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## Gifted and Black

### *The Drama of Lorraine Hansberry*

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**ABSTRACT** With a focus especially on *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*, this article argues that Hansberry's work is, in a sense, underappreciated. Hansberry's fame relies chiefly on *A Raisin in the Sun*, and critics have often failed to appreciate *Brustein* because of its general allusion to life in the Village and comparative lack of adherence to Black topics. The article however argues that this is an indicator of Hansberry's overall strength as an author, rather than a weakness. The article assesses the work's importance with allusions to Anne Cheney and comparisons to the writing of August Wilson. It additionally explores her upbringing in the Black bourgeoisie.

**KEYWORDS:** Hansberry, race, drama

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Those who have worked on Lorraine Hansberry and the body of writing that she left have often been puzzled by the effect that she has on scholars; much of what has been written about her exhibits a degree of discomfort with her origins in the Black bourgeoisie.<sup>1</sup> This might not be thought to be a major issue, were it not for the fact that the historical origins of the bourgeoisie in the latter part of the nineteenth century have a great deal to do with the trajectory of the African Diasporic population in the Americas overall. Because of the ties of the Black middle class to former slaveholding families, and because of the prominent effects of colorism, there is little that can be said about the middle class (especially around the time of Hansberry's birth) that seems progressive or that seems to speak to larger social issues.

Is it possible to resuscitate the reputation of the author of *A Raisin in the Sun* and *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* so that we can see her in larger terms? We need to ask ourselves questions about what the overall scope of her life and work meant, and how it can inform us today. If, as Cornel West and others have suggested, part of today's struggle involves uniting the Black bourgeoisie, how can the work that Hansberry did decades ago be of use?<sup>2</sup>

Hansberry's background and the trials through which she passed in order to write work that was deemed to be progressive in its time are part and parcel of the story of the Black movement in the 1960s. *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* is perhaps even more important in her body of work than *A Raisin in the Sun*.

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1. See, for example, the work of Anne Cheney. Hers was one of the first biographies of Hansberry—Anne Cheney, *Lorraine Hansberry*, New York: Twayne, 1984.

2. Cornel West, *Keeping Faith*, New York: Routledge, 1994.

Hansberry's second play—opening in 1964, about five years after *Raisin*—is often derided as an attempt to make a “statement” about contemporary society without the grace and fluidity that would be necessary for a successful drama. But part of what makes *Brustein* a remarkable effort is the fact, apparently unnoticed by many, that Hansberry is one of the few major Black authors of the twentieth century to try to write about the general American experience (that is, at the time, white experience) rather than continuing to focus on her own background. This, alone, makes the work a noteworthy effort.

Anne Cheney feels that the play was insufficiently appreciated in its time partly due to being somewhat ahead of its era and partly due to the obvious complicating factor that many theatergoers, white and Black alike, would probably have thought that Hansberry would have continued to address primarily Black issues (she did, to some extent, in a trio of later plays, only one of which ever received a major production). As Cheney wrote, “[L]ittle more than a decade after Hansberry’s ‘failure,’ Broadway raved over an infinitely more ‘talky’ play of social ideas.”<sup>3</sup> Why does *Brustein* continue to have an effect on those who read it? Like parts of *Raisin*, the play brings forth a number of matters in ways that have emotional resonance. This, in fact, might be deemed to be a special strength of Hansberry’s.

The carefully detailed stage settings of the play depict quite accurately the Village atmosphere of the early- to mid-sixties and this atmosphere—perhaps in a somewhat altered form—will of course take over the country at a later point. We see the lead characters, Sidney and Iris Brustein, as disaffected intellectuals who have difficulty believing in causes or even making everyday commitments. Into their life comes a candidate for local office, Wally O’Hara, and the one Black character reveals himself as having a relationship with Iris’s sister. All of this sets the tone for a remarkable play.<sup>4</sup>

*Brustein* has as its focus the general notion of oppression, but it is either a strength or weakness of the work, depending on one’s point of view, that much of the oppression that Hansberry depicts has to do with populations unrelated to the Black experience. One of the lead characters, David, is gay—and this is well before the beginning of what will later be considered the gay liberation movement. As indicated, the one Black character has a minor role, and much of the rest of the oppression Hansberry alludes to is more or less a sort of sexism. One of the questions that the play raises is how much Hansberry’s outsider status in the Black community affected what she wrote—and we can guess that the answer is that it made a great difference. A poignant part of the plot of *Brustein*, somewhat overlooked in much of the commentary, is the extent to which Sid and Iris have a relationship that is based on a fantasy notion of Iris as a mountain girl—a young Appalachian who is able to lead Sid out of his city existence and into, as he puts it, a “primeval” state.<sup>5</sup> But this sort of recurring reverie would not be as important

3. Cheney, *Hansberry*, 93.

4. In the edition with an introductory note by Robert Nemiroff, he remarks on having the French actress Simone Signoret contact him about the drama, claiming that she had “tears in her eyes” while attempting to do a translation because of the emotional force of the work. Lorraine Hansberry, *The Sign in Sidney Brustein’s Window*, New York: Random House, 1965, pp. 5-6.

5. Much of the dialogue that reveals the strength of this plot device is in Act II, scene ii; the use of the word *primeval* occurs on p. 64 of the text.

to these denizens of New York were it not for the fact—as the play makes clear—that even as inhabitants of the Lower East Side, they feel cut off and different from others. It is here that Hansberry excels at developing the notion of the artist as someone not a part of what surrounds him or her. In a scene where Sid pretends to be on a mountain, he claims:

SIDNEY: Coming here makes me believe that the planet is mine again. In the primeval sense. Man and earth and earth and man and all that.<sup>6</sup>

These lines, quintessentially of the spirit of what will become American bohemia in the 1960s, reveal Hansberry at her best. This daughter of the Black bourgeoisie who was an outcast in her own Chicago neighborhood as a child is adept at finding the voice of the outcast in each cultural milieu.<sup>7</sup> Hansberry also recognizes that, in a sense, the artist or intellectual must stand outside a given group, or he or she will not be able to do the conceptual work necessary to produce. James Baldwin, a friend of Hansberry's during this period, was another who realized that the commonality of artists standing out, combined with other forms of group exclusion, was something that drove the artist, whether the individual recognized the mechanism at work or not.

Sid and Iris Brustein are such artistic outsiders, and so are David and Alton, the other two major characters introduced at the beginning of the play. David is gay, and Alton is a young light-skinned Black man. Each has a burden to carry, and much of the dialogue at the opening of the play has to do with the carrying of those burdens. The difference between *Raisin* and *Brustein*, then, has a great deal to do with the shifting of the notion of not being part of a group from the obvious construct of race to other constructs, perhaps more salient in an artistic community, but not as well known to the general public at that time.

*The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* is at its best when Hansberry contrasts the “uptown” attitudes of Mavis and some of her friends (including former acquaintances of Iris's) to the strongly held beliefs of Sidney and those on the Lower East Side. Sidney attempts to explain the better-off with sarcasm and contempt; a dilemma for the play is that Iris is at a stage in her life that demands that she at least minimally have something to do with those in a position to get her an acting job. In a compelling scene where Iris tries to explain to Sidney that she has just gotten a job in a television commercial, the following exchange takes place:

IRIS: (Defensively.) It isn't exactly a show—but it is acting. Sort of. (He stares at her.) It's a TV commercial ...

SIDNEY: (Laughing.) Oh, Iris, Iris.

IRIS: (Turning and flinging bag down on couch. Hotly.) Oh, aren't we

6. Ibid.

7. Cheney, *passim*.

better than everybody! Aren't  
we above it! Well, I have news:  
if he gets me that job, I am going  
to take it.<sup>8</sup>

Here Hansberry deftly works with the natural material of the bohemian community, who of course would disdain a television commercial—but who, like Iris, would probably take one as a stint if one were offered. With the outsider's eye, Hansberry is able to take material from a community that is not, on the whole, a community of color and work it to her purposes.

## II

There is no question that Hansberry's work stands out, but for purposes of comparison we might want to think of the plays of August Wilson. Wilson addresses some of the same issues; Hansberry, however, might be thought to be the more progressive of the two playwrights. One take on the overview to be developed between the work of Hansberry and that of Wilson revolves around a contrast between *Fences*, one of Wilson's most popular works, and Hansberry's own productions.<sup>9</sup>

*Fences* is popular because it shows a certain sort of defensiveness that developed in the Black population due to the degradations of Jim Crow—and Wilson is gifted at giving us characters, such as Troy, that exemplify the hurt and anger that Jim Crow caused. But again, Troy is believable as a character because (although we might wish that it were not the case), he is not given to intellectualizing. Even his children, Cory and Lyons, cannot understand why Troy simply cannot remove himself from the excessive ruminations in which he indulges over his problems. Here is a major break between the type of work produced by Hansberry, on the whole, and that produced by Wilson—Wilson's work has turned out to be more frequently produced (and more rewarded), even though, his plots and characters simply do not address issues as thoroughly as Hansberry's. In other words, we might be tempted to say that Hansberry is too much of a conceptualizer and intellectualizer in her work, and this is certainly demonstrated in *Brustein*.

Should a playwright who is a person of color stick to the well-known material of his or her background, or should the individual be unafraid to break new ground? This time-honored and hallowed theme takes on new resonance when we examine the work of Black playwrights, since it is clear that the Black population has been under a special level of oppression throughout its history in the New World. One might want to claim that Black authors should write only on Black subjects—after all, it might be argued, if the African-ancestored author does not work with these themes, who will? Even Wilson shows hints of understanding that the author can move in other directions, since his character Lyons in *Fences* is a musician and identifies with the Beat culture.

8. Hansberry, *Signs*, 73–4.

9. Wilson, *Fences*, New York: Vintage, 199.

But Hansberry is cut from a different bolt of cloth, and this shows both in the themes that she chooses and in her handling and development of these themes. *Brustein* is not simply about persons in the Village—it is also about a sense of estrangement from American life in general, and it is fair to say that Hansberry is more concerned about this sense of alienation than she is about Blackness, at least in this play. (This is also the case with at least one of her other, posthumously-recognized works.) It is also related, no doubt, to the circumstances surrounding her marriage and her own personal life. But it says a great deal about this young woman from Chicago's better-off group that she seems, on the whole, to be more invested in developing the notion of the artist or intellectual as an outsider against society than in the development of any other notion. It may very well be the case—as many would no doubt argue—that her comparative degree of privilege made it easy to transfer her status into a more general theme.

As indicated, although Wilson has room in his plays for those who might be deemed to be outsiders in every sense of the word, a crucial difference between Wilson and Hansberry is that, in Wilson's work, this theme is not fully developed. Troy's grievances, in general, revolve around race—we cannot see Troy as a character similar to any of the characters in *Brustein*, and indeed he seems to be driven largely by self-serving and small interests. Because of this, it is in some sense difficult to fully identify with Troy and his various foci—it is clear that Wilson, in general, intends that we fail to do so because he wants to present a very complex situation in which it is not easy to identify with any characters. On the other hand, what Hansberry accomplishes in *Brustein* is to provide us with characters, including Alton, the one Black, whose motivations in general transcend personal interest and are, by and large, those of the intellectual and the artist.

Although all of these comparisons might seem to be merely straightforward, we are discussing the work of a Black author, and in that sense the comparison brings forward lines of thought that might be believed to be standardly outside the realm of African diaspora work. A line of argument could be constructed to the effect that, because of the history of the African diaspora in the New World, the role of the “outsider” artist or freethinker has historically been denied to many, and due to that denial, it is somewhat unrealistic to engage in the construction of such characters. The problem with this point of view is that it elides the plain fact that there are artists and those who stand apart in every society, and that such persons in traditional indigenous African societies often had a special role. Thus the strength of the work that Hansberry creates in *Brustein* is that it allows us to see a community of intellectuals, at least one of whom is Black, in their own right.

The sense of alienation that Hansberry so ably articulates is, of course, a staple of twentieth century literature. From Camus to Sylvia Plath, and from Richard Wright to James Baldwin, many authors from a variety of backgrounds have tried to point out the plight of the artist and to pinpoint the variety of challenges that the artist faces. The common theme here, as said before, is that the intellectual orientation exists across all cultures, and can be found in all walks of life. But much of the literature of the African diaspora has had, perforce, to focus on other issues—the struggle has been for daily bread and a sense of having a shared outlook. Because so much of this already has the cast to it that the sufferer is, in a sense, not part of American society (or any society), to exaggerate or put a stronger

spin on the sense of alienation might be thought to be unnecessary. This probably has a great deal to do with why it is that the approach that Hansberry took was not particularly popular with critics at the time—they may simply not have believed that a Black woman author would go at urban material in the way that she did. Hansberry is, then, not only courageous, but innovative in constructing a play about the Village with an assortment of characters, Black and white and so on at a time when these issues were seldom addressed in American literature.

August Wilson gives us inner city characters who participate in the daily drama of inner city life; Lorraine Hansberry gives us characters from the urban scene who have more than one issue with which to deal, and she ably demonstrates that they can do so. Both playwrights have much to offer, but it is clear that, of the two of them, Hansberry is the more innovative and the more daring playwright.

### III

When we think of the various links that could be made to Black literature on the basis of the work that Hansberry does in *Brustein*, the ties are of the utmost importance. Although there have not been as many works in the Black canon that have to do with the topic at hand as an individual might wish, there are indeed such works. As mentioned earlier, Richard Wright's *The Outsider* is one such work. This work has turned out to be of some historical importance because Simone de Beauvoir, Sartre, and other French thinkers were directly implicated in Wright's decision to author the work. As Wright stayed in Paris, his own overview of the Black experience began to change, and of course he became a great deal more familiar with the tradition that the artist or intellectual stands outside society in any case, and that she or he may have a special role to fulfill.

The theme of *The Outsider* is the theme of the Black intellectual as outcast, including from the Black community. As his novel makes clear, the Black intellectual, according to Wright, is not at home in the black community because he is an intellectual, and not at home in the intellectual community because he is Black. Wright has a savage way of indicating that this status of outsider-ness appears to be perpetual, and that there is little that can be done about it. In that sense, a great deal of what Wright wrote is very similar to the themes that Hansberry undertakes in *Brustein*—the difference being, of course, that *Brustein* has only one Black character.

It might be instructive to examine some other literature, authored in general by white writers, that focuses on the notion of the artist as outsider, or some concomitant notion. Why, one might wonder, is it so important to Hansberry to portray Sidney as someone who feels outside American society, and why does Hansberry consistently allude to these notions in general, especially with the play's other characters? We might think of the work of Sylvia Plath (although she is not of the same ethnicity, she and Hansberry seem to have shared some of the same personal problems). Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* contains more philosophical overtones than a reader might initially expect—and at least some of those themes revolve around outsider-ness. Although not a denizen of any colony of artists, Plath's protagonist Esther feels so far apart from the circle of her fellow editorial internees

in their New York setting, making this theme, in fact, the driving construct of the book. Just as Sidney makes acidulous comments about everyone from his neighbors to Iris's sisters, Esther cannot simply interact with the other interns—she must make observations that carefully separate her from them. In her illness, Esther refers to the individuals around her as “marionettes”—but then again, that is probably the way that she has been seeing them all along.<sup>10</sup>

Camus also has a penchant for depicting characters who stand apart (Camus is, in fact, mentioned in the play). Both Dr. Rieux in *The Plague* and Meursault in *The Stranger* cannot interact with others without feelings of unreality and unrelatedness coming in—it is as if the mere fact of personhood were too much to bear in an impersonal and unexplained world. Although the comparison might not seem to work, we must remember that Camus also wrote plays.

A sense of unreality seems to permeate parts of *Brustein*, and there is little question that Hansberry intended this to also be a statement about the artistic life. Toward the end of the play, in a sequence that precedes Gloria's death, the characters engage in a roundabout in which they comment on the futility of human endeavor and the fragility of life. But again, this is all within a tradition that, as has been argued here, shows up not only in the work of Richard Wright (and to some extent Ralph Ellison), but even, to add one more existentialist author, Sartre. The parts of *Nausea* that most convincingly describe the states of dissociation and alienation that plague Roquentin are, in a sense, quintessentially about the experience of the intellectual and the intellectual's attempts to come to grips with that experience. The individual who stands outside the common range of experience has something specific to say—and in *Brustein*, Hansberry has conveyed this in a remarkable way, while still weaving into the plot one Black character who has his own personal take on the situation.

That Hansberry chooses, in this one particular drama, to foreground the experience of the artist over the her previous subject matter, the general experience of Black Americans, tells us a great deal about Hansberry as a person. Her story is one of personal hardship, but the comparatively well-off life that she lived in Chicago as a member of the Black bourgeoisie enabled her to distance herself, on occasion, from the lot of most Black Americans. That she chose to do this in the play that was the follow-up to her enormous success in *Raisin* tells us a great deal about how much she identified with the life of the artist or intellectual, and how that informed her writing.

Why be concerned about the themes of *Brustein*, or how they tie into other literature? This issue would not be so important were it not for the fact that Hansberry has achieved a reputation for having been one of the few Black writers who chose to write about non-Black issues. But, as we have seen, there is a reason for this—and that reason is strongly tied to the very identities that Hansberry had as a person. Her desire to see herself as someone who was forging a new artistic path had a lot to do with what she wrote, and ultimately with its reception.

Throughout the history of literary endeavors, the role of the artist as someone who explores and sees things differently has been advanced and commented upon. Plato and

10. See “Plath and the Philosophical Novel,” in *Philosophy and Literature*, 2014.

the other ancients were all aware of the special role of the artist; that is why, in fact, Plato denounced the arts. But if the artist might be thought to have a special duty to a group (and here we think of the Black artist), new moves must be made to stake out the artist's territory. It is clear that Hansberry will have none of the argument that she must write only on Black issues, and it is also clear that this caused a great deal of problems for her, especially toward the end of her life. *Brustein* might have received a different reception if it had been more solidly rooted in the Black experience, had more Black characters, and so forth. As it is, the play does a wonderful job of portraying life on Manhattan's lower East Side, and if viewers (or readers) have difficulty with what goes on in the play, it probably has more to do with a lack of familiarity with the various counterculture strands than it does with Hansberry's particular take on what is going on. It is not at all clear, in fact, that more Black characters or a greater allusion to the Black experience would have helped.

#### IV

I have been arguing that the work of Lorraine Hansberry is somewhat misunderstood if we focus mainly on *A Raisin in the Sun* and ignore her more controversial work, *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*. Part of my argument has been that Hansberry stands in a long tradition of artists and writers who have demarcated themselves as outsiders, but that what makes Hansberry's work particularly interesting is that she is one of the few Black authors (and especially one of the few Black women authors) to be a part of this tradition. Writing in this vein requires, at least to some extent, that the author place herself a bit outside of her own ethnicity because it is clear that what drives this sort of composition is the notion of the individual as outside of most of society.

I have also compared Hansberry's work to that of another well-known Black playwright, August Wilson. There is, indeed, a bit of the same position in some of Wilson's work, but it does not take up as large a space as in *Brustein*. The character of Lyons in *Fences* makes some of the same statements, and it is clear that Wilson wants us to know that this individual would never be able to drive a garbage truck. But what has made *Brustein* controversial, at least in some circles, is the fact that there is only one minor Black character and that this drama is essentially a play about young, disaffected white people on New York's Lower East side. Some have claimed that Hansberry should not have written the work; others simply find it flawed.

As Black writers continue to move forward and obtain their place in the pantheon—writers as diverse as Toni Morrison and Toni Cade Bambara, Gayl Jones and Brent Staples—it is important to acknowledge the place of Hansberry and the variety of work that she completed in her brief life. *Raisin* and *Brustein* are not her only plays; *Drinking Gourd*, *What Use are Flowers?* and *Les Blancs* were also completed during her lifetime, and with some work from Nemiroff, *Les Blancs* was later performed.<sup>11</sup> All of the plays have one feature in common: with the possible exception of *Raisin*, the plays go at the Black experience with a bit of a difference. Just as *Brustein* is largely on another topic, with a Black

11. It was performed in New York in 1969.

character added, each of the other works is sufficiently different from *Raisin* to make the entire body remarkable.

The topic of whether the artist of color has a moral obligation to serve only and always as a voice for the persons of color population is one that will continue to be debated ad infinitum. In a sense, one is tempted to say that the answer is yes—the artist does have such an obligation, and should make every attempt to follow through with it. But that is a decision for the individual artist to make, and it is clear that Hansberry made another sort of decision. Identifying as an artist and as one on the edge of social groups, rather than primarily as a member of one group, her remarkable body of work is still somewhat underappreciated, probably because of the presence of *Brustein* and the controversy that it evoked. Those who feel that the authoring of a play such as *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* was a mistake are not taking into consideration the circumstances of Hansberry's life and the way in which her entry into New York informed her work. We must today honor the author of both *A Raisin in the Sun* and *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*. ■

