CHAPTER I

LILLIAN HELLMAN AND HER TIMES
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The theatre... is a vivid and vibrant expression of truths and ideas. It helps to make life whole.

- Brooks Atkinson

The nineteen thirties in the literary world has been considered a great period of revolution and resurgence. The economic depression, the industrial explosion resulting in the growing unrest among workers and the birth of trade unionism, the rise of nationalist movements in colonial countries under imperialistic governments and the exploitation of various kinds resulting in capitalistic societies -- these are some of the economic, social and political conditions that affected the literary world bringing about a remarkable change in the attitude of the writers towards life and literature. An editorial of the London Magazine pointed out that during the thirties "it was a widely held view that poets, novelists and playwrights should be closely concerned in their writing with the fundamental political and social issues of their time."

Commitment on the part of creative writers had come to assume new literary connotations during this period. Whether they subscribed to the political ideology of Marxism or not, commitment was imminent to them. As Gerald Rabkin puts it,

"whatever his politics, the significant fact is that in the thirties the writer felt compelled to commit himself, to involve himself in the social issues of the age to which he belonged."² In *The Writer and Commitment*, John Mander continually asserts the importance of commitment for the writer. "What matters in art", he states, "is the quality and nature of artists' commitment."³

The problem of commitment manifested itself most sharply and clearly in the drama of the 1930s since drama, by its very nature, is an immediate and public art. Drama is pre-eminently a 'social art' and has more direct impact on society. As Francis Fergusson has pointed out, "the theatre artist cannot practise his art without real people assembled before a real stage; a theatre without an audience is a contradiction in terms."⁴ In an essay entitled "Theatre and Living" Tynan argues that there are three attitudes toward life open to the dramatist: he can record it imitatively, he can withdraw from it, or he can seek to change it. Great art, he continues, must, by definition deal with more than the recording of detail: it must, in the nature of the case, comment, and drama, in particular, demands not only explanation but resolution as well. "Therefore," Tynan asserts, "the artist and particularly the dramatist, is forced to involve himself with political issues, to immerse himself in the world of

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which he is a part. Art which ignores social questions, is a shrinking flower that conspires at its own death by ignoring the soil in which it grows.\footnote{5 Tynan, \textit{Theatre and Living} (London, 1957), pp.94-95.}

The dramatist of the period, who found a number of burning problems around him demanding immediate attention, began to use the stage as a ‘pulpit,’ a ‘soap-box’ and a ‘makeshift platform’ from which he could shout his own personal solutions to contemporary problems. Dramatists whose medium of communication was the stage, started using the whole machinery of the theatre as “a way of thinking critically and constructively about their world.”\footnote{6 William Arrowsmit, "A Greek Theatre of Ideas," \textit{Ideas in the Drama}, Ed., John Gassner (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), p.1.} They came to believe that ‘a drama of no comment is a drama of no future.’

Sam Smiley in his \textit{The Drama of Attack: Didactic Plays of the American Depression}, describes three types of commitment among the social dramatists of the thirties -- multiform social concerns, rigid political systems and parties, and leftist theatrical companies. The late twenties and the early thirties saw the formation of several leftist theatrical companies committed to the production of plays of social significance. For instance, the New Theatre League, the Theatre Union and the Group Theatre, were all created for promoting socially relevant drama. They were less concerned with aesthetic quality than with social or political programmes. However,
the Group Theatre placed its major emphasis on the combination of social comment and art. As Rabkin puts it, "whatever the final verdict as to the durability of American drama in the thirties, there is no doubt that much of this accomplishment is due to the efforts of the Group Theatre."^7

Three distinct stages of development are evident in the decade beginning with the first years of the depression. The first phase, 1929-33, saw attempts at 'hard-line' Marxist drama by such writers as Clarie, Paul Sifton and Elmer Rice and writers of social comedy like Philip Barry and S.N.Behrman. It moved from mild lampooning of mores and convention to biting political satire as is seen in Maxwell Anderson's Both Your Houses.

The second phase, 1933-36, saw the advent of the social critics on stage as Marxist and communist didacticians, whose plays such as Clifford Odets' Waiting For Lefty and Kingsley's Dead End synthesized the elements of agit-prop with the more acceptable forms of Broadway plays to offer a drama which declaimed, exhorted and informed its audience, but entertained it as well. This synthesis continued to influence drama through such companies as the Federal Theatre Project.

The third phase, 1937-39, which began as a softening of the 'hard-line' Marxist position gave way to attempts to synthesize political and social activism with

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^7 Gerald Rabkin, Drama and Commitment, p.86.
the 'well-made' play such as Odets' *Golden Boy*. The phase came to fruition as Philip Barry's *The Philadelphia Story* effectively combined social comedy and social criticism into a play which illustrated the need for unity and understanding between all elements of American society on the eve of an international crisis.

II

According to Gerald Rabkin, a social drama is a play which suggests social alternatives, "either reformist or radical," or a play which demands "personal or collective action." It is heartening to note that the majority of plays of social consciousness produced during the thirties fulfil Rabkin's requirements of social drama. In these plays the emphasis shifts from radical cures to careful diagnosis. Instead of examining the relationship between man and God as in messianic drama, the social dramatist concentrates on man in society in conflict with community, government, academy, church or family.

Social drama is mostly written in the realistic or naturalistic style. Messianic voluptuousness and exuberance are replaced by more controlled and modulated feelings, as the playwright absents himself from the proceedings and permits the action to speak for itself. Social, political, moral and economic questions are aired in

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8 Gerald Rabkin, *Drama and Commitment*, p.78.
an atmosphere of impartiality. Psychological insights and scientific ideas are presented without any qualms of conscience.

As for character, social drama puts contemporary society on the stage and draws its 'dramatis personae' from the middle class. The protagonist is subject to the same laws as the audience; shares the same ambitions (or the lack of them); performs the same domestic duties; and speaks the same unlovely prose. Human stature, in other words, shrinks to average height and man's surroundings.

The social drama of the thirties grew from a precocious comedy, gently poking fun at national ills in the late twenties, to a keen satiric comedy by 1933. It had become palatable to audiences because the playwrights learned to use drama effectively as a weapon of social change by making it both inform and entertain the audiences. In other words, it presented social criticism in the form of sugar-coated pills. Although such plays as Anderson's Both Your Houses (1933) and Behrman's Rain from Heaven (1934) are hardly Marxist in their appeal or message, they are seriously critical of social institutions and prevailing national attitudes concerning self-perpetuating evil of commercial wealth. Though these plays contain 'call to action,' they are couched in well-made dialogue. The design of their social comedy is to create a public arousal through knowledge rather than through the preachments of the
political drama of the avowed leftists. What they seek to do is to evoke the ‘pleasure and profit’ idea of combining a ‘sermon’ with a ‘tickle.’

The development of social drama in the thirties is largely an extension of work of playwrights like Howard Lawson and Elmer Rice in the twenties who made the theatre "a school, a forum, a communal institution and a weapon in the hands of the masses for fashioning a sound society." In his ‘preface’ to Ben Blake’s *The Awakening of the American Theatre*, Lawson substantiates this point of view and states, "Behind these pages is a story best appreciated, perhaps, by those like myself who have laboured long at the task of establishing this theatre movement. A long road still lies ahead. But history has been made."

One of the most outspoken, socially conscious playwrights of the twenties, Lawson became a leading leftist playwright and critic. Each of his significant plays - *Processional* (1925), *Nirvana* (1925), *Loudspeaker* (1926), *International* (1927) and *Success Story* (1930) -- contains sufficient entertainment potential as well as social

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comment. As R.C. Reynolds puts it "by using expressionistic technique and caricature and satire, Lawson was cunningly able to stage social comment which ideally applied the theory of 'sermon and tickle.'" 12 If Lawson was a mentor to some, he was a model to others. In his plays, he "represents the man who is always conscious of his role in society, of his debt to it and also of its encroachments upon his individual conscience."13 However promising his work appeared in the late twenties, Lawson's plays became increasingly didactic. It was this growing emphasis on informing the audience at the expense of entertaining them that marked his decline as a successful voice in the drama of the early depression years.

Elmer Rice reflects his deep concern with the social issues of the times in all his plays. Right from his earliest attempt at playwriting, A Defection from Grace, which focuses on the rampant corruption in society and the conflict between a woman's career and her domestic life, till the last published play, Cue for Passion, Rice attempts to bring to light the ills afflicting the American society. Elmer Rice is deeply concerned about restoring finer values like human dignity and individual freedom. Through several plays Rice advocates these values. Rice's most popular play, The Adding Machine, is a step in this direction. It has justly been regarded as the best play that vividly portrays the dehumanising effects of the machine. The play


13 Gerald Rabkin, Drama and Commitment, pp.128-129.
presents, "soul destroying drudgery and routine, of grubby passions unsatisfied, of grubbier dreams unrealised, and of the eternal babble of long deed cliches."\textsuperscript{14} Elmer Rice, as rightly pointed out by Gerald Rabkin, "suggests the need for rapprochement which would combine the social fervor of Marxism and the individual liberties of capitalist democracy."\textsuperscript{15}

The theatre of the thirties is remembered for its playwrights not because they produced masterpieces for the ages, but because they responded to the challenge of their times vigorously and excitingly. Of late, it has become increasingly apparent that the past decade needed their verve, and could have used their passion for engaging themselves to a cause, an ideal or even a delusion.

The dramatists of this period added social commitment to the substance of their plays. They became public spirited, less interested in the problems of the individual and more worried about national distresses. The speed with which they adapted themselves to the new environment differed with each playwright.

The contribution that the playwrights of this generation made to the theatre lay in their ability to discuss all sides of serious issues in a dialogue that argued rather


\textsuperscript{15} Gerald Rabkin, \textit{Drama and Commitment}, p.253.
than exhorted. In their plays they reviewed the evidence of social decay without
dogmatism and without an attempt to suggest easy cures. The crisp dialogue that in
the twenties exposed the personal difficulties within the home became a medium for
the treatment of public problems. They wished to analyze the social forces that created
killers, perjurers, slanderers and other anti-social beings. By winning sympathy among
audiences for their fierce disquisitions on social injustice, they succeeded in
sharpening the tone of broadway drama.

III

The playwrights of this ‘depression period’ can be divided into two main
groups - those who first arrived in the theatre - Clifford Odets, Lillian Hellman, Irwin
Shaw, Victor Wolfson, Sidney Kingsley and William Saroyan. These dramatists
brought with them a reputation achieved in the previous decade. Their plays were
popular less for their showmanship and more for their incorporation of literary themes
- naturalism, allegory and social relevancy. The other group includes Elmer Rice,
John Howard Lawson, S.N.Behrman, Philip Barry, Robert E.Sherwood, Paul Green,
and Maxwell Anderson, who emerged later in the dramatic scenario. To these two
groups, a third group may be added which consists of very young playwrights, Arthur
Miller and Tennessee Williams, whose work first arrived on the professional stage in
the 1940s, but whose youth and early writings were formed in the decade of the
depression.
However, the characteristic playwriting of the decade was not the exclusive contribution of any single group. The lengthening perspective of history brings the first two playwriting generations of the thirties closer to each other. They were jointly responsible for what was good and bad in the dramatic art of the times -- for its passionateness and sentimentality, genuine feeling for common humanity, moral vigour and didactic crudity. The playwriting of the thirties was not a cult but simply playwriting leavened by the authors' engagement to life in the midst of economic and political crisis.

While the nineteen thirties witnessed a virtual hey-day for comedies by Kaufman, Moss Hart and William Saroyan, it also saw the genius of Maxwell Anderson and Clifford Odets who used techniques of showmanship and theatricality in their plays. Because their plays were popular successes, modern critics tend to dismiss them as popular writers rather than to consider them as committed literary artists.

Though he aspired to the empyrean of poetic tragedy, Maxwell Anderson could successfully reflect only the tensions of his time, as in the political satire of Both Your Houses, or refract them as in the oblique dramaturgy of Winterset and High Tor. It is true that Anderson like many other playwrights of the period wrote plays about social evils of different kind such as political and social corruption, housing problems and the lack of understanding between peoples within a social framework. But his
approach to such problems in his plays like *Winterset* is different from Odets' approach in *Waiting for Lefty* in that he depicts the problems and dramatises their effects whereas Odets "dramatises the problem and calls for action in a demand for immediate redress."  

While Elmer Rice presents the drawbacks in society and calls for a return to the noble values like individual dignity, the credit for calling for collective action goes to Clifford Odets whose work is intricately interwoven with the dislocated strands of American life in the 1930s. He gave voice to the anguish of a generation which was going through one of the worst periods of American history, both socially and economically. He identified himself with the suffering working class and middle class sections of American population and effectively presented the socio-economic problems from their point of view.

In his very first play, *Waiting for Lefty*, Odets presents the striving of worthy young people, the frustration of a generation unable to find security or fulfilment in the depression period. In *Till the day I Die*, Odets takes up for presentation the brutalities of Nazi oppression vis-a-vis the high ideals of the communist party and the sincerity of the party comrades. Odets, who considers the family as the basic social unit, portrays the effects of the depression period on a typical American working class

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16 R.C. Reynolds, "Introduction," *Stage Left: The Development of the American Social Drama in the Thirties*, p.XXIII.
family in *Awake and Sing*. In *Paradise Lost*, he presents a much darker picture of the decaying middle class. The image that pervades the play is the 'sweet smell of decay.'

In *The Golden Boy* and *The Big Knife*, Odets presents the consequences of attaining or attempting to achieve 'success' in the prevailing American sense. The problem of homelessness in all its ramifications is portrayed by Odets in *The Night Music*. The feeling of loneliness, personal isolation and the sense of insecurity prevalent in American society during the 30s is presented in the play through people sleeping in the lobby of hotels, in the parks, and in the constant movement of characters from one place to another. In *Rocket to the Moon*, Odets presents the troubles and tribulations faced by professionals like doctors and personal secretaries in the American society during the thirties. Incidentally he also suggests the importance of love as the invigorating emotion that can sustain human relations during the troubled times.

In *The Country Girl*, Odets takes up for presentation the problems faced by yet another section of the American population - the sensitive artist. The play deals with the re-emergence of Frank Elgin as a talented actor from the abysmal depths into which circumstances have pushed him. The last play of his career, *The Flowering Peach* (1954) can also be seen to reflect the major concerns of the times. During the fifties, because of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, there was a growing awareness about the serious disaster that a nuclear war might cause. Odets, in order
to reflect this concern, chose as the basis for his play Noah’s legend. The disaster caused by the floods in the legend serves admirably to reflect the possible annihilation consequent upon a nuclear war.

Thus, it can be seen that, Odets, who wrote plays for more than two decades, reflects in almost every play, the social problems of the times. During the 30s when the lives of working class and middle class sections of the American population became miserable, Odets used the stage to even advocate collective action. In several plays like The Golden Boy, Awake and Sing, Paradise Lost, Odets deals with the prevalent socio-economic problems and suggests that through determined action, the situation can be rectified.

However, it is generally believed that Odets lost his force as a maker of social drama after Golden Boy. In spite of his attempt to radically alter the intellectual concepts of his audience, Odets was unable to balance his social concerns with his dramatic medium. But, when he softened his social exhortation and political didacticism in favour of dramatic or literary style, many in his audience missed his point. His plays continued to ‘work’ theatrically but "the verve and drive which had moved the audience at the end of Waiting for Lefty or brought them to see Golden Boy and applaud its artistry were gone, and Odets’ plays became melancholy and flat without the tonic of commitment he gave them between 1935 and 1937."\(^{17}\)

It is important to note that during the nineteen thirties, the American stage finally became more of a playwright's theatre than ever before in its history, "affording incentive to the playwright not to truckle to popular taste, giving him some necessary measure of control over his playscript, and encouraging him to use modern content, argument and idea into his work."\(^{18}\) Hence the importance of the thirties as a decade from the standpoint of the changing role of the writer from technician to artist.

However, there are also some misconceptions about the period of the thirties, one of the most prevalent being the view that the period was inimical to humour and light entertainment. Nothing could be farther from the truth, even if zealots of 'social drama' seemed to imply that seriousness undermined the American way of life. George Kaufman and his collaborators assimilated the economic struggle quite successfully in their comedies of the depression -- *Stage Door* and *You Can't Take it with you* -- as did Arthur Kober in *Having a Wonderful Time* and Saroyan in *My Heart's in the Highlands*. And, political tension was also successfully translated into comedy by Maxwell Anderson in *Both Your Houses* and *High Tor* and by Behrman in *Biography* and *End of Summer*. There was a distinct comic strain in the work of Odets, Robert Arday, Marc Blitzstein and others. The vigour of the thirties sustained a frolic as well as a political commitment. No wonder, therefore, if John Mason Brown described this depression period of the theatre as 'these full lean years.'

\(^{18}\) Gerald Rabkin, *Drama and Commitment*, p.78.
Moreover, we must free ourselves of the notion that the characteristic plays of the period were standardized works of sociological realism. The distinctive realism of the thirties was something else. We must distinguish it from merely descriptive realism because it brought factual detail into focus by means of some perspective of thought and feeling. This type of social drama must be distinguished from the ordinary 'problem play' because the dramatist did not offer specific solutions to specific problems so much as he challenged an entire way of life. These plays tended to be revolutionary in spirit rather than ploddingly reformatory and their realism was characterized by intensity and explosiveness. The pathos and fury in the plays of Odets and the sympathy and scorn in those of Hellman were anything but impersonal qualities born of ideology or introduced into the work by ideological persuasion. The characteristic social dramas of the decade brought much resolve and not a little bravura into the theatre. They sought maximum expressiveness for their protest, conviction and compassion. And to expressive language they added an energetic search for expressive form.

For a period full of collectivist idealism, the thirties were curiously rich in individuality, much richer than the fifties, when socialistic idealism had virtually vanished from the theatre. The 'social' dramatists who seemed to share so much anti-capitalist animus and pro-socialist faith were distinct individuals. The poignant singularity of young Odets was often marked. By way of contrast, the young Sidney
Kingsley was meticulous and logical. Paul Green was ‘regional’ yet ‘universal,’ a realistic yet poetic.

However, there was one serious limitation in the playwriting of the period. Many a playwright used social faith as a crutch very much as recent playwrights have used psychopathology. When the crutch slipped from under the armpit, the playwright stumbled. Even Odets’ considerable dramatic talent could not consistently sustain him as has already been shown, and less gifted social dramatists crumbled. Lillian Hellman alone continued to create with unabated power.

IV

It would take a strong mind and will to create a play that could combine social statement with entertaining drama. As Odets’ plays slipped increasingly into melancholy themes and Lawson and other leftists continued to exhort Marxist philosophy through loosely constructed melodramas, audiences and critics began to look for fresher themes and newer approaches to social problems, Lillian Hellman rose to the occasion to fill the bill and prove her mettle.19

19 Lillian Hellman was introduced into the literary world by Dashiell Hammett, who apparently shaped her writing through often caustic and unappreciative criticism. He also seemed to have given direction to her social ideas and leftist sentiments. Hammett had little patience with the didactic, hardline, protest drama of the left and he frequently looked with disdain upon efforts of such writers as Odets to combine social protest and well-constructed drama. This is made clear by Hellman herself when she discusses in her memoirs of the period her impressions of Hammett’s politics. (see Lillian Hellman, Scoundrel Time (Boston: Little Brown & Company, 1976), p.68.
Lillian Hellman emerged as a bright star in the cloudy horizons of the great depression of the thirties. Beginning in an unprecedented economic dislocation and ending in a global war, the decade was a massive trial of endurance. The decade began with industrial chaos, the collapse of the financial structure, mass unemployment and it ended with Second World War. The social climate of the 1930’s brought a new outburst of awareness of the theatre and the theatre became an active participant in the struggle to arouse a disheartened people to renewed optimism. Social protest was in the air which was reflected in the creative thoughts of the time. The result was a good drama which pricked the conscience and stimulated the imagination of the audience.

A more realistic view of mankind’s prospects is present in the plays of Lillian Hellman who is widely acclaimed as one of America’s most distinguished playwrights. In 1941, Freedlay and Reeves in A History of the Theatre, expressed an opinion which still prevails. They rightly point out that:

Lillian Hellman has demonstrated greater power than any woman now writing for the stage.20

She has a permanent place in the American theatre, not just as the first American woman playwright, but as one who could fashion a play with both relevance and drama.

As a playwright of the 'depression period,' Hellman had the will and impulse to express the age in her plays. Along with many American writers from the generation of the 1930s, the "red decade," Hellman, addressed the 'Great Depression' in her plays of the period, and reflected on its aftermath her own political awakening throughout her career. Her analysis of American society is essentially Marxist, since it is based on the primacy of material and economic conditions to explain social relations and emphasizes environmental conditioning conflict among classes, and the hope that a new person, socialist man, would be born of the conflict through the dialectical collision of opposites.

Lillian Hellman is essentially a socially conscious playwright concerned with social and economic justice. Naturally, she was influenced by deeply committed playwrights like Brecht, Ibsen, and Chekhov. She never recanted her belief in the visionary goal to which socialism aspires, and she came to admire Bertlot Brecht as the master dramatist of the century. Although, Hellman never speculated about direct influences, a number of resemblances in technique and attitude can be noted between some of her later works and certain Brecht plays. A more significant influence can be noted with Brechtian theory of drama in her best and most explicitly political plays of the late 1930s. Like Brecht, Hellman expects her audience to be enraged enough

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by the injustice she dramatizes to leave the theatre and take social action. But, also like Brecht, she has scant faith in the audience's own capacity for moral commitment. Indeed, these resemblances with Brecht makes Hellman's own dramatic method appear more sophisticated than critics widely assume and may indicate a generic feature of political drama independent of influences.

Skilfully constructed and nailed together with strong scenes, crisp dialogue and powerful characters, Hellman's theatre is fashioned largely under the influence of Ibsen, an unvarnished tribute to contemporary social realism. Like Ibsen, she believes that drama could be a vehicle for social commentary, psychological insight and, above all, sharp incision into the diseased body of a corrupted society. As her model was Ibsen, in her early plays, she shared his love of tightly knit plots. Her best plays, like Ibsen's, are those in which a powerful character cuts loose and transcends the limitations of the play's rigid symmetry and plot contrivance. Hellman's *The Little Foxes*, like Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* and *A Doll's House*, addresses important social questions.

Later, in her playwriting career, Hellman made a conscientious effort to loosen up her style by employing the more indirect, apparently plotless techniques of Chekhov. However, the traces of Chekhov's influence can be drawn even in her earlier play, *The Little Foxes*, where Chekhov's brilliant depiction of the effete but cultured Russian upper class at the turn of the century is seen in his *The Cherry
Orchard and Three Sisters. But, in the later plays like The Autumn Garden and Toys in the Attic, Hellman turned to Chekhov for inspiration. They recall the mood and ambiguous moral judgements of the Russian dramatist. Neither of these plays has a truly pernicious villain and most of the characters seem to suffering from a Chekhovian paralysis of will. The atmosphere is deterministic and the plots are truer to life. But she never wavered in her Ibsen-influenced conviction that theatre could be a force for change in what she considered an unethical, unjust, essentially venal world.

V

Hellman, in her three Memoirs -- An Unfinished Woman, (1969) Pentimento (1973) and Scoundrel Time (1976) gives a new style of writing biography to the American Theatre. In these, she has given readers the meat and left the bare bones for the academics. One can legitimately examine the memoirs for the insights they provide into her dramatic craftsmanship and progress.

The first book, An Unfinished Woman, is built as a narrative, not strictly chronological, but still chiefly linear in movement from past to present and back again, relating events and persons to time and to each other. The second, Pentimento, is constructed as a series of portraits, each a unit, including group portraits and landscapes. It demonstrates the complete mastery of Hellman’s method as vision gives
technique and technique reveals vision. The third, *Scoundrel Time*, is a frustratingly slim volume, made thicker by an introduction by Garry Wills, which gives the background of the McCarthy Inquisition for those too young or too forgetful to remember it. What she gives the reader here is a personal, moral history.

There seems to be some differences in the forms of the separate chapters or portraits in *An Unfinished Woman* and *Pentimento*. But, that is all deceptive. At first glance they seem to fall into three categories - the cluster of anecdotes or brief reminiscences grouped around a period or a subject, the diaries and the dramatic tales or short stories told dramatically like plays or film scripts. But a closer look reveals that the anecdotes may be clustered to illustrate a theme, and a diary may turn out to be a mysterious quest or a dramatic tale.

As speaker and actress, Hellman is the principal unifier of the memoirs, and recurrent settings and characters also help to unify the books as they did her life. They reveal the author, but in carefully selected times, places and company. Even in the anecdotes and diaries, she is both narrator and protagonist, in a series of short, self-contained dramas.

By the time she wrote *An Unfinished Woman*, Hellman had moved from the impersonal public tone of the early non-fiction to 'dramatic' organization, with herself as the protagonist and viewpoint character. She had mastered the use of sentence and
paragraph rhythm to create a mood, convey an attitude. She had developed fully the use of extended metaphor, of the concrete to convey the abstract. Hellman had mastered in the independent sections of the first memoir the techniques of organizing memory and self-analysis in time-whorls around a central figure or image.

The sum of *Pentimento* is more than that of the portraits which are its parts. It gives the reader a portrait of a lady who, while judging others, reserves the severest judgements for herself. The lady’s clarity of mind and moral sensibility make readers question themselves, perhaps the best gift a book can give in these times.

*Scoundrel Time*, focuses on a limited period in the national madness that began in the late 1940s and subsided in the late 1950s. Compared to the other memoirs, *Scoundrel Time* is a minor literary performance that elicited a major political controversy. Hellman, in this memoir, points out the connections between the ‘Witchhunt’ days of Vietnam and Watergate and doubts our ability to remember long enough to avoid doing it all over again.

*Scoundrel Time* is different from the other two memoirs. Hellman does not let anything deflect the straight, strong narrative drive, what one critic called the ‘understated fury.’ If *An Unfinished Woman and Pentimento* are portraits in oil, *Scoundrel Time* is a black-and-white engraving. Gone are the interior flashbacks and extended metaphors that had become almost a trademark of her style of the previous
memories. In a short epilogue, Heilman tells the reader that she is still angry at the people, who let McCarthyism happen. She blames McCarthy, Richard Nixon, and the rest of the boys in the band less than the liberals who did nothing to stop them.

Thus, Hellman's memoirs reveal to us both her mind and art. Because of these memoirs, and the life revealed in these books, Hellman speaks to us with great moral authority. Her work is much more in the tradition of the autobiographical writings of such literary artists as Stendhal in *The Life of Henry Brulard*, W.B. Yeats in his *Autobiography* and Henry James in *A Small Boy and Others*. It was certainly not the best of times. It was perhaps the worst of times, it was a time of scoundrels and sad clowns, but at this time, a Southern lady, Lillam Hellman, risked her material and creative future for simple human decency, shaming those who would do less.

VI

Between 1935 and 1969, Hellman wrote a few 'occasional' non-dramatic pieces, very few compared to the output of such playwrights as Tennesse Williams or Arthur Miller. These few deal primarily with travel and with her visits to Spain during the Civil War and to Russia during World War II. Viewed chronologically, however, even these non-fiction pieces reveal a steady development toward the persona she used in the memoirs.
Out of her trip to Spain came an article for the *New Republic*, "Day in Spain," and several diary excerpts, collectively titled "The Little War" published in *This is My Best*. The Spanish Civil War pieces are objective journalism, after Hemingway. Hellman's emphasis is on observed details rather than on her subjective reaction. With the exception of "A Blonde Lady" in *This is My Best*, the Civil War pieces have the careful, professional style of a war correspondent who only incidentally is a woman and a creative writer.

"A Blonde Lady" differs from the other pieces in revealing that Hellman has always been a masterful story-teller. The description of a harrowing drive through the Spanish Countryside with a dangerously incompetent driver foreshadows the style of the memoirs.

The Kriendler Collection at Rutgers University contains an unpublished Spanish Civil War manuscript entitled "Richard Harding Davis 1938." The article expresses strong antipathy toward a *New York Times* correspondent named Carney who avoids danger and is sympathetic to the Franco side. Hellman's final war-piece, "I Meet the Front-Line Russians" (1945) filters out her personality. The language is careful, the diction simple, the emphasis on factual detail.

Hellman's non-dramatic pieces are important to know about her own views on theatre and also on the mission of a dramatist. Hellman claims in her memoir,
that playwrights are quite different from novelists. There is a light that natural dramatist can see on a dark road. This light is a singleness of purpose, the ability to remain focused on one event. The dramatist conducts one search for one answer and rejects whatever distractions might be enjoyed if he were travelling this road in the company of a novelist. In her conversations with Morsha Norman, Hellman says:

in a good play each detail falls into useful place. The shortest line, and the smallest stage movement, has an end in view and is not used as a trick, or pull fashionable wool over the audience’s eyes. To such writers, in whatever field they be, we give our full attention and they deserve it.22

In Hellman’s view, it is not enough to learn to write for the theatre. A playwright must learn to survive in the theatre. Hellman says that in order to survive in the theatre the playwright must act with confidence. Ordinarily timidity and stumbling seem like disintegration in the theatre. They are infectious and corruptive to other frightened people. Hellman watched the theatre changing, and she did not like it. She says:

I think that after Watch on the Rhine, much of the pleasant hijinks of the theatre was never to be seen again because the theatre, like the rest of the country, became expensive, earnest and conservative.23

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23 Lillian Hellman, Ibid., pp. 1-7.
Apart from the section in *Pentimento* called "Theatre," Hellman has written about her work only four times in four theatre pieces in her long career. The first is "*Back of Those Foxes*" (1939) written in connection with the opening of *The Little Foxes*, the second "*Author Jabs the Critic,*" written in a response to Brooks Atkinson's review of *Another Part of the Forest*, the third "*Preface and Postscript*," written as an introduction to her *Four Plays*, and the fourth "*Time of the Foxes,*" a reminiscence of the first production, occasioned by the Lincoln Center revival of *The Little Foxes* in 1967. In both "*Author Jabs the Critic*" and "*Preface and Postscript*" the style is polished and impersonal, even when Hellman recalls personal details. Hellman defends her plays against the charge that they are 'well-made' and 'melodramatic.' In all these theatre pieces Hellman's tone is public.

VII

During the 1930s the predominant themes explored by the women playwrights appear to be mainly social and domestic in which comedy, farce and melodrama were employed. Glaspell, Crothers, and Hansberry have contributed significant works to American drama that explicitly or implicitly helped to establish a female tradition in the American theatre. In the early part of the century the insistence upon the truth, the goal of verisimilitude, 'the desire to get closer to the fact' was the dominant chord in the American drama. And woman playwrights did not hesitate to portray issues that drew upon the 'facts' of their lives as women. The women's issues were portrayed by
them from the point of view of the 'New Woman' as conceived by Ibsen and Bernard Shaw. This prototypical woman, "was unafraid to challenge male decisions and male dominance."  

But, unlike Glaspell, and Crothers, Hellman does not present what have been termed 'women's issues' as the central focus of any of her plays. However, in her own characteristic style, she does emphasize economic factors. Her women characters are often portrayed against the socio-economic structures that create and perpetuate their roles. Hellman's characters, though personally and morally responsible for their actions, are almost always portrayed within a social framework, their motives rooted in social forces. Hellman does not stereotype women, but rather portrays them as fully defined individuals, shaped by complex political, social and psychological forces.

In the 1930s, she had begun work with Hammett's encouragement on her first play, *The Children's Hour* (1934), which was an immediate success. From then onwards, she wrote seven more plays and four adaptations upto 1960, and she was launched as one of America's outstanding playwrights. Hellman, in many ways, remains the hardiest survivor of the thirties, because unlike Odets, she commands a technique which can survive abrupt changes in the winds of doctrine.

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Hellman’s three plays of the decade -- *The Children’s Hour* (1934) *Days to Come* (1936) and *The Little Foxes* (1938) -- reflect social concerns. *The Children’s Hour* is a paradigm of a well-crafted, as opposed to the merely well-made, play. It is unusually gripping because Hellman takes the act of lying and links it with one of our deepest fears - total loss. By joining them as cause and effect, Hellman makes the lie more pernicious than it actually is. For this play, Hellman chose a situation which had a foundation, in fact, under the title of *Closed Doors* or *The Great Drumsheugh Case*. All that Hellman did was to bring the story upto the twentieth century. It was an instant and complete success which brought fame to the writer.

Hellman’s next play, *Days to Come*, was not a success. It is crowded and over-wrought, but it is a good report of rich liberals in the 1930s and of a labour leader who saw through them. Her third play, *The Little Foxes* deals with the transition from an old to a new South. It is a powerful drama in which an entire society in decay is revealed. The Hubbards are intended to be human beings as well as masters of selfishness. As Bigsby observes, "*The Little Foxes* was produced in which the writer was pressed to declare his or her allegiance in ideological terms. Despite the subsequent attempt by the House Un-American Activities Committee to turn her into an ideologue, and despite the more simplistic assumptions of *Days to Come*, Hellman was never that. Indeed, she took some pride in her refusal to bend
By the end of the thirties, however, American drama had assumed a position of some stature in world drama, and it became a recognized force. During the war years of the forties, American plays largely reflected the agony and anger of an aroused people. The major distinguishing feature was psychological interest in man's emotional reaction to war. Both Hellman and Sherwood reacted vigorously to the war in Europe. With her superior control of melodramatic action, Hellman wrote a powerful anti-fascist play, *Watch on the Rhine* (1941). She made an even more serious comment as she ridiculed the previous twenty years of American foreign policy in *The Searching Wind* (1944). *Watch on the Rhine*, which won the New York Drama Critics award is more popular than *The Little Foxes*. It is the most human of all the Hellman's plays, the warmest and in someways the most understanding. It is an improbable story about the betrayal of a resistance worker by a cynical German exile. *The Searching Wind* is an attempt to analyze the moral failures which had led to war, the liberal equivocations and the self-concerned tolerance for the intolerant.

Hellman again returned to the Hubbard family of *The Little Foxes* and wrote *Another Part of the Forest* (1947), set in 1880, twenty years before *The Little Foxes*.

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is set. In the second play, she lays great emphasis on the society’s ostracizing of the Hubbards and the impulse to get ahead financially to compensate for their loneliness.

In the mid-century, Hellman turned from Ibsen to Chekhov and wrote two other plays — *The Autumn Garden* (1951) and *Toys in the Attic* (1960). These two plays present middle-aged people who come to recognize the bleakness of their lives but find they cannot change it. In *The Autumn Garden* Hellman insists that people are responsible for their actions and that they are the sum of their choices. *Toys in the Attic*, Hellman’s last successful play, focuses on the individual psychologies of characters whose failure to understand themselves is the origin of their pain. One year after the production of *Toys in the Attic*, Hammett died. With the exception of an adaptation, Hellman never wrote another play.

Since Lillian Hellman is a playwright of the thirties, she has sometimes been taken simply as a social playwright. Although there is implicit anti-capitalism in *The Little Foxes* and explicit anti-fascism in *Watch on the Rhine*, she has always been most concerned with personal morality. No one can deny the importance of Hellman’s contribution to the modern theatre as an interpreter of the South and as an American artist. Hellman’s plays cover three decades in the annals of the contemporary American drama, from the thirties to the fifties — a period of extraordinary interest and great activity.

The following chapters seek to make an indepth study of Lillian Hellman’s eight original plays in terms of their thematic concerns and technical virtuosities.