**A Raisin in the Sun Reading Guide**

**Title**: A Raisin in the Sun

**Author**: Lorraine Hansberry

**Setting**: a small, cramped apartment in the South Side of Chicago during the 1950s

**Plot Summary**: The play centers around the Younger family whose life is set to potentially change when they receive a $10,000 insurance payment after the death of Lena's husband. Each family member has different ideas for how to use the money. Walter Lee wants to invest the money to open a liquor store with his friends. Beneatha wants to use part of the money to pay for her medical school tuition. Lena wants to buy a house for the family to get them out of the run-down apartment. Tensions and conflicts arise as the different family members argue over their competing dreams and how to spend the insurance money.

**Major Characters:**

* Lena Younger (Mama) - The matriarch of the Younger family. She wants to use the insurance money to buy a house for the family.
* Walter Lee Younger - Lena's son, he dreams of using the money to invest in a liquor store business to achieve financial independence.
* Ruth Younger - Walter's wife, she is pragmatic and wants to provide a better life for her family.
* Beneatha Younger - Lena's daughter, an intellectual who wants to use the money for her medical school tuition. She struggles with her African identity.
* Travis Younger - Walter and Ruth's young son.
* Joseph Asagai - A Nigerian man who courts Beneatha and represents her African heritage.
* George Murchison - Beneatha's wealthy and assimilated African American boyfriend who wants her to ignore her African roots.
* Karl Lindner - A White representative from the neighborhood where the Youngers plan to move, he tries to buy them out to maintain segregation.

**Themes:**

* **The American Dream** - The play examines the difficulties and limitations that African Americans faced in pursuing economic mobility, dignity, and the ideals of the American Dream due to racial discrimination and lack of opportunities.
* **Racial Identity** - Characters like Beneatha struggle to understand and embrace their African heritage in the face of assimilation pressures and racism. The play explores what it means to be a Black person in White America.
* **Family Bonds and Conflicts** - The tensions and differing dreams within the Younger family underscore the challenges of balancing individual desires with family obligations and responsibilities.
* **Gender Roles** - Ruth and Beneatha's storylines touch on the limited roles available to women, especially women of color, during the time period.
* **Generational Divides** - There are contrasting viewpoints between the older and younger generations on the best way to survive and get ahead in an oppressive society.
* **Social Inequality** - The play shines a light on the substandard housing, lack of economic opportunities, and injustices faced by African Americans due to poverty and systemic racism.

**Review Questions**: Answering the following questions will increase your comprehension of the novel. Respond to these questions by writing the answers in your notebook. *Some of the questions require you to express an opinion or describe your reaction to events in the novel. In these instances, there is no right or wrong answer, and your responses will vary.* The answers to factual questions are included in this reading guide.

**Act I– Scene I**

1. Describe the setting of the Younger family's apartment based on the stage directions. What details suggest the family's economic struggles? Cite specific evidence from the text.
2. Walter says to Ruth: "A man needs for a woman to back him up..." What does this quote reveal about Walter's views on gender roles and his expectations for his wife? How does Ruth respond?
3. Beneatha expresses her desire to become a doctor, which her family questions. What does this show about Beneatha's values and aspirations? How do her ambitions differ from the other characters?
4. Make a personal connection: Mama slaps Beneatha for denying God's existence. Is physical discipline an acceptable form of parenting in your view? Why or why not? Discuss how family conflicts over core beliefs could be resolved in a healthier way.

**Act I - Scene II**

1. Describe the conflict between Walter and Mama over the use of the insurance money. What does each character want to do with the $10,000? Use evidence from their dialogue to support your answer.
2. Analyze how ruth is feeling about her pregnancy. What does this reveal about her circumstances and mindset? How do Walter and Mama react when they learn of her plans?
3. Beneatha receives traditional Nigerian clothing and records from her friend Asagai. What does this gift symbolize in terms of Beneatha's journey to discover her identity? Cite details from the text.
4. Mama says to Walter: "When a man goes outside his home to look for peace." What does this quote suggest about the tensions within the Younger household? Discuss the meaning behind her words.

**Act II – Scene I**

1. Describe Beneatha's transformation when she puts on the Nigerian dress and headdress. What does this costume symbolize for her character? Use details from the stage directions.
2. Analyze the confrontation between Walter and George Murchison. What does their conflict reveal about their contrasting values, ambitions, and perspectives on race/class? Cite specific quotes that highlight the tension between them.
3. Walter accuses Mama of "butchering" his dream by putting the insurance money down on a house instead of letting him invest in the liquor store business. What does this quote reveal about the different dreams and priorities between Walter and Mama?
4. Make a personal connection: Mama buys a house for the family in the White neighborhood of Clybourne Park, hoping to provide better opportunities. Do you think this was the right decision? Why or why not? Discuss the potential risks and benefits from moving to a different racial environment.

**Act II – Scene II**

1. Beneatha rejects George Murchison, calling him a "fool" and saying she could never be serious about him. What does this reveal about Beneatha's values and priorities? Use evidence from their dialogue to support your answer.
2. Analyze the confrontation between Mama and Mrs. Johnson. What does their argument over the Younger family moving to Clybourne Park reveal about their contrasting perspectives on race relations and progress?
3. Walter has been missing work for three days, instead driving aimlessly and spending time at a jazz club called the Green Hat. What does this behavior suggest about Walter's state of mind and dissatisfaction with his life circumstances?
4. Mama decides to entrust the remaining $6,500 of the insurance money to Walter, telling him "I'm putting it in your hands." What does this pivotal moment reveal about Mama's hopes for Walter? Analyze the significance of her decision.

**Act II – Scene III**

1. Analyze the confrontation between Walter and Mr. Lindner from the Clybourne Park Improvement Association. What does their dialogue reveal about their contrasting perspectives on race, community, and the American Dream?
2. Mama decides to put the remaining $6,500 from the insurance money in Walter's hands, telling him "I'm putting it in your hands. I'm telling you to be the head of this family from now on." What does this pivotal moment symbolize in terms of Mama's hopes for Walter?
3. The family celebrates with gifts for Mama, including gardening tools and an oversized gardening hat from Travis. What is the significance of these gifts? How do they connect to Mama's values and dreams?
4. Walter's business partner Bobo reveals that Willy Harris took off with all of Walter's invested money meant for the liquor store. Describe Walter's emotional reaction to this devastating news. What does it suggest about the importance he placed on this business venture?

**Act III**

1. At the beginning, Asagai invites Beneatha to come live with him in Africa after getting married. How does Beneatha react to this proposal? What does her response reveal about her mindset and priorities at this point?
2. Walter reveals he has called Mr. Lindner from the Clybourne Park Improvement Association to take their offer of money to not move into the White neighborhood. Analyze the long speech Walter gives to Lindner about his family's pride and decision to keep the house. What makes this a powerful moment?
3. Mama initially seems resigned to not moving after Walter's plan failed, saying "Sometimes you just got to know when to give up some things." However, she changes her stance after Walter's defiant speech. What prompts this shift in Mama's perspective?
4. Beneatha calls Walter a "toothless rat" after he considers taking the buyout offer. Yet Mama passionately defends him, saying "There is always something left to love." What does this reveal about Mama's unconditional love for her son? Do you agree with her stance?
5. Make a personal connection: In the final moments, the Younger family is joyfully preparing to move to their new house, putting the recent conflicts behind them. Do you think their optimism and dreams for the future are well-founded or naive? Discuss your perspective.

**Answers to Chapter Review Questions:**

**Act I– Scene I**

1. The stage directions describe the Younger family's apartment as cramped, worn down, and making do with tired, old furnishings that have seen better days. Details like the couch fighting to show its pattern under "acres of crocheted doilies," moving furniture to disguise worn spots in the carpet, and the overall sense of "weariness" in the room suggest the family is struggling economically. The line "All pretenses but living itself have long since vanished from the very atmosphere of this room" drives home their lack of material comfort.
2. This quote reveals Walter's traditional view of gender roles where the man is meant to be the breadwinner and provider, while the woman's role is to support her husband's ambitions and dreams. He expresses frustration that Ruth doesn't fully "back him up" on his business plans. Ruth responds wearily, indicating she is tired of always having this same argument with Walter about money.
3. Beneatha's desire to become a doctor shows her independent spirit and ambition to define her own future outside of traditional gender roles for women of her time. Her aspiration to have a professional career as a physician differs from the other characters who seem resigned to jobs with limited opportunities. It represents Beneatha's feminist values and refusal to conform to societal gender norms.
4. Personal response will vary, but here are some potential points:
   1. Physical discipline like slapping is not an advisable form of parenting as it can be traumatic, erode trust, and models violence as acceptable.
   2. However, some may view Mama's reaction as understandable given her deeply held religious/cultural beliefs that Beneatha directly challenged in an insulting way.
   3. A healthy approach could include open family discussions to understand each other's perspectives, agreeing to disagree on certain issues, family counseling or avoiding personal attacks.

**Act I - Scene II**

1. Walter wants to use the $10,000 insurance money as an investment to open a liquor store business with his friends Willy and Bobo. He sees it as his chance to finally achieve financial independence and provide better opportunities for his family. Mama, however, is firmly against investing in a liquor business and wants to use part of the money as a down payment on a house with a yard for the family. Their conflict is evident in exchanges like:

WALTER: "Mama, you ain't even looked at it."

MAMA: "I don't aim to have to speak on that again. And there ain't going to be no investing in no liquor stores."

1. Ruth's mindsetdecision to consider getting an abortion reveals she feels overwhelmed by their difficult circumstances and the prospect of another child. Her mindset is one of pragmatism over idealism, as suggested by her line "When the world gets ugly enough—a woman will do anything for her family." Walter is stunned and unable to react, while Mama chastises him for not taking a stronger stance against it as the father.
2. The traditional Nigerian clothing and records Asagai gifts Beneatha symbolize her journey to discover and connect with her African heritage and identity. Details like Asagai teaching her the proper way to drape the robes, the meaning of her nickname "Alaiyo," and Beneatha's self-conscious reaction to her natural hair texture all represent her negotiating between her American and African senses of self.
3. This quote suggests there are deep underlying tensions and lack of peace within the Younger household. Walter is so dissatisfied and restless that he feels compelled to go "outside his home to look for peace," indicating the home environment does not provide him solace or contentment. Mama's words reveal her concern about the family's strained dynamics.

**Act II – Scene I**

1. Beneatha's transformation when she puts on the Nigerian dress and headdress is quite dramatic. The stage directions describe her emerging "grandly" and "thoroughly robed" in the costume, with her hair completely hidden by the headdress. She parades for Ruth, fanning herself with an ornate fan, and turns off the blues music, replacing it with a lovely Nigerian melody. Her eyes are described as looking "far away—'back to the past.’” She begins dancing a folk dance, completely enraptured. This costume symbolizes Beneatha's embrace and exploration of her African heritage. She is rejecting "assimilationist junk" and instead connecting with her roots and cultural identity.
2. The confrontation between Walter and George Murchison highlights their contrasting values, ambitions, and perspectives on race and class. Walter is bitter about his socioeconomic status and feels misunderstood and undervalued. He criticizes George's privileged lifestyle, saying, "You're all wacked up with bitterness, man." George, on the other hand, looks down on Walter and dismisses his ambitions with boredom, replying, "Yeah—sometimes we'll have to do that, Walter." Walter's bitterness is evident when he says, "Here I am a giant—surrounded by ants! Ants who can't even understand what it is the giant is talking about." This conflict reveals Walter's frustration with his lack of success and respect, while George represents an assimilated, upper-class Black identity that Walter resents.
3. Walter's accusation that Mama "butchered up a dream of mine" by putting the insurance money down on a house instead of letting him invest in the liquor store business reveals the stark difference in their priorities and visions for the future. Walter dreams of financial success and independence through business, which he believes will elevate his status and provide for his family. Mama, on the other hand, prioritizes stability, security, and a better living environment for her family. This quote highlights the generational and ideological gap between Walter's desire for quick success and Mama's focus on long-term stability and family welfare.
4. Personal responses will vary but here are some potential points:
   1. Mama's decision to buy a house in the White neighborhood of Clybourne Park, hoping to provide better opportunities for her family, was courageous and well-intentioned. The potential benefits include access to better schools, safer streets, and a more spacious living environment. These potential benefits can lead to improved quality of life and future prospects. However, the risks are significant, including facing racial discrimination, hostility from neighbors, and the stress of being the only Black family in a predominantly White neighborhood. This decision reflects Mama's hope for progress and a better future, but it also requires the family to be resilient and prepared for the challenges that come with breaking racial barriers. While the risks are substantial, the potential rewards of better opportunities and a chance to uplift the family make Mama's decision understandable and admirable, even if it may be difficult.

**Act II – Scene II**

1. Beneatha's rejection of George Murchison reveals her values and priorities. She calls George a "fool" and says she could never be serious about him, indicating that she does not respect his shallow, materialistic mindset. Their dialogue highlights their contrasting perspectives - George wants Beneatha to drop her intellectual pursuits and just focus on her looks, saying "Guys aren't going to go for the atmosphere." However, Beneatha values education, independent thinking, and exploring her African heritage. She refuses to conform to George's idea of what a woman should be, prioritizing her own identity and dreams over societal expectations.
2. The argument between Mama and Mrs. Johnson reveals their contrasting perspectives on race relations and progress. Mrs. Johnson expresses fear and resignation about the Youngers moving to the White neighborhood of Clybourne Park. She seems to accept the status quo of segregation. In contrast, Mama is determined to provide better opportunities for her family, even if it means confronting racial hostility. She defiantly states, "We ain't exactly moving out there to get bombed." Mama believes in pushing forward and breaking down barriers, while Mrs. Johnson represents a more cautious, resigned attitude towards racial progress.
3. Walter's behavior suggests he is in a state of deep dissatisfaction and disillusionment with his life circumstances. He feels unfulfilled as a chauffeur, and his aimless wandering reflects his lack of purpose and direction. The Green Hat, with its music that "talks to him," provides a temporary escape from his frustrations. Walter's actions indicate he is grappling with a sense of stagnation and a desire for something more meaningful in his life.
4. Mama's decision to entrust the remaining $6,500 of the insurance money to Walter reveals her hopes for him to take responsibility and become the head of the family. Despite Walter's recent irresponsible behavior, Mama still trusts him, saying "I ain't never stop trusting you." This pivotal moment suggests Mama believes in Walter's potential and wants him to seize the opportunity to provide for the family and pursue his dreams. By giving him control over the money, she is placing her faith in him to make wise decisions and fulfill his role as the family's leader and provider.

**Act II – Scene III**

1. The confrontation between Walter and Mr. Lindner from the Clybourne Park Improvement Association reveals their contrasting perspectives on race, community, and the American Dream. Mr. Lindner represents the entrenched racism and segregationist attitudes of the White community. He tries to rationalize their desire to keep Clybourne Park an all-White neighborhood, claiming "people get along better when they share a common background." However, his talk of "caring about the other fellow" is revealed as hollow rhetoric when he offers to buy the Youngers out, essentially paying them to not move in.

In contrast, Walter sees through Lindner's thinly veiled prejudice. He defiantly asserts his family's right to pursue their version of the American Dream by living where they choose. Their dialogue exposes the deep racial divides and opposing visions of an integrated society versus enforced segregation.

1. Mama's decision to entrust the remaining $6,500 to Walter symbolizes her hopes for him to take responsibility and become the head of the family. Despite his recent irresponsible behavior, she still trusts him, saying "I ain't never stop trusting you." By giving him control over the money, Mama places her faith in Walter's potential to make wise decisions, pursue his dreams, and fulfill his role as the family's provider and leader. This pivotal moment suggests Mama believes Walter is ready to step up and secure a better future for the Youngers.
2. The gifts from Travis hold significant meaning for Mama's values and dreams. The tools represent Mama's desire for a garden and a connection to nature, something she has been denied in their cramped city apartment. The hat, while comically large, symbolizes Mama's aspirations for a better life and the opportunity to enjoy simple pleasures like tending to her own garden. These gifts connect to Mama's humble dreams of having a piece of land to call her own and the dignity of working the soil - dreams that were denied to previous generations but are now within reach.
3. Walter's emotional reaction is one of utter devastation. He becomes frantic, desperately clinging to any possibility that Willy is just delayed or will return the money. Walter screams "That money is made out of my father's flesh!", showing how deeply he had invested the emotional weight of his father's life and sacrifices into this business venture. His sobbing and pleading reveal the immense importance he placed on using that money to finally achieve financial independence and provide for his family.

**Act III**

1. When Asagai invites Beneatha to come live with him in Africa after getting married, she reacts with a mix of intrigue and hesitation. While she seems drawn to the idea of embracing her African heritage, she also expresses uncertainty, saying "I don't know what I feel about anything right this minute." Beneatha's response reveals her mindset is in flux - she is disillusioned about her dreams of becoming a doctor, yet still grappling with defining her identity and purpose. Asagai's proposal represents an enticing path of self-discovery, but one she is not fully ready to commit to in that moment.
2. Walter's long speech to Mr. Lindner about keeping the house is a powerful moment of defiance and reclamation of dignity. Despite Lindner's condescending offer to buy them out, Walter asserts his family's pride and right to live where they choose. He invokes the sacrifices of previous generations, stating "We don't want your money...my father earned it for us brick by brick." This speech marks Walter's evolution from someone willing to compromise his values for financial gain, to a man standing up for his family's honor and rejecting the racist status quo. His impassioned words make this a cathartic climax.
3. Mama's initial resignation about not moving stems from Walter's failed business venture and loss of the insurance money. She seems to accept giving up the Clybourne Park house, saying "Sometimes you just got to know when to give up some things." However, Walter's defiant speech to Lindner prompts a shift in Mama's perspective. Witnessing her son finally embrace his manhood and stand up for the family's dignity moves her. She recognizes this as Walter "coming into his manhood" and finds the strength to fight for their dream of a better life after all.
4. Mama's unconditional love for Walter is revealed when she passionately defends him after Beneatha calls him a "toothless rat." Despite his mistakes, Mama insists "There is always something left to love" and chastises Beneatha for judging too harshly. She urges understanding of the hardships Walter has faced, saying "Make sure you done taken into account what hills and valleys he come through." Mama's stance shows her deep wellspring of compassion and her belief in loving her children unconditionally, even when they falter. While Walter's actions were flawed, Mama still sees his essential humanity.
5. Personal responses will vary but here are some potential points:
   1. The Younger family's optimism and dreams for their future in the new house feel well-founded, despite the recent conflicts. Their joyful preparations and ability to put the past behind them demonstrate resilience and hope. Mama's line about Walter "finally coming into his manhood" suggests they have emerged from this trial stronger and more unified as a family. While challenges certainly still lie ahead, their bond has been fortified by this experience. Their optimism stems from a hard-won sense of pride, dignity and belief in their ability to create a better reality through determination. The family's vibrant spirit makes their dreams feel achievable if they continue supporting each other through inevitable future struggles. Their hopefulness represents the best of the human capacity for perseverance.