

Writers Who Influenced Lorraine Hansberry:

Langston Hughes and James Baldwin

By Rayna Coleman

Perhaps one of the most prominent and influential figures that played a significant role in the history of Lorraine Hansberry's life was Langston Hughes, who was a well-known American poet of the era. He himself being a Black man and a talented writer, he took to writing poetry to tell of all that he felt pertaining to the presence of racism in the U.S. Thus, Hansberry being from a somewhat similar background as Hughes, was able to more closely identify with not only his work, but also with the concepts he drew upon within his works, which ultimately inspired her to pursue her own purpose and success. Furthermore, the fact that they both were active activists along with other artistic figures such as Harry Belafonte, Lena Horne and James Baldwin, could also have been yet another factor that allowed for a deeper connection and respect between the two poets/playwrights. In one of Hughes's many poems more commonly known as "Harlem", he too speaks of and makes references to the importance of dreams and the power they hold, similar to the overall theme of Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun*. In her play, Hansberry makes a direct reference to his work by using one of the lines of the famous poem in the title.

As it turns out, Hansberry's play went on to obtain unprecedented levels of recognition, which is in part what makes it relevant even to this day. According to one source, it is stated "It [*A Raisin In The Sun*] was the first play produced on Broadway by an African American woman, and Hansberry was the first Black playwright and at 29, the youngest American to win a New York Critics' Circle award" (Biography.com). This achievement, although being entirely her own, was due perhaps in part to Langston Hughes among other individuals that Hansberry found to be inspirational and that acted as a driving force behind her overall widely acknowledged success.

James Baldwin was another prominent figure who influenced the writings of Hansberry. It is said that they were both each other's inspiration at one point or another as they both seemed to have been fighting the same battle against the many unjust aspects of society during that time.

Despite the fact that many writers had an effect on Hansberry's work as a whole, it can also be said that Hansberry naturally had a similar effect on the work of others. For instance, Imani Perry, a widely recognized American scholar, wrote a book dedicated to Hansberry which served to bring to light the many trying obstacles Hansberry and her family had to face throughout their lives. This overall reflection on Lorraine Hansberry's life ultimately allowed Perry to take into consideration the struggles along with the triumphs Hansberry experienced and to therefore garner what she could do to honor her legacy by working to contribute to the greater cause of today's society.

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