



Pearson
Edexcel

GCE English Literature

Component 1: Drama

Les Blancs, Lorraine
Hansberry

An Introductory
Guide





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Overview

Lorraine Hansberry's last play, *Les Blancs*, was published in 1972. Hansberry began writing it in 1960 and was still working on the final draft when she died in 1965. Her ex-husband, Robert Nemiroff, completed the play based on her drafts and it was first performed in 1970. The play depicts the lives and conflicts of the people living in an unnamed African mission compound around the end of colonialism in the late 19th century.

The play focuses on the return of Tshembe Matoseh to his birthplace after he has been living in England with his white English wife and their child. He returns for the funeral of his father and tries to reconnect with his family and his past whilst struggling to deal with the conflict and violence which has been building up in his absence.

This play was Lorraine Hansberry's only play set in Africa and, through her characters, she wanted to highlight and discuss the different forces and agendas which were facing black Africans as a result of colonialism, imperialism and racism.

Versions of the play

There are currently two versions of the play available to buy online.

1. *Les Blancs: The Collected Last Plays*, Lorraine Hansberry – edited by Robert Nemiroff with an introduction by Margaret B. Wilkerson (Vintage, 1992).
2. *Les Blancs: A Drama in Two Acts*, Lorraine Hansberry – final Text adapted by Robert Nemiroff (Samuel French, 2009)

The Samuel French version was completed by Robert Nemiroff in 1972 and the Vintage version is a later version adapted by Robert Nemiroff in 1982.

Both editions are similar, and either can be used in the study of this play. The Vintage version of the play is more readily available on Amazon and other online sites.

The National Theatre, for their production of the play in 2016 were permitted to make amendments to Hansberry's work. This [video](#) explains the process. The script of this production is not available. We would recommend that students are permitted to watch this version of the play but are reminded that that they need to refer to the published text in their examination responses.



Key themes of the play

- **Violence and power** – this important theme is represented by a number of key characters. From the outset, in the Prologue, when the Woman in traditional dress, raises a spear which has been planted into the earth, Hansberry makes it clear that her play is going to ask the audience to think about the nature of violence and power. An air of violence pervades the play. Throughout the play, **Major Rice** is quick to use violence to preserve his ‘power’ over the African people. Tshembe sees how his homeland has become torn apart and he, in turn, is torn between supporting his country and family in their fight for freedom and preserving his new life with his wife and child in England. We are poignantly reminded in the play that this violence is not new as Ngago, a militant leader who tries to recruit Tshembe, issues a stirring speech about the three hundred years of oppression and violent acts the African people have endured and that it is now, finally, time to fight back.
- **Conflict** – whilst there is violence and physical conflict in the play, there are also other types of conflict. Tshembe struggles with the inner conflicts of his past life and his new life. Likewise, his brother Abioseh shows the conflict between ‘reason’ and violence as he has converted to Catholicism and wants a peaceful resolution – putting him in conflict with his family and other friends. There is also racial conflict which is exemplified by the way Major Rice speaks to and about the African villagers and how the settlers view themselves and their beliefs in comparison to the African way of life.
- **Colonialism** – Major Rice, as the antagonist of the play, represents the arrogance and the unfeeling nature of the white settler or colonialist. His violence and suspicious nature and the fact that he truly believes that Africa ‘belongs’ to the white settlers highlights the battle the African people had to reclaim their rights. Charlie Morris, although a more sympathetic character who disagrees with Major Rice, is nonetheless naïve about the issues facing Africa and has to be educated by Tshembe to fully understand the significant problems colonialism has caused, and how, after years of trying to come to a peaceful solution, now may be the time for more radical action. The other white settlers at the Mission – Martha Gotterling, Willy DeKovan and Madame Neilsen – are kind and well-meaning. However DeKovan, in particular, does recognise that they are also part of the problem as the Mission is encouraging the teaching of western religion and education as well as keeping the settlers in control.
- **Identity** – many of the characters, due to the conflict and the escalation of the violence in the region, struggle with their own identities and beliefs. Tshembe is first seen in a suit as he has returned from England for his father’s funeral. As the play progresses, he changes out of this into traditional clothing and learns more about his father’s role in the fight for freedom. This makes him question his new professional life and his identity. Likewise, his eldest brother, Abioseh, struggles with his new identity as a Catholic priest which ultimately leads him to betray his family and roots when he causes Peter to be shot by Major Rice.



- **Family and duty** – Tshembe returns to Africa to support and honour his father, Old Abioseh, who once was a friend of the Mission but who became a commander in the revolution. He is then torn between honouring his father’s memory by ensuring that Africa becomes free from the tyranny and cruelty of colonialism or returning to his wife and child back in England. His eldest brother, Abioseh, who has converted to Catholicism and has assimilated all of the ways of the colonialists, wants Tshembe to stay uninvolved. The brothers argue over the care of their youngest sibling, Eric, who is struggling with his addiction to alcohol and his place in the world. Both men end up putting duty before family as Abioseh betrays Tshembe by revealing to Major Rice that Peter is a terrorist and Tshembe kills Abioseh and helps fight against the colonialists.
- **Tradition and education** – from the outset, the play shows the importance of heritage and tradition in Africa. The use of traditional dress and music as well as the introduction of the Modingo fable illustrate how strong and important heritage and tradition are. The conflict between tradition and ‘education’ can be seen when Tshembe and Abioseh argue about their father’s funeral ceremony. Both Tshembe and Abioseh have been educated at the mission and have more ‘western’ knowledge and although Tshembe is grateful for this and has used it to gain work and a new life in England, he also sees and appreciates the importance of traditions and others’ views and how these must not be eroded by colonialism and the white settlers taking over.



Literary features that shape meaning

- **Staging/Costume/Stage directions** – Hansberry’s play is rich in detail in terms of the staging, costume and stage directions. The opening prologue offers advice on how to light the stage to look like African twilight as well as details around the ‘bangles of feathers’ in the costume of the Woman. This use of light and dark helps to shape meaning and creates a sense of tension and fear as the audience are plunged into darkness at the start of the play but later see the flames and the figure of the woman in the light at the end of the play perhaps to signify a new beginning. The use of costume helps to highlight contrasts and changes in the characters. We know that some of the characters are colonialists, for example, as they are wearing ‘pith’ helmets. Likewise, the differences between Tshembe and Abioseh are foregrounded when Tshembe changes out of his suit into traditional dress and his brother is wearing the robes of a Catholic priest. Hansberry includes a lot of detailed stage direction in her play as significant amounts of action take place off-stage, but she also wants to shape the audience response to her characters and to the ideas they represent. Such rich direction and description helps both actors and audience to explore the conflicts and issues the characters were facing.
- **Characterisation** – Hansberry uses her characters to represent key themes and issues. For example, Charlie Morris, the white American journalist, is very sympathetic to the cause of the African people and clearly shows his dislike of Major Rice and his methods. However, when he talks to Tshembe, he realises that he too has his own prejudices and has underestimated, or not thought about, all of the issues around colonialism despite not being as extreme in his views as Major Rice. Like Charlie Morris, Madame Neilsen is extremely sympathetic and wants to help the Africans who come to her mission by providing them with education and medicine. She, like her husband, has formed friendships with many of the Africans who live in the villages around the mission, but she does not fully understand why or how their presence might also be unwelcome or resented. As a literally blind character, we can see that not only is she old and vulnerable, but also that she has become less aware of what is going on around her, politically and socially. Tshembe represents the conflict and issues that many migrants experience. He wants to improve personally and create a better and more financially prosperous life, but he cannot ignore the issues and conflicts that his family, and his nation, are suffering.
- **Invisible/silent characters** – Hansberry uses absent and silent characters to convey meaning. Tshembe’s father is already dead when the play opens but it is his funeral, and his legacy, which form the catalyst for a lot of the action. Likewise, the wise and much revered Reverend Torvald Neilsen is never seen. Like Tshembe’s father, he is a catalyst for both the situation as it is now (we are told that he opposed the villagers’ requests for more representation and that he thought the two races should be kept apart) and for the escalation in violence as it is his death which causes Major Rice to call in more troops and to shoot Peter. The Woman is also an important character even though she is silent. She represents the complexities and conflicts at the heart of African cultural identity and appears to Tshembe in full African clothing against a backdrop of drums holding a spear. She is there to remind him, and us, about the struggle for power and survival and how the time has come to take action.



- **Music and sound** – music and sound create a sense of atmosphere and tension throughout the play. Hansberry’s stage directions refer to drums and music on numerous occasions and even give advice on the volume to help increase the tension. The drums in particular are both warning signs and a symbol of a more traditional way of life. They are also used to commemorate the death of Tshembe’s father and to mark Tshembe’s arrival. The drums are then used at the end of the play to show how Tshembe is stepping into his father’s shoes and becoming a revolutionary leader himself. Likewise, other sounds are used to create meanings. At the start of the play, Hansberry includes the sounds of animals such as crickets and the ‘laughter’ of the hyena in the African bush to help build atmosphere. The introduction of the hyena also foreshadows the use of the fable of Modingo and the harrowing cries of Tshembe at the end of the play when he murders his own brother.
- **Motifs and symbolism** – Hansberry uses motifs and symbols throughout her play to create meaning. The symbolic use of the Woman almost haunts Tshembe to make him face the truth about what he needs to do. Likewise, the use of the symbolic character Modingo helps Tshembe to take action. The fable of Modingo the Hyena is that he waited too long to fight back against the Elephants who took his home and drove the hyenas out. This is why the hyena has a bitter laugh. By using this fable, Hansberry appears to be suggesting that you can’t stand around for too long and listen – you need to take a side.



Contextual factors

- **The author's life and beliefs** – Lorraine Hansberry is now recognised as an important and influential voice and playwright. She was the first African American woman to have a play – *A Raisin in the Sun* – performed on Broadway. As well as being an accomplished playwright, she also wrote widely about civil rights and gender politics. She was particularly passionate about the negative effects of colonialism both in the USA and in Africa and this was one of the main motivations behind writing *Les Blancs* in the 1960s. She also challenged the lack of radicalism of white liberals and encouraged everyone to take action against injustice.
- **Historical contexts** – Lorraine Hansberry is said to have been greatly affected and influenced by Ghana's successful fight for independence in 1957.
- **Literary context** – in the introduction to the Vintage edition of the play (p.32), Hansberry's husband talks about how Hansberry began thinking about her play in 1960. However, he states that it took its 'final shape and title' after Hansberry had seen *Les Nègres (The Blacks)* by the French playwright, Jean Genet in 1961. She felt that the French playwright had not realistically explored the human cost of colonialism and she wanted to address these issues in her own play. There are also literary parallels in the play to both tragedy as a genre and to other tragic heroes such as Hamlet, with Tshembe seemingly unable to escape his fate and haunted by his personal ambitions and his broader duties to his nation and family.
- **Social context** – although the play is set in the late 19th or early 20th century, its themes and issues are highly relevant, both to the time Hansberry was writing and now. When Hansberry was writing the play in the 1960s, there was a strong and active civil rights movement in American led by Martin Luther King and Malcolm X and supported by her fellow writers such as James Baldwin. Hansberry was very active in this movement and fought for the rights of Black Americans. She was anxious for everyone to see the parallels between slavery, colonialism and the contemporary treatment of Black Americans. Likewise, in the 21st century, the fight for equality is still continuing with the work of BLM in the UK and the USA. The play highlights the need for peaceful discussion and negotiation but also that there are times when direct action is needed to fight against oppression, violence and systemic racism.



Further information and reading

- *Les Blancs – The Last Collected Plays* – edited by Robert Nemiroff with an introduction by Margaret B. Wilkerson (Vintage Books, 1994) contains a very interesting and thorough discussion of Lorraine Hansberry's life and works as well as some critical material about *Les Blancs* in particular, with references to other available material.

For further information about Lorraine Hansberry, the following links provide some useful background.

- [American Radio Works](#) – this page gives an overview of Hansberry's life and works as well as an audio file and transcript of a speech she gave shortly before her death in 1965.
- [The New Yorker](#) – this article – which does require you to sign in for free – looks at Hansberry's life and reviews a recent biography about her.
- [Introduction to Lorraine Hansberry](#) – Joi Gresham, the director of the Lorraine Hansberry Trust, on a short video introducing the playwright and *Les Blancs*.
- [The National Theatre](#) – this page is a biography of Hansberry and has some quotations from other writers who knew and admired her work. It also gives some background about *Les Blancs*.
- The National Theatre staged a production of *Les Blancs* in 2016 and the links below to webpages and some YouTube clips refer to this production.
 - [Les Blancs show page](#) – this page contains links to the trailer of the play and interviews with the cast about the play.
 - [National Theatre at Home](#) – this page contains the link to the paid for rental of a performance of the play.
 - [Learning resource](#) – this short resource is a pdf with interactive links and some suggestions around reviewing the production of the play.
 - [Panel discussion](#) – this is a short YouTube clip with three panellists discussing *Les Blancs* and its themes.

The following links may be a useful introduction to some of the historical/social context mentioned above

- [BBC: On this Day](#) – this webpage gives a short history of the history of the independence of Ghana in 1957.
- [Independence Day in Ghana](#) – a short video showing Independence Day in Ghana in 1957.
- [The Mau Mau uprising in Kenya](#) – this webpage shows photos and gives more information about the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya in 1953 when the Mau Mau tribe attacked European settlers in Kenya.
- [Kenya declares independence in 1963](#) – this webpage gives more information about Kenya's successful fight for independence in 1963.
- [Jomo Kenyatta](#) – a video outlining the life and achievements of the influential leader of Kenya who helped them gain independence in 1963.