

2014 Study Guide for *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* by Lorraine Hansberry

Before seeing/reading the play

1. Who was Lorraine Hansberry? What was her contribution to American theatre? How did her parents Carl and Nannie Hansberry influence and inspire her life's work?

These and other websites provide information:

<http://voices.cla.umn.edu/artistpages/hansberryLorraine.php>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lorraine_Hansberry

2. *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* is set in a New York City neighborhood in 1964. What was the social, political and economic climate of the time? This and other websites provide information:

<http://www.history.com/topics/1960s>

3. Define the term bohemianism. Research how Greenwich Village was the bohemian haven of the 1960s. These and other websites provide information:

<http://subcultureslist.com/bohemianism/>

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/episodes/greenwich-village/about-greenwich-village/620/>

4. Familiarize yourself with Communism, psychoanalysis, the Women's Liberation Movement, and the Civil Rights Act of 1964. What were American opinions on these topics in the early 1960s? These and other websites provide information:

<http://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communism>

http://www.tn4me.org/sapage.cfm/sa_id/135/era_id/8/major_id/10/minor_id/23

http://www.intropsych.com/ch13_therapies/psychoanalysis.html

<http://tavaana.org/en/content/1960s-70s-american-feminist-movement-breaking-down-barriers-women>

<http://www.history.com/topics/civil-rights-act>

5. Who were Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus? What were their philosophies? How did they differ? These and other websites provide information:
http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1964/sartre-bio.html
<http://www.egs.edu/library/albert-camus/biography/>
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_iW74PnBGo

6. Research Henry David Thoreau. What question does he explore in *Walden*? What is civil disobedience? This and other websites provide information:
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thoreau>

7. There are several Classical references in the play. Who are the Philistines and Judah Maccabee? What was the role of the chorus in Greek tragedy? Who were the Fates? These and other websites provide information:
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philistinism>
<http://judaism.about.com/od/jewishbiographies/g/judahmaccabee.htm>
<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/114599/chorus>
<http://www.theoi.com/Daimon/Moirai.html>

8. Look up and examine the Spanish painter Francisco de Goya's etching *One Hunting for Teeth*. These and other websites provide information:
http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/goya/hd_goya.htm
<http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/18.64.12>

After seeing/reading the play

1. Refer to your research on bohemianism in Greenwich Village, and the various social and political movements of 1964. David tells Alton that at least his own struggles are a distraction from “the cross that you so nobly and so deliberately bear.” What are the “crosses” that each of the characters bear? Pay particular attention to Sidney, Iris, Alton and David.

2. Refer to your research on psychoanalysis. How do Iris's views on psychoanalysis differ from Sidney's? What does Iris hope to accomplish by seeing a psychoanalyst? In what ways does she achieve her goals?

3. Addressing the political corruption in New York City at the time, Wally states that “this is the second largest narcotics drop in the city! The syndicate acts like it owns this neighborhood.” He tells Sidney, “I’ve finally faced up, and it’s time you did too; there is work to be done.” How are Wally’s motives for getting involved genuine? In what ways are his motives self-serving? In what ways will Wally be able to effect change by working within a corrupt system? What will his challenges be?
4. Refer to your research on Henry David Thoreau. How does Sidney identify with the philosophical ideals expressed in *Walden*? What is the significance of Sidney naming his failed business Walden Pond? In what ways does Sidney’s journey reflect Thoreau’s?
5. Refer to your research on Communism and the Civil Rights Movement. Alton is a former member of the Communist Party who chooses to identify as black. In what ways does he still represent communist ideals? In what ways do his actions go against these ideals? How does his stance on civil rights support what remains of his communist values? How do they conflict?
6. Refer to your research on the Women’s Liberation Movement. Iris states that they live in an “anti-sex society.” What does she mean? How does she play into Sidney’s fantasies about her? How does she take action to break free from these fantasies? In what ways does she change to find her individuality? What does this transformation represent for Sidney? In what ways does Iris succeed in liberating herself?
7. Refer to your research on the philosophies of Sartre, Camus and Thoreau. Which characters align their ideas about the individual’s role in society with Sartre? Camus? Thoreau? In what ways do characters’ philosophies shift during the course of the play?
8. Alton accuses Sidney of “ostrich-ism.” In what ways does Sidney choose to avoid taking action, either politically or personally? In what ways does Iris struggle with her own inaction? What are the consequences of not taking action for Iris? For Sidney? Their marriage? How does Gloria’s final action propel Iris and Sidney’s actions at the end of the play?

9. Refer to your research on the Greek chorus and the Fates. In what ways are the sisters like a Greek chorus? How are they like the Fates of Greek mythology? Which Fate does each sister represent? How does each Parodus sister describe their father? How have these views shaped how they each live their lives?
10. Refer to your research on Judah Maccabee. What is the significance of Sidney breaking his “sword” in half at the end of Act Two? How are Sidney and Judah’s journeys similar? How do they differ?
11. What do the phrases “Live and let live” and “you’ve got to swing the way the world swings” mean? How does living by these mottos create a positive atmosphere for the characters in the play? For each character, what are the consequences of prescribing to these mottos as a way of life?
12. Iris says to Sidney, “Don’t start blaming everything on society.” When do each of the characters in the play accept responsibility for their own actions? What are the consequences of accepting that responsibility?
13. What is the relationship between having strong opinions and getting things accomplished for Sidney? For Iris? For Alton? For Wally? For David? When do characters’ opinions and actions contradict each other? What do these contradictions reveal about these people?
14. Mavis states “There are no squares, Sidney.” What does she mean? How does she defy Sidney’s vision of who she is? How do other characters defy Sidney’s projections of who he wants them to be? How does he defy his own expectations of himself?
15. When David finally achieves success, what does this represent to Sidney? What does success and recognition represent to David? What are the problems that David has with fame? When does he eventually accept his success? What causes this shift?
16. When do other characters “sell out,” or become accepting of “tiny corruptions”? When is selling out a positive opportunity for the characters? What do they gain? When is it negative? What do they lose?

17. How does Alton react when he figures out what Gloria really does for a living? What in his own life does he equate with prostitution? How does this equation keep him from marrying Gloria? In what ways does Alton’s refusal of Gloria affect her?
18. Refer to your research on Francisco de Goya and his famous etching, *One Hunting for Teeth*. Gloria says “The things people think they have to do? To survive? Someday I’m going to buy that print. It’s all about my life.” Why does she think this print accurately depicts her life? How does this realization propel her actions forward?
19. One of the main themes of the play is the relationship between hope and caring. Near the beginning of the play Sidney says that he has experienced “the death of the exclamation point.” What does this mean in relation to his level of hope and caring? In what ways have other characters experienced “the death of the exclamation point?” Which characters rediscover it? How do these rediscoveries change them?
20. What is the significance of the title of the play? What does it symbolize? How does the meaning of the sign change from the beginning of the play to the end?

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