CHAPTER X

LILLIAN HELLMAN'S ACHIEVEMENT AS A DRAMATIST
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Beginning in an unprecedented economic dislocation and ending in a global war, the 1930s was a great period of revolution and resurgence. The economic, social and political conditions of the period, culminating in capitalistic societies greatly affected the literary world and brought about a radical change in the attitude of the writers towards life and literature. The social climate of the 1930s brought about a new awareness of the potentialities of the theatre. And, the theatre became an active participant in the struggle to rouse a disheartened people to renewed optimism.

Social protest was in the air which was reflected in the creative thoughts of the time. With the awakening of the writers and the realization of their responsibility to society, commitment on the part of creative writers had come to assume new literary connotations. Dramatists all over the world started using the theatre as a powerful weapon to attack and purge the society of its evils. The result was a good drama which pricked the conscience and stimulated the imagination of the people.

The American dramatists of the thirties looked longingly at the national theatres of Germany, France and Russia seeking to enliven their own drama and to stimulate their own public demand for an American National Theatre, by emphasizing playwriting as an autonomous literary activity of the stage. The result was a plethora of dramatic works by native writers, in general, and John Howard Lawson, Elmer Rice, Maxwell Anderson and Clifford Odets in particular.
Stimulated to a great extent by the radical playwrights of Germany and also by a desire to spread the gospel of communism, as understood in Soviet Russia, the dramatists of the period began to use the stage as a pulpit to work out solutions to contemporary burning problems in terms of dramatic art. They were ultimately dedicated to the idea that drama should proclaim the brotherhood of man by exhibiting the evils of capitalism.

The play of 'social significance' was one of the outstanding phenomena of the 1930s. But most of those plays were "mechanical in structure, naive and unconvincing since nearly all of them were inspired rather by their authors' desire to protest against injustice or to plead for some new type of utopia than by an impulse to set forth, in terms of beauty or truth, some basic concept of human value, without argument and with no concern over its political effect."1 As Lawson and other leftists continued to exhort Marxist philosophy through loosely constructed melodramas and Odets' plays became melancholy and flat without the tonic of his earlier commitment, the contemporary audiences and critics began to look for fresher themes and newer approaches to social problems. It is at this critical juncture that Lillian Hellman, who is rightly considered to be "America’s number one woman playwright" entered the American theatre to fulfil the expectations of the audience and critics.

Supremely intelligent, respected by her peers, Lillian Heilman is one of the forces in the last forty years of American theatre. Her plays explore the human capacity for malice, the lure of power and money, and the dichotomy between individual interests and social consciousness. Emerging from the spirit of the consciousness-raising theatre projects and supported by the government in the 1930s, Heilman has earned a reputation as an outspoken writer whose primary concerns are moral and whose works dramatically embody her insight into the socio-economic causes behind the behaviour of her characters. She is favourably compared to Tennesse Williams for her powerful evocation of immorality in the Southern milieu.

Heilman is an early and impressive example of the independent woman. A pioneer women's liberationist, she took her chances among the men on Broadway. Her plays are bold efforts, indicative of social documents. They are problem plays, whose problems are no longer secrets. She is a tough woman who has almost certainly not been relishing the patronizing critical practice.

A woman of her time, Lillian Heilman is deeply stirred by all injustices and she boldly speaks out against them. She does not hesitate to portray issues that draw upon the facts of her life as woman. But unlike Glaspell, Crothers and Hansberry, she does not present women's issues as the central focus of any of her plays. Though, at times, Heilman's characterization of women appears harsh, she affords her audience
the opportunity to explore the conditions of a women's life which may lead to manipulating, possessive and emasculating behaviour.

Hellman is different not only from the women playwrights but also from the men playwrights of the period in her techniques and interpretation of social problems. Unlike Odets, she is not a 'theatre person,' an actor, who desperately wishes to write plays. Her desire to write drama is a curious one. Her true purpose in the theatre has been to ferret out truth in lives frittered away by aberrant lying obsessions. Her concern for social problems is clearly evident in her plays. And with considerable force, she attacks evils in society as well as the power of fascism. Combining her interests, she has produced tales of horror dealing with lesbianism, unnatural greed, and human degeneracy - tales in which she has imposed certain criticism against gossip, racial problems, and Southern prejudices.

Using both comedic and melodramatic techniques, Hellman exposes the selfishness and the cruelty of man with a penetrating clarity and a highly theatrical, if sometimes, melodramatic effectiveness. Generally, her objectives may not be different from many writers of the thirties. But with superior artistry and more intense and controlled imagination, she has succeeded in suggesting a universality in her works.
Heilman has to her credit eight original plays, apart from four adaptations, all of them written on serious themes. The themes of her original plays are succinctly summarized by Ellen Moers in the following words:

All the plays are built around two consuming obsessions: family and capital. Capital is power, lust, hate, duty and destiny: Large public themes do of course march across the surface of Heilman’s plays in step with her times like society’s persecution of lesbians in *The Children’s Hour*, class war and strike breaking in *Days to Come* exploitation and corruption in the New South in *The Little Foxes* and *Another Part of the Forest*, the fight against Nazism in *Watch on the Rhine*, complicity of the rich liberal classes in the rise of World Fascism in *The Searching Wind*. Only in the two plays of the 1950s, in some ways the most interesting of all (*The Autumn Garden*, 1951 and *Toys in the Attic*, 1960), is the new stuff of family melodrama allowed to stand alone, without public trappings.²

Generally considered Heilman’s best play, *The Children’s Hour* (1934) is based on an actual British Court case in which two headmistresses of a Scottish girls academy are falsely accused by a student of homosexual activity. Set at a private boarding school, *The Children’s Hour* concerns a spoiled and mean-spirited girl, Mary Tilford, who seeks retribution for what she feels is unfair treatment by accusing two of her teachers of a lesbian affair. The play shocked many with its almost forbidden theme, but suggested very clearly the bold quality of Heilman’s approach to drama. It is neither a lesbian play nor even a play about lesbianism, as some critics think. As Heilman herself states, the play is really about a lie. It is both an engrossing drama and a serious study of abnormal psychology. It demonstrates the playwright’s ability to weave tough-minded expressions of liberal social attitudes into a suspenseful plot.

Heilman’s second play, *Days To come*, (1936), unsuccessfully attempts to incorporate themes regarding the evolving character of labour unions and the conflicts between members of a family. The play presents a family of more or less well-intentioned Americans confronted by the problem of dealing with organised labour when their employees undertake a strike. Although Heilman says that the play is about individuals, most critics feel that the strike is the story and find no connection between the strike and the revelation of personal lives of the characters. The significance of the play lies in Heilman attempting to develop a theme common to all her plays -- that the world we live in is the sum total of the acts of each individual in it. The play shows how ignorance, dishonesty and cowardice in personal lives affect social events.

Set in a small Southern town in 1900, Heilman’s third play, *The Little Foxes* (1938), depicts greed and sibling rivalry among members of the affluent Hubbard family who seek to expand their wealth by exploiting the cheap labour force available in their community. The business venture turns into a catastrophic conflict between Ben Hubbard, Oscar, his brother, and their sister, Regina, as their quest for power and money results in double dealings, theft, blackmail and an act that is tantamount to murder. The play offers a scathing criticism of a class of people who manipulate society and the lives within it with a ruthless eye toward greater personal wealth and power. The play implicitly condemns the vindictiveness and rapacity of bourgeois society. Thus, the play is concerned with social degradation and moral decay as
inescapable consequences of the inordinate appetite for money and power. It is a sombre study in the psychology of evil. *The Little Foxes* has received widespread acclaim for its strong characterization, tightly woven plot and spirited dialogue.

*Watch On The Rhine* (1940), the fourth play, centres upon a family involved in the anti-Nazi movement. It is a vital, eloquent and compassionate play about an American family suddenly awakened to the danger threatening their liberty. It is the most human of all Hellman's plays, the warmest and, in some ways, the most understanding. The play asserts the necessity of struggle against both evil and the passivity of bystanders. The moral and political questions with which it deals continue to provoke us even today.

In her next play, *The Searching Wind* (1944), Hellman advocates anti-fascist activity in an examination of well-meaning affluent Americans who fail to use their money and influence to halt the progress of Bermito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler. *The Searching Wind* is in a sense an extension of *Watch on the Rhine*, like which it is contemporary. Hellman uses flashbacks to show us how the middle-aged characters arrived at their present plight and how their personal lives reflect and influence the world they live in. In this sense the play is reminiscent of *Days to come*, making the point that the world is the sum total of each person's personal actions. However, many critics contend that the play's multiple scenes and numerous major characters divert audience from Hellman's thematic intentions. If *The Searching Wind* has plot...
problems and deficiencies in characterization, what saves the play is the dialogue which is crisp, clear, often witty and always intelligent.

In *Another Part of the Forest* (1947), the succeeding play, Hellman returns to the Hubbard family twenty years prior to the action of *The Little Foxes* in order to trace the origins of their obsession with money and power. The play centres on the family patriarch, Marcus Hubbard, a self-made man who becomes rich during the civil-war by charging outrageous sums for necessities. The elder son, Ben, blackmails Marcus into naming him the heir of the family business when he discovers his father’s indirect involvement in the deaths of twenty seven confederate soldiers. Though not as successful as *The Little Foxes*, *Another Part of the Forest* has garnered praise for Hellman’s insights into the sources of human behaviour.

Hellman’s seventh play, *The Autumn Garden* (1951), is concerned with a group of middle-aged individuals vacationing on the gulf of Mexico, who discover the ramifications of the decisions and compromises they have made. Considered an unusually introspective work in the Hellman canon, this play received positive reviews and drew comparisons to the works of Anton Chekhov for its emphasis on characterization and dialogue. *The Autumn Garden* is more individualized and technically experimental than Hellman’s earlier plays. Unlike Hellman’s other plays, it lays emphasis on character over plot. In a summer boarding house, a group of people who lack purpose, joy and love are gathered. Hellman’s characterization shows
a notable advance in subtlety as she views her people with more sympathy and less simple judgement.

*Toys in the Attic* (1960) is Hellman’s last original play. It is less Chekhovian than *The Autumn Garden* and more like the earlier Hellman full of mystery and melodrama. It is a Southern Gothic piece revolving round the obsessive and destructive relationship between spinster sisters, Carrie and Anna, and their younger brother, Julian, whose sudden wealth and marriage threaten their domination of him. Like the *The Autumn Garden*, *Toys in the Attic* basically looks at a family and shows the deceptions in the lives of the characters. Gradually, the characters come to varying degrees of awareness of their self-delusions and go on their way with little hope for any future change. The play progresses unsteadily towards its conclusion. A series of schemes, psychological abnormalities, sexual alliances and psychic experiences constitute the structure which is not without loose ends. The principal virtue of *Toys in the Attic* is Hellman’s use of irony. Irony comes from characters who have insights other characters lack and they speak ironically. Hellman’s mastery of irony makes *Toys in the Attic* both character drama and dark comedy. The play combines all of Hellman’s earlier virtues as a dramatist with compassion, truth, detachment and tremendous dramatic power.

Thus, Hellman through her eight original plays, makes a significant contribution to the development of social drama in the 1930s. Her plays, though not
purely Marxist, represent the highest achievement of the leftist writers in their organisation, communication of social awareness and intensive employment of thought. Like Odets, Hellman uses allegory to depict the struggle between good and evil, capital and labour, socialist and fascist. Like Odets, she writes with a conscious eye towards injustice, corruption, the allusiveness of material success and man's capacity for sadism and cruelty to his fellow-men.

Hellman's reputation as a dramatist rests on a handful of tightly-constructed plays skilfully depicting human perversity and evil. The destructive power of evil is a common theme in all her plays. However different the story, the place and the people, the theme of Hellman's play is always the same, the struggle between good and active evil. It reveals Hellman's creative skill and technical equipment to approach a single goal from many angles and still to keep each separate line of approach clear, each story vivid. The single-minded devotion to her own idea of what is important and her ability to translate the idea into play, over and over again with an increasing power and persuasion, are Hellman's distinctive achievement.

Approached from another angle, Hellman's plays are all about money. Her own complicated attitude towards money underlies all her work. Her major theatrical subject is money, how it is made, how it changes lives, what people will do to acquire it. Money and materialism are the main concerns of her characters and as they are greedy, they want more money. Money, in fact, is usually an additional shadow
character in her plays, often the most important one. It can function symbolically but it also has a tangible, concrete, almost organic nature. In *Toys in the Attic*, for instance, money is stroked as if it were a domestic animal. Hellman sometimes seems to divide the world according to how people’s loyalties and values are affected by money.

Although Hellman’s plays are known for their revolutionary themes, they are traditional as far as the technique is concerned like Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger* (1956). As a dramatist she is contented to work within the traditional confines of the well-made play. Her plays are neatly structured with a good beginning, a good middle and a good end. The main character observes but does not affect the action though its violent consequences bring him to his recognition. The action and the participants in the action assume more importance than the plot and the main character. The participants in the action are named but not explored while the inactive main character is fully delineated. He is the only character who changes in the course of the play and the action exists for the single purpose of bringing him to awareness.

Hellman’s plays follow a consistent dramatic pattern. The plot consists of a gradual awareness of a character who has refused to see or to act upon the objective facts of her life. The action, distinct from the plot, comprises a series of sensational events in the conflict of obviously good and evil forces which culminate in a physical or emotional violence.
Though Hellman is a social dramatist, her plays are not sociological dramas as some critics think them to be, for her characters are genuine individuals, not social symbols. The central interest in her plays is always on persons rather than on social ideas. Hellman writes in the tradition of Ibsen’s *Hedda Gabler* rather than that of a *A Doll’s House* or *An Enemy of the People*. Like Odets, Hellman employs characters who reflect ‘types.’ But, her types are more oblique -- the ‘capitalist’ might be a benevolent grandmother or the ‘gangster-fascist’ or might be a teenage girl. Hellman’s heroes and heroines are invariably defeated by their own personal frailty or their own internal corruption rather than by social forces of economic determinism. Hellman uses economics and other social elements to create an abstract set of ‘moral assumptions’ and she attempts to dramatize the lives of human beings as they are played out against the backdrop of those assumptions.

Unlike other woman playwrights like Ellen Glasgow, Hellmans’s interest is equally distributed between male and female characters. She often shows a remarkable knowledge of the male side of life and insight into masculine mentality. With the possible exception of Tennesse Williams, few male dramatists of her generation have demonstrated such a convincing understanding of the psychology of the opposite sex.

Interested in women and sensitive in depicting them, Hellman has always included major female characters in her plays. She uses their confrontations with both male characters and other female characters to provide the plays with energy and
emotive power. Hellman's use of female characters is an important element of her
dramatic method. She attempts to evaluate the variations in roles found in woman's
social standing. The manner in which Hellman develops her female character is
consistently dramatic rather than novelistic.

To illustrate, in *The Little Foxes* Hellman approaches her women entirely from
the outside. In *Another Part of the Forest*, she experiments in characterization moving
towards a more internal examination of women. In *The Autumn Garden*, she perfects
her power of internal characterization and in *Toys in the Attic*, she combines in expert
balance the external approach and the internal approach. In her advanced perception
of the role of woman in society, Hellman has drawn many women characters -- from
Regina, the vicious predator, to Alexandra the energetic new woman. In between
these lie Hellman's other women -- the trapped, destroyed, the well-intentioned but
dangerous.

As a dramatic artist, Hellman adheres to the conventions of dramatic realism.
She is extremely realistic as an interpreter of South which provides the setting of four
of her plays -- *The Little Foxes, Another Part of the Forest, The Autumn Garden and
Toys in the Attic*. Her theme in *The Little Foxes* and *Another Part of the Forest* is the
rapaciousness of a family of rising Southerners. She contrasts them with the ruined
aristocracy who cannot adapt themselves to changing conditions. Hellman's two plays
contrast the loneliness of the falling and the rising Hubbards, illuminating on the two
women, Birdie and Regina. Like Tennesse Williams' later plays, the later Hellman plays become more interesting, personal and autobiographical. For both, a shadowy plantation South reflects the present discontent. Though change is inevitable, the Southerners find the change painful. While Williams sees the enemy as time or fate, Hellman sees it as human evil. Yet, both share the common belief that strength of will and independence can triumph to some extent. As Nancy M. Tischler observes, "Hellman is the only woman playwright of prominence in modern American theatre history. Her portrayals of her native South are effective vignettes of 'home and frightening land.'"³

Hellman's plays are good examples of topical drama concerned with the realistic manifestations of good and evil in human character. Hellman believes that if one were a healthy person, morally and socially, she is assured of a rightful place in the social order. Hellman's dark world of those who triumph through a calculated disregard of moral values is as grim and full of pain as in the most extreme theatre of the absurd. Her plays are portraits of people and not of abstract symbols. Hellman's characters, though personally and morally responsible for their action, are always portrayed within a social framework, their motives rooted in social forces. Hellman is one of the first women to begin the social theatre. Along with Glaspell,

she buried the romantic women characters beside the romantic women playwrights who created them.

Thus, Hellman's plays like Ben Jonson's, are intensely realistic, reflecting as they do moral and social issues. Hellman's last plays reflect a deeper understanding of the complexities of human nature than her earlier works. The subtlety and elusiveness of her characterization add to the depth and texture of her works, suggesting an artistic maturity. Hellman does not present images of women as in any way stereotypical, but tends to present them as fully defined individuals within complex social and psychological contexts. Hellman's plays are part of the wave of social criticism that permeated the theatre during the depression and the war years.

Hellman is essentially a playwright with a deep moral concern. In her hands drama becomes a tool for conveying her moral concerns. She is strongly moral and writes with a righteous indignation. She is greatly concerned with evil in society. Her plays are, in a sense, studies in evil. The problem of good and evil is basic to all of Hellman's work. In all her plays, the well-intentioned are destroyed by the 'little foxes' who are always around to 'eat the earth.'

Politically, Hellman is a liberal, an anti-Nazi and an anti-fascist who believes more in the rights of the working man than in any other rights. In spite of her bias, her plays are never didactic. Although there is implicit anti-capitalism in The Little
Foxes and explicit anti-fascism in *Watch on the Rhine*, Hellman has always been most concerned with personal morality. Despite her obvious concern with social evil, Hellman, more often than not, seems to be pre-occupied with abstract evil, even to the point of caricature as in *Another Part of the Forest* or she goes out of her way to provide acres of psychological motivation as in *Toys in the Attic*. For her, however, psychological determinism, as *The Autumn Garden* shows, is never an excuse. Always a moralist, the playwright is usually intent on pointing a critical finger not only at the eaters of the earth, but at those who, in Addie's words in *The Little Foxes*, 'stand and watch them do it.'

Many of Hellman's plays explore the corruptive nature of evil and the decay of morally deficient characters. She uses allegory to depict the struggle between good and evil, capital and labour, socialist and fascist. She writes with a conscious eye towards injustice, corruption, the elusiveness of material success and man's capacity for sadism and cruelty to his fellowman. The world of Hellman family is as violent and dramatic as a summer thunderstorm, but just as dry and airless and it is absolutely sealed off from strangers. In each play, someone lives dangerously lives a lie, comes to a turning in the road and risks truth-telling. The truth is revealed and the evil is exposed.

Thus, Hellman’s plays, which are well-made, are redeemed from commercialism by their strong commitment. Her moral message is organically part
of her artistic structure and characterization. She constantly makes the point, equally applicable to private and public affairs, that it is immoral to remain passive when evil is being done. She believes that clear moral message "is only a mistake when it fails to achieve its purpose, and I would rather make the attempt, and fail, than fail to make the attempt." Hellman’s works like her life, consistently demonstrate responsibility, courage and integrity.

Hellman’s moral vision, it must be noted, is inseparable from her ironic vision and voice. Though obviously more overt in the memoirs -- An Unfinished Woman (1969), Pentimento (1973) and The Scoundrel Time (1976) -- her ironic vision is all-pervasive in her plays. And as Wayne Booth rightly observes, "as soon as an ironic voice has been used to any extent in any work of any kind readers inevitably begin to take interest and pleasure in that voice --- in the task it assigns and the qualities it provides; it thus becomes part of whatever is seen as the controlling context." A careful reading of her plays reveals that those generally considered her best --- The Little Foxes, The Autumn Garden, Toys in the Attic, Watch on the Rhine, Another Part of the Forest --- are the most fully ironic. Readers and audiences with predilection for irony can hopefully turn to Lillian Hellman, the way they turn to Jane Austen and R.K.Narayan, for an ironic vision of life trenchantly expressed.

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In spite of her solid contribution to the growth and development of American drama, Hellman is often criticized for her artful contrivance of 'well-made play,' for her use of artificial melodramatic techniques to achieve the thrilling climaxes in her plays, and for her rhetorical curtain speeches. Critics like Jacob Adler and Barret H. Clark, who have tried to reduce all her plots and characters to repeated formulas and types, think that Hellman's plays are too well-made, depending as they do upon the careful structuring of events to create suspense. They are of the opinion that "the plays, whose effects are contrived, whose threads are knit tighter than the threads in life do not convince."7

This charge is levelled at much of Hellman's work, and her answer is always to the effect that drama as a form demands contrivance, and that it does not matter if the play is contrived, as long as it is convincing. For, as Hellman says,

the stage is a tight unbending, unfluid, meagre form in which to write... (The author) has three walls of a theatre and he has begun his pretence with the always rather comic notion that the audience is the fourth wall. He must pretend and he must represent. And if there is something vaguely awry, for me, about the pretence of representation... it is not that I wish to deny to other writers their variations of the form, but that, for me, the realistic form has interested me most.8

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8 Lillian Hellman, Ibid.

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And, as to 'well-madeness' the theatre itself is a trick, according to Hellman, and demands that the playwright 'trick up the scene.'

The convincing well-madeness of a play can be illustrated through *The Children's Hour* and *The Little Foxes* which are widely regarded as Hellman’s best plays. Both are well-made plays but in neither are any actions or characters who do not contribute directly to the unfolding of the central incident. Once the initial situation has been established, the whole movement of the plays is direct and without embellishment toward the climax. The contrivances in both the plays are theatrically convincing and true to dramatic art.

As regards the charge of melodrama, the term is frequently used in a derogatory fashion to suggest that a playwright attempted tragedy and failed to achieve the necessary insight of a character development. Critics like Joseph Wood Krutch, Bigsby and William T. Going feel that Hellman can save her plays from an indiscriminate labelling of melodrama by avoiding happy ending. Lillian Hellman, as a moral writer, wanting always to emphasize the consequences of evil as well as the distortions of human character that are the cause of evil, defends herself saying:

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I think the word melodrama, in our time, has come to be used in an almost illiterate manner. By definition it is a violent dramatic piece, with a happy ending. But I think we can add that it uses its violence for no purpose, to point no moral, to say nothing on say-nothing's worse sense. But when violence is actually the needed stuff of the work and comes toward a large enough and, it has been and always will be in the good writer's field. There is a needed return to the correct use of the word melodrama. It is only then the critic will be able to find out whether a writer justifies his use of violence, and to scale him against those who have used it.10

Properly understood, melodrama, through an exciting adventure which aims at thrilling the audience is a heart-touching ordeal. It differs from the older American melodrama in the modern dramatist's attempt to be more subtle, more realistic, and, perhaps, more truthful.

From her able defence of the alleged charges of well-madeness and melodrama, it is clear that few women writers in the theatre have shown the strength and determination of Hellman. In both her life and work, she has demonstrated extraordinary power and integrity of ideas. She wishes to set right a 'system' grievously out of order through her plays. In an era that largely featured lighthearted romantic plays and drawing-room comedies, Hellman's preference for confronting more complex issues of modern society earned her the reputation as an innovative contributor to the American theatre and the foremost woman playwright in the United States.

Heilman is not a specialist in abnormal psychology or in the Marxian interpretation of society. She is a specialist in hate and frustration, a student of helpless rage, an articulator of inarticulate loathings. Although Ibsen, Chekhov and even Strindberg have been mentioned as possible influences on Heilman, she is fascinated by her own hatred of something. She is never a copyist. She has found her own way of making her own comment upon the American scene.

Heilman is a progressive writer and excels at contrivances, big scenes and sulphurous melodramatics. She writes with a fervour as a person to whom ideas and causes came naturally. The protest in her voice is strong. It is as characteristic of her as the energy of her attack or the neatness of her planning.

Heilman has no need of an entourage. Her plays are models of dramaturgy and worthy of revival. They are realistic and tightly constructed reflecting moral and social issues. Her last plays reflect a deeper understanding of the complexities of human nature than her earlier works. The subtlety and elusiveness of her characterization add to the depth and texture of her works, suggesting an artistic maturity. Stylistically Heilman’s drama is noteworthy for its sophistication and polish and for its adroitly vernacular dialogue, for its unerring accuracy in transcribing the manners of diverse cultures from the small Southern town to the diplomatic circles of pre-war Rome.
In spite of its obvious intelligence, her drama is invariably facile and easily comprehensible to the ordinary audience, a quality which has enabled her to achieve an impressive box-office success. As John Heresy observes, her "plays are real classics of the theatre of our time,"\textsuperscript{11} because "she constructs a play as if it were a temple, working slowly from foundation to roof."\textsuperscript{12} It is art in the Aristotelian sense of the word -- skill, craft, technique--that characterizes Hellman's work. Her work is a part of the wave of social criticism that permeated the theatre during the depression and the war years. Small wonder, therefore, if Rabkin writes that Hellman commands a technique which can "survive abrupt changes in the winds of doctrine."\textsuperscript{13}

Hellman's plays project, beyond those of her contemporaries, the pungency, the ferocity and the sense of righteous indignation that have come to seem the very feel of the 1930s. As Barret Clark notes, she has "pretty well mastered the tools that every dramatist must use in order to gain the attention of the public. She is conscious of the limitations of the drama medium, and she has found at moments how to make


the best of them." Heilman is an impressive dramatist in the 30s, by virtue of her avoidance of the easy answer.

Hellman's plays have a life outside the context of the Depression years. They remind us not so much of Tennesse Williams or Arthur Miller, but of a contemporary playwright like Neil Simon. Like him, Hellman is a thorough professional and concocts plays that maintain interest and quicken the pulse. If Simon is more entertaining, Hellman is more earnest, and more apparently engaged with important matters. They hold a mirror up not so much to man as to the needs of the Broadway audience.

Hellman's plays, as Sam Smiley states, while not purely Marxist, represent "the highest achievements of the leftist writers in their organisation, communication of social awareness, and intensive employment of thought." The theme of class struggle is seen in Hellman's plays also, but her class struggle differs from that of typical Marxist writers, as she emphasizes social injustice, rather than class exploitation, personal rather than political or economic corruption, and a desire for understanding rather than revolution.

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To conclude, Hellman has a dramatic mind, an eye for character, a fundamental strength and a complete and unremitting integrity that are rare among the native playwrights of her sex. Her creative skill and technical equipment are praiseworthy. What is more, she is adept at characterization and dialogue. Her skill in creating first-rate acting plays makes her well-made melodramas far more exciting on stage than on page. A single-minded devotion to the requirements of dramatic art, an extraordinary ability to translate her ideas into plays with an increasing power and persuasion, an ability for a superb portrayal of good and evil in life, use of melodramatic devices to dramatise social problems and, above all, an impeccable sense of morality are Hellman’s distinctive achievement as a dramatist. And, we may say that no other woman in the history of American theatre has reached her stature and few have attained her position as one of the ‘gurus’ of the American literary scene.