

## Inter-ethnic Issues in Lorraine Hansberry's *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*\*

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When Lorraine Hansberry's second produced play, *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*, opened on Broadway in 1964, some white critics expressed surprise that her protagonist was Jewish rather than black and some blacks were disappointed or even outraged by this, feeling that she was deserting the "cause" and trying too hard to win acclaim as a "universal" writer.<sup>1</sup> Others from both groups, of course, warmly defended her.

The surprise and the outrage were unjust since *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* explores many of the same issues that *A Raisin in the Sun* did and continues to attack the same enemy, the oppressive system that enables some to live in luxury while the many just survive and that ruthlessly strives to wipe out ethnic cultures as potential sources of resistance through the concept of the "melting pot." In the earlier and more famous play, the residents of Clybourne Park claimed that it wasn't racism that was driving them to keep out the Younger family but a belief that "people get along better . . . when they share a common background"<sup>2</sup>—or, in short, when they melt down into a common blob. The Youngers, while fully aware that the Clybourne Park residents, despite their disclaimer, are virulent racists, fight back as a group of individualists united mainly by their need to struggle against a common oppression and to seek a society more open to them and outsiders.

This implicit statement in favor of multi-ethnic society and a multi-ethnic approach to combatting the oppressive American system becomes a bit more explicit in *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*. As Ellen Schiff argues in her study *From Stereotype to Metaphor: The Jew in Contemporary Drama*, "In making Brustein the axis of her play and the magnet that attracts its other outsiders, Hansberry draws on the

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historical experience of the Jew” so that “a notably sensitive concept of the Jewish experience as archtypal furnishes the subtext” of the play.<sup>3</sup> She also notes that in another context that “even before the black theatre came of age, Negro Playwrights were equating the situation of blacks and Jews and demonstrating that traits heretofore considered peculiar to the latter represented blacks as well,”<sup>4</sup> suggesting one possible reason for Hansberry’s choice of a Jew as protagonist. In one of the play’s most powerful scenes, Sidney himself calls the sole Afro-American’s black nationalism “the new Zionism,” thus making a direct comparison between one aspect of the experience of blacks and Jews. He also appears to exhibit a special feeling for this character, Alton Scales, based on a close identification of Jews with blacks.

Robert Nemiroff, Hansberry’s former husband and literary executor, in a letter to Lisbeth Vuorijarvi, a Swedish scholar who had inquired about Schiff’s treatment of Hansberry, observed that “Jews have played an extraordinary role out of all proportion to their numbers . . . in all democratic, liberal, and radical, humanizing and liberating movements” and that “other oppressed peoples—especially in the Hitler years and their aftermath—have recognized this tacitly and often explicitly, and have tended to look to Jews for greater understanding. As allies or potential allies or, at least, as the least hostile ethnic group in the society at large.”<sup>5</sup> As one example of such involvement with other oppressed people, he affirmed that “Jews (at no time all or most of the Jewish establishment but in critically significant numbers) played a major role in supporting and funding black education at the turn of the century through the thirties, and the NAACP, and, of course, the civil rights struggle of the 60’s.”<sup>6</sup> Moreover, in an earlier part of the letter, he similarly argued that “Sidney’s Jewishness is in no sense accidental” since “Lorraine, who had a tremendous emotional identity with the Jewish radical and intellectual tradition on many levels (going back initially perhaps to Robeson, who also had that identity—I don’t recall ever hearing him when he didn’t sing at least one song or say something to emphasize his special bond with the Jewish struggle and Jewish people) deliberately chose him as the personification of the things he represents in the play (once she had determined to go in that direction, rather than dealing with the Italian working class).”<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, Hansberry’s complex vision, while heartily approving all the above views, suggests that there may be a less attractive and even dangerous side to the bond between blacks and Jews (or between any two ethnic groups), at least if it becomes an exclusive bond. One of the reasons Sidney fails to see his sister-in-law Mavis Parodus as anything other than “the Mother Middleclass itself”<sup>8</sup> or indeed to discover any positive traits in her is his righteous anger at her obvious prejudice toward both blacks and Jews, but especially toward blacks. When he plays upon her well-known prejudice by telling her about a new suitor for her call girl sister Gloria without revealing the race of the suitor

until she is greatly excited over the prospective groom, the audience's and the author's sympathy is with him since Mavis's racism deserves such a blow. However, when he introduces her to Alton Scales, the black suitor who appears to be white, and then carefully chooses the most embarrassing moment to reveal his race, he is clearly portrayed as having gone too far. Hansberry's stage directions underline Sidney's own prejudice at this moment, a prejudice that arises in justifiable repugnance at racism but that becomes distorted when it leads him to mistake this particular flaw in a person for the whole person. In the moment that Sidney makes his embarrassing revelation to Mavis, the stage directions inform us that he and Alton and his wife Iris "variously concentrate on the food and exchange *superior* and rather *childish* glances; letting her live through the moment of discomfort" (p. 244, emphasis mine). Almost immediately afterward, when Sidney calls her "the Mother Middleclass itself standing there revealed in all its towering courage" to the "snickers of delight from the diners," Hansberry's directions note that this is stated "swiftly, with open-hearted malice" (p. 245). Mavis's response is one of the most moving speeches in the play—and an early indication of how much Sidney has been overlooking in her:

I am standing here and I am thinking: how smug it is in bohemia. I was taught to believe that—(Near tears) creativity and great intelligence ought to make one expansive and understanding. That if ordinary people, among whom I have the sense at least to count myself, could not expect understanding from artists and—whatever it is that *you* are, Sidney—then where indeed might we look for it at all—in this quite dreadful world. (She almost starts out, but thinks of the cap) Since you have all so busily got rid of God for us (p. 245).

Ironically, Sidney is only "somewhat" moved "by this eloquence" whereas Alton, who (as the target of her strongest prejudice) should be the most offended by her, is "the most affected" by what she has said.

What all this implies is that Sidney, while being the "magnet" that attracts the other characters and indisputably the central sensibility in the play, is a flawed protagonist, often displaying prejudices and behavioral weaknesses similar to those he so readily attacks in others. He too can be vicious and unreasonable and highly unjust. This makes clear the complexity and difficulty of the struggle he is engaged in since ultimately he must face the enemy within as well as the more comfortable one without. He is distinguished from the other characters by his greater awareness, sensitivity, integrity and, above all, capacity for growth. However, it is precisely these qualities that enable him to comprehend that any meaningful change he can bring about in society must also include a change in himself. They are also the qualities that make him finally see beyond the stereotype in which he has encased Mavis and to realize that she too has a measure (much larger than he ever guessed) of awareness, sensitivity and integrity and would like to improve herself. This realization, a step on his tortuous and often tormenting path toward self-discovery and a fuller understanding of the world around him, helps him in part to make his final assertion that "the earth turns and men

change every day and that rivers run and people wanna be better than they are” (p. 317), thinking of himself and Mavis among others. His ability to make this assertion is his triumph—and the play’s, but clearly such an insight is neither easily attained nor easily sustained. Intellectual understanding is far from enough to make the insight viable; to truly appropriate it and make it useful, one must be highly open to it, suffer for it and live it to the fullest when it comes. This strongly implies that Hansberry’s assessment of the problems involved in overcoming interethnic hostilities and creating a workable multi-ethnic society is not a dewy-eyed and painless one; she, more than most, knew the complexity in such a struggle.

Just as it is no accident that Sidney is Jewish since this, in spite of all of Sidney’s acknowledged weaknesses, enabled Hansberry to express her admiration for the Jews’ historical resilience in oppression and adversity and for the sensitivity, courage and insight that they derived from this, it is surely also no accident that Sidney is surrounded by representatives of a wide range of ethnic groups. These include his wife Iris, “the only Greco-Gaelic-Indian-hillbilly in captivity” (p. 212); Alton Scales, the “cream-colored” black (p. 288); Wally O’Hara, the Irish-American “reform” politician who needs to be reformed; and Sal Peretti, the Italian-American juvenile junkie who worked for Sidney as a janitor and who died of an overdose of American oppression. This range creates a powerful impression of the rich ethnic diversity in American society, a diversity so great that it seems impossible that it could ever be melted down. Moreover, the play clearly applauds the contribution each ethnic group has made to American society and forcefully implies that a multi-ethnic society has far more to offer than any homogeneous society.

The richness and importance of ethnic culture is brought out most vividly in a remarkable scene between Sidney and his sister-in-law, Mavis Parodus Bryson. Hitherto regarded as a bigoted, middle class mediocrity (as previously noted), Mavis reveals to Sidney that when she was young, her father used to stage Greek tragedies in their home with all the family taking part and that she still remembers lines from *Medea* in colloquial modern Greek (her father was poor and had never learned classical Greek). She also tells him that her father had deliberately changed their family name from “plain old everyday Paradopoulos” to “Parodus” as a symbolic statement that they were all simply part of the “Chorus” of ordinary people who observe and comment on the actions of the great (p. 285). These revelations (along with others about her sensitive awareness of many of her weaknesses and limitations, her courage in facing her husband’s infidelity and the fact that he has an illegitimate son, and her desire to reach a higher level of thinking than she believes she is capable of) help to change Sidney’s view of her, both by making him respect her and increasing his pain that she remains unable to see the richness of other ethnic groups, such as Jews and blacks, though her ability to talk to him about herself indicates at least a

partial breakthrough.

Sidney also has a sense of the richness of his own cultural heritage and, in a key speech, tells Wally O'Hara:

In the ancient times, the good men among my ancestors, when they heard of evil, strapped a sword to their loins and strode into the desert; and when they found it, they cut it down—or were cut down and bloodied the earth with purifying death (p. 274).

While freely admitting that in the face of “these thousand nameless faceless vapors that are the evil of our time,” he can only internalize them and then take a pill to narcotize them, he longs “to take up the sword of the Maccabees again” (p. 275). Thus, at the end when he is finally able to take a heroic stance and fight the evil around him he becomes inextricably linked to the tradition of these Jewish ancestors as well as willing to face up to the second alternative of being cut down in a purifying death.

However, while powerfully affirming the high value of each ethnic tradition, Hansberry also noted the extraordinary achievements that may be reached by intertwining traditions. Her stage directions at the beginning, for example, remind readers of the mixed Dutch and English contribution to Greenwich Village and indeed New York City itself where the play is set so that a casual stroller may find “a renovation of a ‘Dutch farmhouse’” (p. 189) or “one or two narrow and twisty little streets with squared-off panes of glass that do, in midwinter, with their frosted corners, actually succeed in reminding of Dickensian London” (p. 190). Later, in describing Joan Baez’ version of “Babe, I’m Gonna Leave You,” a song that greatly pleases Sidney, Hansberry observed that “it is a white blues out of the Southland; a lyrical lament whose melody probably started somewhere in the British Isles more than one century ago and has crossed the ocean to be touched by the throb of black folk blues and then, finally, by the soul of back-country crackers. It is, in a word, old, haunting, American, and infinitely beautiful” (p. 196). Still later is one of the more enchanting moments of the play when Iris Brustein performs a dance that illustrates her mixed ethnic background:

She snakes out promptly, hissing, in the dance steps of the Greek Miserlou—which turns into a jig and then into the usual stereotyped notion of some Indian war dance, concluding with a Marilyn Monroe freeze (p. 213).

Sidney himself, while (as we have seen) thoroughly respectful toward his own Jewish tradition, has a profound appreciation for the cultures of all countries. He makes detailed and accurate references to Plutarch, Euripedes, Thoreau, Shakespeare, Goethe, Camus, Strindberg, Japanese painting, Akira Kurasawa’s *Rashomon*, Yiddish melodies and many other works from a wide variety of countries. In addition, during the absurdist fantasy sequence, he “assumes his own parodied version of classic Hindu dance pose” (p. 306) and, a short time afterwards, “sits up, cross-legged, Zen Buddhist fashion” (p. 308). These references and poses clearly indicate his refusal to restrict his thinking and understanding of the world to one tradition, no matter how noble or wise it is. Of course, the

ability to understand one's own culture and that of others does not guarantee an equivalent ability to understand and be sensitive toward other people, as Mavis rightly reminds Sidney and his friends. What makes Sydney outstanding is his willingness, at times, to really listen to others and to admit making errors.

Concerning the author's own similar approach to culture, Robert Nemiroff wrote in a letter dated May 8, 1985, to Rose Subramanian, a student writing a thesis on Hansberry at the University of Hyderabad, India, that:

L's delight and pride in her African American identity was inseparable from and buttressed by her internationalism; the constant wonder and delight she found in other folk and national cultures, the nuances of style, humor, music, movement, idiom, psychology, the differences and confluences between peoples—each unique in expression, yet in content universal—affirmed her own place in the human family. She learned this in the Left and from, among others, Robeson, who exemplified it in his art and music (he spoke 13 languages and his repertoire was international).<sup>9</sup>

In line with her belief in the high value of both ethnic cultures and the intermingling of cultures, Hansberry vehemently attacked the Theatre of the Absurd for cutting itself off from any particular culture or cultures and the problems faced by individuals or groups within them for the sake of a spurious universality. Just as Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting For Godot* took place vaguely on "a country road" near "a tree"<sup>10</sup> and his *Endgame* took place in a room with a "bare interior . . . two small windows . . . an armchair on castors," and "two ashbins" in which an old man and woman live,<sup>11</sup> Hansberry's Absurdist playwright David Ragin's play is set in "a refrigerator" where two characters live who "are both male and married to each other" (p. 240), an attempt to satirize what is nearly unsatirizable (or is already self-parodied to the ultimate degree). Moreover, she has Sidney criticize David for writing "fourteen plays about not caring, about the isolation of the soul of man, the alienation of the human spirit, the desolation of all love" (all of which are popular themes of Absurdist playwrights) when the statement that David has really wanted to make all along is that he is "ravaged by a society that will not sanctify [his] particular sexuality" (p. 247). Even though Sidney has made this criticism in a manifestly inappropriate context, a moment when his intellectual (and highly insensitive) attack on David reinforces a vicious personal insult by Alton on David's homosexuality, it does seem to reflect Hansberry's considered view that the most meaningful writing deals with the specific problems presented by a specific culture. As she stated to Studs Terkel in an interview about *A Raisin in the Sun*, "I believe that one of the most sound ideas in dramatic writing is that, in order to create the universal, you must pay very great attention to the specific" and in discussing some of the details she paid close attention to in her first play she observed that it was about "a Negro family, specifically and definitely and *culturally*" (emphasis mine).<sup>12</sup> Clearly, she paid equal attention the multi-cultural dimensions of her Greenwich Village setting in *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*.

Given this profound and abiding respect for ethnic and national cultures, one would expect Hansberry's work to oppose any attempt to ridicule, attack or diminish them, and it does. Her play contains numerous examples of bigotry and in each case it is shown to be lamentably wrong, no matter what the source. Sidney, for example, has experienced anti-semitism among his in-laws. When his wife Iris accuses her sister Mavis of anti-semitism in front of him, she denies it, asking him to support her, but he remains silent. Iris then instantly replies:

Now, come on: you nearly had a heart attack when we got married. In fact, that's when you went into analysis. Now, either you were madly in love with me or you hate the Jews—*pick!* (p. 233).

Even at the moment that Sidney finds Mavis most sympathetic, immediately after her discussion of her childhood acting (indicating a hitherto unsuspected sensitivity and even a touch of artistic sensibility) and her present heroically endured hardships, she still displays prejudice against blacks and adheres to stereotyped notions of Jews, as when she tells him, "I told Fred, 'Say what you will, but the Jews have get-up!'" (p. 289). Though in his mood of the moment, this merely amuses him, it is clear that Sidney would normally be offended by such comments. He also reveals that the crimes of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, including, of course, those against the Jews, are never far from his mind during his final confrontation with the corrupt politician Wally O'Hara. When it becomes obvious that Wally intends to do nothing about the narcotics traffic in his area, Sidney "instinctively" and "swiftly" comments:

I see: We can go on stepping over the bodies of the junkies—the trains will run on time! (p. 315).

Moreover, he follows this up by clicking his heels and throwing off "the Facist salute smartly" (p. 315). However, for all his awareness of the prejudice and crimes against Jews, including, above, all, the holocaust, he also knows that prejudice exists among Jews, including his mother, and he can ridicule this:

You should hear my mother on Iris. (*The inevitable*) "Not that I have anything against the *goyim*, Sidney, she's a nice girl, but the rice is too greasy. And *lamb* fat? For the *stomach*? With hominy grits? *Like a lump it sits* (p. 213).

Of course, as indicated earlier, Sidney himself, despite his unusually large understanding of his culture and the nature of prejudice, displays certain types of bigotry. Of these, the most significant is his attitude toward women, especially his wife. As I argued in my article on "Images of Men in Lorraine Hansberry's Work," Sidney, while remaining "an extraordinarily sensitive Jewish liberal who cares deeply about the sufferings of others, who strongly opposes all forms of social and political oppression, and who displays concern to the point of meddling daily in the lives of those around him . . . compels his wife to distort her character by living up to his fantasy image of her."<sup>13</sup> I observed that he pressured Iris to play the role of "a spritely, barefooted mountain girl" in his "fantasy of living Thoreau-like in the pure air of the mountains" as part of his attempt "to cope with the strain of residing in New York City,

with its filth, its widespread social and economic injustice, and its inordinate amount of crime (the play opens with a discussion of the death of a seventeen-year old junkie who had worked for Sidney)."<sup>14</sup> It seems clear, though, that no matter how sympathetic Sydney is and how comprehensible his reasons for creating this fantasy are, his actions are those of a male chauvinist and what he has done is highly damaging to his wife and his relationship with her. In an early draft of the play during a moment when Sydney is feeling under intense pressure in this relationship, he even says to Iris "(From out of nowhere, the only reference he can think of at the moment) 'DOESN'T THAT FEMALE BRAIN WORK LIKE THE REST OF THE SPECIES' " and Iris appropriately responds that "that's male chauvinism."<sup>15</sup> More subtly yet undeniably present in the finished version of the play, Sydney's male chauvinist fantasies drive Iris away from him because she increasingly feels the need to live in accordance with her recognition of her inner realities and drives. Only at the end when Sydney seems more able to face reality in general and the reality of women in particular is Iris willing to return to him.

As I also contended in "Images of Men in Lorraine Hansberry's Work," the primary event that alters Sydney's attitude toward women is his sister-in-law Gloria's suicide:

Gloria's tragedy is crucial to Sidney's development, since it leads him to see how his male-supremacist fantasizing has harmed his wife. As a call girl recruited for her innocent, all-American-girl appearance, Gloria has been paid to let men make her part of their warped sexual fantasies, and she has suffered such mental and physical abuse that she begins taking drugs to escape. After being severely beaten by one of her clients, she decides to break free from the life by marrying Sidney's friend Alton Scales, only to find that Alton has been told about her profession and is so appalled by the destruction of his idealized conception of her that he is unwilling even to talk to her. Still reeling with shock from this, she is approached by another of Sidney's friends [David Ragin] who wants her to aid him in a perverted sexual fantasy. She deliberately takes an overdose of drugs, saying "Papa—I *am* better than this! Now will you forgive me—?"

Sidney is reflective enough to understand what has been done to Gloria and the reason that she killed herself, and he realizes that he, like Alton and Gloria's clients, has caused immeasurable damage by upholding a false concept of woman. He also realizes that he must free himself from all such concepts and see his wife as the individual she is if their marriage is to be preserved. At the same time, he decides that he must take a stand against the drug pushing that helped to destroy the seventeen-year-old boy and Gloria, and he finds that his wife wishes to be an ally in this struggle.<sup>16</sup>

Of course, what Sidney learns about the dangers of fantasizing and the imperative need to recognize the reality of the Other applies as much to ethnic groups as to women.

In addition to his male chauvinism (which he seems on his way toward overcoming at the end), Sidney also displays a mild contempt or at least an insensitivity toward homosexuals. For example, he uses the term "fag" a little too casually, as when he refers to Harry Maxton, a director whom Iris has been hoping to interest in hiring her, as "one of the most famous fags in America" (p. 227). Even though he does this in a joking manner and in the midst of a tension-filled argument, it is suggestive of a



bias, especially since he knows the more positive term “gay” as he demonstrates by using it as the first descriptive word when attempting to explain to Mavis about David Ragin’s homosexuality (p. 237). Of course, it is equally true that Sidney, in spite of violent disagreement with David over his artistic philosophy, has helped to “subsidize” his playwriting by supplying him with paper and free meals (p. 237) and he also defends him against Wally O’Hara’s slur on his supposed mannerisms by asserting, quite rightly, that David’s “not swish” (p. 273). He is clearly far from being a blatant bigot, but he is not untouched by prejudice.

In an early draft, Sidney’s prejudice was a bit more obvious and a little sharper. In the scene following Alton’s brutal display of disgust toward David when he tells him to “turn off, Fag Face” and claims that “hanging out with queers gets on my nerves” (p. 246 of the published version), Sidney, as in the final version, becomes offended by David’s anguished suggestion that the reason Alton has reacted so violently toward him is that he is repressing his own homosexuality. After asking David if that is “the best you can do” (as he does in the final version), Sidney then continues:

Well, it’s time to stop pretending with you! Your much cherished, over-attended, self-preoccupying “curse” is a BORE—and *I* am bored with having to treat it like some holy, leviathan secret of the kind only the deepest, the most gifted, the most nobly tortured can know: It ain’t. It’s just one kind of sex—that’s all. Go out and picket the courts or something if you want! Attack the laws, the laws stink! But please, please, please, David, outgrow the notion that the universe revolves around your not very awesome sexuality!<sup>17</sup>

The polished version of this speech is slightly less hostile and a shade more reasonable. In it, Sidney makes no claim that he has been “pretending” with David about anything and asserts neither that David’s attitude toward his homosexuality is a “BORE!” nor that his sexuality is “not very awesome,” though he does state as before that David’s is “just one kind of sex” (in itself an unarguable observation). The greater eloquence of the polished version also makes it more persuasive:

If somebody insults you—sock ’em in the jaw. If you don’t like the sex laws, attack ’em, I think they’re silly. You wanna get up a petition? I’ll sign one. Love little fishes if you want. *But*, David, please get over the notion that your particular “thing” is something that only the deepest, saddest, the most nobly tortured can know about. It ain’t—(*Spearing into the salad*) it’s just one kind of sex—that’s all. And, in my opinion—(*Revolving his fork*) the universe turns regardless (pp. 247-248).

Here, Sidney’s advice about how to deal with insults and archaic sex laws sounds aggressive but apt, especially since it seems to express his own similar approach to such problems and since he offers to sign any petition David chooses to write. His comments on the simultaneously self-pitying and self-aggrandizing attitude which some homosexuals, presumably including David, have taken toward their form of sexuality also seems fairer when expressed in this modified way. However, two problems remain concerning the overall fairness of the speech. First, in context it is harsh and even rude since Sidney makes it so soon after

David has been savagely attacked by Alton, a man whom he had reason to regard as a friend (or at least a tolerant acquaintance) during a dinner at which he thought he could relax. Second, Sidney's remark "love little fishes if you want" seems to equate the act of one man loving another with an exotic and even impossible relationship, thus implying an incomprehension or intolerance of David's sexuality that the rest of Sidney's speech consciously denies. This suggests how hard it is for someone of even Sidney's broadmindedness and experience to eradicate all traces of prejudices (ethnic or other) that are so thoroughly ingrained in his culture. It also implies a point made throughout the play that it is possible for a person to act or think in a way that is simultaneously right and wrong and that it is therefore excruciatingly difficult to choose the proper course for the appropriate reasons. At the same time, of course, it is overwhelmingly imperative that we attempt to do so.

The case of Alton Scales involves an even more complex intertwining of virtues and vices than Sidney's since he demonstrates that it is possible for a member of an ethnic minority to be simultaneously a victim of racism and a racist. In explaining to Sidney why he cannot marry Gloria Parodus now that he knows that she has been a high-class call girl, he recalls his father's humiliation at being forced to accept all the thrown away and stolen things that his wife brought home from the house of the white family for whom she worked as a maid, and he tells his friend and near brother-in-law that he doesn't want "white man's leavings" (p. 281). Sidney can, of course, understand the pain inflicted on Alton and his father by a racist and oppressive society, but he cannot regard Gloria as an object like "the piece of ham" or "the broken lamp" that were brought home (p. 280), and he also knows the pain that Alton is preparing to inflict on Gloria. When he asks Alton what he would do "if she was a black woman" and he makes no reply, Sidney asserts that "that's racism, Alton" and Alton, touching his head, responds, "I know it— . . . here!" (p. 281). Moreover, when Sidney comments "sadly" that "a star has risen over Africa— . . . over Harlem . . . over the South Side . . ." and that this "new Zionism is raging" in him (p. 281), Alton acknowledges the truth of this statement. It is thus clear that in spite of all his strong motivation based on past and undoubtedly also present injustices, he too is behaving unjustly and is aware of this, though unable or unwilling to alter his behavior.

Sidney's sadness in making this comparison between Zionism and black nationalism in this context strongly implies his view that both of these movements, while thoroughly understandable and even justified in some ways, are ultimately dead end streets because they lead those who follow them to shut themselves off from revivifying and creative contact with other groups. No group, however wounded or wronged it may be, can afford to completely isolate itself from others since this is the one sure path to sterility. Of course Sidney knows only too well that forced relationships between different ethnic groups can be vicious and

humiliating, as in the case of white plantation owners and black slaves. As Alton has lamented bitterly to him:

I got this color from my grandmother being used as a commodity, man. The buying and selling in this country began with *me* (p. 280).

However, he also knows that voluntary contact between members of differing groups may be highly fructifying, or else he, a Jew, wouldn't have chosen to marry a woman of mixed Greek, Irish and Cherokee descent. He also wouldn't have studied works from so many other cultures alongside his own or surrounded himself with people from so many different ethnic and minority backgrounds, finally reaching out to embrace someone as different from himself as Mavis Parodus Bryson. In the last scene, having been sensitized and enlarged by the complex experience he has had in the play, he can even reach out to the man who has betrayed him, Wally O'Hara, and say, "I love you—I should like to see you redeemed," though he immediately modifies this by stating, "But in the context in which we presently stand here I doubt any of this is possible" (p. 317). The context he refers to is the oppressive society that has "warped and distorted all of us" (p. 317), in part by trying to eliminate ethnicity, individuality (including nearly all possibility of personal growth through making one's own errors and learning from them), and, above all, the vitalizing variety of life that has meant so much to Sidney. This vitalizing variety which is the essence of a truly multi-ethnic society is worth fighting for, and this is one of the things Sidney is so staunchly and rightly ready to defend at the end.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>For example, a *Liberator* writer quoted by Harold Cruse in *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (New York: Morrow, 1967), p. 411, stated: "Black Nationalists are mad because she did not write about the folks." Cruse himself contended that she did not write about the "folks" simply "because ideologically and psychologically she was unable to" (p. 412).

<sup>2</sup>Lorraine Hansberry. *A Raisin in the Sun*. (New York: Random House, 1959) 104.

<sup>3</sup>Ellen Schiff. *From Stereotype to Metaphor: The Jew in Contemporary Drama*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982) 156.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid. 155.

<sup>5</sup>Robert Nemiroff. "On Aspects of Sidney Brustein's Jewishness." Unpublished Letter to Lisbeth Vuorijarvi, a Swedish scholar, concerning Ellen Schiff's *From Stereotype to Metaphor*.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Lorraine Hansberry. *A Raisin in the Sun and The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*. (New York: New American Library, 1966). ©1958, 1959, 1966 by Robert Nemiroff. All rights reserved. All subsequent references will be made in the text to this edition.

<sup>9</sup>Robert Nemiroff. "Comments on Thesis Proposal of Rose Subramanian, University of Hyderabad, India." Unpublished Letter dated May 8, 1985.

<sup>10</sup>Samuel Beckett. *Waiting for Godot*. (New York: Grove Press, 1978) 6.

<sup>11</sup>Samuel Beckett. *Endgame*. (London: Faber, 1958) 11.

<sup>12</sup>"Make New Sounds: Studs Terkel Interviews Lorraine Hansberry." *American Theatre*. November 1984. ©1961, 1984 by Robert Nemiroff. All rights reserved.

<sup>13</sup>Steven R. Carter. "Images of Men in Lorraine Hansberry's Work." *Black American Literature Forum*. Vol. 19, No. 4 (Winter 1985) 161.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid. 161.

<sup>15</sup>Lorraine Hansberry. Unpublished early draft of *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*.

<sup>16</sup>Carter, 161-162.

<sup>17</sup>Lorraine Hansberry. Unpublished early draft of *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*.

## Critique

Carter's analysis of the varied ethnic backgrounds of the characters in this play demonstrates Hansberry's commitment to a multiethnic society. Ethnicity is also clearly a factor in the complexity of the individual characters themselves, and in their interaction. Carter further gives a credible rationale (documented by quotations from Robert Nemiroff's correspondence) for Hansberry's choice of Sidney, a Jew, as the vehicle for her message.

Hansberry, however, does not really stress inter-ethnic issues here.