Name: Date:

**Analytical Paragraphs Prompt:** After reading the following article “Housing and Race in Chicago” describe and evaluate two challenges faced by an African American family who moved to Chicago in the mid 1900’s. Support your response with specific textual evidence from the article.

Thesis:

Quote I:

Quote II:

“Housing and Race in Chicago”

By James Gross et al

Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* chronicles the efforts of an African American family to move out of the ghetto to a better neighborhood. It draws upon a complicated and difficult part of Chicago’s history. The play is set sometime between 1945 and 1959 and illustrates many of the conflicts that surrounded the questions of race and housing during this period in Chicago. Although less well known than The Great Migration of 1910-1930, when large numbers of African Americans first moved to Chicago from the South, the period of 1940-1960 actually saw more African Americans arrive in the city, owing to such factors as the availability of industrial jobs during World War II and the collapse of the Southern share-cropping system.

The housing market in Chicago was tight even before the end of World War II when veterans returned in need of housing. African Americans were primarily limited to an area of Chicago known as the “Black Belt,” which was located between 12th and 79th streets and Wentworth and Cottage Grove avenues. Approximately 60,000 blacks had moved from the South to Chicago during 1940-44 in search of jobs. In an effort to keep the newly arriving African Americans out of their neighborhoods, whites within a residential block formed “restrictive covenants,” legally binding contracts that specified a house’s owner could not rent or sell to black people. Such covenants, by restricting African Americans to the Black Belt, increased overcrowding within this area during the war. When overcrowding continued into the post-war years as more blacks moved north to Chicago, many families would often live in one apartment.

Such overcrowding, while difficult in itself, also contributed to generally poor housing conditions for black families. Because there were so many people living in this one area, demand far exceeded supply, and landlords would divide apartments into tiny units called “kitchenettes” and charge exorbitant rents. These apartments often had no bathrooms, with all the occupants of a floor having to share a single hall unit. Buildings sometimes lacked such basic amenities as proper heating. Residents used kerosene lamps instead, and their improvised stoves often overheated and caused fires. The partitions used to divide the apartments were flammable as well, adding to the hazardous conditions. Approximately 751 fires occurred in one year in the Black Belt, many of them fatal. Despite building codes, landlords were rarely penalized for owning slum housing and the few landlords who were fined found it was far more profitable to pay the usually small fine than to maintain their buildings. These conditions of ramshackle and dangerous housing, neglect and indifference from city officials and poor sanitation resulted in infestation by rats. This is illustrated in *A Raisin in the Sun* when Travis Younger and his friends kill a rat as “big as a cat.” Rats reportedly attacked sleeping children, sometimes maiming and even killing them. Tuberculosis and other diseases spread; the infant mortality and overall death rates were higher in the Black Belt than in the rest of Chicago.

After the war there was an outward migration from the Black Belt into surrounding neighborhoods. In 1948, the Supreme Court declared restrictive covenants unconstitutional. A predominantly white housing boom on the fringes of the city and in the suburbs meant more available housing in the city. An increasing number of African Americans were moving into the middle class and were finally able to get out of the slums—some were able to move to better neighborhoods and enjoy a far better quality of life. In other cases, however, the migration of African Americans only amounted to an expansion of the slums they were trying to escape. Unscrupulous real estate speculators played a large role when African Americans sought to move into better, primarily white neighborhoods. In order to increase their profit margin, speculators would play on the white people’s fears of black neighbors. Working-class whites were especially vulnerable to such practices. Their homes often were their only asset and owners feared declining property values. Practices known as “block busting,” in which speculators tried to convince working-class whites that their neighborhoods were going to deteriorate owing to an influx of African Americans, took advantage of such fears. Thus, when the speculators offered cash for a house, the white owners often accepted less than the house’s actual value on the assumption that their houses would be worth even less later.

Taking advantage of patently racist practices by banks such as “red-lining,” speculators were able to make a handsome profit off of the incoming African Americans, sometimes doubling their money. Banks would draw a red line around an “undesirable” neighborhood and deny mortgages to the new African American residents. As a result, although African Americans fought housing discrimination by protesting and filing lawsuits, the first African American families seeking to move into these areas would have no choice but to work with the speculators on extremely disadvantageous terms. They could acquire houses for a low-down payment, but the speculators would demand an astronomically high monthly payment. Since the black families would also have to sign an installment contract that left the title to the house in the speculator’s possession, a family could be evicted for the smallest violation of the housing agreement. Desperate to make the high payments, African American families resorted to the practice of taking in large numbers of boarders. This recreated the condition of too many occupants in too little space. Burdened with the monthly payment to the speculators, they would not have the money to keep up the property they had sought so desperately and the neighborhood would deteriorate. Additionally, black neighborhoods did not receive the same quality of city services, and so the area that had originally looked like the promised land to African Americans became another slum.

Integration of neighborhoods was an extremely charged affair. Riots by white mobs were not uncommon. Most Chicagoans, however, had no idea of the situation’s volatility. For much of the 1940s the major newspapers, at the request of the Chicago Commission on Human Relations, would simply not report the occurrence of these riots. The white families who lived along the border of the “Black Belt,” and could not afford to move formed neighborhood associations to let blacks know that they were not welcome. In *A Raisin in the Sun*, Karl Lindner, of the Clybourne Park Improvement Association, visits the Younger family and states, “Negro families are happier when they live in their own communities.” Mr. Lindner offers to buy the property back from the Younger family for more than they paid. More often, efforts to keep African Americans out were not so gentle.

Sometimes, the first African American family to move into a white area would require police escorts in order to move around the neighborhood. They suffered constant verbal abuse and the threat of physical violence. Their property was damaged by hurled bricks and explosives were thrown through their windows. African Americans endured danger and ostracism in the neighborhoods where they were simply seeking a decent place to live.

**Sources**

* Grossman, James R. *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners and the Great Migration*. University of Chicago Press, 1991.
* Hirsch, Arnold R. *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960*. Cambridge University Press, 1983.
* Strickland, Arvarh E. *History of the Chicago Urban League*. University of Missouri Press, 2001.
* Travis, Dempsey J. *An Autobiography of Black Chicago*. Urban Research Press, 1981.
* Winger, Stewart. “Unwelcome Neighbors.” *Chicago History*, v. 21, n. 1 and 2, 1992.

Content last updated: April 30, 2003