

Lorraine Vivian Hansberry

(May 19, 1930 to January 12, 1965: First Black Woman Playwright to have a Play Performed on Broadway)

Lorraine v. Hansberry, was a world renowned author and playwright, born in Chicago, Illinois on May 19, 1930. Her Mother, Nannie Louise Perry, was a driving school teacher; her Father, Carl Augustus Hansberry, was a successful real estate broker. Hansberry was the youngest of four children.

An interesting fact: Hansberry's most famous work, "A Raisin in the Sun," was somewhat autobiographical. In 1937, her father attempted to purchase a home in the then predominantly White Woodlawn neighborhood, which was located on Chicago's South Side. His purchase of the home was blocked by Anna M. Lee, a white resident, who sought to enforce the racially discriminatory restrictive covenant that was in place to keep the neighborhood segregated.

Represented by the NAACP, Carl Hansberry challenged the constitutionality of the covenant. They litigated the case all the way to the Supreme Court, which resulted in a landmark decision. Hansberry v. Lee, 311 U.S. 32 (1940). Citing stare decisis, the Court ruled in favor of Lee. Years later, the Court reversed itself, and held that racially restrictive covenants were in fact unconstitutional. Shelley v. Kraemer, 334 U.S. 1 (1948)

Hansberry was clearly inspired by her father's activism. While she matriculated at the University of Wisconsin, she became active in the Communist party. In 1950, she moved to New York, where she continued her activism and began her writing career. In 1953, she married Robert Nemiroff, a Jewish, publisher, songwriter political activist and Communist. These associations, her activism and membership in the Communist Party, prompted the FBI to surveil and to develop a file on Hansberry.

Most people know Hansberry from her play, "A Raisin in the Sun." The work borrowed its title from a Langston Hughes's poem: "Harlem" often titled "Dream Deferred." "A Raisin in the Sun" was the first play written by a Black woman to be performed on Broadway. Hansberry would later make it a screenplay; which would then lead to the famous movie version that starred Sidney Poitier and Ruby Dee.

Hansberry's life was tragically cut short at the age of 34; she died from pancreatic cancer. Nevertheless, despite her young age, she left behind an impressive compilation of writings and plays.

- Toussaint (a musical drama, unfinished) (1958)
- A Raisin in the Sun (1959)
- On Summer (Essay) (1960)
- The Drinking Gourd (1960)
- What Use Are Flowers ? (1962)

- The Arrival of Mr. Todog -a Parody of Waiting for Godot
- The Movement Documentary of a Struggle for Equality (1964)
- The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window (1965)
- To Be Young, Gifted and Black, Lorraine Hansberry in Her Own Words (1969)
- Les Blancs: The Collected Lost Plays, by Lorraine Hansberry edited by Robert Nemiroff (1994)

References and Additional Reading

- Hansberry v. Lee, 311 U.S. 32 (1940),
<https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/service/ll/usrep/usrep311/usrep311032/usrep311032.pdf>
- An Overview of Hansberry's Life and Work:
<https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/lorraine-hansberry>
- Schomburg Center: The Lorraine Hansberry Papers
<https://www.lhlt.org/schomburg-center-lorraine-hansberry-papers>