Race, Gender, and the American Dream
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Prior to researching *The Great Gatsby*, I had no idea that Jordan Baker is believed by many scholars to be both a lesbian and a Black woman passing for Caucasian. In many ways, this revelation shifted the focus of the story for me. Jordan Baker became more than a tertiary character; she became emblematic of women's progress in a more significant way than simply evolving beyond the domestic spheres of marriage and motherhood. That is to say she eclipses the notion of the "new woman" of the 1920s who won the right to vote; traded in her apron for a punch card; and wore bobbed hair, makeup, and short skirts. While those were important achievements in and of themselves, I think they're sum is indicative of an even more significant cultural shift, one in which women rejected the stifling Victorian values of old and adopted the independence and autonomy afforded to them by a new era. In Jordan, we meet a cunning woman who has figured out how to navigate her patriarchal setting as well as, if not better than, the men for which and by which it was designed. Some might argue that white women, simply because they were white, had more access to better opportunities than Black women. But that just makes Jordan—a minority (female) of a minority (African American) of a minority (lesbian)—that much more extraordinary. When we consider her strictly in terms of her ability t to reinvent herself in pursuit of the American dream, I would argue that she rivals the novel's namesake and, in many ways, is much more successful.

I was much more familiar with *A Raisin in the Sun*, so while my understanding of the historical time period and social issues presented in the play did not change much, my empathy did deepen. Life is exceptionally difficult for the Youngers, a working-class Black family living in Chicago's slums. Though that era was progressive in its own right, hostility rooted in racism, discrimination, resistance, and fear seemed to supersede new, more equitable laws and the hard-

fought battle for civil rights. Meanwhile, the Youngers, in many ways, were a family divided across generational lines. Lena Younger, the product of an an earlier era founded on Christian values and hard work, tried to pass on her old-school views and practices to her adult children but to little avail. That divide coupled with Beneatha's sometimes confused search for an authentic identity and self-understanding in context of a greater whole and the anger, shame, and self-loathing with which Walter contends due to his lack of resources and consequent inability to support his family made me much sympathetic toward these characters than I had been in past readings. The struggles for people of color were inter, intra, and extra, which makes Beneatha's unwavering convictions about God, education, politics, and career all the more impressive.

While both Fitzgerald's novel and Hansberry's play depict the prevailing cultural and social beliefs and values of their respective historical times, they both ultimately reject those beliefs and values. A major belief at the center of both stories, for example, is the American dream, and hard work, meritocracy, and material wealth are just three values that feed that dream. While Gatsby manages to achieve material wealth, it is not through hard work but through crime, and it does not afford him the happiness he so desperately seeks. In the end, he does not win Daisy—his American dream personified; he does not gain the acceptance or respect of the "old money" crowd; and he is murdered by George. Similarly, happiness seems to elude even Jordan Baker, who enjoys a privileged lifestyle, acquired through deceit and trickery, but is nonetheless described as careless and bored.

In *A Raisin in the Sun*, every member of the Younger family pursues his or her own version of the American dream. Lena (Mama) wants to buy her family a house and leave their crowded apartment behind. Ruth, too, wants to move her family, including her unborn child, out of the ghetto. Walter wants to buy a liquor store that will generate the independence and wealth

he feels necessary to be happy and to support his family. Beneatha wants to become a doctor, a path that will give her financial independence and purpose beyond marriage and motherhood. Only Lena and Ruth achieve their dream of moving out of the ghetto but, considering the historical climate and the white homeowners' association's attempt to keep the family from moving into the neighborhood by offering Walter a bribe, it's clear that the family's "happy ending" will be fraught with its own set of challenges. Meanwhile, neither Walter nor Beneatha, by the play's end, are in reach of their respective goals, debunking the notion of an achievable American dream.