

• ACTIVITY •

Read the opening stage directions that Lorraine Hansberry wrote for her play *A Raisin in the Sun*. What is the connection between the setting and the characters? How does this opening section suggest ideas likely to be explored during the course of the play?

**From *A Raisin in the Sun***

LORRAINE HANSBERRY

*The Younger living room would be a comfortable and well-ordered room if it were not for a number of indestructible contradictions to this state of being. Its furnishings are typical and undistinguished and their primary feature now is that they have clearly had to accommodate the living of too many people for too many years—and they are tired. Still, we can see that at some time, a time probably no longer remembered by the family (except perhaps for Mama), the furnishings of this room were actually selected with care and love and even hope—and brought to this apartment and arranged with taste and pride.*

*That was a long time ago. Now the once loved pattern of the couch upholstery has to fight to show itself from under acres of crocheted doilies and couch covers which have themselves finally come to be more important than the upholstery. And here a table or a chair has been moved to disguise the worn places in the carpet; but the carpet has fought back by showing its weariness, with depressing uniformity, elsewhere on its surface.*

*Weariness has, in fact, won in this room. Everything has been polished, washed, sat on, used, scrubbed too often. All pretenses but living itself have long since vanished from the very atmosphere of this room.*

*Moreover, a section of this room, for it is not really a room unto itself, though the landlord's lease would make it seem so, slopes backward to provide a small kitchen area, where the family prepares the meals that are eaten in the living room proper, which must also serve as dining room. The single window that has been provided for these "two" rooms is located in this kitchen area. The sole natural light the family may enjoy in the course of a day is only that which fights its way through this little window.*

*At left, a door leads to a bedroom which is shared by Mama and her daughter, Beneatha. At right, opposite, is a second room (which in the beginning of the life of this apartment was probably a breakfast room) which serves as a bedroom for Walter and his wife, Ruth.*

TIME: Sometime between World War II and the present.

PLACE: Chicago's Southside.

AT RISE: It is morning dark in the living room. Travis is asleep on the make-down bed at center. An alarm clock sounds from within the bedroom at right, and presently Ruth enters from that room and closes the door behind her. She crosses sleepily toward the window. As she passes her sleeping son she reaches down and shakes him a little. At the window she raises the shade and a dusky Southside morning light comes in feebly. She fills a pot with water and puts it on to boil. She calls to the boy, between yawns, in a slightly muffled voice.

Ruth is about thirty. We can see that she was a pretty girl, even exceptionally so, but now it is apparent that life has been little that she expected, and disappointment has already begun to hang in her face. In a few years, before thirty-five even, she will be known among her people as a "settled woman."

She crosses to her son and gives him a good, final, rousing shake.

[1959]

10

## Symbol

In drama, symbols are intended to be visually represented on stage, making them even more clear and powerful than symbols in fiction. These symbols may be part of the setting, character, or even the plot. Let's return to the stage directions for *A Doll's House*. Ibsen opens act II by shifting the setting just slightly:

### ACT II

*Same room. Beside the piano the Christmas tree now stands stripped of ornament, burned-down candle stubs on its ragged branches. NORA's street clothes lie on the sofa. NORA, alone in the room, moves restlessly about; at last she stops at the sofa and picks up her coat.*

Notice the change in the Christmas tree from act I to act II. The Christmas tree and its degradation become a symbol of the intensifying conflict going on in the household.

In drama, any item used by an actor or as part of scenery is called a prop — short for "theatrical property," because props are items owned not by the actors but by the theater or troupe. Props may simply add to a character's appearance (a pipe held by a detective) or to the atmosphere created by the setting (an old rocking chair), but they frequently function as symbols. In August Wilson's 1987 play *The Piano Lesson*, the piano is a central symbol of the play. Wilson emphasizes its importance in his opening directions to the play:

*Dominating the parlor is an old upright piano. On the legs of the piano, carved in the manner of African sculpture, are mask-like figures resembling totems. The carvings are rendered with a grace and power of invention that lifts them out of the realm of craftsmanship and into the realm of art.*