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Martin Luther King Jr and Malcolm X (1964).

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Cultural groups of
black people

The importance of the collectivist approach was basically the idea that there is strength in numbers. Whereas earlier black writers had been individuals struggling to find a way to have their voices heard, the Harlem scene encouraged groups of people **to come together to assist one another in their creative endeavours**, supporting their writing or music or art in collaboratively organised galleries, readings, newspapers, performances, et cetera. There was huge potential for the fertile cross-pollination of ideas and techniques and energies, not just within one medium, like poetry, but across various media, as can be seen with the influence of jazz music on the poetry of Langston Hughes.

“assimilationist”
blacks

The other equally important development was the attention paid to the **African origins of African-America**. This was not an easy or an obvious topic. The cultural conditions under which black Americans had been living for centuries bred submission and self-negation: politically voiceless, treated as subhuman, abused and discriminated against well into the 20th century, the blacks of America faced enormous pressure from the dominant white culture **to reject their identity and their heritage**. An uncomfortable middle ground for what Beneatha calls “assimilationist” blacks (p. 63) is to try to conform to white middle class society. Despite knowing that a racist, predominantly white society **will never accept them as equals**, the “assimilationist” blacks reject and mock the mythical Africa of their distant past and embrace the materialist values of modern capitalist America. This is represented in *Raisin* by the figure of George Murchison, and the antidote comes in the form of Joseph Asagai.

Langston Hughes
(1902–1967)

The major literary figures of the Harlem Renaissance include Jean Toomer, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston and Countee Cullen (there were many, many more writers, poets, musicians and artists who belonged to the scene). Of these, **Langston Hughes had**

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the most direct and obvious influence on Lorraine Hansberry and *A Raisin in the Sun*, as the title of the play is taken from a line a poem of his (for more on this see the chapter in this study guide on Origins & Sources, p. 38).

Although the Harlem Renaissance as a defined period of focussed cultural activity was over by the mid-1930s, it was a genuine renaissance – literally, rebirth – in that it inspired new vitality, focus and areas to explore for African-American culture. Its echoes were felt for decades to follow and **its themes continue to be relevant and fertile to this day**.

Society and politics

The critical conflict in the plot of *A Raisin in the Sun* is the offer made by the white residents of Clybourne Park to buy back the Younger family's house. The residents' unspoken fear is that **the presence of a black family will lower the attractiveness of the neighbourhood** and therefore make their own property less valuable. This is one example of *de facto* racial segregation (as opposed to *de jure*).

Racial
segregation

***De facto* and *de jure*:** These Latin legal terms mean, respectively, “in fact”, referring to things which exist in reality, even if they are not prescribed by law, and “in law”, meaning things which are prescribed and defined by law. These terms are often used when discussing the history of racism and racial inequality in the USA, because while many racist laws have been struck down or reversed, removing the *de jure* justification for racist practices, in many cases the *de facto* reality of inequality and discrimination rolls along, business as usual. A major part of the legal efforts to change things in the civil

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rights movement is concerned with combatting *de facto* inequality with *de jure* security. This is the case with the landmark court case in which Lorraine Hansberry's father was involved – for more on this, see the chapter in this study guide on Origins & Sources, p. 36.

Hansberry v. Lee

Segregated ethnic
neighbourhoods

Chicago was, in the 1950s, at the peak of its size, power and influence. It had a population of over three and a half million inhabitants – the highest of its history, a point from which it continues to decline – and was **an industrial powerhouse**. Chicago is called the Windy City, Chi-Town, and City of the Big Shoulders², a line from the poem *Chicago* by Carl Sandberg, a reference to the blue-collar, hardworking industrial identity of the city. It was also, as it had been for most of its history, one of the most ethnically diverse cities in America, a true **melting pot** – but it was a city of segregated ethnic neighbourhoods.

Great Migrations

Rich white businessmen, managers, bankers and executives moved throughout the city's history into particular areas, leaving the inner city districts to the poorer immigrants (largely the Irish and the Poles) and to the African-Americans. During the Great Migrations (roughly 1910–1930 and 1940–1970), when **African-Americans left the South in the thousands to seek work and better living conditions** up in the North, big northern industrial centres like **Chicago, Detroit and New York** exploded with larger populations, more workers, bigger factories, more industry, more money, more jobs, expanding cities, more service industries, and on and on.

2 <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/12840/chicago>

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Through later stagnation and reversal of industrial growth due to increased competition from foreign manufacturers, in particular in the **metal and automobile industries**, large parts of these industrial cities declined into urban wastelands – decaying ghetto districts and dead industrial zones unable to offer anything for the people who remained there. But in the 1950s things were still looking good for Chicago as a whole. There were jobs, there was money, and there were opportunities.

But the Younger family in *Raisin* represent a different side of 1950s urban America. They are poor, black, and living in a ghetto. The conflict of the play is about their efforts to raise themselves out of the despair of segregated life in a squalid apartment in a poor inner-city black ghetto by moving into a house with a garden in a better (middle class) neighbourhood. The residents of this neighbourhood, Clybourne Park, are white. **They fear the intrusion of blacks into their neighbourhood.** So many things are suggested and implied by their offer to buy off the Younger family, stopping them from coming: They fear the presence of blacks, they fear crime, they fear falling property values (“there goes the neighbourhood!”), and they fear conflicts between the Youngers and aggressively anti-black elements among the white population of the area. This conflict in the play brings together a number of strands in society and politics, all of which are tainted with racial inequality and discrimination.

Raisin in the Sun:
Fear

Pan-Africanism: African-Americans and Africa

There is no single, simple answer to the question of how African-Americans in the 1950s felt about Africa. The many different kinds of relationship were complex. This is presented in *Raisin* in the thematically and dramatically opposing characters of Joseph Asagai and George Murchison, but also in the way Beneatha, Walter Lee