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- [Administrative Log in](#)

Hansberry as a Social Activist

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Lorraine Hansberry is most well known for her contributions as a playwright to the American theater. Her most famous works include: the 1959 Broadway production *A Raisin in the Sun*, *The Movement: Documentary of a Struggle for Equality* (1964), *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* (1965), *To Be Young, Gifted and Black* (1969), and *Lorraine Hansberry: The Collected Last Plays* (1983). Each play demonstrated a deep commitment to the Black struggle for human rights and equality. In addition to her plays, Hansberry also made numerous contributions to human rights and feminist organizations, and authored extensive commentary on issues ranging from black liberation to feminism. This section is dedicated to the legacy of Lorraine Hansberry as a social activist.

To see more on *A Raisin in the Sun*, [click here](#).



Contents

- [1 Hansberry and Early Activism](#)
- [2 Hansberry and Perspectives on Race and Social Justice](#)
- [3 Hansberry and Feminism](#)
- [4 In Her Own Words](#)
- [5 James Baldwin on Lorraine Hansberry](#)
- [6 Organizations and Publications](#)
- [7 Court Cases](#)

Hansberry and Early Activism

Lorraine Hansberry's parents were intellectuals and activists. Her parents were active members of the Republican Party. In 1940, Hansberry's father won an anti-segregation case before the Illinois Supreme Court, upon which the events in *A Raisin in the Sun* were loosely based. When Lorraine was eight, her parents bought a house in a white neighborhood, where they were welcomed one night by a racist mob. Their experience of discrimination there led to a civil rights case, *Hansberry v. Lee*. Hansberry's parents also sent her to public schools rather than private ones as a protest against segregation laws. The work of her parents provided an early education in issues of race, and social justice.

Hansberry's interest in global issues, especially those concerning Africa, also began at an early age. In an unfinished, partly autobiographical novel Hansberry wrote: "In her emotions she was sprung from the Southern Zulu and the Central Pygmy, the Eastern Watusi and the treacherous slave-trading Western Ashanti themselves. She was Kikuyu

and Masai, ancient cousins of hers had made the exquisite forged sculpture at Benin, while surely even more ancient relatives sat upon the throne at Abu Simbel watching over the Nile." Events and experiences such as these set the tone for a life centered on activism, political thought, and social justice.

Hansberry and Perspectives on Race and Social Justice



W.E.B. DuBois

Lorraine Hansberry's life was dedicated to ameliorating social justice. While attending the University of Wisconsin, Lorraine joined the Young Progressives of America and the Labor Youth League. These were organizations that fought for world peace and racial equality. Hansberry also studied African Culture and History with W.E.B. DuBois at the Jefferson School for Social Sciences in New York. While taking a class at the Jefferson School, she was introduced to Paul Robeson. For her course, instructed by DuBois, Hansberry wrote a paper entitled "The Belgian Congo: A Preliminary Report on Its Land, Its History, and Its People," demonstrating her expanding interest in global issues of justice and equality.

She soon joined Paul Robeson's *Freedom* newspaper, where she received her initial political and professional apprenticeship (or what came to be known as her college education). She began as a subscription clerk, receptionist, typist, and editorial assistant, and was quickly promoted to associate editor. Regularly in contact with Robeson and DuBois, Hansberry used the opportunity to expand her

understanding of race, politics, and culture. She authored several articles for *Freedom*. Within its pages she celebrated victories of newly independent nations against their former European colonizers, explored the origins of American political economy, delineated the expression of the American political economy in its maintenance of racially-based ghettos, dealt with cultural structures and institutions that preserved racism, and defended colleagues under ideological attack from the FBI and anti-communist Senator Joe McCarthy.

Hansberry and Feminism

While most of Hansberry's attention centered on black liberation and world peace, she also addressed issues of feminism and lesbian liberation. Following her attendance at the International Peace Congress in Uruguay, Hansberry's awareness of issues of feminism was heightened by her discussions with other feminists. She soon returned to the U.S. and lent her support to the emerging American lesbian movement. Hansberry joined the Daughters of Bilitis, a pioneering lesbian organization, in 1957. She endorsed the organization's newsletter, *The Ladder*, for its efforts in promoting the need for women to have their own publications. Lorraine also contributed several letters to *The Ladder*.

In her personal letters, Hansberry drew connections between sexism, antifeminism, and homophobia. This was an analysis widely believed to be ahead of its time. She called for an analysis of ethical questions implicit in the social and moral inequalities produced by patriarchal culture. In *The Ladder*, she also mused about butch-femme culture, spoke about the gap between lesbians and gay men, and condemned homosexual persecution by pointing its origins to social ignorance and a philosophy rooted in philosophically anti-feminist dogma. Though her writing with *The Ladder*, Hansberry displayed a strong feminist awareness that would grow significantly in later years.

In Her Own Words

On Integration

Hansberry believed that integration was the removal of all barriers to the construction of solidarity among the children of the American working class. A push for integration was not a sign of African Americans wishing to be absorbed

into the house but rather that negro people would like to see the house rebuilt. The success of integration and the conquering of racism would enable the tackling of other problems such as poverty, militarism, inequality, and education (Hansberry, *The Village Voice*, July 1964).

On *Brown v. Board* and Cultural Preservation of Racism

From the time he is born, the negro child is surrounded by a society organized to convince him that he belongs to a people whose past is so worthless and shameful that it amounts to no past at all awaiting our youth in every area of American life is a barrage of propaganda which distorts and disparages their identity in a land where the Grace Kelly-Marilyn Monroe monotype ideal is imposed on the national culture, racist logic insists that anything directly opposite no matter how lovely is naturally ugly. (Hansberry, *Freedom*, March 1955).



Nettie and Nickie Hunt on the steps of the Supreme Court after the *Brown* decision.

On Racial Prejudice

Popular idiom deals best with race prejudice: who needs it? It too is a killer. Negroes, for instance, simply do not live as long as white people in America. I think we must begin to remember facts like that and chatter less about the sensibilities of our bigots. We have been pathetically overgenerous with their malignant whimsy for three centuries. I hope in the next ten years we will begin to recognize the void that racism has left in the character of white Americans. The sorry absence of courage on the race question presents terrifying implications for our culture. I also hope that a new spirit will charge the ranks of negro leadership. The current plantation-paced dance of gratitude for crumbs shames the heart. (Lorraine Hansberry, 1960)

On Feminism

"I think it is about time that equipped women began to take on some of the ethical questions that a male-dominated culture has produced and dissect and analyze them quite to pieces in a serious fashion. It is time that 'half the human race' had something to say about the nature of its existence. Otherwise -- without revised basic thinking -- the woman intellectual is likely to find herself trying to draw conclusions -- moral conclusions -- based on acceptance of a social moral superstructure that has never admitted to the equality of women and is therefore immoral itself." (Hansberry, *The Ladder*, 1957)

James Baldwin on Lorraine Hansberry

"It is possible, that her plays attempt to say too much; but it is also exceedingly probable that they make so loud and uncomfortable a sound because of the surrounding silence; not many plays, presently, risk being accused of attempting to say too much!... they have the unmistakable power of turning the viewer's judgment in on himself. Is it true or not true? The play rudely demands; and, unforgivably, leaves us squirming before this question. One cannot quite answer this question negatively, one risks being caught in a lie. But an affirmative answer imposes a new level of responsibility, both of one's conduct and for the fortunes of the American state..."

- James Baldwin, *The Price of a Ticket*

In James Baldwin's book, *The Price of a Ticket*, Baldwin discusses the lasting impact Lorraine Hansberry had on the



James Baldwin

American theater. To Baldwin, Hansberry was not only an artist who successfully transcended the typical pathways of American theater, but a witness for blacks struggling to break down the barriers and cultural institutions of racism and oppression. Her play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, offered, for the first time in American drama, a candid and forthright display of African-American life. Deeply devoted to the human race, but not nearly as romantic about it, Hansberry used her plays to raise important questions on race, politics, and culture. Baldwin believed Hansberry had a greater purpose in her art--to actualize discourse and foster action. Hansberry believed in her soul that art contained the energy necessary to produce action--action she believed was essential to creating social change. Baldwin saw Lorraine Hansberry as a true visionary, concerned with the human race, who used the theater as a stage for social activism.

Organizations and Publications

Young Progressives of America

Labor Youth League

International Peace Congress

Daughters of Bilitis

Freedom newspaper

The Ladder newsletter

[Click here for more info on relevant organizations and publications listed above.](#)

Also see: Audre Lorde Project, African Ancestral Lesbians United For Social Change

Court Cases

Summaries

Hansberry v. Lee

Brown v. Board of Education

Complete Transcripts

HANSBERRY v. LEE, 311 U.S. 32 (1940)

BROWN v. BOARD OF EDUCATION, 344 U.S. 141 (1952)

BROWN v. BOARD OF EDUCATION, 347 U.S. 483 (1954)

BROWN v. BOARD OF EDUCATION, 349 U.S. 294 (1955)

[Back](#) | [Social Justice Home](#)

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