CHAPTER - VI

CONCLUSION
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Hellman arrived on the American stage two decades before absurdist playwrights began effectively. In certain respects she depends upon the conventions of the well-made play. But she uses these conventions to lure the audience into confrontation with unpleasant truths. Hellman is known for her play-writing which enables her to tell her stories suspensefully. This is done initially in the manner of Ibsenite social realism where the plot functions as a diversionary device by which the dramatist attacks particular contemporary issues. She often relies upon what she calls the "tricks" of the theatre like strong curtains, overheard conversations, the use of blackmail, and so on. These devices at times test the reader's credulity, though as critics like Mark Estrin point out, they do not appear incredulous in a well directed production. Further, Hellman's use of blackmail in philosophical, thematic, and structural terms shows that even while following Ibsen, she goes beyond him by linking blackmail to notions of money and power, family and capital that define some of her major theatrical preoccupations.

The plays of Lillian Hellman fall broadly into two principal groups based on her view of human action and motivation. The first two plays became signposts marking the direction to be taken by the later plays. The
Children's Hour deals with active evil, here the ruin of two women by the spreading of a malicious lie. The drama points the way towards the three plays whose chief characters are despoilers, those who exploit or destroy others for their own purposes.

The despoiler plays are The Little Foxes, Another Part of the Forest, and Watch on the Rhine. Each is a tightly constructed drama, heading to a violent climax, which is the result of evil doing. Most of the characters are clearly defined good or as evil, harmful or harmless. But the so called by-stander plays - The Searching Wind, The Autumn Garden, and Toys in the Attic - are as different from the despoilers in structure as they are in theme. The action in these plays is slower, the plot more discursive and low-keyed. It moves more within the characters and the events that befall them than through their actions. For most of these people are unable to act positively or with conviction. They let things happen and they become passive victims of the despoilers. Despoilers and bystanders appear in some form in all the plays, but Hellman clearly differentiates between evil as a positive, rapacious force in the first group, and evil as the negative failure of good in the second.

The Children's Hour is a play about two young women whose lives are wrecked by a sadistic child and a careless woman. The play has the essential elements of good drama - plot, character conflict,
movements, and words that are vibrant in the theatre. The Children’s Hour reveals tight craftsmanship and an unusual explication in theatrical terms of the theme of the power of a lie over human lives.

Hellman uses blackmail more often than Ibsen. In The Children’s Hour, Mary Tilford intimidates one of her schoolmates into supporting her vicious, destructive lie by threatening to reveal the other child’s petty thievery if she does not conform. In The Little Foxes Regina extorts far more than her legitimate share of the profits in a family enterprise by threatening to reveal that her brothers have stolen her husband’s bonds. In Watch on the Rhine a penniless Romanian Count warns that he will reveal to the German Embassy the identity of the son-in-law of a wealthy Washington family as that of a prominent member of the anti-Nazi underground forces, unless he is given a large sum of money. While the family agrees to pay the ransom, the son-in-law, who does not trust the Count and who knows that the Count’s information endangers not only his own life but that of many of his friends, murders the Count in what he considers a legitimate act of war. In The Autumn Garden a seventeen-year-old girl insists upon blackmailing a wealthy woman for money by threatening to exaggerate a very minor scandal about the woman’s husband, when the woman would be quite willing to aid her financially simply as an act of generosity.
In *Watch on the Rhine* and *The Autumn Garden*, the victims of blackmail are guilty of nothing. They are more admirable in their willingness to behave in such a way as to protect others. And the blackmailers too differ from the Hubbards. The Count in *Watch on the Rhine* would like to be a Hubbard, but he can't because he has the glimmerings of a conscience and the ability to recognise good when he sees it and differentiate it from evil. Sophie in *The Autumn Garden* commits blackmail only to avoid being patronized. Unlike the Count and the Hubbards, she is in no sense evil at all.

Blackmail is necessary to the plot in *Watch on the Rhine* only to the extent that it results in the murder of the Count. The Count here is a real Nazi who plans to report to the embassy simply out of his sense of duty. But Kurt has much less ostensible choice, and he chooses murder. In *The Autumn Garden*, in contrast, blackmail seems almost wholly gratuitous, as though Hellman could scarcely let go of a play without it. Hellman wanted to show Nick's wife paying cash to extricate herself from another folly. Blackmail increases Nina's humiliation and emphasizes Sophie's sense of independence. By using it, Sophie saves her self-respect.

Blackmail adds to the scope of the Hubbard's capacity for oppression in *The Little Foxes*. It enables the oppressed Ben to rebel and become the oppressor in *Another Part of the Forest*. It is revelatory of Nazi oppression in *Watch on the Rhine*. The *Autumn Garden* shows
generosity as a form of oppression that blackmail can counter. In *Toys in the Attic* what Julian does may show that love itself can become a form of oppression. Hellman makes clear that, for her, greed and oppression are among the worst of evils.

Lillian Hellman's works are realistic, well-made plays. They take place in private rooms which are meant to contain not merely private dramas but public issues. Her contribution to the American theatre did not lie in her innovatory approach. Carefully structured and elaborately plotted, her plays are fiercely moral. The South, which is the setting for some of her best plays, is not merely a moralised landscape but a set of myths and values which provides a resonance to the private dramas which are the centre of her concern. The neurotic girl, miscegenation, suggestions of incest, the vital but socially incapacitated young man, the fading spinster, the decaying mansion, are all recognisable elements of Southern writing from Poe onwards. That is to say, they are familiar components of a myth which is created to convey a sense of a culture under strain, a world which embraces the trope of faded glory and of anarchy concealed beneath surface order. The denial of history finds its parallel in a concern with individuals who never grow to full maturity, who are physically damaged, whose innocence becomes a menacing fact. Hellman's response to this myth is itself profoundly ambivalent. On the one hand she resisted its rationalizations, its corruption into a simple lie and into cover for a
rapacious materialism sheltering behind a false gentility. On the other hand, she responded to its recognition of a deconstructive drive, its acknowledgement of decay, of loss, of self-deceit, of a tendency to deny responsibility for the past and involvement in the present.

Despite Hellman’s growing insights, which contributed to the psychological complexity of her later plays, there is a remarkable consistency about her fictional characters. Starting with the character of Mary in *The Children’s Hour*, Hellman’s stage creations reflect her unconscious conflicts. *The Children’s Hour* is about two young female instructors at a girls’ school who are accused by Mary, one of their students, of involvement in a lesbian relationship. Although the play is based on a true story reported in the newspapers, the character of Mary is similar in a number of ways to that of the young Hellman: tempestuous, willful, domineering. Mary, who is motherless, is the embodiment of the “bad me” because she acts out her jealousy and rage, particularly in response to adult love relationships. Like Hellman, the child, Mary can be both destructive and self-destructive, impelled as she is by a deep sense of injustice. Hellman as an adolescent had identified herself closely with her cousin Bethe. Bethe was ostracized because of her unconventional love life. The young Hellman empathised with Bethe’s spirit of rebellion and admired her loyalty to her beleaguered lover. As a young woman Hellman was furious with Hammett when she pointed out Bethe’s importance as a
role model and Hammett failed to understand what she meant. The adolescent Hellman projected on to the frightened inarticulate Bethe her own yearnings for love and intimacy at the same time that she felt the injustice of Bethe’s ostracism. For the romantic young girls, Bethe clearly was a victim of middle-class hypocrisy. Bethe’s seeming badness appealed immensely to the young Hellman, who set herself to the task of discovering the hiding place of Bethe and her mysterious lover. Like Mary in The Children’s Hour who possesses precocious sexual knowledge (she is right intuitively about the lesbian inclinations of one of the accused instructors), Hellman was fascinated by Bethe’s forbidden sex life. Unlike her fictional creation, Hellman tried to protect Bethe from the consequences of her sexual indiscretions. Thus Hellman’s superego, ever unrelenting, was also on the side of righteous rebellion. The fictional Mary has no superego and is depicted as a complete psychopath. For this reason she comes through as a caricature and as evil personified. Mary is a manipulative, controlling child who bullies the other girls at school and takes advantage of her doting grandmother’s credulity. Hellman refers to The Children’s Hour as a protest against the injustice of denunciation and innuendo.

The Little Foxes focuses sharply on the cruelty and greed of the rich. Even so, The Little Foxes includes a character who embodies the humane instincts of Andrew Rodman in Days to Come. Horace Giddens, the ailing banker, is pitted against his selfish and manipulative wife,
Regina, and her scheming brothers, Ben and Oscar. Although Regina is a bad woman, she is plainly the heroine of *The Little Foxes*. Hellman distinguishes sharply between characters who are good but weak like the confused and dissatisfied Julie in *Days to Come* and those who are bad but strong. In *The Little Foxes*, for example, Regina’s sister-in-law, Birdie, is a frightened, bewildered woman with humane feelings. Her husband Oscar terrorizes her. By contrast, Regina, the central figure, is a powerful woman verbally aggressive and as unscrupulous as her brothers. Hellman seems to be echoing the popular dictum that to be effective, to be a winner, it is necessary to be tough, even ruthless.

In fact, Hellman’s weak characters are ineffective in proportion to their sense of decency and their capacity for affection. Regina’s tender-hearted daughter, Alexandra, in *The Little Foxes* is powerless, for example, to prevent her scheming mother from bullying her stricken father Horace, who has only a short time to live. If Hellman’s weak characters are defeated by their ruthless adversaries, they are at least more successful as rounded character studies. The powerful villains in Hellman’s play fail to convince us that they are psychologically valid portraits because they are one-dimensional. The result is a set of vivid caricatures. Her protagonists also lack the range of feelings necessary for communicating inner conflict, thereby eliminating the possibility of tragedy.
The rigidity with which Hellman clings to her one-dimensional portrayals carries over from one play to the next. Regina in *The Little Foxes* who deliberately withholds medication from her dying husband is nothing but the spiteful Mary of *The Children's Hour* now grown up. Ellicott, the heartless lawyer in *Days to Come*, is the forerunner of evil brothers Ben and Oscar in *The Little Foxes*. It is not that destructive people do not exist in the real world. The task of the playwright, however, is to explore the complexity of human motives. This requirement is not met by Hellman in *The Little Foxes* because of her unconscious need to split her characters into separate personifications of good and evil, along the lines of a morality play. According to her memoirs, Hellman was unable to fuse her positive and negative images of her mother until late in life. Hellman’s message in her plays is that good people should not abdicate their responsibilities while selfish people run the world.

In *Watch on the Rhine*, Kurt, the anti-fascist murders a Romanian collaborator who threatens to expose his mission of raising money in the U.S. to ransom political prisoners in Nazi Germany. Kurt argues that until the world is a better place violent struggle will continue to be necessary. He even considers the possibility that he is becoming bad himself, but he cannot be deflected from his goal. Kurt may be seen as a further elaboration of Leo Whalen, the labour organizer in *Days to Come*. Both men fight against forces of injustice, but Whalen is fearful of violence and
believes that labour's enemies seek a confrontation so that they can exert their superior force. In the end, Whalen is defeated. The character of Kurt represents a genuine departure for Hellman. An obvious explanation for this shift would be that in the interval between the composition of the two plays – between 1936 and 1941 - Hellman had been to Spain and had seen the Spanish Civil War in process. Like everyone else, she had watched the fall of France and the other events associated with the outbreak of the Second World War. It should be noted that Hellman's model for Kurt was the Austrian anti-Fascist Joe Buttinger who escaped to the U.S. with his wife Muriel in 1939. Murriel was the model for Kurt's wife, Sara, as well as the model for Hellman's "Julia" in Pentimento even though Hellman had never met Murriel.³

In The Children's Hour and Days to Come the victims of violence are women. Martha, accused of lesbianism, dies by her own hand in The Children's Hour, and a striker's little girl is killed by strike breakers in Days to Come. In the latter play, an evil strike breaker is also slain, but his death is at the hands of one of his accomplices. Thus the pattern of violence changes from the first two plays to the dramas of the middle period shifting from the death of passive victims, both female, to the death and mutilation of males fighting for what they believe in.

In The Autumn Garden violence disappears from Hellman's plays. This circumstance is all the more surprising because the writing and
production of this play coincided with the height of the McCarthy period and the prosecution of Hammett by the Federal Government. Of this painful period of her life Hellman wrote in *Scoundrel Time* (1976).

> My belief in liberalism was mostly gone. I think I have substituted for it something private called, for want of something that should be more accurate, decency.

**The Autumn Garden** is about a young man, Frederick, whose mother, Carrie, objects to his all-absorbing relationship with a young novelist, Payson, who has been described to her as a homosexual. Although the play does not focus on any one character or relationship, the relationship between Frederick and Payson (who never appears onstage) is very similar to that between Martha and Karen in *The Children’s Hour* and carries the same overtones. In *The Autumn Garden* there is no brash, masterful woman as in *The Little Foxes* or *Another Part of the Forest*. The most attractive of the female characters, Constance, is portrayed as a middle-aged spinster living a drab life in a provincial Southern town. She is a good woman who has wasted her life dreaming of the man she has loved since girlhood. The man is a libertine who jilted her to marry an heiress whom he did not love. Nor are there any strong male characters. Even the villain, Nick, the object of Constance’s misplaced affection, is a failure in life who derives malicious pleasure from wrecking other people’s lives by his sneers and innuendoes.
Constance’s realization in *The Autumn Garden*, that Nick is a pseudo-artist and a drunkard tells us the tale of a human betrayed by her romantic ideals. Like Constance, Hellman had strong need for affection that was repeatedly frustrated, despite her outward brashness and seeming self-sufficiency. Her intermittent relationship with Hammett did not provide her with adequate emotional support, partly because of Hammett’s alcoholism and self-absorption and partly because of Hellman’s need for independence. *The Autumn Garden* is not, however, a feminist tract. Hellman’s male characters are also victims. They are defeated by their own weaknesses. Only one female character in *The Autumn Garden* emerges strong enough to shape her own life. This person is Sophie, Constance’s French niece, who, realizing that her fiance does not love her, decides to return to France. As a parting shot, Sophie, like the mercenary Regina in *The Little Foxes*, compels Nina to pay her $5,000 as compensation for having been compromised by Nick’s drunken behaviour in her bedroom. This twist of the plot indicates that Regina of *The Little Foxes* and Sophie represent Hellman’s ambivalence toward her role as a woman in which she could not decide whether it was good or bad to insist on one’s rights and to protect one’s interests by aggressive behaviour.

*The Autumn Garden*, which Hellman regarded as her best play, was indeed superior to her previous works, although it was not successful commercially. It is an advance over Hellman’s earlier work in the sense
that it deals with inner conflict and self-deception. In addition, Hellman no longer focuses exclusively on the rich and powerful and their exploitative ways. Consistent with the theory that stress may serve as a catalyst for artistic growth, it might be argued that The Autumn Garden owes its superiority to its having been written when its author felt herself to be in great danger and summoned up unusual resources of strength and imagination. The Autumn Garden is not a total departure from Hellman's familiar theme, which is that people fail because they do not assert their will whether as citizens who are unwilling to face up to their moral responsibilities or as private persons who fail to control their lives.5

Of The Little Foxes Hellman was to say that placing it in the South was purely incidental and fortuitous.

That it was set in the milling district of the South stems from the circumstance that I wanted to set the time scheme of the play at about the turn of the century and that it was in the cotton states that these years witnessed the sort of exploitation I wanted to write about ... I merely chose the South because it fitted the period I wanted for dramatic purposes and because it is a part of the world whose atmosphere I personally am familiar with as a Southerner6.
The Southern settings of several of Hellman's plays are integral to and essential for their effectiveness. First of all, the dichotomies — the old landed gentry versus riches, the old South tradition versus the New South movement, agrarianism versus industrialism, the code of honour versus the new amorality — are inextricably linked to the milieu of the region, to the character of its inhabitants, and to the times about which she wrote. The conflicts manifest in both *The Little Foxes* and *Another Part of the Forest* and require rural and small-town Alabama settings to give them meaning. In *The Autumn Garden*, set in the home of a woman fallen on hard times who has converted it into a boarding house, both locale and atmosphere are essential element in the drama. One of the motifs concerns itself with Southern provincialism. For example, Mrs. Ellis, finding Nick Denery asleep on the couch, which usually serves as a bed for the maid, observes that scandal is inevitable:

> *You are in Sophie's bed, in the living room of a house in a small Southern town where for a hundred and fifty years it has been impossible to take a daily bath without everybody in town knowing what hour the water went on.* (238)

In terms of characters in general, Hellman's people have one or two traits that distinguish them as being of the South, although qualities like greed and ruthlessness that set apart her most remarkable creations are not confined to any region. Hellman observed in a 1939 interview thus:
I always wanted a certain naive or innocent quality in some of my characters which I could find in the South but which would have been quite out of place in any other American setting.

(Bryer, *Conversations with Lillian Hellman*, 8)

Characters such as Lavinia (*Another Part of the Forest*), Birdie (*The Little Foxes*), and Carrie and Lily (*Toys in the Attic*) clearly exhibit such a quality in a distinctively Southern mold. In *The Autumn Garden* there is considerable dialogue characterizing Southern women. Rose Griggs is almost a stereotype of the "Southern Belle", flighty, empty-headed, and talking incessantly. She reports about her husband's Boston-born mother who is "sometimes a little sharp about Southerners". She used to say that Southern women painted a triangle of range on their faces as if they were going out to square the hypotenuse". In the same play, Southern men in general are portrayed in action and described in dialogue as romantic and immature, as when Edward Crossman observes that "boys will be boys and in the South there's no age limit on boyishness" (241).

Various segments of Southern society play essential roles in the development of Hellman's dramaturgy. There are the aristocrats fallen on hard times perhaps because of moral weaknesses they display. They struggle ineptly to survive in a new world with new standards which they do not comprehend or perhaps even perceive as existing. They still cling as they do to memories of "the war" and "the lost cause". Doomed families,
they are parallel to those in the classic Greek tragedies. Nearer home in
time and place, they are akin to those immortalized by William Faulkner in
novel after novel. Juxtaposed to them are nouveaux riches, those who made
their money in illegal dealings during the war between the States, or in the
case of The Autumn Garden, World War II. They share many traits in
common with the reprehensible Snopes family in Faulkner's fiction. They
are voracious, destructive, materialistic, and although the playwright
herself would perhaps disagree with such an interpretation, essentially
amoral.

In her autobiographical writings Hellman describes herself as a
young girl distressed by the plight of the blacks. She writes about her
devotion to Sophronia who worked for her family. Sophronia's name is
given to a strong black character in The Searching Wind. In other plays, it
is the blacks who, chorus-like, offer wise advice to the misguided white
characters. In The Little Foxes, for example, it is the servant Addie who
dispenses aphorisms on the actions of the region's inhabitants — "you ain't
born in the South unless you are a fool" (186). She predicts the decline of
the town due to industrialization and comments on the nefarious means
whereby the Hubbards came into wealth and power. The significance of the
comment, "there are people who eat the earth" (182) underscored at the end
of the play when Alexandra repeats it to her mother while asserting her
independence from the Hubbards also needs to be taken into account. In
addition, Hellman spices her Alabama plays with black dialogue and folk wisdom, both serious and humorous, some of which would probably be offensive to many readers or audiences in the 1980’s. In The Little Foxes, for example, Cal remarks to Oscar, “Bet you got enough bobwhite and squirrel to give every nigger in town a Jesus - party” (54). In The Little Foxes, Leo, commenting on the yellow fever epidemic in New Orleans and the cresting of the river there, quotes the blacks who say, “a man born of woman can’t build nothing high enough for the Mississippi” (173).

Language specifically associated with the South and Southern characters spices the plays. There is much talk of the cotton economy, predictions that cotton will be king once again, and of other staple crops of the area. Such regional flora as figs, plums, and scuppernongs are mentioned in dialogue, as well as food such as grits. The evening meal, regardless of how large it may be, is termed “supper” by the Hubbards, and much is made of the fact that Horace Giddens has found Northern coffee inferior to that of Alabama. Colloquialisms of the area abound as when Ben uses the expression “a silver quarter”(141).

It is in the two Hubbard plays that Hellman employs the most Southern elements, motifs and themes. An examination of these plays will reveal the extent to which she is aptly described as a “Southern writer”. Another Part of the Forest and The Little Foxes are two parts of a trilogy detailing the history of the Hubbard family. The trilogy was never
completed apparently because the author lost interest in the project in later years. It is clear that Hellman's intention originally involved a triad of dramas based on the patterns of Greek tragedies perhaps similar to what Eugene O' Neill had attempted in *Mourning Becomes Electra* a decade before *The Little Foxes* appeared. There are numerous standard trappings of the Greek model: for example, the doomed families labouring under a curse because of the sins of their forebears, the chorus, usually in the person of servants, offering counsel and observing the inescapable destruction, the paradoxical sense of man's free will in contrast to the fatal trap in which he is caught, and the inevitable flaw which leads the central character to blunder and fall. In addition, Hellman makes frequent direct references to Greek history and mythology using classical names such as Regina, Lavinia, Marcus, Horace, and Alexandra.

However different the story, the place and the people in Hellman's plays, the theme is always the struggle between good and evil. The single minded devotion to her own idea of what is important and her ability to translate the idea into play form with an increasing power and persuasion are Lillian Hellman's distinctive achievements. The core of all the social anger which is the driving force in Hellman's plays is contained in the following two speeches. The first is from *The Little Foxes* where old Addie, "a tall, nice looking negro woman, about fiftyfive," a family retainer says:
There are people who eat the earth and eat all the people on it like in the Bible with the locusts. Then there are people who stand around and watch them eat it. Sometimes I think it ain't right to stand and watch them do it. (110)

The second is from The North Star. Old Dr. Kurien, the devoted scientist and physician, finds a famous German surgeon whom he knows as a student taking children’s blood (so much of it that they die from it) for transfusion to wounded Germans. Kurien goes into the room where Dr. Ven Harden and his assistant, Richter, a typical Nazi, are operating. He says to Ven Harden that he was the “real filth”.  

Watch on the Rhine stands out as the work in which the means and the ends are most thoroughly blended. The Fascist evil is set against the glowing bravery of the underground personified not only in Kurt Muller but in his family. And here the author’s theme is stated again simply and directly:

Kurt: I have no wish to make a mystery of what I have been doing, it is only that it is awkward to place neatly. It sounds so big, it is so small. I am an anti-Fascist. And that does not pay well ...

Fanny: Are you a radical?

Kurt: You would have to tell me first what that word means to you, Madame.
Fanny: (after a slight pause) That is just. Perhaps we all have private definitions. We are the anti-Fascists, for example.

Sara: Yes, but Kurt works at it. Mama.

Fanny: What kind of work?

Kurt: Any kind, Any where. (654)

Moreover, the whole action of Watch on the Rhine stems from the characters themselves and their relations to the world around them. The distance Hellman has travelled since The Children’s Hour is marked by the fact that in Watch on the Rhine she has not only a theme and a story arranged to suit her moral purpose but also leading characters who have learned to speak for themselves. “Her characters talk and move in a believably realistic fashion,” as Jordan Miller observes.

Whatever the final evaluation of Lillian Hellman’s place in American literature and the history of the theatre may be, it seems certain that she will be accorded some notable position, given the significance of her contribution. If she does not occupy that highest level in the pantheon of modern American dramatists reserved for Eugene O’Neill and Tennessee Williams, surely she will always be recognized for the quality of several of her plays. The virtues of her dramas, demonstrated again and again through the many years of her active career in the theatre, include well-developed plots, larger-than-life characters who are credible, dialogue
distilling the Southern tradition, and themes that are integral to life in the modern world. If, as some of her most severe critics have charged, her works are melodramas and "well-made plays", which in recent decades have become terms of opprobrium in criticism, she is masterful in her handling of those forms. In 1968, she answered the "well-made play" charge by stating that in her most productive period she was "caught between a so-called realistic theatre and a so-called new theatre coming after the Second World War ..." "It is," she continues "a rather foolish charge against anybody, because what is too well-made? Why should something be badly made?" (Bryer, Conversations with Lillian Hellman, 115). To the charge that her plays are melodramas, she terms it a "meaningless word ... usually used to cheapen something." (115)

To sum up the four plays of Hellman, The Children's Hour, The Little Foxes, Watch on the Rhine and The Autumn Garden, we may say that in fact in no Hellman play is there a simple protagonist. Her titles are either thematic or symbolic references to a group of characters. The characters in The Little Foxes are much more sharply differentiated by their speeches than are the characters in The Children's Hour or Days to Come. In the Hellman canon The Children's Hour and Watch on the Rhine are the only plays that approach the definition of tragedy. Although Marvin Felheim describes The Autumn Garden as a tragedy with a Chekhovian element in it, the tone of the play and its multiple patterns of
relationships and unravellings reveal an essential comic spirit. There is an ironic demonstration in the play of the Chekhovian belief that a reasoned life without a definite outlook is a burden and a horror. Hellman's customary detachment from her characters is related to the genre not of tragedy but of melodrama. Her plays which are about good and evil make use of violence not just for sensational effect. In the introduction to *Four plays* Hellman makes the following observation:

*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 in say-nothing's worst sense ... But when violence is actually the needed stuff of the work and comes toward a large enough end, 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.*

Melodrama as Hellman uses the term is a logical outcome of realism in drama which assumes that life is neither mysterious nor predetermined. In most of Hellman's plays when human beings fail or are destroyed, the powers of destruction lie in human hands.

Viewed solely as a melodrama, solely as the story of Kurt Muller, the play *Watch on the Rhine* may be dated. But if it is the story of some naive, liberal Americans put to the test, if it is a character drama. Like *The
Autumn Garden then it has its validity. Until, however, a revival allows us to judge for ourselves, we can view it as probably the best of World War II anti-Nazi plays. Atkinson summarizes his response to the play thus:

Since Miss Heilman has communicated her thought dramatically in terms of articulate human beings, Watch on the Rhine ought to be full of meaning a quarter of a century from now when people are beginning to wonder what life was like in America when the Nazi evil began to creep across the sea.\textsuperscript{11}

The very theme of blackmail, as has been differently used by Hellman, might have had its origin in Ibsen. Ibsen used blackmail in A Doll House, Ghosts and in Hedda Gabler. Ibsen's blackmailers have different purposes and they vary in the degree of their villainy. Blackmail has been an indispensable dramatic convention in Hellman's works. It becomes more integrated both with the plot and the characters of the play in Hellman than in Ibsen. In The Children's Hour Mary Tilford frightens one of her schoolmates into supporting her lie. She threatens to reveal her schoolmate's thievery if she does not support her. In The Little Foxes, Regina threatens her brothers that she would reveal that her brothers have stolen her dead husband's bonds. In Watch on the Rhine Teck warns Kurt that he would reveal his identity to the German Embassy unless he is given a large sum of money. In The Autumn Garden, Sophie blackmails Nina for money by threatening to reveal a minor scandal about her husband Mr. Denery. The blackmail in Hellman, as we notice in all these cases, has
money as its motive and is family-centred. Jacob Adler in his “The Dramaturgy of Blackmail in the Ibsenite Hellman” observes,

No other American makes such extensive use of blackmail as Hellman does ... nevertheless her plays show a wide range of possibilities of oppression in one of its manifestations, blackmail. Blackmail adds to the scope of the Hubbards’ capacity for oppression in The Little Foxes ... It is revelatory of Nazi oppression in Watch on the Rhine. The Autumn Garden shows generosity as a form of oppression that blackmail can counter ... Hellman makes clear that, for her, greed and oppression are among the worst of evils. While her range of blackmail is such that sometimes it represents neither of these evils in its ordinary sense, nevertheless it would be hard to find another human action so neatly capable of representing both.12

Hellman turned to Chekhov for her theme and plot technique in The Autumn Garden. As Jacob Adler tells us,

Miss Hellman turned to Chekhov’s methods in The Autumn Garden as a means of loosening up her plot structure ... As in The Autumn Garden, as in The Three Sisters, as in all of Chekhov’s plays, there is no villain, and Miss Hellman has no fish to fry, takes no sides, urges no action or attitudes. Like Chekhov, she displays compassion and detachment in the process of revealing character, and demonstrating universal uncontroversial truth
... it seems possible to say that Miss Hellman takes a story from Chekhov in order to help herself toward qualities which have clearly not been easy for her to achieve, sympathy, objectivity, universal truth.

Marvin Felheim observes that The Autumn Garden is not merely psychological (as in Tennessee William) nor sociological (as in Arthur Miller) but it is artistic (poetic) and moral and all in the Chekhovian sense. In her various editorial notes Hellman pays tribute to Chekhov’s “common Sense”, to his workmanship and to his “deep social ideals”. Of all the plays she thinks The Three Sisters is the greatest. These opinions throw some light on The Autumn Garden, for they support our idea of its careful design and, in particular, they give a point of reference. For the central “message” of both The Autumn Garden and The Three Sisters is also the same: “the inevitability of disaster in the kind of world presented”.

Apart from influences of individuals, certain social values and social evils have a great influence, to the point of obsession, on Hellman’s plays. Possession of money as capable of generating an enormous power over others is an idea repeatedly used by Hellman. Money plays a vital role in Hellman’s works. In The Children’s Hour money gives old Mr. Ellis the power to be independent which is good and also the power to force other people around. In The Little Foxes, in the hands of the Hubbards money is evil. In The Watch on the Rhine, in the hands of Kurt, who has collected
contributions of $23,000 to help his cause, it is good. In *Toys in the Attic*, money enables Mrs. Prine to live a life of complete unconventionality which might be admirable, were it not representative of her equally complete lack of concern for anyone other than herself and her lover. Otherwise in that play money is totally destructive. Money is important in Hellman's plays presumably because she finds it important in the world she scrutinizes. But this is true in Ibsen also. Money or lack of it is a major concern in almost every play from *Pillars of Society* through *Hedda Gabler*.  

The focal point in Hellman being the family and fiscal considerations, a study of the various characters of Hellman would become imperative. The characters, Mary Tilford (*The Children's Hour*), Regina and Hubbard brothers (*The Little Foxes*), Teck De Brancovis (*Watch on the Rhine*) and Nicholas Denery (*The Autumn Garden*) may be grouped as evil or wicked characters. As far as the child Mary Tilford is concerned, she aptly makes use of the destructive power of a lie and ruins the livelihood of two innocent teachers. In the case of Regina and the Hubbard brothers, their evil and greedy nature destroys the simple rules of human decency when they try to invest their share of money in their business deal. Teck threatens to reveal the identity of Kurt, a repatriate refugee, unless he is paid the ransom which is collected from the penniless poor. Regarding Nick, he meddles with everyone's life. He goes from group to group
making trouble. In *The Autumn Garden* he plays the role of an ironic catalyst.

Skilfully constructed and with strong scenes, Hellman's plays, fashioned under the influence of Ibsen and Chekov, are a fine example of contemporary social realism. Hellman believed, like Ibsen, that drama has a function beyond providing mere entertainment. It is a vehicle for social commentary and psychological insight. It explores the disease which has affected a corrupt society. It is a force for change in an unethical, unjust, venal world. Money is the major theatrical subject for Lillian Hellman and she shows in her plays how it changes lives and what people will do to acquire it. This theme enables her to exploit the tradition of melodrama for the projection of the confrontations between good and evil. With rebelliousness as the essence of her vitality, Hellman reveals in her drama that the manifest content of her politics remains that of the thirties, but the vision in that politics is not circumscribed by time.