

Lorraine Hansberry: The Making of A Woman of the Theatre

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*[Margaret B. Wilkerson's Fellows' Address was delivered at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Washington, D.C. April 23, 1995
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I am very honored to be invited to deliver this lecture for my very distinguished colleagues of the theatre. Especially since this is the birthday of William Shakespeare, the great Bard. I'm happy to say that he and I share a birthday month - so I am hopeful that some of his insightfulness and eloquence will rub off on me today.

This lecture gives me an opportunity to speak on a subject that has occupied my thoughts for some time now - Lorraine Hansberry. I have entitled it, "Lorraine Hansberry: The Making of A Woman of the Theatre." Today, I want to talk about a couple of aspects of Lorraine Hansberry that are not well known: her political development and involvement with the American Left which helped to frame her work and develop as a playwright - what shaped her views, in other words. And second, her efforts to address the "woman question" - her feminist views.

Most of you know Lorraine Hansberry as the highly talented African American woman playwright whose play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, took Broadway by storm in 1959, when she was but 28 years old, and she died all too soon 6 years later at the age of 34. Her play won the NY Drama Critics Circle Award against the work of such giants as Tennessee Williams, Eugene O'Neill, and poet Archibald MacLeish. In 1964-65, another of her plays, *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*, had a harder time on Broadway, closing on the night of her death, despite a valiant effort by distinguished artists of the theatre to save it. *A Raisin in the Sun* lived on to become one of the most produced American plays ever and surely the most produced play by an African American. It has been translated into more than 30 languages and played on every continent, including Russia and many Eastern European countries. (I've seen photographs of the Russian production, complete with darkened faces - I doubt that they knew the history of minstrelsy in our country and the implications of this choice. I imagine they were simply trying to simulate the skin color of the characters.) In the United States, it still commands great interest. In 1989 when American Playhouse televised an expanded version with restored scenes starring Danny Glover and Esther Rolle, the event was the cover story on every major entertainment magazine in newspapers throughout the country. In San Jose last February, a university production attracted standing room only audiences. A few years ago, a San Francisco troupe produced a Vietnamese version of the play. So the play continues to have new life in a new generation.

But what captivated audiences of 1959? I'd like to take you back 40 years to the late 1940s and 1950s to evoke that period when Lorraine was a young woman and was developing her craft.

[Here slides were shown that visually depict lynching, sharecropping, protests and stereotyped stage and film images of African Americans that are a part of American history. These images also included photos of Southern police making obscene gestures to the camera and the hosing of demonstrators in the South as well as Freedom Riders and their efforts to help black Southerners to register to vote. In the midst of these images is a picture of Lorraine at age 19 as a student at the University of Wisconsin in 1949. Then, photos of the opening of *A Raisin in the Sun* are followed by a slide of Lorraine posed with other recipients of the New York Drama Critics Circle Award in 1959]

The critics called *A Raisin in the Sun* an "honest" play. James Baldwin wrote that he had never seen such truths about Black life on the stage before. When I saw it in 1959 as part of my first trip to New York City, I was stunned by the script and the stellar cast - Sidney Poitier was magnificent! Not to mention Claudia McNeil, Ruby Dee, Lou Gossett, Glyn Turman, Diana Sands, Ivan Dixon and a host of then "unknowns" who went on to become stars. A friend of mine who saw it with me said that she didn't realize that Black people talked about white people so much - allowing our friendship to move to a new level. *A Raisin in the Sun* captured a moment in time - perhaps a timeless moment - when the Civil Rights Movement was beginning to seize the headlines, when Black Americans hungered for their own image, truthfully told, on the stage, and many white Americans were trying to understand what the turmoil was all about. The Younger family was a very human family with foibles,

triumphs and struggles with which most people could identify. Hansberry tells their story with dignity and great humor so that the evening was very full with the drama, comedy and pathos of human life. Although the family was undeniably black, and specifically Southside Chicago blacks as Hansberry insisted, most everyone could enter into their lives.

Her success with this play catapulted her into the limelight, and she was immediately called upon to be a spokesperson for the Civil Rights Movement. She handled the demands of fame very well, fencing with the best of the media - like Mike Wallace, for example, who tried to trap her into making controversial statements. A college drop-out, she was more articulate than some with doctorates, and reporters were surprised by that. Had they known more about her background, her bearing and thoughtfulness would have seemed more natural.

You see, Hansberry was a product of a Chicago family that I call the "Brahmin" class. Her father, a very successful businessman, had earned the family's place as one of the leading black families in the city of Chicago. He was named, along with DuBois and Robeson, as one of the top African American men of the year (1940) by *Ebony* magazine. He won a Supreme Court case against restrictive covenants, among other accomplishments. Her mother was a society matron who was the essence of class and manners. Although Lorraine rebelled against the materialism of her family, she retained their sense of pride and their dedication to "help improve the lot of the race." When their two sons and two daughters were teenagers, the parents urged their children to take their dates to Chicago restaurants suspected of racial discrimination and to report back to them about their treatment so that the father could sue them. In some ways, Lorraine was a rebel in her family. Perhaps growing up in the shadow of her popular, attractive sister contributed to her decision, but nevertheless she rejected the Republican politics of her father, who ran for Congress as a Republican in 1940, and became involved in the American Left. Because of her parents' prominence, she met great artists and advocates like Paul Robeson, W.E.B. DuBois, Langston Hughes and even sports stars like Joe Louis when they visited the Hansberry home. The Hansberry children were expected to be present and to participate in these adult conversations, so her political education, speech and debate training began very early.

Unlike her siblings and parents who attended historically black colleges, Lorraine chose the University of Wisconsin at Madison, implicitly declaring her independence. She integrated a women's dormitory, becoming the first black to live at Langdon Manor and immediately became involved in the Young Progressives Association (YPA), a national student organization with chapters on campuses throughout the country, whose major focus was to elect Henry Wallace of the Progressive Party to the United States Presidency. These were the post-World War II years and universities like U.W. were filled with veterans on the G.I. bill - older students who were much more worldly than their 19 and 20 year old peers. Yet Lorraine rose to the leadership of the YPA in her sophomore year and developed a program of outreach to broaden its constituency, a program that included a season of theatre.

She found college to be less stimulating than she expected. It should come as no surprise that her literature and art courses were her favorites. She attended the campus theatre productions and in the company of her friends critiqued them regularly. But she longed to go to New York, and through her network of progressive associates, she was able to do so, carefully keeping concealed from her mother her real reasons for going. During one summer, 1949, of particularly intense political activity with the Labor Youth League, she wrote to a friend that her mother (her father had died a few years earlier) had forbidden her to continue her involvement with the League. She quipped that the family was afraid they would find her strung up somewhere with a hammer and sickle carved on her forehead. Nevertheless, she kept going to their meetings and doing political work - out of sight of her family.

Now I'm going to shift gears for a moment, as I continue to discuss her political education and involvement. I'm going to read an excerpt from my manuscript (the biography of Hansberry that I am writing) which lays out some of the historical context of the period and then begins discussing her involvement in the Left circles of New York City.

"It was 1950, exactly mid-century, and Lorraine was in the mood to change direction. She had worked hard the previous year at Wisconsin, leading a more youthful YPS, but the effort to keep the group together after the defeat of Henry Wallace's presidential bid was ill-fated. Wallace and the Progressive Party had gone down in ignominious defeat; their presidential candidate had run fourth behind Truman and Dewey, Democratic and Republican candidates. Even Strom Thurmond, the renegade states' rights challenger from the Democratic Party had received more votes than Wallace. No longer anchored in the demands and exhilaration of national politics, the college chapters had lost their moorings and suffered some decline in membership, especially as the number of veterans in colleges had dropped. Lorraine, already disgusted with the University and on academic probation, cast

about for another political outlet that could lead her away from Chicago and on to New York City.

“On the national scene, President Truman had proposed a broad program of social and economic reform, and won some parts of it from Congress: a higher minimum wage (from 40 to 75 cents); an increase in social security benefits and coverage of an additional ten million people; federal aid in slum clearance and construction of public housing units; and a slightly more liberal immigration policy for Europeans displaced by the war. But he was less successful in getting support for other parts of his reform program, especially in areas of concern to Lorraine and her colleagues. Congress refused to establish a permanent Fair Employment Practices Commission and ignored the President’s request for federal aid to education, compulsory health insurance, and anti-lynching and anti-poll tax legislation. African Americans were in an insurgent mood. They had given their lives and watched their relatives and buddies die to fight fascism abroad only to return to second-class citizenship at home. Along with the jubilation at the end of World War II had come the worst street riots in America since 1919, discrimination in employment and housing, segregated education, and a continuation of terrorism against blacks both in the South and the North.

“On the eve of the election in 1948, President Truman had issued executive orders which took preliminary steps against racial discrimination in federal employment and in the armed services. But what might have become a liberalization of social, educational and political thinking in the United States was thwarted by the emergence of the Cold War in which the prime enemy became the Soviet Union and Communism. The communist way of life, which promised resolution to the kinds of social ills still plaguing the United States, was perceived as a clear and present danger. As anti-Communist fever was whipped up and fed by the Wisconsin Senator, Joseph McCarthy, anyone who criticized any of the many problems, particularly racial ones, of the country’s undigested past became suspect and a potential object of prosecution by the government.

“In February of 1950, the month that Lorraine left the University of Wisconsin, Senator McCarthy declared that the State Department was saturated with Communists and fellow travelers. He was believed by many, although he presented no evidence to back up his claims. But the Soviets’ explosion of an atomic bomb a year earlier in 1949 and the victory of the Chinese Communists were enough to spark demands for anti-Communist legislation in the United States. A number of states required schoolteachers and other public employees to sign loyalty oaths. Congress approved the McCarran Act (Subversive Activities Control Act) which made it illegal to conspire to form a totalitarian dictatorship in the United States, gave the government power to deport certain aliens, and required officers of Communist and Communist-front organizations to register with the Attorney General and to file financial data. Congress passed the McCarran Act over President Truman’s veto, adding fuel to charges that Truman was soft on Communism. This perception would take its toll in the 1950 Congressional elections with the Democrats losing 28 House and 5 Senate seats in the wake of Republican claims that the Truman administration was riddled with Communist spies.

“The U.S. was vulnerable to communism especially in the area of race. On the one hand, coalitions of Northern conservatives and Southern Dixiecrats prevented needed legislation to relieve and improve living and working conditions for blacks. While on the other hand, anti-racist dissent by blacks or whites was viewed as un-American by the red-baiters. The conflict was real with serious implications. In a speech at a Paris peace conference on April 20, 1949, Paul Robeson, internationally known speaker and singer, declared that Blacks were not likely to fight against the Soviet Union. Although NAACP leaders and Jackie Robinson, the first black to integrate major league baseball, disputed Robeson’s claim, the specter of black resistance in time of ‘national need’ was raised. Therefore, opposition became subversive as the Cold War abroad chilled political dissent at home.”¹

This was the political atmosphere of 1950 as red-baiting began to emerge. Lorraine had just arrived in New York City and after a few false starts - had just landed a J-O-B.

“JOB happened shortly after the move. Paul Robeson, who had been a visitor in her Chicago home during her youth, had had his passport revoked by the State Department. He and Alphaeus Hunton had started Freedom Associates, Inc., whose primary publication would be a newspaper, *Freedom*, with his close friend and associate, Lou Burnham, as editor. Lou had heard of Lorraine and had met her briefly in Chicago. So when her contacts led her to his office, he immediately sensed her potential as a writer and hired her on as a subscription clerk, typist, and editorial assistant. Although it did not pay much, at least she had a JOB, and could allay her mother’s fears about her life in New York.

“The volunteer work at the YPA office and her new roommates gave her a circle of friends to live and socialize with, but she wanted badly to connect with Harlem and to pursue the issues that were directly affecting black people. By this time, the YPA was showing signs of collapse; it had struggled to hold its members’ interest

after the U.S. committed troops to the war in Korea during June of that year. The action was moving to the Labor Youth League in which Lorraine had been briefly active in Chicago. Through her association with *Freedom*, whose offices were in Harlem, and the YPA office, she met the leadership of the Harlem section of the League.

“Bright, attractive and committed, she quickly entered the leadership circle of the League. She became close friends with Roosevelt Ward (now known as Douglas Turner Ward, founder of the Negro Ensemble Company) and Lonne Elder (author of the play *Ceremonies in Dark Old Men*), and came to know the beautiful Elma and her devoted boy friend, Robert Nemiroff, who were on the verge of getting married. (Bob and Elma married soon after but divorced a few years later; Lorraine was Bob’s second wife.) Roosevelt and Lorraine found that they had a lot in common. They were close in age, were highly intelligent, and had a defiant streak, (although Lorraine’s was still somewhat muted). Both had attended big mid-western universities, had become bored with the curriculum, and chose to leave before graduating. And both had come to New York to be at the center of black political and artistic life. Both were natural leaders and promising writers. There was every reason for them to be attracted to each other. But theirs would remain a deep friendship.

“It was Rosie Jackson (not to be confused with Roosevelt Ward), now Roosevelt’s roommate, who captured Lorraine’s attention. Rosie was smooth and cool. But it was probably his street smarts that snared Lorraine. She had always been enamored of the working class - the tough kids who seemed to drink the cup of life with gusto, who fought back, who were independent, adult-acting and defiant. And Rosie was all of that and more. He was also handsome, attractive, and head of the Labor Youth League in Harlem - working class and wrapped in a most attractive package. He was all brilliant instinct. The streets of Harlem had taught him that, and at the moment, he seemed perfect for Lorraine. They became a twosome and ran with their mutual friends, Roosevelt, Lonne and others.

“The JOB - the job was wonderful. She was working for the great Paul Robeson, whose struggle to regain his passport was at the center of progressive black organizing. This publication, she believed, would be *the* journal of Negro liberation. She began as an all-around assistant, handling subscriptions solicited and organized through trade unions throughout the U.S. Although the subscription base was modest, she regularly received letters from the field from people who were so excited by the paper’s stories that they would spread the word and bring in new subscribers without ever being asked. More important, Lou seemed to recognize her talent. He was going to publish one of her poems, ‘Ocomogosiay,’ in the introductory issue of December, 1950.

“Lou Burnham, who was fifteen years older than she, was the mentor who fulfilled all of her intellectual and educational needs. Unlike her father, Carl Hansberry, who had meant so much to her, Lou was not bound by the kind of materialism that she had come to reject in her family. Nor was he a Ray Hansborough (a Communist who influenced her at the age of ten), wedded to the Communist Party and its jargon. For Lou, his people came first, and all struggles had to fit into their fight for freedom. Lorraine wrote of her first meeting with him:

He wore a large black moustache in those days and he was seated in an office on Lenox Avenue behind a desk arranged in front of a large curving window that allowed one to see a lot of Harlem at one time. It seems to me now that there were very few things in that office other than the desk, the two chairs we sat on, a lonely typewriter, some panels of grey afternoon light and the altogether commanding personality of Louis E. Burnham. His voice was very deep and his language struck my senses immediately with its profound literacy, constantly punctuated by deliberate and loving poetic lapses into the beloved color of the speech of the masses of our people. He invariably made his eyes very wide when he said things in idiom and sometimes, in the middle of a story, he just opened his mouth and howled for the joy of it.

...

I had just turned twenty when I met him and I told him about the novel I had wanted to write when I was eighteen. I told him how I was desperately worried about having become too jaded, at twenty, to retain all the lovely things I had wanted to say in my novel when I was eighteen. It was part of his genius as a human being that he did not laugh at all or patronize my dilemma, but went on to gently and seriously prod me to consider the possibilities of the remaining time of my life.²

“Lou was first and foremost a journalist, and he had been a youth organizer years earlier in the Southern student movement. He had a great deal to teach the 20 year old Lorraine who loved the black working-class and was devoted to its struggle, but who knew of it only second-hand. For him, journalism was almost a calling, and he rekindled in Lorraine her desire to be a journalist - and a writer of the first order. It was Lou who reminded her,

through his own example, that one brought not only skills to this job, but a certain kind of intellect, direction, and philosophy.

“At the same time that he was passionate about this work, he was very personable and direct, and felt responsible for the generation behind him. He knew that Lorraine had special gifts to bring, and he cultivated them. He loved and admired her, and enjoyed having her bright, alert mind engaged in *Freedom*. Although he couldn’t pay Lorraine and other staff members very much, he was still quite particular about the people who worked there. Lorraine loved Lou as if he were her lost father but reincarnated in the authentic, down-home cast of the black working-class. He had the pulse of the people, she felt, and the integrity of a saint.

“As you might guess, *Freedom* survived on a shoe string. Dependent on mail subscriptions, it was not sold at newsstands, and because of its political positions, did not have the readership of other black newspapers. A young actress and writer named Alice Childress (who later wrote the play *Wedding Band*) wrote a popular column, “Like One of the Family,” that presented a feisty Black domestic named Mildred who never took no stuff off white folks.³ Some people purchased the paper just to read her latest quips. Robeson had a regular column of news and commentary, and on occasion, W.E.B. DuBois wrote a story. But the bulk of the space was devoted to news of all kinds related to the struggle of blacks for human rights, especially in the U.S., with special emphasis on the advocacy of labor unions, peace organizations, and civil rights groups attacking racial discrimination in the many places where it occurred. International news about the fight for independence on the African continent was a regular feature. The paper did not carry sensational murders and other crimes that filled many of the other Negro newspapers around the country, and was notable for their absence.

“It was an exhilarating time for her. A lot of hard work, constant deadlines to meet, and frequent visitors. Paul Robeson was an international magnet, and often people from Africa or other foreign lands would seek him out at *Freedom’s* modest offices. Lorraine met a number of African students and other international dignitaries in this way. Where else might you have Paul Robeson sitting at one end of the table, DuBois at the other end, and Lou Burnham discussing with you editorial issues, debating the major questions of the day, or reflecting on the hopes and dreams for black and other oppressed people of the world? Lorraine sat in that company. Sometimes Paul would ask the staff’s opinions about a concert or lecture tour he was considering. And on at least one occasion, he took their advice not to go.

“Lorraine’s first ‘hard’ news story, ironically, was written about her friend and her lover’s roommate, Roosevelt Ward. Roosevelt (Douglas Turner Ward) had become quite visible as a leader of the Harlem section of the Labor Youth League. He was unjustly accused of draft evasion and held in a New York jail for an extradition hearing which Lorraine covered and which she later tried to turn into a play. Roosevelt was extradited to New Orleans for trial. Handcuffed, he was taken to Louisiana by four federal agents in a Pullman, traveling by train in a style to which he had never been accustomed.

“With Roosevelt gone, the League lost some of its fire. Lorraine was without her close friend, and Rosie lost, perhaps, some of his ballast. By this time, Lorraine and Rosie were engaged, and Roosevelt’s leaving, terrifying as it was, had freed up the apartment for them to live together. No longer did they have to wait for weekends or other times when Roosevelt would conveniently and discreetly be absent. In July, during the time that Roosevelt was in jail, Lorraine wrote to Edythe, a close friend from college:

Supposed to get married about September. Spirit: Happy and defiant Have learned to love clothes in a new way .. Life in a new way. I think I am a little different.⁴

She had indeed learned to love clothes, and the handsome man who filled them. Her mother would be pleased with the prospect that her dress might reflect better taste.

“But the legalized terrorism against the outspoken had come perilously close, and Lorraine felt both the fear and the thrill of danger. Her relationship with Rosie, her working-class hero, was tinged with risk and adventure, but not in frivolous pursuits - in work that mattered. It gave a special edge and, perhaps, excitement to their relationship. In the same letter to her college friend, Edythe, she added:

It is true I know many of those who have already been lapped up by this new Reich terror, know about the arrests in the early morning, the shifty eyed ones who follow, follow follow ... and know the people who are the victims: the quiet and the couragious. {sic} Frankly, I would not have thought the caliber of

humanity to be so sturdy after such spheres of corruption have surrounded it. But it is so.⁵

Then she went on in the letter to speculate on the kind of conversation she and Edythe might have if they met now, and comments:

I would recall the horsemen I have seen riding down human beings in Times Square, because they were protesting ... lynching. Quite simply and quietly as I know how to say it: 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. So dear friend I must perhaps go to jail. Please at the next red-baiting session you hear ... remember this "Communist!"⁶

"The possibility of her being caught up in some trumped-up charge was not mere fantasy. At a time when some kept careful distance from the controversial Paul Robeson, Lorraine welcomed her association with him. In October of that year (1951), W.E.B. Dubois would stand trial as a 'foreign agent' and be brought into court in shackles although he was in his seventies. Lorraine was happy to be in his company and since arriving in New York had welcomed the nickname "Du-B," consciously modeling herself intellectually on this outstanding and historic figure. So despite the implicit drama of the moment felt by this 21 year old, the possibility of harassment and arrest were quite real.

"Lorraine's star was rising in Harlem's progressive circles. Her poem, 'Lynchsong,' was published in the July issue of *Masses and the Mainstream* (A Left journal), and the editors had described her as 'a young Negro writer.' [Emphasis mine.] She was thrilled at this recognition, though it was only the first step in her stride towards fame. 'Lynchsong' revealed Lorraine's ability to express one of the most important and difficult aspects of the black struggle with the economic language of poetry. Focusing on the execution of Willie McGee, a young black man accused of rape in Laurel, Mississippi, she contrasted the lyrical name of the town, Laurel, with the brutality of legalized lynching of black men in the criminal justice system. The poem reflected the stories of Lorraine's family and particularly the account of her Aunt Louise, who had babysat her so frequently during her youth in Chicago, and whose father had been lynched along with his three brothers near Elaine, Arkansas, in 1918. So Lorraine had been as close to the experience as one can be without being there because she had heard the story told over and over again by her Aunt.

"The poem also reflected Lorraine's active protest against the unjust prosecution of black men. She had been a member of a national delegation of women who presented a petition to the governor of Mississippi earlier that year to stay the execution of Willie McGee, and she had participated in and reported on the delegation of 122 black women, the Sojourners for Truth and Justice, who demanded federal protection of the lives and liberties of blacks. The group included Mary Church Terrell, the famous opponent of lynching. 'Lynchsong' marked her as a rising young writer. These two important events in her life as a writer - the publication of her poem and joining the staff of *Freedom* - also marked her in another way. By December of that year, she was on the subversive list of the 1st Army's Military Intelligence division based in New York."⁷

The FBI continued to check on her, often following her, particularly after she married Robert Nemiroff in 1953. Nemiroff had his own record with the Communist Party and later radical activities - in fact, he met Lorraine on a picket line at New York University. They spent the night before their wedding at a candlelight protest vigil for the Rosenbergs who were executed that night. One of my favorite stories about Lorraine and the FBI is that the Bureau sent two agents to see *A Raisin in the Sun* to determine whether it was a subversive play. They came to the conclusion that it was not. Lorraine would probably have been very disappointed in the statement, had she known.

An aspect of Lorraine's work that has not received as much attention as it deserves, has to do with her feminist views. I want to shift to that subject at this point. We get some indication from the roles of women in *A Raisin in the Sun* and *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*. In these two Broadway plays, the women - except for Beneatha the college student who aspires to be a physician and who is modeled on Hansberry at age twenty - are cast in fairly traditional roles of homemaker, domestic, or prostitute. They form the conventional circle of support for the male protagonists. In *Sign ...*, she even signals the women's role as supporter and educator by giving the three sisters the maiden name of Parodos, the word for the chorus of Ancient Greek drama, which carried out a similar role. At the same time, these women are ill at ease with or rebel against their circumscribed roles, although their resistance is not the central focus of the works; they are ultimately instrumental in the male protagonist's self-realization. Hansberry's feminist views are subtly expressed in these plays, a perception that has led feminist critics

to wonder why Hansberry, a strong advocate for women's liberation, did not create a female protagonist in her major plays, and why in the case of two of her plays (*Sign...* and *Les Blancs*), she changed the protagonists from female to male.

The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window, set in Greenwich Village with a Jewish protagonist as the central character, probably confused critics and some audiences because it seemed to be such a departure from *A Raisin in the Sun*. After all, she was expected to be a spokesperson for the Black Movement in the media and on the stage, but she chose instead to write a play which contained only one black character - and a minor one at that. The theatre was not yet ready for this reversal.

But what may ultimately be most fascinating about this particular play is that it began as *The Sign in Jenny Reed's Window* and went through several complete drafts before she shifted to a male protagonist. As I read through these drafts, I could see her experimenting with the attributes of the protagonist and antagonist, and a woman as protagonist, trying to adhere to a classical structure, but being thwarted perhaps by her feminist views.

What do I mean here? Let us go back a few years in her life to 1954 - the mid-1950's. During those years, she read a book that sparked great controversy among those who read it: Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. The central thesis of the book is that women in general have been forced to occupy a secondary place in the world in relation to men in patriarchal cultures and that this position is comparable in many respects to that of racial minorities in spite of the fact that women comprise half of the human race. This secondary standing is not imposed of necessity by natural "feminine" characteristics but rather by strong environmental forces of educational and social tradition under the purposeful control of men.

This condition has resulted in the general failure of women to take a place of human dignity as free and independent individuals, associated with men on a plane of intellectual and professional equality, a condition that not only has limited their achievement in many fields but also has given rise to pervasive social evils and has had a particularly vitiating effect on the sexual relations between men and women."⁸ In a commentary on the book, Lorraine revealed the impact of *The Second Sex* on her thinking. She carried on conversations with the books she read. *The Second Sex* numbers over 700 pages, and Lorraine wrote on all but 15-20 pages of that book. So she read it very closely. She describes herself as "the twenty-three year old woman writer closing the book thoughtfully after months of study and placing it in the most available spot on her 'reference' shelf, her fingers sensitive with awe, respect on the covers; her mind afire at last with ideas from France once again in history, égalité, fraternité, liberté - pour tout le monde!"⁹ It is worth noting that Hansberry wrote this commentary in 1957 the same year that she was completing her signal work, *A Raisin in the Sun*. And it is a sign of her times, the 1950's, that she was apparently one of few readers of either gender who paid close attention to de Beauvoir's revolutionary analysis of "the woman question."

Like de Beauvoir, Hansberry held women partly responsible for much of the "confusion;" "They have been born into a cultural heritage which has instructed them of a role to play without question and in the main they are willing to do so."¹⁰ Her condemnation of housework and home-making as "drudgery" and a negation of women's potential to be producers rather than maintainers places her well beyond the 1950s discourse on the perception of women.

Even though she doubted that, in the American theatre of the 1950s, audiences were likely to sit still for women who embodied these views, she nevertheless continued to experiment with dramatic formats which could contain her vision. One of the most interesting is the unpublished, unproduced play entitled *The Apples of Autumn* in which a young working woman named Julia Bernstein breaks off her relationship with her boyfriend because he makes a pass at her girlfriend the same day that he proposes to her. Even though the girlfriend rejects his advances, Julia finds it a violation of all she believes of him. (Hansberry sincerely describes him as a good man.) Julia's life is further complicated because that girlfriend reveals herself to be a lesbian and in love with her. (Even Hansberry was capable of clichéd situations, but she was trying to work out this issue onstage.) In describing Julie, Hansberry writes: "In one part of her intellectual being she rejects what she regards as the false standards men have imposed on women's values; at the same time she dreads the fading of her own dark beauty because reality has taught her the meaning of life for the unbeautiful, and she cannot help herself, secretly it frightens her."¹¹

Her discussion of the structure and content of this play reveals the compelling nature of her intellect, the degree to which de Beauvoir's book connected with her thinking, and her effort to expose the serious questions underlying what seem to many to be trivial issues worthy only of soap operas. Reflecting on the significance of this topic, she wrote:

Socially it seems to me that there are far more important questions with respect to the equality of women than how they are treated by their individual husbands or lovers. As Julie in the play points out these problems are results rather than causes. Humanity would be the better served when the social minded artist feels free to tackle some of the really basic areas of feminine oppression or at least some of the more vastly crucial issues peculiar to women's rights such as job discrimination, prostitution, discrimination in education, special health needs and political equality. This last is certainly the crux of women's or anybody else's oppression and in the future I suspect intelligent and courageous social dramatists will treat it so.¹²

Incidentally, in 1955 after she had finished this script, she read it to a few friends, among them her husband Robert Nemiroff and Phil Rose, who would eventually produce *A Raisin in the Sun* three years later. She dutifully took down their reactions, and later in the quiet of her study, critiqued the value of their criticism. She noted that none of them felt that the subject matter was of sufficient moment. And she agreed, indicating that the time to explore this material on stage had not yet come.

In concluding this presentation, I want to add that Hansberry's archive of unpublished and unproduced material is one of the most important extant collections. Some scripts (adaptations of the novels *Master of the Dew*, *Laughing Boy*, *The Marrow of Tradition*) have been tied up in legalities while other materials are provocative glimpses into her thinking and the craft of her writing. Her new literary executor is anxious to make these works accessible within the next several years. I have been assisting with that process. I am hopeful that we will edit an anthology of Hansberry's essays and interviews even sooner. A truly remarkable woman, Hansberry relished the tough questions, and worked tirelessly to bring to the American stage a vision that encompassed both humankind's cruelty and potential for greatness. Her character, Sidney Brustein, seems to speak for her:

I care. I care about it all. It takes too much energy *not* to care. Yesterday I counted twenty-six gray hairs on the top of my head all from trying *not* to care... The *why* of why we are here is an intrigue for adolescents; the *how* is what must command the living. Which is why I have lately become an insurgent again.¹³

And finally, in deference to this day, William Shakespeare's birthday, I would like to close with Hansberry's comments on the Bard. His works stimulated her intellect and artistry, the largeness, the great potential that he saw for humankind. In an interview she was asked: Which is your favorite Shakespeare play and why? She said:

Favorite? It is like choosing the superiority of autumn days. Mingling titles permits a reply: *Othello* and *Hamlet*. Why? There is a sweetness in the former that is in *Othello* that lingers long after the tragedy is done. A kind of possibility that we suspect in man wherein even its flaw is a tribute. The latter, *Hamlet*, because there remains a depth in the Prince that, as we all know, constantly re-engages as we mature. And it does seem the wit remains brightest and most instructive in all dramatic literature.¹⁴

And finally, when she was asked: What is the most important result of your familiarity with Shakespeare? What has he given you?, she answered,

Comfort and agitation so bound together that they are inseparable. Man, as set down in the plays, is large. Enormous. Capable of anything at all. And yet fragile, too, this view of the human spirit; one feels it ought to be respected and protected and loved rather fiercely.

Rollicking times Shakespeare has given me. I love to laugh and his humor is that of everyday, of every man's foible at no man's expense. Language at 13 - is a difficult and alien tedium, those Elizabethan cadences, but soon a balm, a thrilling source of contact with life.¹⁵

Lorraine was a playwright of conscience who believed that the problems of the most ordinary person deserve to be and could be writ large on the stage - whether the person was from Chicago's South Side, whether it was a Jewish intellectual who lived in Greenwich Village, an African intellectual returning home for a father's

funeral getting swept up in a revolution, the ordinary housewife or the ordinary young working class woman trying to find her way through the mire of relationships between men and women. She was a playwright with a comprehensive vision of humankind's potential, and I believe, truly a woman of the theatre.

Notes

1. Excerpt from unpublished manuscript, *Lorraine Hansberry: Passionate Witness* by Margaret B. Wilkerson; None of the excerpts appearing in this lecture are to be quoted without written permission from the author.
 2. Lorraine Hansberry on Lou Berman (February 15, 1960). An edited version is printed in *To Be Young, Gifted and Black: Lorraine Hansberry in Her Own Words*, Adapted by Robert Nemiroff, Vintage Books, 1995, p. 79.
 3. A selection of these columns was later published as *Like One of the Family: Conversations from A Domestic's Life* by Alice Childress, Beacon Press, 1986.
 4. Lorraine Hansberry, unpublished letter to Edythe Cohen, New York City, circa July, 1951. Portions of Cohen letter are edited and a revised version printed in 1995 edition of *To Be Young, Gifted and Black* (1995), pp. 82-83.
 5. Ibid.
 6. Ibid.
 7. End of excerpt from Wilkerson manuscript. The FBI document indicating Hansberry's placement on the list of subversives: Headquarters First Army, Governors Island, N.Y., "Military Intelligence Report: Index of Domestic Intelligence Report," p. 9 of listing of organizations and individuals.
 8. This summary is paraphrased from the Translator's Preface by H. M. Parshley in *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir, Alfred Knopf, 1952.
 9. Lorraine Hansberry, "Simone de Beauvoir and *The Second Sex*: An American Commentary," in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, Edited by Beverly Guy-Sheftall, The New Press, 1995, p. 130.
 10. Ibid. p. 5.
 11. Lorraine Hansberry, *Apples of Autumn*, unpublished play with "Author's Notes on Characterization, Structure and Content," 1955, p. 1.
 12. Ibid. p. 5.
 13. Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun and The Sign on Sidney Brustein's Window*, Vintage Books, 1995, p. 269.
 14. *To Be Young, Gifted and Black* (1995) p. 45. Reprinted from "The Shakespearean Experience *Show* Poll # 5," *Show* magazine, February, 1964.
 15. Ibid.
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