

Raisin in the Sun: This play explores the relationship between money and human dignity (and identity) in the U.S. It deals with the destructive side of the American Dream, which (for men) ties self-worth to economic success: Since 1) everyone is equal and 2) hard work and enterprise are all that are needed for “success,” failure to achieve economic status means that you are lacking in character. The rich “deserve” their wealth-- they earned it and they’re “entitled” to it. (One indication of such thinking is the effort to reduce heavy inheritance taxes which affect only people inheriting two million dollars or more.) Ralph Ellison, a distinguished African-American novelist, says that the American Dream has the effect of keeping most people in the society always “running.” Who, in this play, equates self-worth with making it big? Do the main men and women in the play define self-worth similarly, or is there a gender difference? Below are some statistics and a poem by Langston Hughes. Reading and journal questions follow.

Statistics from *We’re Number One!*, by Andrew Shapiro (1992).

The United States is number one in the world in the following areas:

- Teenage pregnancies
- Billionaires
- Children living in poverty
- Defense spending (and last in spending on the poor, the aged, and the disabled)
- Houses with 5 or more rooms
- Homelessness
- Salaries paid to athletes (and last in compensation for teachers)
- Percent of crime, murder, rape, drugs
- Prison population

Dream Deferred --Langston Hughes (1902-1967)

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore--
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over--
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

One journal is due. Write on EITHER Question 1 or Question 2 from Act II: Due Tues. 3/7 (please type, double-spacing. Include quoted phrases from the text that will support your points about the characters)

Reading Questions (Friction in families might be caused by living conditions and by conflicting dreams.)
Act I

1. What seems the purpose of the opening scene with Travis, with regard to helping us understand the frictions in this family and the source of the frictions?

2. What is Walter's dream (and why does it necessitate "big" bucks instead of a "well-paying job")? How does his dream relate to gender role?
3. What is Beneatha's dream? How does it relate to gender role?

Act II

1. Being a "man" in this society is difficult. Mama thinks giving the check to Walter will improve his self-image because she defines a key feature of the masculine gender role rather differently from the way Walter defines it: What is her "key feature"? What is his "key feature"? Defend each view as matching some feature of the masculine gender role (in other words, be that person's "advocate"). Then comment with your own opinion. (Finding the passages where Mama explains her action and Walter explains the reasons for his frustration will help you defend each because Hansberry has provided a "rationale" to each.) I'll give credit on the basis of how well you can be an advocate for each position, relating it to a "gender role" feature.
2. Each of Beneatha's two boyfriends represents a distinctive choice of identity for her (a choice that faced African-Americans in the 50's and 60's). Find a passage identifying George's attitude toward life and compare what he represents as a choice with what Asagai represents (taking into account that Asagai is African and not African-American). Since the word "assimilation" is central to these choices, look it up. Relate each choice to gender role. (Credit will relate to demonstrating understanding of each choice in relation to the meaning of "assimilation" and "gender role".)
3. To be African American and trying to attain the American dream is to be pulled in several directions. Lindner represents a kind of problem (and therefore a choice), and Mrs. Johnson another problem. Lindner, for instance, does not consider himself as prejudiced because he sees only from his own perspective, and not from any other: find a speech where he talks about his community in order to identify what his concerns are and why he does not see himself as being prejudiced (you're trying to figure out why he can't see that he is insulting them and yet he is!).

Act III

1. How does the line/circle speech (p. 134) relate to George's speech on education and to choices Beneatha and Walter must make in this act?
2. Find the speech indicating why Beneatha wants to be a doctor. In what sense is it surprising? (Her career choice at first seems to fit with George's and Walter's definition of the American dream— although they don't necessarily think her choice appropriate for women— but this speech gives another perspective.)
3. Find a speech indicating Mama's philosophy of life. It explains her major decision concerning Walter in the play. (She defines self-worth differently from the way Walter defines it.)
4. Look back at Langston Hughes' poem. At what point in the play do Walter's actions fit the poem?
5. How does Walter's final decision on whether or not to take Lindner's money bear on whether or not he has "learned" (whether he still defines himself according the American Dream). (Find a speech early in the play that shows that he did define his self-worth according to the American Dream.)
6. Why is Ruth always trying to feed Walter? (There's a speech in Act I regarding that). The answer indicates differences in the views of women vs. men about roles and what constitutes "being a good person.")