

Lorraine Hansberry's To Be Young, Gifted and Black: A Critique

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Abstract

Lorraine Hansberry (1930-1965) was a trailblazing American playwright, writer, and an activist who made significant contributions to the American literary canon and the Civil Rights Movement. While her most prominent work, *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), cemented her legacy, her posthumously published autobiographical work *To Be Young, Gifted and Black* (1970) offers profound insight into her life, experiences, and the intersection of her personal narrative with broader social issues. Compiled by her ex-husband, Robert Nemiroff, the work stands as both a celebration and a testament to Hansberry's resilience in the face of systemic racism, sexism, and intellectual alienation. The paper aims to provide a critical examination of *To Be Young, Gifted and Black*, focusing on Hansberry's exploration of identity, race, gender, and the role of the artist. Through a detailed analysis of key themes and literary techniques, this paper will make an attempt to explore Hansberry's critique of the socio-political structures of her time, her rejection of the limitations imposed by the American education system, and her reflections on the struggle for Black liberation and intellectual freedom. *To Be Young, Gifted and Black* is more than an autobiography. It is a powerful manifesto that challenges systemic oppression through the lens of personal experience. This paper argues that Hansberry uses her own life as a mirror to reflect the racial, gender, and intellectual struggles of her era, offering a profound critique of American society while simultaneously presenting a hopeful vision of liberation and self-realization.

Keywords: Identity, Race, Gender, Black Liberation, Oppression, Racism

Lorraine Hansberry remains a towering figure in American literature, especially for contribution to African American theatre and social justice. Her life was deeply intertwined with the social and political upheavals of her time. Her firsthand experiences with racism and segregation instigated her to craft powerful plays that probed the complexities of African American life. Amiri Baraka in this regard, astutely observes that "*Hansberry's plays are a testament to her unwavering commitment to social justice and her unshakeable belief in the power of art to transform society*" (Baraka, 1993). This commitment is evident in her breakthrough work, *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), which probed the complexities of African American life and challenged dominant narratives. Hansberry's subsequent works, including *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* (1964), and the posthumously published *Les Blancs* (1970) and *To Be Young Gifted and Black* (1970) further solidified her reputation as a masterful playwright and an advocate for social justice. Born in Southside of Chicago, Illinois, to a well-to-do middle-class African American family, Hansberry became the youngest African American woman to have her play produced on Broadway, earning her several accolades and recognition, one being the most prestigious, New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for Best Play.

Lorraine Hansberry's literary career was marked by her profound contributions to African American literature and her active involvement in the Civil Rights Movement. Through her writing, Hansberry gave voice to the struggles and triumphs of African Americans, cementing her legacy as a pioneering figure in American literature. Her works are deeply intertwined with her commitment to social justice. She used her plays, essays, and public speeches to challenge the pervasive racism and inequality in American society. Her writing often reflects the complexities of African American identity, the fight for civil rights, and the broader human struggle for dignity and freedom. Hansberry's impact extends beyond the stage. She was a prominent figure in the Civil

Rights Movement, advocating for racial equality, women's rights, and LGBTQ+ rights.

To Be Young, Gifted and Black (1970) is the portrait of an individual, the workbook of an artist, and a chronicle of a rebel who celebrated the human spirit. According to Robert Nemiroff, *To Be Young, Gifted and Black* is a "prophetic chapter in the history of a people and an age". (TBYGB, xviii) It is a rich and complex text published posthumously. It is a key text that encapsulates various themes and motifs, reflecting her experiences, artistic vision and her dedication to Black identity and culture. The structure of the play is not of a traditional narrative but rather a montage of Hansberry's writings, including autobiographical sketches, excerpts from her plays, and other writings, offering a deep insight into her thoughts on race, art, and activism. The title itself, inspired by a phrase from one of her speeches, has become an anthem of Black pride and empowerment.

Lorraine Hansberry serves as an iconic example of the realization of the Black American Dream for many aspiring young artists. Her life was far from a bed of roses yet it took immense courage for her to boldly define herself as young, gifted and black. She faced numerous struggles throughout her life that shaped her confidence and identity as a pioneering Black artist and activist. The fragmented structure of *To Be Young, Gifted and Black* is one of its most distinctive features. The play's non-linear forms composed of monologues, letters, and reflections, mirrors Hansberry's complex internal struggles.

On one hand, this structure effectively conveys the multifaceted nature of identity, as Hansberry's experiences are not neatly categorized or confined to a single narrative thread. The non-linear approach also allows the audience to piece together Hansberry's journey in a way that reflects the fractured nature of the Black experience in America. However, this very fragmentation can also be seen as a limitation. The constant shifts between personal anecdotes and political commentary can feel disjointed, leaving the audience with an incomplete understanding of either realm. Besides the limitation, *To Be Young, Gifted and Black* was the longest-running Off-Broadway drama of 1969, widely recorded, filmed, and published in expanded book form, and has toured an unprecedented forty states and two hundred colleges.

Born into material comfort on the South Side of Chicago, and grew up as part of the middle class, she was subject to the same dangers and discrimination that plagued other Blacks in segregated Chicago. Growing up in a segregated America, Hansberry faced intense racial hostility despite her financial stability. It is evident when she defiantly writes:

I was born on the Southside of Chicago. I was born black and a female. I was born in a depression after one world war, and came into my adolescence during another. While I was still in my teens the first atom bombs were dropped on human beings at Nagasaki and Hiroshima... worst conflict of nerves in human history – the Cold War. (TBYGB, 41)

Hansberry's upbringing on the Southside of Chicago, particularly during the Cold war era, deeply influenced both her career and the themes in her work. She grew up in a racially segregated neighborhood and witnessed first-hand experiences of the discrimination faced by Black families. According to Hansberry, the truth of her life and essence begins in the Chicago ghetto where she was born:

I think you could find the tempo of my people on their back porches. The honesty of their living is there in the shabbiness. Scrubbed porches that sag and look their danger. Dirty gray wood steps.... My people are poor. And they are tired.... Our Southside is a place apart: each piece of our living is a protest. (TBYGB, 45)

The Black families had miserable kind of life with racially restrictive covenants and discriminatory policies which led to overcrowded neighborhoods and inadequate housing conditions. Schools were often underfunded and overcrowded giving minimal access to quality education. It is evident when Hansberry writes about the plight of ghetto school: "... not to give education but to withhold as much as possible..." (TBYGB, 63)

She reflects on the inadequacies of her school education, particularly in how it limited her academic development. She expresses frustration over the way school system failed her, especially in the area of mathematics. In one instance, she candidly states:

I am one of the most famous alumni of the South Side of Chicago – that is, I am a product of that system and one result is that – to this day – I cannot count properly. I do not add, subtract or multiply with ease. (TBYGB, 63)

In her writings and interviews, she often highlighted how children in urban ghettos were denied the same

educational opportunities as their white counterparts, which perpetuated cycles of poverty and limited social mobility. Hansberry believed that education should be a tool for liberation, but in the ghettos, it became a means of social control, keeping Black children from achieving their full potential. "...the marks that the ghettoized child carries through life. To be imprisoned in the ghetto is to be forgotten – or deliberately cheated of one's birthright – at best." (TBYGB, 63)

The revelation of Hannibal's ability to read in the play *The Drinking Gourd*, exposes the deep ideological tensions between colonizers and colonized, particularly regarding knowledge and power. Hannibal's declaration, "I kin read," is a powerful assertion of his intellectual capability, challenging the racist assumptions of inferiority that colonial powers often impose on the colonized. In the colonial framework, the ability to read and write is often viewed as a sign of civilization, something denied to native population to maintain control and subjugation. For Sarah, who has internalized these colonial beliefs is speechless and fearful of the revelation as she sees this act of literacy as a threat to the established order. For the colonizers think, "The ability to read in a slave is a disease." (TBYGB, 167) The ability to read made Hannibal more confident and suggests a rejection of the status quo and a strong determination to carve out a new identity free from the limitations placed upon him by colonialism. It is evident when Hannibal screams at Everett, "... I kin read! I kin read! You kin beat me and beat me... but I kin read..." (TBYGB, 167) He wishes to flee north and establish a new sense of identity. His idea of going north symbolizes a desire for escape and a quest for freedom from colonial oppression.

Education played a crucial role in uplifting the morale of the oppressed. Hansberry was concerned that the poor conditions of schools, lack of resources, and discriminatory policies within the education system reinforced racial inequality. Her portrayal of characters like Beneatha in *A Raisin in the Sun* reflects her belief in the transformative power of education. Throughout the play, Beneatha is portrayed as an ambitious, intellectually curious young woman who sees education not just as a way to escape poverty, but as a path toward self-realization and resistance against systemic oppression.

Hansberry uses Beneatha's character to challenge the stereotypes of Black women in the mid-20th century. Beneatha's desire to become a doctor is revolutionary. It was a profession that was not typically accessible to Black women in mid-20th century America. She advocates for the idea that Black people, particularly women, deserves access to the highest levels of education, a radical stance during a time when opportunities for Black individuals were still heavily restricted by segregation and economic inequality. Through Beneatha, Hansberry explores the idea that education is not only a personal pursuit but also a means of social and racial empowerment.

In Act 1, Scene 1 of *A Raisin in the Sun*, Walter dismisses Beneatha's ambitions to become a doctor, mocking her dreams and questioning the practicality of her education. He expresses frustration with the family's financial situation and ridicules Beneatha's lofty goals, saying, "Who the hell told you you had 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." (A Raisin, 38) Walter's words reveal his belief in conventional gender roles, suggesting that Beneatha should either settle for a less ambitious career or focus on marriage, rather than pursuing a challenging and expensive education.

Beneatha, however, fiercely defends her right to become a doctor. She retorts, "I'm going to be a doctor, and everybody around here better understand that!" (A Raisin, 36) Beneatha's determination to break free from traditional roles and societal limitations reflects her belief that education is her birth right and a pathway to self-empowerment.

One of the most notable incidents of systemic racism occurred when her family moved into a predominantly white neighborhood, leading to a violent legal battle after a mob attacked their home.

"...Twenty-five policemen... guarded the house and stationed at each window stood my father's guns and at night he and other friends patrolled the house with loaded revolvers." (TBYGB, 82)

This experience of racial violence deeply influenced her understanding of systemic oppression and the complexities of racial identity. As a child, this incident had profound and lasting impact on her life, shaping both her personal worldview and her artistic career. This experience contributed to her lifelong commitment to fighting racial injustice, both through activism and her writing. The trauma and impact of the mob scene can be seen in her works, most notably in *A Raisin in the Sun*. In this play, the Younger family's decision to buy a home in a white neighborhood and the resulting opposition they face mirrors Hansberry's own family experiences.

Hansberry's father, Carl Hansberry purchased a home in 1937 in a white neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago, defying racially restrictive covenants that prohibited Black families from living there. This bold move led to violent backlash, as white neighbors formed a mob, threatening the Hansberry family with insults, bricks, and aggression. Despite the constant danger, the Hansberry's stood their ground, with Lorraine's mother defending their home while Carl fought a legal battle. The case, *Hansberry v. Lee* (1940), reached the U.S. Supreme Court, where the Hansberry family won on legal technicalities, allowing them to remain in their home.

In *A Raisin in the Sun*, Lena Younger (Mama) uses her late husband's life insurance money to buy a house in Clybourne Park, a white neighborhood. Like the Hansberry's family, the Younger family too faces opposition from the white residents who do not want them moving into their neighborhood. Karl Lindner, a representative of Clybourne Park Improvement Association, offers money to the Youngers to drop the idea of moving in, fearing that a Black family will disrupt the "PEACE" of their community. The rejection of Lindner's bribes by Walter Lee Younger "We don't want your money" (*A Raisin*, 148) parallels the Hansberry family's determination to fight for their right to live where they choose. This act transforms the house into a symbol of dignity and resistance, as Walter declares, "We have decided to move into our house because my father... he earned it for us brick by brick." (*A Raisin*, 148)

The dialogue between Charlie and Tshembe further encapsulates the broader tensions surrounding race and identity. It reflects Hansberry's critique of the colonial apparatus that has sought to control and dehumanize African people while simultaneously illuminating the resilience and strength found in their quest for self-definition. Tshembe's argument that "Race is a device," (TBYGB, 256) posits that the historical legacy of racial categorization has led to an internalized sense of inferiority among many Africans, complicating their efforts to reclaim and assert a cohesive identity.

Hansberry not only critiques racial oppression but also highlights the intersection of class and gender. As a woman navigating predominantly male intellectual circles and as a member of the middle class, Hansberry often found herself in spaces where Black women's voices were marginalized. Her reflections on gender roles and class divisions within the African American community reveal the multiple layers of oppression she faced, complicating traditional notions of Black identity.

She revolutionized the living patterns and life styles particularly of the Black women in America. She redefines and reshapes the Black women as an active and responsible citizen and as one who can reshape and revitalize America and democracy. She imbibed the desirable virtues from her parents who believed in the concept of EGALITARIANISM. Hansberry proudly states: "We are one people." (TBYGB, 229)

Hansberry gained confidence and renewed zest for life from her father Carl Hansberry, who displayed talents for finance, law, invention, and social and political action. She was deeply influenced by her mother and her uncle, Leo William Hansberry who sprouted in her the seeds of Black Consciousness. Hansberry was profoundly touched by William Shakespeare and his works such as *OTHELLO* and *HAMLET*. It is evident in her exploration of universal themes such as ambition, love, betrayal, and identity, her development of complex, morally conflicting characters, and her use of tragedy and symbolism. Like Shakespeare, Hansberry used drama as a means of probing deeply into the human condition, addressing both individual desires and larger societal issues, creating works that resonate across time and culture.

Lorraine Hansberry was notably influenced by Sean O'Casey and his play *Juno and the Paycock*, particularly in her approach to portraying working-class families, social struggle, and the intersection of the personal with the political. Her admiration for the playwright can be quoted as:

"I love Sean O'Casey. This, to me, is the playwright of the twentieth century accepting and using the most obvious instruments of Shakespeare, which is the human personality in its totality." (TBYGB, 90)

O'Casey's exploration of class struggle and the consequences of political violence mirrored Hansberry's focus on the systemic racism and economic oppression that African American faced. Hansberry also adopted O'Casey's tragic realism, showing how external societal forces, such as poverty and political turmoil, crush individual dreams and aspirations.

The Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s marked a landmark of artistic efflorescence and a blossoming of creative temper. Hansberry was a leading figure in the movement and often regarded as the "Grandmother of Harlem Renaissance." She led a mission to rectify the misconceptions and prejudicial conceptions of the Black race by systematically, purposefully, and definitively exploding the myths and stereotypes, concerning Africa

and the Blacks, introduced by the whites. In a letter addressing her friend Edythe, she expresses her desire to take a stand for her people. She expresses her frustration thus:

“...I am sick of poverty, lynching, stupid wars and the universal maltreatment of my people and obsessed with a rather desperate desire for a new world for me and my brothers.” (TBYGB, 103)

She projects the right images of the Black men and women in her oeuvres to create the right kind of Black Consciousness. She establishes the truth that Blacks are no INFERIOR and that BLACK IS BEAUTIFUL. They have their own history based on a strong cultural heritage. She began to write not for her academic pleasure but for her people. Hansberry believed that man is unique in the universe, the only creature who has in fact to transform the universe. By taking hands in writing, she tried her best to exhibit the ground level of systemic oppression. Hansberry also emphasizes the necessity of reconnecting with African roots as a means of empowerment. She portrays African heritage not as a monolithic or static entity but as a rich, dynamic tapestry of history, culture and resilience.

Characters in her plays often grapple with their identities, seeking to understand their place within both their African lineage and the modern world. Joseph Asagai, embodies the themes of African heritage, identity, and intellectual idealism. Through Asagai, Hansberry introduces the idea of Pan-Africanism. He is a Nigerian intellectual and student who play a crucial role in *A Raisin in the Sun*. He is deeply connected to his African heritage. He is idealistic about the future of Africa and sees the potential for positive change in the world through self-determination and political activism. He plays a pivotal role in Beneatha's personal growth and search for identity. He believes in the power of Africans to overthrow colonialism and create independent nations. His ideas reflect Hansberry's engagement with Black consciousness and global African liberation movements.

The Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s sought to empower Black people through art and culture, challenging dominant narratives and promoting self-definition. Larry Neal, in his seminal essay, “The Black Arts Movement,” defines the movement's goals and aesthetics, emphasizing the need for a cultural revolution. He asserts that a cultural revolution is essential to transform how Black individuals perceive themselves and their societal roles. He advocates for Black artists to liberate themselves from Western aesthetic traditions and cultivate a distinct Black art form that authentically reflects the unique experiences and values of Black people. He powerfully states the Black Arts Movement is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept highlighting the integral role of art in the struggle for Black liberation.

While Lorraine Hansberry was not a direct participant in the Black Arts Movement, which arose after her death, her work is often seen as a precursor to many of its ideals. The play *To Be Young, Gifted and Black* reflects many of the movement's core principles. Her focus on using art as a tool for activism, exploring Black identity, and critiquing systemic oppression places her as a fore runner to the cultural and political developments that defined the Black Arts Movement.

The title *To Be Young, Gifted and Black* carries profound significance, both as a reflection of Lorraine Hansberry's life and as a powerful message for African Americans during the Civil Rights era and beyond. The title celebrates Black identity, specifically the talents and achievements of young Black people. It serves as a call to embrace their gifts, intelligence, and capabilities, countering societal narratives that have historically devalued Black potential. The phrase “Young, Gifted and Black” became an anthem for the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, especially after Nina Simone turned it into a song following Hansberry's death. The title also serves as a tribute to Hansberry herself, who embodied the qualities of being young, gifted and Black. Although she passed away at an early age of 34, her work and contributions to literature, theatre and the Civil Rights Movement cemented her legacy as a gifted writer and thinker.

Her works greatly contribute to the tradition of Black aesthetics. In her most famous play, *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), Hansberry engages with Black aesthetics through her portrayal of the Younger family's aspirations, frustrations and struggles in a racist society. While the play deals significantly with the effects of systemic racism, it also explores themes of African heritage, family solidarity, and the quest for personal and communal fulfillment. The play strongly critiques societal structures, but also presents Black characters with dignity and agency, resisting reductive stereotypes. For Hansberry, Black aesthetics could not simply be about race. She believed that Black stories should reflect the breadth and diversity of Black life, beyond simplistic narratives of oppression.

In *To Be Young, Gifted and Black*, Hansberry articulates her belief in the power of art to enact social

change. She emphasizes the importance of creating works that reflect the true experiences of Black people, challenging stereotypes and advocating for a more just and equitable society. This collection stands as a testament to Hansberry's enduring legacy as both a writer and an activist, illustrating how her literary career was inextricably linked to her commitment to the broader struggles of her time. Hansberry's work continue to resonate today, inspiring new generations of writers, activists, and artists to explore the complexities of identity, fight against injustice, and celebrate the richness of Black culture. *To Be Young, Gifted and Black* remains a vital text embodying Hansberry's enduring message of hope, resistance, and the pursuit of a more inclusive and compassionate world.

Hansberry strongly persuades the Blacks to embrace the reality and accept it wholeheartedly without being ashamed of their slave past, their skin color, their biological heritage and their economic backwardness. She wants the Blacks to reconsider that Black is Beautiful, and to gain recognition through proper education and through economic independence with sweat and labor. She rightly argues that the Blacks are not mere ciphers. Far from being squarerootofminusone - - less than nothing - - the Blacks are dreamers, witnesses, and lovers. Therefore, Hansberry systematically de-creates the stereotypes with a view to arouse the right kind of Black consciousness. She establishes the truth that Blacks are not inferior to any other race, and that the Black race has its own history based on a strong cultural heritage.

In conclusion, Lorraine Hansberry's *To Be Young, Gifted and Black* offers a deeply personal and poignant reflection on the complexities of race, identity, and self-actualization. Through the collection of her essays, letters, interviews, and autobiographical reflections, Hansberry presents a narrative that intertwines the personal with the political, illuminating the profound struggles and triumphs of being Black in America. She urges her readers to acknowledge and confront the inequalities that persist while simultaneously celebrating the strength, resilience, and brilliance inherent in Black identity. Her message resonates with a powerful sense of hope and possibility, as she advocates for a future where Black individuals can fully embrace their gifts and their identities without being constrained by the prejudices of society.

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