bring a realist aesthetic to the literature of the United States. His stories of middle and upper class life set in the 1880s and 1890s are highly regarded among scholars of American fiction. His most popular novel, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), depicts a man who, ironically, falls from materialistic fortune by his own mistakes. Other early American realists include Samuel Clemens, better known by his pen name Mark Twain, Stephen Crane, and Horatio Alger.

Mark Twain [1835–1910] was an American writer, humourist, entrepreneur, publisher, and lecturer. Among his novels are *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) and its sequel, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885). Twain’s style, based on vigorous, realistic, colloquial American speech, gave American writers a new appreciation of their national voice. Twain was the first major author to come from the interior of the country, and he captured its distinctive, humorous slang and iconoclasm. For Twain and other American writers of the late 19th century, realism was not merely a literary technique; it was a way of speaking truth and challenging worn-out conventions.

Stephen Crane [1871–1900] was primarily a journalist who also wrote fiction, essays, poetry and plays. Crane saw life at its rawest, in slums and on battlefields. His haunting Civil War novel, *The Red Badge of Courage*, was published to great acclaim in 1895, but he barely had time to bask in the attention before he died, at twenty-eight, having neglected his health. He has enjoyed continued success ever since – as a champion of the common man, a realist, and a symbolist. Crane’s *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893) is one of the best, if not the earliest, naturalistic American novel. It is the harrowing story of a poor, sensitive young girl whose uneducated, alcoholic parents utterly fail her. In love, and eager to escape her violent home life, she allows herself to be seduced into living with a young man, who soon deserts her. When her self-righteous mother rejects her, Maggie becomes a prostitute to survive, but soon commits suicide out of despair. Crane’s earthy subject matter and his objective, scientific style, devoid of moralizing, mark *Maggie* as a naturalist work.

Horatio Alger, Jr. [1832–1899] was a prolific nineteenth century American author whose principal output was formulaic rags-to-riches juvenile novels that followed the adventures of bootblacks, newsboys, peddlers, buskers, and other impoverished children in their rise from humble backgrounds to

lives of respectable middle-class security and comfort. His novels, of which *Ragged Dick* is a typical example, were hugely popular in their day. Other later American realists are: John Steinbeck, Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser, Upton Sinclair, Jack London, Edith Wharton and Henry James.

### 11.2.3 Characteristics of American realism

Richard Chase in his book *The American Novel and its Tradition* has put forward the following as the distinct features of realism:

- Realism renders reality closely and in comprehensive detail. It selectively presents reality with an emphasis on verisimilitude, even at the expense of a well-made plot.
- Character is more important than action and plot; complex ethical choices are often the subject.
- Characters appear in their real complexity of temperament and motive; they are in explicable relation to nature, to each other, to their social class, to their own past.
- Class is important: the novel has traditionally served the interests and aspirations of an insurgent middle class.
- Events will usually be plausible. Realistic writings avoid the sensational, dramatic elements of naturalistic novels and romances.
- Diction is natural, vernacular, not heightened or poetic; tone may be comic, satiric or matter-of-fact.
- Objectivity in presentation becomes increasingly important; overt authorial comments or intrusions diminish as the century progresses.
- Interior or psychological realism is a variant form of realism.

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## 11.3 LORRAINE HANSBERRY'S *A RAISIN IN THE SUN*

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### 11.3.1 Lorraine Hansberry's early life

Lorraine Hansberry was born in Chicago on May 19, 1930, the youngest of four children. Her parents were well-educated, successful black citizens who publicly fought discrimination against black people. When Hansberry was a child, she and her family lived in a black neighbourhood on Chicago's South side. During this era, segregation - the enforced separation of whites and blacks - was still legal and widespread throughout the Southern States, including Hansberry's own Illinois, had no official policy of segregation, but they were generally self-segregated along racial and economic lines. Chicago was a striking example of a city carved strictly divided black and white neighbourhood. Hansberry's family became one of the first to move into a white neighbourhood, but Hansberry still attended a segregated public school for blacks. When neighbours struck at them with threats of violence and legal action, the Hansberrys defended themselves. Hansberry's father successfully fought his case all the way to the Supreme Court. He died in 1946, when Lorraine was fifteen years old; "American racism helped kill him," she later said (Anderson 263).

Hansberry graduated from Betsy Ross Elementary in 1944 and from Englewood High School in 1948. She attended the University of Wisconsin-

Madison, where she immediately became politically active and integrated a dormitory. Hansberry's classmate Bob Teague remembered her as "... the only girl I knew who could whip together a fresh picket sign with her own hands, at a moment's notice, for any cause or occasion" (Anderson 263).

### 11.3.2 Hansberry's later life and writing career

Hansberry broke her family's tradition of enrolling in Southern black colleges and instead attended the University of Wisconsin in Madison. While at school, she changed her major from painting to writing, and after two years decided to drop out and move to New York City. In New York, Hansberry attended the New School for Social Research and then worked for Paul Robeson's progressive black newspaper, *Freedom*, as a writer and associate editor from 1950 to 1953. She also worked part-time as a waitress and cashier, and wrote in her spare time. By 1956, Hansberry quit her jobs and committed her time to writing. In 1957, she joined the Daughters of Bilitis and contributed letters to their magazine, *The Ladder*, about feminism and homophobia. Her lesbian identity was exposed in the articles, but she wrote under her initials, L.H., for fear of discrimination.

During this time, Hansberry wrote *The Crystal Stair*, a play about a struggling black family in Chicago, which was later, renamed *A Raisin in the Sun*, a line from a Langston Hughes poem. The play opened at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre on March 11, 1959, and was a great success, having a run of 530 performances. It was the first play produced on Broadway by an African-American woman, and Hansberry was the first black playwright and the youngest American to win a New York Drama Critics' Circle award for Best Play of the year. She used her new fame to help bring attention to the American civil rights movement as well as African struggles for independence from colonialism.

In 1963, Hansberry became active in the Civil Rights Movement. Along with other influential people, including Harry Belafonte, Lena Horne and James Baldwin, Hansberry met with the then attorney general Robert Kennedy to test his position on civil rights. According to historian Fanon Che Wilkins, "Hansberry believed that gaining civil rights in the United States and obtaining independence in colonial Africa were two sides of the same coin that presented similar challenges for Africans on both sides of the Atlantic" (199). In 1963, her second play, *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*, opened on Broadway to unenthusiastic reception. Hansberry wrote that she always felt the inclination to record her experiences. However, her promising writing career was cut short when she died from cancer in 1965, at the age of thirty-four.

Hansberry's untimely death at the age of thirty-four on January 12, 1965, left a void in American theatre and in the circle of black writers. Jean Carey Bond, in an article in *Freedomways* magazine, says of Hansberry:

[Her] brief sojourn was, in one of its dimensions, a study in pure style. Born into material comfort, yet baptized in social responsibility; intensely individual in her attitudes and behavior, yet sensitive to the wills and aspirations of a whole people; a lover of life, yet stalked by death -- she deliberately fashioned out of these elements an articulate existence of artistic and political commitment, seasoned with that missionary devotion which often intensifies the labors of the mortally ill.

Hansberry left behind three unfinished plays and an unfinished semi-autobiographical novel.

### 11.3.3 Plot of *A Raisin in the Sun*

*A Raisin in the Sun*, Lorraine Hansberry's most celebrated play, is a realistic portrait of a working-class black family struggling to achieve the American Dream of careers and home ownership while gripped by the reality of their lives as African Americans who must survive in a racist society.

Hansberry based her play on her knowledge of life in Chicago's black ghetto and the families to whom her father, a successful real estate broker, rented low-income housing. The action takes place in the cramped, roach-infested apartment of the Youngers, where three generations of the family have resided for years. With the death of her husband, Lena [Mama] becomes the head of the family. She has the right to decide how to use the \$10,000 in life insurance money that has come with her husband's death.

Tensions develop quickly. Mama dreams of using the money to move out of the apartment into a new, large home where her family can breathe the free, clean air outside the ghetto. Her son Walter, seeing himself as the new head of the family, envisions the money as a way to free himself and his family from poverty by investing in a liquor store. Walter's intellectual sister hopes the windfall may be a way for her to break racist and sexist barriers by getting a college education and becoming a doctor.

As the play unfolds, Hansberry explores issues of African American identity, pride, male-female relationships within the black family, and the problems of segregation. Mama makes a down payment on a house in a white neighbourhood. Fearing that her exercise of authority will diminish her son's sense of masculine self-worth and in spite of her opposition to buying a liquor store, she reminds Walter of his sister's right to some of the money for a college education and entrusts him with what is left of the money after the down payment. When he returns despairingly after losing all of it, he considers that the only way to recoup the loss is to humiliate himself and his family by making a deal with the Clybourne Park Association, a group of white homeowners who want to buy back the new home in order to keep their neighbourhood white.

In a dramatic conclusion, the disillusioned Walter enacts the dilemma of the modern African American male. Trapped at the bottom of the economic ladder, he must again submit to matriarchal authority. Mama despairs at having to take control and wield the authority she knows is destroying her son's masculine identity. Walter finally realizes that he cannot accept the degradation he would bring upon himself, his family, and his father's memory by accepting the association's offer. Discovering his manhood and his responsibility to his family and his race, he refuses to sell back the house. When the association's representative appeals to Mama to reverse her son's decision, she poignantly and pridefully says, "I am afraid you don't understand. My son said we was going to move and there ain't nothing left for me to say." The play closes with the family leaving their cramped apartment for their new home and the challenges that surely await them there.

### 11.3.4 List of Characters

**Walter Lee Younger** – In his middle thirties, he is the husband of Ruth, father of Travis, brother of Beneatha, and son of Lena [Mama] Younger. Walter works as a chauffeur and drinks a bit too much at times. When he discovers that his mother will receive a \$10,000 cheque from his father's insurance, he becomes obsessed with his dreams of a business venture which will give him financial independence and will make him a more valuable human being.

**Beneatha Younger** – Beneatha Younger is the twenty-year-old sister of Walter Lee and the daughter of Lena Younger. She is a college student planning to go to medical school. The only family member privileged to have the opportunity for a higher education; she is sometimes a little overbearing in the pride she takes in being an "intellectual."

**Lena Younger** – Lena Younger is the mother of Walter Lee and Beneatha, mother-in-law of Ruth, and grandmother of Travis. Lena's [Mama's] every action is borne out of her abiding love for her family, her deep religious convictions, and her strong will that is surpassed only by her compassion. Mama's selfless spirit is shown in her plans to use her \$10,000 insurance cheque for the good of her family, part of which includes plans to purchase a house in a middle-class white neighbourhood.

**Ruth Younger** – Ruth Younger is the wife of Walter Lee Younger and the mother of Travis, their ten-year-old son. Ruth acts as peacemaker in most of the explosive family situations. Unpretentious and unfussy, Ruth reveals her strongest emotions only when she learns of the possibility of their moving to a better neighbourhood.

**Travis Younger** – Travis Younger is the ten-year-old son of Walter and Ruth Younger. Living in a household with three generations in conflict, Travis skilfully plays each adult against the other and is, as a result, somewhat "spoiled."

**Joseph Asagai** – An African college student from Nigeria, Asagai is one of Beneatha's suitors. Mannerly, good looking, and personable, he is well liked by all members of the Younger household.

**George Murchison** – Beneatha's other boyfriend, he too is a college student. His wealthy background alienates him from the poverty of the Youngers.

**Mrs. Johnson** – Brash and abrasive neighbour of the Youngers, she insensitively points out to the Youngers all the negative repercussions that await them should they decide to move into the white neighbourhood.

**Karl Lindner** – A weak and ineffectual middle-aged white man, Lindner is the spokesman for the white community into which the Youngers plan to move. He has been sent to persuade the Youngers not to move into the white neighbourhood. In fact, he has been authorized by the white community to offer the Youngers a monetary incentive not to move in.

**Bobo** – Bobo is the somewhat dim-witted friend of Walter Lee who, along with another friend, Willy, plans to invest in Walter Lee's business scheme.

**Willy** – Willy is the unscrupulous "friend" of Walter Lee and Bobo who absconds with all the money for the prospective business venture.

### 11.3.5 A Raisin in the Sun as a Realist Play

Lorraine Hansberry was one of the first playwrights to create realistic portraits of African-American life. Her play *A Raisin in the Sun* is arguably the first play to portray black characters, themes, and conflicts in a natural and realistic manner. It is recognizably autobiographical. *A Raisin in the Sun* was a revolutionary work for its time. Hansberry creates in the Younger family one of the first honest depictions of a black family on an American stage, in an age when predominantly black audiences simply did not exist. Before this play, African-American roles, usually small and comedic, largely employed ethnic stereotypes. Hansberry, however, shows an entire black family in a realistic light, one that is unflattering and far from comedic. She uses black vernacular throughout the play and broaches important issues and conflicts, such as poverty, discrimination, and the construction of African-American racial identity.

The play examines such serious generational and racial issues as assimilation and the conflicts between idealism, the pursuit of the American dream, and pride in one's racial and cultural heritage, and for the first time, African Americans' life are being brought out and focused on in a literary form. The public is aware that this was how African Americans were living their lives in the 1950s. The different problems in the story that the characters encounter are similar to how people in real life were facing. For certain individuals of the general public, the story would be more familiar, because they probably faced similar issues or know people who were going through hardships, just like the Younger family.

*A Raisin in the Sun* marked the beginning of a more confrontational era in black theatre. It was the first in a series of "black reactions to black American repression in particular and human issues in general" (Effiong 27). *A Raisin in the Sun* was embraced both for its universal themes and for its specific depiction of the struggles of an African-American family living in a racially discriminated place. The play's universal appeal defies, in retrospect, some of the early critics' views of *A Raisin in the Sun* as being simply "a play about Negroes." Although *Raisin* addresses specific problems of a black family in Southside Chicago, it also mirrors the very real problems of all people. In an interview with social historian Studs Terkel, Hansberry explains, "Well, I hadn't noticed the contradiction because I'd always been under the impression that Negroes are people . . . in order to create the universal, you must pay very close attention to the specific" (Young 113).

The social, economic, and emotional context of the 1950s as well as the perception of blacks during this time period is heavily reflected in the play itself. The entire action of the play takes place in the Southside of Chicago sometime between World War II and present (1958): namely the 1950s. During this era, Chicago was strictly divided by race and segregation. The 1950s are often considered a prosperous time for the United States; a time where blacks were content with their inferior status, and women were happy to stay at home and be housewives. This of course caused great tension in both blacks and women and ultimately led to the great civil rights and feminist movements in the 1960s. *A Raisin in the Sun* predates both of these movements, but provides great insight into life during this time period and how it erupted into the 60s.

Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun* is driven by characterization. Though the events center on Mama's decision over what to do with her \$10,000 insurance cheque, the internal motivations, values and traits of each of the main characters influence their decisions and set the plot in motion. Hansberry's characters are fully developed. The characters are mixture of real persons and stereotypes. All the characters of *A Raisin in the Sun* speak "to the text and are critical to its dramatic tensions and understanding. They are necessarily larger than life – in impact – but crafted meticulously from living social material" (Baraka 20).

Mama is probably the most recognizable and longest perpetuated image of African-American women in American society. Mama initially fits the popular stereotype of the Black Mammy. She rules everyone's life, even making a down payment on a house in an all-white neighbourhood without consulting her son. However, as she begins to comprehend the destructive effect of her actions on Walter, she relinquishes her authority and gives him what remained of the money to invest as he wishes. Walter's happiness does not live for long time, however, because he loses the money by entrusting it to his friend Willy who steals him and disappears. In an effort to recover his loss, Walter tells his family that he will accept money from Karl Linder whose, "characterization is a scathing commentary on white northern racism at the personal level" (Jose 882). He is the supposed neighbour of Walter who would rather buy him off than live next door to him. Walter says: "That white man is going to walk in that door able to write checks for more money than we ever had. It's important to him and I'm going to help him" (*A Raisin*). The decision is a personal test for Walter, for he is sorely tempted to sacrifice his pride and integrity for mercenary values. In a highly dramatic moment, Walter gets down on his knees and shows his mother how he will beg, if necessary, for the white man's money. He bents his head and laughs in the style of the old Uncle Tom. Even with Walter's pitiful display Mama is not angry with him, but rather surrounds him with her circle of love and compassion. She is just as the stereotyped image of the Mammy that "gives way to the caring, understanding mother, historic cornerstone of the black family" (Wilkerson).

Douglas Turner Ward has correctly identified that Hansberry's real triumph is the depiction of Walter Lee as a complex character who thinks and acts not as "an author's marionette, but as a harbinger of all the qualities of character that would soon explode into American reality and consciousness" (Ward Douglas). His personal crisis of pride, brought on by his inability to support his family in his job as a chauffeur, culminates with his decision regarding Karl Lindner's offer to purchase the Youngers' new house. But, in a dramatic reversal at the end of the play, Walter decides to reject Linder's offer and reclaims his personal pride, asserts his family's historical right to be treated fairly in their country, and support his family's dignity.

The character of Mr. Linder makes the theme of racial discrimination prominent in the play as an issue the Youngers cannot avoid. The governing body of the Younger's new neighbourhood, the Clybourne Park Improvement Association, sends Mr. Linder to persuade them not to move into the all-white Clybourne Park neighbourhood. Mr. Linder and the people he represents can only see the colour of the Younger family's skin, and his

offer to bribe the Youngers to keep them from moving threatens to tear apart the Younger family and the values for which it stands. He states:

[Y]ou've got to admit that a man ... has the right to want to have the neighborhood he lives in a certain kind of way... I want you to believe me when I tell you that race prejudice simply doesn't enter into it. It is a matter of the people of Clybourne Park believing ... that for the happiness of all concerned that our Negro families are happier when they live in their own communities. (*A Raisin in the Sun*)

These words of Mr. Lindner bring the issue of racial prejudice under focus. Ultimately, the Youngers respond to this discrimination with defiance and strength. The play powerfully demonstrates that the way to deal with discrimination is to stand up to it and reassert one's dignity in the face of it rather than allow it to pass unchecked.

Hansberry deals with segregation as "a socialist organization of society, as the next great and dearly won universal condition of mankind" ("The Tribute" 17). Locating the Younger family in Chicago's South Side, Hansberry directly engages crises produced by "ghetto economies and dehumanizing living conditions, restricted educational access and literally explosive encounters along urban color lines" (Gordon 125). The concern over money and the kind of resistance and violence the Younger family faces in trying to attain its dreams of going out of the ghetto show how racism has much effect on everything in their daily life.

By explicitly confronting segregation in Chicago, Hansberry's anti-racist aesthetic gives shape to a pragmatic social vision and a "genuine realism," both designed to promote meaningful social change. Genuine realism, Hansberry explained, imposes on a work "not only what is, but what is possible ... because that is part of reality too ... So that you get a much larger potential of what man can do" (*Young* 228). Her conception of genuine realism renders human beings as active agents in their own liberation as well as in the oppression of others, and opens a cultural space in which to imagine alternatives to a truthfully represented, repressive social reality. Equally concerned with present truth and future possibility, Hansberry's genuine realism rejects the deterministic impulses of naturalism; unwilling to succumb to the social constructions of capitalist white supremacy, her genuine realism relies instead upon what she considered an imperative, but in no way naive, idealism.

Hansberry portrays the African American "nostalgia which has been nurtured by the Younger's dream but which remains realistically counterbalanced by the inexorable facts of the Younger's American identity" (Brown). For instance, Beneatha embodies the yearning for a future which is informed by a sense of identity that proudly encompasses a more accurate knowledge of the African past. She attempts to embrace her heritage by changing her hair style to natural, her tribal dress and African dance. Hansberry shows that "the African was much more than the primitive, savage exotic portrayed in American films and novels" (Elam 46). Beneatha searches for her identity "as a mature adult by rebelling against her mother's orthodox Christianity in favour of rational humanism; as a woman by choosing the non-traditional

vocation of doctor; and as a black by rejecting her moneyed assimilationist boyfriend” (Krasner 173). She dismisses the middle-class George Murchison who considers her desire to be a doctor as laughable, and when she tries to talk to him seriously, he advises her “to cut it out.” (*A Raisin*)

Beneatha’s other suitor, the African student Joseph Asagai, is somewhat complex and highly appealing. He is a charming “mixture of idealism and sophistication” (Carter 161). He is a romantic hero who is the spokesman for many of Hansberry’s political and philosophical views. Hansberry uses Asagai, to challenge the notions of both realism and idealism: “it is very odd,” he muses, “but those who see the changes – who dream, who will not give up – are called idealists . . . and those who see only the circle we call them the ‘realists’!” (*A Raisin*). Brown argues that Hansberry’s dramatic insight of the “romanticization of Africa, in the person of Asagai, goes hand in hand with the emphasis on the Youngers’ American commitment” (Brown). Asagai is both “inheritor and exponent of the ancestral and human impulse for freedom” (Elam 47). He expresses in philosophical and political terms “the long-desired reuniting of Africans and Afro-Americans through shared beliefs, not colour alone” (Wilkerson).

Hansberry’s evaluation of assimilation and identity is expressed through the characters of George and Asagai. Beneatha’s two suitors embody the dichotomy between the conflicting identities available to blacks: the identity that seeks assimilation and the identity that rejects assimilation. George represents a black person assimilating into the white world, while Asagai, stands for the new Africanist culture that those who oppose assimilation pursue. Through the character of Joseph Asagai, Hansberry reveals a trend toward celebrating African heritage. As he calls for a native revolt in his homeland, she seems to predict the anti-colonial struggles in African countries of the upcoming decades, as well as the inevitability and necessity of integration.

Almost all the characters in *A Raisin in the Sun* have unfulfilled dreams. These dreams mostly involve money. Although the Younger family seems alienated from white middle-class culture, they have the same materialistic dreams as the rest of American society. In the 1950s the stereotypical American dream was to have a house with a yard, a big car, and a happy family. The Youngers also seem to want to live this dream, though their struggle to attain any semblance of it is dramatically different from the struggle of a similar suburban family might encounter, because the Youngers are not a stereotypical middle-class family. Rather, they live in a world in which being middle class is also a dream.

The entire play centers around dreams, as each character and the Younger family, as a whole, have a dream they struggle to achieve in their oppressive environment. Even the title of the play refers to a poem written by Langston Hughes, which talks about “dreams deferred.” This highlights the importance of dreams in *A Raisin in the Sun* and the struggle that the characters face to realize their individual dreams, a struggle inextricably tied to the more fundamental black dream of equality in America.

Every member of the Younger family has a separate, individual dream. Beneatha’s dream is to become a doctor. Further, Beneatha wants to break

free of conforming to the white ideal. She does not want to assimilate into the dominant white culture and give in to what other people expect of her. Walter wants to have money so that he can afford things for his family. In Act II Scene II, Walter's conversation with Travis expresses his ambition and hope for the future of the family, "your daddy's gonna make a transaction . . . a business transaction that's going to change our lives." (*A Raisin*) Mama's dream is for Walter to grow up and be the head of the family. She wants him to take responsibility and for Beneatha to pursue her dream. Ruth's dream is to have a bigger house to fit and unite the family together.

The Youngers struggle to attain these dreams throughout the play, and much of their happiness and depression is directly related to their attainment of, or failure to attain, these dreams. Despite the several hardships the Younger family is forced to endure, the family exemplifies love and strength in their relationships with each other. In the end, the family decides to chase the dream of owning a house, since it will benefit and unite the family most. However, the desire for and efforts put into each person's dreams are what make up the play, and the integrity of each character. This of course ties into the great American Dream and the African families who struggle to attain their own version of it.

Lorraine Hansberry's use of the black vernacular adds to the realistic aspect of the play. Clearly, Hansberry understood that the dialects of black communities were distinctly different from the dialects of other communities for she has her characters speak in the very real language of their community. Although Hansberry's own immediate family were all college educated and spoke Standard English all the time at home, Hansberry herself spent a lot of time in poor Southside households that were similar to that of the Younger family in *A Raisin in the Sun*. Naturally Mama's speech is different from Beneatha's; however, there are even subtle differences between the speech patterns of Mama and Walter and Ruth and Bobo.

The language of many of the characters of *A Raisin in the Sun* is unconventionally non-Standard English; the black characters are not merely speaking English that is ungrammatical; rather, they are speaking a dialect common in the black communities that are heavily populated by migrants from the South. Their dialect, although similar to the white southern dialect, is distinctly different in that it is mostly an outgrowth of the period of slavery. At that time, slaves were forbidden a formal education and therefore mimicked whatever English they heard, ending up with a "Pidgin English" not unlike the English spoken by many of the American population. Since Hansberry is familiar with the non-Standard English spoken in Southside Chicago, she employs black dialect throughout her play to highlight the very realities faced by the "plain working folks" (*A Raisin*).

Anchored in the traditions of radical black American art, organized activism and thought, Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* provides not only instructive social critique but also prophetic inquiry. This prophetic inquiry operates as an integral part of her genuine realism, urging her readers, as *Raisin's* title suggests, to consider seriously both what happens to millions of dreams deferred, and the trials that those who fight for independence must face.

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## 11.4 SUM UP

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*A Raisin in the Sun* explores not only the tension between white and black society but also the strain within the black community over how to react to an oppressive white community. The play deals with everyday situations and is written from a third person objective point of view with the 'narrator' giving stage directions to what the characters are doing. Almost all the characters are black and they speak in African American dialect. Hansberry tries to show that black are no less human than white. The Youngers have the right to live and hope for better life but unfortunately Youngers can do that only through insurance of their father's death. The problem of Walter and his mother is similar to those which may appear in any other family. They depict families which approve their similarities to those who are around them. Even though, towards the end, the Youngers move to their new house, they are aware of their future in a white neighbourhood. The play is not so hopeful of the future but the hope lies in the strength and endurance of black people.

Hansberry did more than document which was the most limited form of realism. She depicted the realistic image of the Black people with – “greater realism and complexity” (Carter) but this did not “obscure her awareness of and sensitivity to African-American hardships and neither did it estrange her from the ordeals shared by most blacks” (Effiong 29). Hansberry's aesthetic is distinctly black, egalitarian and radical – placing, in the words of Amiri Baraka, “real life under the lights and speaking with the sharp eruptive force of black everyday everywhere” (Baraka “Sweet Lorraine” 526). Her art reflects her own “sense of tactical reality,” and her firm belief that “the world is political and that political power, in one form or another, will be the ultimate key to the liberation of American Negroes and, indeed, black folk throughout the world” (*Young* 212, 213).

Despite being placed in 1950s, many of the racial, familial or financial struggles presented in the play are still real today for a lot of people. Hansberry's portrayal of how an African American family strives to accomplish this dream poses many more conflicts than it typically perceived, forcing readers to redefine the American Dream for people like the Younger family. *A Raisin in the Sun*, therefore, can be read as a realist play which reflects the social realities of African-American people.

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## 11.6 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (POSSIBLE QUESTIONS)

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- Q1. Define realism.
- Q2. Discuss the importance of Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*.
- Q3. Discuss racism with reference to the text discussed in the unit.
- Q4. Comment on the plot of '*A Raisin in the Sun*'.

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## UNIT 12: LORRAINE HANSBERRY'S *A RAISIN IN THE SUN* AS A MARXIST PLAY

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### Structure

#### 12.0 Objectives

#### 12.1 Introduction

12.1.1 What Is Marxism?

12.1.2 Basics Of Marxism

12.1.3 Features Of Marxism

#### 12.2 Marxist Theory Of Literature

12.2.1 Marxist Literary Criticism

12.2.2 Emergence Of Marxist Literary Criticism

12.2.3 What Marxist Critics Do?

#### 12.3 Lorraine Hansberry's Early Life

12.3.1 Hansberry's Later Life And Writing Career

12.3.2 Plot Of *A Raisin In The Sun*

12.3.3 List Of Characters

12.3.4 *A Raisin In The Sun* As A Marxist Play

#### 12.4 Sum Up

#### 12.5 Check Your Progress (Possible Questions)

#### 12.6 References And Further Reading

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### 12.0 OBJECTIVES

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After reading this unit, you will be able to

- recognize what is meant by the term 'Marxism' and its basics
- understand the meaning of the terms 'bourgeois' and 'proletariat' and their relation to class-conflicts
- learn the literary theory associated with Marxism and the application of Marxist theory in literary texts
- realize the important role of Lorraine Hansberry in recording the social life of African-Americans and the various issues relating to this
- comprehend *A Raisin in the Sun* as a compendium of social struggles and economic diversities

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### 12.1 INTRODUCTION

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#### 12.1.1 What is Marxism?

Marxism is a method of socio-economic analysis that analyses class relations and societal conflict using a materialist interpretation of historical development and a dialectical view of social transformation. It originated from the mid-to-late nineteenth century works of German philosopher

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, a German sociologist, who were the joint founders of this school of thought.

The aim of Marxism is to bring about a classless society, based on the common ownership of the means of production, distribution, and exchange. Marxism is a materialist philosophy, that is, it tries to explain things without assuming the existence of a world, or of forces, beyond the natural world around us, and the society we live in. It looks for concrete, scientific, logical explanations of the world of observable fact. [Its opposite is *idealist* philosophy, which does believe in the existence of a spiritual world elsewhere and would offer religious explanations of life and conduct.] But whereas other philosophies merely seek to understand the world, Marxism seeks to change it.

### 12.1.2 Basics of Marxism

Marxist methodology originally used a method of economic and socio-political inquiry known as “historical materialism” to analyze and critique the development of capitalism and the role of class struggle in systematic economic change. According to Marxist perspective, class conflict within capitalism arises due to intensifying contradictions between the highly productive mechanized and socialized production performed by the proletariat, and the private ownership and appropriation of the surplus product [profit] by a small minority of the population who are private owners called the bourgeois. As the contradiction becomes apparent to the proletariat through the alienation of labour, social unrest between the two antagonistic classes will intensify, until it culminates in social revolution. The eventual long-term outcome of this revolution would be the establishment of socialism – a socio-economic system based on social ownership of the means of production, distribution based on one’s contribution, and production organized directly for use. As the productive forces and technology continued to advance, Marx hypothesized that socialism would eventually give way to a communist stage of social development, which would be a classless, stateless, humane society erected on common ownership and the principle of “From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs”.

The simplest Marxist model of society sees it as constituted by the “base” [the material means of production, distribution, and exchange] and a “superstructure,” which is the ‘cultural’ world of ideas, art, religion, law, and so on. The essential Marxist view is that the latter things are not ‘innocent’, but are ‘determined’ by the nature of the economic base. Marx argues that these cultural systems are set by the ruling class in accordance with their need to maintain or increase class conflict in order to remain in power. This belief about culture, known as “economic determinism,” is a central part of traditional Marxist thinking.

There were various influences on early Marxist thinking in addition to that of the political experiences of its founders, including the work of the eighteenth-century German philosopher Hegel, especially his idea of the “dialectic”, whereby opposing forces or ideas bring about new situations or ideas. Marxism also built upon the socialist thinking which was produced in France at the time of the French Revolution, and it inverted some of

the ideas of early economic theory, especially the view that the pursuit of individual economic self-interest would bring economic and social benefits to the whole of society.

Cuban revolutionary and Marxist-Leninist politician Fidel Castro on discovering Marxism, states:

Marxism taught me what society was. I was like a blindfolded man in a forest, who doesn't even know where north or south is. If you don't eventually come to truly understand the history of the class struggle, or at least have a clear idea that society is divided between the rich and the poor, and that some people subjugate and exploit other people, you're lost in a forest, not knowing anything. (100)

Marxism greatly influenced many Western writers, in addition to being the guiding principle behind most literary works in communist and socialist Russia. Richard Wright, Claude McKay, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir and Bertolt Brecht were deeply influenced by Marxist and socialist theories of the day, and much of this type of reflection is evident in their writings of the time.

### 12.1.3 Features of Marxism:

According to Karl Korsch, a German Marxist theoretician, there are few important features of Marxism:

- All the tenets of Marxism are particular and not general. It has not built up any general theory which is applicable in all places. Marx's concept of "base" and "superstructure" is a real concept, but its application differs from place to place. The only statements that are valid are particular descriptions of particular phenomena at a given stage of history.
- Marxism is not science or philosophy. It is simply a critical and practical analysis of existing society. Marxism is based on exact and verifiable knowledge. It can be empirically tested or verified. Hence it is an empirical doctrine.
- The central subject of Marxism is capitalist society. Marx scanned almost all the important aspects of capitalist society by applying dialectical materialism.
- Its chief aim is not simply to analyse the capitalist society, but to change it. Marx has said that the philosophers have interpreted the world, but the real task is to change the world or society.

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## 12.2 MARXIST THEORY OF LITERATURE

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### 12.2.1 Marxist Literary Criticism

According to Marxists, literature reflects those social institutions out of which it emerges and is itself a social institution with a particular ideological function. Literature reflects class struggle and materialism. So Marxists generally view literature "not as works created in accordance with timeless artistic criteria, but as 'products' of the economic and ideological determinants specific to that era" (Abrams 149).

Marxist literary criticism maintains that a writer's social class, and its prevailing 'ideology' – outlook, values, tacit assumptions, and the like – have a major bearing on what is written by a member of that class. So instead of seeing authors as primarily autonomous 'inspired' individuals whose genius and creative imagination enables them to bring forth original and timeless works of art, the Marxist sees them as constantly formed by their social contexts in ways which they themselves would usually not admit.

### **Definition**

The English literary critic and cultural theorist, Terry Eagleton, defines Marxist criticism this way:

Marxist criticism is not merely a 'sociology of literature', concerned with how novels get published and whether they mention the working class. Its aim is to explain the literary work more fully; and this means a sensitive attention to its forms, styles and, meanings. But it also means grasping those forms, styles and meanings as the product of a particular history. (3)

### **12.2.2 Emergence of Marxist Literary Criticism**

Karl Marx's studies have provided a basis for much in socialist theory and research. Marxism aims to revolutionize the concept of work through creating a classless society built on control and ownership of the means of production. Marx believed that Economic Determinism, Dialectical Materialism and Class Struggle were the three principles that explained his theories. The Bourgeois [Dominant class who control and own the means of production] and Proletariat [Subordinate class: Do not own and control the means of production] were the only two classes who engaged in hostile interaction to achieve class consciousness. Marx believed that all past history is a struggle between hostile and competing economic classes.

It is through the theories of class struggle, politics and economics that Marxist literary criticism emerged. The thought behind Marxist Criticism is that works of literature are mere products of history that can be analyzed by looking at the social and material conditions in which they were constructed. Marx's *Capital* states that "the mode of production of material life determines altogether the social, political, and intellectual life process. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but on the contrary their social being that determines their consciousness." In simple words, the social situation of the author determines the types of characters that will develop, the political ideas displayed and the economical statements developed in the text.

The simplest goals of Marxist literary criticism can include an assessment of the political 'tendency' of a literary work, determining whether its social content or its literary form are 'progressive'. It also includes analyzing the class constructs demonstrated in literature. Aesthetic and artistic elements are less important in Marxist literary criticism. The historical, social and political meanings are considered more important.

### **12.2.3 What Marxist critics do?**

Literary text interpretation based on Marxist literary theory, directly or indirectly, focuses on certain societal issues like class, culture, power and

the likes in the literary text. Some of the methods of Marxist literary analysis are as follows:

- Marxist critics make a division between the “overt” [manifest or surface] and “covert” [latent or hidden] content of a literary work and then relate the covert subject matter of the literary work to basic Marxist themes, such as class struggle or the progression of society through various historical stages, such as the transition from feudalism to industrial capitalism.
- Another method used by Marxist critics is to relate the context of a work to the social-class status of the author.
- A third Marxist method is to explain the nature of a whole literary genre in terms of the social period which produced it.
- A fourth Marxist practice is to relate the literary work to the social assumptions of the time in which it is ‘consumed’, a strategy which is used particularly in the later variant of Marxist criticism known as cultural materialism.
- A fifth Marxist practice is the ‘politicisation of literary form,’ that is, the claim that literary forms are themselves determined by political circumstance.

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### **12.3 LORRAINE HANSBERRY’S EARLY LIFE**

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Lorraine Hansberry was born in Chicago on May 19, 1930, the youngest of four children. Her parents were well-educated, successful black citizens who publicly fought discrimination against black people. When Hansberry was a child, she and her family lived in a black neighbourhood on Chicago’s South side. During this era, segregation - the enforced separation of whites and blacks - was still legal and widespread throughout the South. Northern States, including Hansberry’s own Illinois, had no official policy of segregation, but they were generally self-segregated along racial and economic lines. Chicago was a striking example of a city carved strictly divided black and white neighbourhood. Hansberry’s family become one of the first to move into a white neighbourhood, but Hansberry still attended a segregated public school for blacks. When neighbours struck at them with threats of violence and legal action, the Hansberrys defended themselves. Hansberry’s father successfully fought his case all the way to the Supreme Court. He died in 1946, when Lorraine was fifteen years old; “American racism helped kill him,” she later said (Anderson 263).

Hansberry graduated from Betsy Ross Elementary in 1944 and from Englewood High School in 1948. She attended the University of Wisconsin–Madison, where she immediately became politically active and integrated a dormitory. Hansberry’s classmate Bob Teague remembered her as “. . . the only girl I knew who could whip together a fresh picket sign with her own hands, at a moment’s notice, for any cause or occasion” (Anderson 263).

#### **12.3.1 Hansberry’s later life and writing career**

Hansberry broke her family’s tradition of enrolling in Southern black colleges and instead attended the University of Wisconsin in Madison.

While at school, she changed her major from painting to writing, and after two years decided to drop out and move to New York City. In New York, Hansberry attended the New School for Social Research and then worked for Paul Robeson's progressive black newspaper, *Freedom*, as a writer and associate editor from 1950 to 1953. She also worked part-time as a waitress and cashier, and wrote in her spare time. By 1956, Hansberry quit her jobs and committed her time to writing. In 1957, she joined the Daughters of Bilitis and contributed letters to their magazine, *The Ladder*, about feminism and homophobia. Her lesbian identity was exposed in the articles, but she wrote under her initials, L.H., for fear of discrimination.

During this time, Hansberry wrote *The Crystal Stair*, a play about a struggling black family in Chicago, which was later, renamed *A Raisin in the Sun*, a line from a Langston Hughes poem. The play opened at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre on March 11, 1959, and was a great success, having a run of 530 performances. It was the first play produced on Broadway by an African-American woman, and Hansberry was the first black playwright and the youngest American to win a New York Drama Critics' Circle award for Best Play of the year. She used her new fame to help bring attention to the American civil rights movement as well as African struggles for independence from colonialism.

In 1963, Hansberry became active in the Civil Rights Movement. Along with other influential people, including Harry Belafonte, Lena Horne and James Baldwin, Hansberry met with the then attorney general Robert Kennedy to test his position on civil rights. According to historian Fanon Che Wilkins, "Hansberry believed that gaining civil rights in the United States and obtaining independence in colonial Africa were two sides of the same coin that presented similar challenges for Africans on both sides of the Atlantic" (199). In 1963, her second play, *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*, opened on Broadway to unenthusiastic reception. Hansberry wrote that she always felt the inclination to record her experiences. However, her promising writing career was cut short when she died from cancer in 1965, at the age of thirty-four.

Hansberry's untimely death at the age of thirty-four on January 12, 1965, left a void in American theatre and in the circle of black writers. Jean Carey Bond, in an article in *Freedomways* magazine, says of Hansberry:

[Her] brief sojourn was, in one of its dimensions, a study in pure style. Born into material comfort, yet baptized in social responsibility; intensely individual in her attitudes and behavior, yet sensitive to the wills and aspirations of a whole people; a lover of life, yet stalked by death – she deliberately fashioned out of these elements an articulate existence of artistic and political commitment, seasoned with that missionary devotion which often intensifies the labors of the mortally ill.

Hansberry left behind three unfinished plays and an unfinished semi-autobiographical novel.

### 12.3.2 Plot of *A Raisin in the Sun*

*A Raisin in the Sun* portrays a few weeks in the life of the Youngers, an African-American family living on the South Side of Chicago in the 1950s.

When the play opens, the Youngers are about to receive an insurance cheque for \$10,000. This money comes from the deceased Mr. Younger's life insurance policy. Each of the adult members of the family has an idea as to what he or she would like to do with this money. The matriarch of the family, Mama, wants to buy a house to fulfill a dream she shared with her husband. Mama's son, Walter Lee, would rather use the money to invest in a liquor store with his friends. He believes that the investment will solve the family's financial problems forever. Walter's wife, Ruth, agrees with Mama, however, and hopes that she and Walter can provide more space and opportunity for their son, Travis. Finally, Beneatha, Walter's sister and Mama's daughter, wants to use the money for her medical school tuition. She also wishes that her family members were not so interested in joining the white world. Beneatha instead tries to find her identity by looking back to the past and to Africa.

As the play progresses, the Youngers clash over their competing dreams. Ruth discovers that she is pregnant but fears that if she has the child, she will put more financial pressure on her family members. When Walter says nothing to Ruth's admission that she is considering abortion, Mama puts a down payment on a house for the whole family. She believes that a bigger, brighter dwelling will help them all. This house is in Clybourne Park, an entirely white neighbourhood. When the Youngers' future neighbours find out that the Youngers are moving in, they send Mr. Lindner, from the Clybourne Park Improvement Association, to offer the Youngers money in return for staying away. The Youngers refuse the deal, even after Walter loses the rest of the money (\$6,500) to his friend Willy Harris, who persuades Walter to invest in the liquor store and then runs off with his cash.

In the meantime, Beneatha rejects her suitor, George Murchison, whom she believes to be shallow and blind to the problems of race. Subsequently, she receives a marriage proposal from her Nigerian boyfriend, Joseph Asagai, who wants Beneatha to get a medical degree and move to Africa with him [Beneatha does not make her choice before the end of the play]. The Youngers eventually move out of the apartment, fulfilling the family's long-held dream. Their future seems uncertain and slightly dangerous, but they are optimistic and determined to live a better life. They believe that they can succeed if they stick together as a family and resolve to defer their dreams no longer.

### 12.3.3 List of Characters

**Walter Lee Younger** – Walter Lee Younger is the protagonist of the play. Walter is a dreamer. He wants to be rich and devises plans to acquire wealth with his friends, particularly Willy Harris. When the play opens, he wants to invest his father's insurance money in a new liquor store venture. He spends the rest of the play endlessly preoccupied with discovering a quick solution to his family's various problems.

**Beneatha Younger** – Beneatha Younger is Mama's daughter and Walter's sister. Beneatha is an intellectual. Twenty years old, she attends college and is better educated than the rest of the Younger family. Some of her personal beliefs and views have distanced her from conservative Mama. She dreams

of being a doctor and struggles to determine her identity as a well-educated black woman.

**Lena Younger** – Lena Younger is Walter and Beneatha's mother. Lena Younger, referred to simply as "Mama" throughout the play, is the beneficiary of the \$10,000 insurance cheque. The matriarch of the family, Mama is religious, moral, and maternal. She wants to use her husband's insurance money as a down payment on a house with a backyard to fulfill her dream for her family to move up in the world.

**Ruth Younger** – Ruth Younger is Walter's wife and Travis's mother. Ruth takes care of the Youngers' small apartment. Her marriage to Walter has problems, but she hopes to rekindle their love. Ruth is quite passive, taking Walter's abuse and working silently and tirelessly to help provide for them. Constantly fighting poverty and domestic troubles, she continues to be an emotionally strong woman.

**Travis Younger** – Travis Younger is Walter and Ruth's sheltered young son. Travis earns some money by carrying grocery bags and likes to play outside with other neighbourhood children, but he has no bedroom and sleeps on the living-room sofa.

**Joseph Asagai** – Joseph Asagai is a Nigerian student in love with Beneatha. Asagai, as he is often called, is very proud of his African heritage, and Beneatha hopes to learn about her African heritage from him. He eventually proposes marriage to Beneatha and hopes she will return to Nigeria with him.

**George Murchison** – George Murchison is a wealthy, African-American man who courts Beneatha. The Youngers approve of George, but Beneatha dislikes his willingness to submit to white culture and forget his African heritage. He challenges the thoughts and feelings of other black people through his arrogance and flair for intellectual competition.

**Mr. Karl Lindner** – Karl Lindner is the only white character in the play. Mr. Lindner arrives at the Youngers' apartment from the Clybourne Park Improvement Association. Lindner is the spokesman for the white community into which the Youngers plan to move. He offers the Youngers a deal to reconsider moving into his all-white neighbourhood.

**Bobo** – Bobo is one of Walter's partners in the liquor store plan. Bobo appears to be as mentally slow as his name indicates.

**Willy Harris** – Willy Harris is a friend of Walter and coordinator of the liquor store plan. Willy never appears onstage, and is the one who absconds with all the money for the prospective business venture.

**Mrs. Johnson** -- Mrs. Johnson is the Youngers' neighbour. Mrs. Johnson takes advantage of the Youngers' hospitality and warns them about moving into a predominantly white neighbourhood.

#### **12.3.4 *A Raisin in the Sun* as a Marxist Play**

*A Raisin in the Sun* is a skillful portrayal of racial issues, which is also intertwined with the American dream that most people of the middle and lower class were pursuing. The play shows the economic struggle the family is going through and how they were looked down by society.

Furthermore, it shows that almost all African-American families at this time face economic difficulties. The play also demonstrates the gulf that exists between the whites and the blacks by introducing the notion of social class into the interpretations of the play. It further manifests something of the state of mind that is characteristic of each class.

The main social force portrayed in *A Raisin in the Sun* is racial prejudice. The story takes place in Chicago between World War II and the present, a time period in which African Americans were fighting for their Civil Rights. Hansberry herself experienced racial conflict very similar to the type seen in her play. The dream the Younger family has of moving into a house is crushed by the white community's inability to accept a black family. Mr. Lindner, who represents the bourgeois, offers the family compensation to encourage them not to move into Clybourne Park because the white residents do not feel comfortable accepting them. "I don't understand why you people are reacting this way. What do you think you are going to gain by moving into a neighbourhood where you just aren't wanted and where some elements – well – people can get awful worked up when they feel that their whole way of life and everything they've ever worked for is threatened." The family's main dream together finally becomes a reality when Mama puts the down payment on the house, but racism drives their dream down.

Throughout the play, the presence of racism and racial judgments affect the characters. In the political economic sense, Walter is affected by racism in his yearning for money: "Mama – sometimes when I'm downtown and I pass them cool-quiet-looking restaurants where them white boys are sitting back and talking 'bout things ... sitting there turning deals worth millions of dollars ... sometimes I see guys don't look much older than me." Walter says this to show his anger about how young white men have so many more economic opportunities than he does simply because of their race, and this fuels Walter's want for a better job and a better life for his family. He hates his work as a chauffeur because he feels like a slave working for another man, a belief that Walter shares with his late father.

Beneatha's exploration of her African heritage through her new hairstyle is symbolic of her anti-assimilationist beliefs as well as her desire to shape her identity by looking back to her roots in Africa. When Beneatha takes off her Nigerian headdress and reveals that she has cut her hair and is no longer straightening it, even her own family is taken aback and upset with her. Beneatha's cutting of her hair is a very powerful social statement and it represents her embracing of her heritage. The African American community during the time period of the play is one that is not really even sure about embracing their African roots and a lot of its members, especially Mrs. Johnson simply think that the circumstances are not going to change. "The Youngers' is too much for me! You sure one proud-acting bunch of colored folks. Well – I always thinks like Booker T. Washington said that time – 'Education has spoiled many a good plow hand.'" This quote from Mrs. Johnson shows the acceptance of the situation that holds down the Younger family's dreams. She believes that black people should not bother reaching for something higher, but the Younger's choose to fight Mr. Lindner and move on with their dreams.

The next social force portrayed in the play is gender roles. Gender oppression is closely related to class oppression and the relationship between men and women in society is similar to the relations between proletariat and bourgeois. On this account women's subordination is a function of class oppression, maintained like racism because it serves the interests of capital and the ruling class. It divides men against women, privileges working class men relatively within the capitalist system in order to secure their support; and legitimates the capitalist class's refusal to pay for the domestic labour assigned, unpaid, to women.

Gender roles in the play are emphasized by the power relations that exist between Walter and Beneatha, Ruth and Walter, and Mama and the other characters of the play. It is obvious that between Walter and Beneatha, the relationship is one of rivalry and anger. Walter resents the fact that Mama has to decide how to split the money between him and Beneatha when he would prefer to take the money for himself, feeling that investing the money in his liquor store would be more worth it than investing it in Beneatha becoming a doctor. He looks down on Beneatha's goal of being a doctor, stating to her, "Ain't many girls decide to be a doctor," or "Who the hell told you to be a doctor? If you so crazy 'bout messing 'round with sick people – then go be a nurse like other women – or just get married and be quiet . . ." Although Walter does not hate Beneatha or completely feels that she cannot succeed as a doctor, he does not want to have the problem of having Mama decide who to give money to. He also feels underestimated many times throughout the story about being a true man, feeling like he cannot provide for his family. Hence he looks down on other women to make sure he still has the sense of superiority as a man of the family.

Between Ruth and Walter, Walter tends to look down upon Ruth's dreams, not realizing the troubles that she is going through since he is too busy with his own situation. She admits to Walter as well, "Honey . . . life don't have to be like this. I mean sometimes people can do things so that things are better . . . You remember how we used to talk when Travis was born . . . about the way we were going to live . . . the kind of house . . . Well it's all starting to slip away from us . . ." In this scene, Ruth tries to tell Walter that although she loves him she cannot stand the way they are living anymore. She truly wants to move out of the house and wants Walter to understand that she too works hard for the family and she needs him to understand her and why she wants to use the money to buy a new house. Walter seems not to understand her throughout the story, frustrated with his own desires in making means to provide for the family and being that "American man" with the "American dream" or starting small and ending big.

The relations between Walter and Ruth/Beneatha truly show the cultural practices and social institutions during the time the work was written. Walter evidently does not appreciate the dreams and goals of Beneatha, putting her down consistently and telling her to "be a nurse like other women" because he thinks too highly of his own goals in being the man of the family and providing for his family. He wants to remain the man and seem like the superior figure in the household, making the money through the liquor store and providing for Ruth and Travis. He acts similarly to Ruth as well when he underestimates her desire for wanting to move houses and use Mama's

money to do so. He does not pay much attention to Ruth's feelings since he is too focused on his own problems of opening the liquor store or how to acquire more money.

These power relations show how men of the time the work was written underestimated the dreams and hopes of women since they felt that women should remain supportive of them and nothing more. Walter is not used to the new era of women acquiring more civil rights and having jobs that can be superior to the men's own jobs, such as Beneatha being a doctor. The relations show the transition of men trying to accommodate the fact that women are gaining more rights and higher ranks whereas women are trying to push past the criticism they get from men.

Beneatha is quite conscious of the social forces of the time period. Though she oftentimes is portrayed as naive and blindly following any activist movement, she refuses to comply with the restrictions that society set on her. Hansberry clearly sets up the values of Beneatha against Murchison's view, whose bourgeois values, in addition to requiring African-Americans break away from their heritage, necessitates the subjugation of women. In Act II, Scene II, as Beneatha is returning home from a date with George, and wants to have an intellectual conversation, he says,

I know [you love to talk] and I don't mind it sometimes . . . I want you to cut it out, see – The moody stuff, I mean. I don't like it. You're a nice-looking girl . . . all over. That's all you need, honey, forget the atmosphere. Guys aren't going to go for the atmosphere – they're going to go for what they see. Be glad for that. Drop the Garbo routine. It doesn't go with you. As for myself, I want a nice simple, sophisticated girl . . . not a poet – O.K.?

The italicized text actually says that he gropes her as he says this. Beneatha can see many times the way in which women are treated in society, the way everyone expects her to be a nurse rather than a doctor, and the idea that women do not need to be educated. Asagai calls her "Alaiyo" a nickname meaning "one for whom bread is not enough." She strives for something greater for her future. Beneatha is determined to raise her social standing through a doctorate. Mama, Ruth and Travis all know the effects of these social forces as well. When Mr. Lindner offers them money to stay out of the white neighbourhood, this becomes clear.

Economic diversity plays a major role in *A Raisin in the Sun*. The entire plot of the play seems to revolve around what Mama will do with the insurance cheque, and the dreams of each member of the Younger family somehow centre on how the money is dispersed. The class conflict between the "plain working folks" and the bourgeois is made obvious in the play through the economic differences that exist between the Younger family and the white people they serve as well as the neighbourhood they hope to move into.

The Younger family have the same materialistic dreams as the rest of American society. In the 1950's the stereotypical American dream was to have a house with a yard, a big car, and a happy family. The Youngers also seem to want to live this dream, though their struggle to attain any semblance of it is dramatically different from the struggle of a similar suburban family might encounter, because the Youngers are not a stereotypical middle-class

family. Rather, they live in a world in which being middle class is also a dream.

The Younger family is very poor. To emphasize this, the opening scene of the play depicts Walter and Ruth's son Travis asking for fifty cents for school and Ruth refusing him, saying they do not have fifty cents. Walter gives Travis more money than he needs, telling him to take a taxi to school or buy some candy. Walter thrives on the idea that he can provide for his family economically. When the cheque for the ten thousand dollars in insurance money comes in the mail for Mama, Ruth and Travis are extremely excited. Mama says that they are not the type of people who get so excited over money, but Ruth says "We ain't never had none before – OPEN IT!" Travis tells Mama that she's rich, and when Walter comes home, he simply asks if the cheque came yet. Mama scolds him for not first saying hello. Walter tells her that this money is very important to him because he wants so many things, but for Mama the ten thousand dollars seems to be a compensation payment for the loss of her husband. She realizes that no amount of money can replace things like the people you love, but Walter cannot see this. He is blinded by his want for money and being a man. Mama says, "Somebody would've thought my children done all but starved to death the way they talk about money here lately."

Mama's ability to control the materialistic desires reveals a strong contrast to Beneatha's worldliness. Mama is a very faithful and religious person, who cares a lot about her children. In Act I Scene I of the play, in a conversation with Ruth Mama says, "Now don't you start, child. It's too early in the morning to be talking about money. It ain't Christian." Mama believes strongly in God, and her conservative beliefs are shown when she feels disappointed when Ruth considers abortion, refuses to give her son money for a liquor store since she thinks drinking is sinful and winces at Beneatha's exclamations of "Christ!"

Beneatha, on the contrary, values money too much. She longs to be independent, but she cannot fund her dreams on her own and she still lives at home, relying on her mother and still very immature. She tells her mother that she's tired of hearing about God, because "God doesn't pay tuition," offending Mama, who is very religious. Mama slaps Beneatha, telling her that as long as she lives under her Mother's roof, there is a God. Beneatha's primary focus is herself and the furthering of her own dreams, and she knows money is the only way to do this. Ruth wants a bigger house because she is pregnant once again and has no room for the baby. Beneatha says, "Where's the baby going to sleep, on the roof?" Money for Ruth is a symbol of a better life for her family. Unlike Beneatha and Walter, she tries to be selfless and never outright asks Mama for the money to buy the house.

The lives of the characters are extremely influenced by these socio-economic forces. The main theme of the entire story comes out of the fact that the family is able to stand up and overcome these obstacles to move into Clybourne Park. All of the central themes, including the idea of dreams and plans in the midst of poverty are connected to and influenced by these social, political and economic forces. The characters are aware of this. Walter falls into a sort of depression over the fact that he cannot invest in

the liquor store and provide for his family without Mama's consent. Walter Lee yearns to be part of the upper class through means of a liquor store. Mama asks him why he talks so much about money, and he says "Because money is life, Mama!" Mama disagrees with this, saying that there was a time when freedom was life, but she understands how society has changed its priorities. When he has the money, he finally feels better and begins to mend his relationship with Ruth.

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## 12.4 SUM UP

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In *A Raisin in the Sun*, Hansberry skillfully addresses the family's material ambitions which are juxtaposed with more spiritual ideals. She presents "the moral conflict between the spiritual promises of the dream ideal and the frank materialism of the impoverished dreamer" (Brown). The family members move under the control of their materialistic needs, their feeling and attitude which is part of their inner life "objectives," (Locke) and the outer life objectives which are "the ideals of American dream, the American institution and democracy" (Locke). For instance, the distance between Walter and his mother is caused by his acceptance of the society's materialistic ideals that identify him as a mere commodity. Walter is not just a black victim of white racism but also a victim of a materialistic American dream that can enslave men or women of any race. The knowledge that the society "not only denied non-whites property ownership but also denied non-whites their humanity and made them property to be owned," (Matthews) is one of the crueller lessons for Negro and keep him hopeless and frustrated. This is evident in Walter Lee's character who is affected by economic pressure placed upon him by racist society. It leads him to a "kind of crazy". He displays hostility towards his wife for increasing his financial burden by becoming pregnant, toward his mother for not giving him the insurance money and toward his sister for wanting some of the insurance money to help her continue to study to become a doctor. The play *A Raisin in the Sun* thus illustrates the economic as well as social difficulty of the Youngers and hence can be read as a Marxist play.

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## 12.5 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (POSSIBLE QUESTIONS)

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- Q1. Discuss Marxism – its various contexts.
- Q2. Discuss 'A Raisin in the Sun' as a Marxist work.
- Q3. Comment upon the art of characterization in 'A Raisin in the Sun'

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## 12.6 SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

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