CHAPTER - 1

FAMILY AND CAPITAL IN THE PLAYS
OF LILLIAN HELLMAN: A STUDY
The thirties is an important decade in American democratic history from the standpoint of the changing role of the writer from technician to artist. The period saw a virtual heyday for comedies by George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart, for musicals and family dramas, and for the sentimental comedy of William Saroyan. It also saw the genius of Maxwell Anderson, Lillian Hellman, and Clifford Odets. These latter dramatists used techniques of showmanship and theatricality in their plays, and because their plays were popular successes as well, modern critics tend to dismiss them as popular writers rather than consider them as literary artists. What made the plays of Anderson, Hellman, and Odets popular was less their showmanship than their incorporation of literary themes and devices such as naturalism and allegory. Moreover, their plays were known for their social relevance.

Gassner declared that "the main historical reason" why an "ample body of literary drama" was not forthcoming since the break the modern theatre made from the "pragmatic older American theatre" was that the "pragmatic theatre" did not regard drama as literature at all:
During the 1930s 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.¹

Historically, the 1930s demonstrated an intensification of the experimentation carried on before and during the 1920s both in the United States and abroad. Others have named it “Belascoism” demonstrating sustained intellectual ideas and social awareness which stimulated the American writer to further his experiments in all aspects of dramatic art.

“Expressionism” was popularised as a dramatic mode by O’Neill and Elmer Rice in the 1920s and a decade later it became a major part of the naturalistic plays of Odets and Anderson. By using the expressionist techniques introduced by O’Neill, Rice and others in the 1920s, dramatists were able to present the modern man, according to Rabkin, “in a perennial theme of alienation”.²

Eric Bentley writes thus: “Experimentalism in the arts always reflects historical conditions, always indicates profound dissatisfaction with established modes, always is groping towards a new age”.³ The playwrights of the 1930s used the “experimentalism” of earlier decades to
open new realms of intellectual, social and philosophical inquiry. They used the perfected techniques developed by their predecessors. They believed they were a "new age." They proceeded to do and say things no playwright had done or said before. For this reason the 1930s represents the end of one experimental age and the beginning of another.

In Stage Left: The Development of the American Social Drama in the Thirties, R.C. Reynolds draws upon Eleanor Flexner’s argument and observes as follows:

According to Eleanor Flexner’s argument Eugene O’Neill, Philip Barry, Maxwell Anderson, had turned away from ‘reality’ and sought ‘artistic detachment’ by writing fantasy, history, and romance. They were not, in her view, facing the grim verities of their time: the depression, the rise of fascism, and the inequitable distribution of wealth, especially in the United States. She despairs of the ‘direction’ of these writers, accusing them of responding more to newspaper critics and a desire for commercial success, than to a sense of social obligation, and she feels they should use their talents to illustrate social ills and call for redress.

Eleanor Flexner finds the only hope for American drama’s future in the Federal Theatre Project plays. Although they were not good plays, not
very well acted and produced, she writes, their popularity indicated a strong 'hunger for the first rate' in playwriting among theatre goers. They communicated "an understanding and a vision of life". In other words, a bad 'drama of ideas' which addresses social wrongs with an eye toward correcting them is preferable to a "retreating" drama of romantic stuff which ignores unpopular notions and caters to critical approval. She fears, however, that the younger playwrights of social dedication will become trapped by Hollywood's lures, cornered by critical complaint or driven into 'retreat' by the unpopularity of their material issues. But if they do not, she predicts that they - Lillian Hellman and Clifford Odets among a very few others - might have the potential to bring their early promise to fruition and reverse the 'retreat' of the American drama in the twentieth century.

But some critics suggest that if the drama of 1930s lacks any lasting significance it is because it moves too far in the direction of "reality" focusing too much on the economic, political and social issues of the day and becoming more polemic than literary. These critics, Gerald Rabkin, Michael J. Mendelsohn, Sam Smiley, and Louis Broussard, for example, divide the American drama of the thirties into two categories: those plays written only to entertain, garner favourable notices, and sustain long runs, and those which are didactic, political and / or propagandistic. Although they do not agree on which plays belong in which categories, these critics suggest that the major contribution of the 1930s drama is in the
polemical field. Sam Smiley sees the plays of the thirties more as road markers in the progress of social drama than as models of a universal pattern for the writing of plays. He writes, “a growing recognition of these didactic playwrights is welcome, but.... perspective must be maintained”.6

John Gassner, writing a preface to Flexner’s work, states that her perception of ‘retreat’ in the theatre in the thirties is accurate, but he claims that a proclivity for ‘mysticism or romanticism’ does not prevent a ‘new life’ from emerging in the American drama. He tempers Flexner’s complaint by stating, “despite serious difficulties American society has revealed a remarkable capacity for producing important theatre, and the one real quarrel with it is that it has merely scratched the surface”.7 While agreeing with Flexner’s condemnation of American playwriting, he suggests that the potential for meaningful drama not only exists but several writers, especially Odets, Hellman, and Saroyan, have already written plays of high quality and social awareness.

Arthur Hobson Quinn declares that the “real hope” of American drama rests in the combined excellence of the playwrights. He concludes that “the major problems of American drama are clearly related to a paucity of sturdy playwrights and a lack of recognition for their effort,”8 but he does not believe that these problems indicate any decline or retreat from artistic integrity. He defends Gassner’s point that the drama of writers
such as Hellman and Odets has merit because of its tendency to present society against a backdrop of moral and social issues, or in Flexner's term "reality".

Krutch, Quinn, and Gassner agree that the drama of the 1930s in America is more than literary or historical curiosity. They agree with Flexner to the extent that they despair of Hollywood's negative influence on playwrights and that the successful run of a Broadway show is all too often the only determiner of its literary merit. These considerations can be brought together in one central question: Does American playwriting of the 1930s have any inherent literary significance beyond its theatrical or commercial value? If so, does this significance lie in its social commentary, its theatrical technique, or in its artistic (and hence aesthetic and literary) merit?

Dramatists of the thirties, with few exceptions, confined their ambitions to writing. They were still closely aligned with their production companies - the Theatre Guild, the Group Theatre, the Theatre Union - and this association often obscured their individual efforts as producing writers and artists in their own right. The economic crisis of the 1930s emphasized this constant determinant of what shows would and what shows would not be produced and which would fail or succeed. Many playwrights were
dismissed because they catered to popular taste rather than having explored new vistas in dramatic themes and experimentation.

The political didacticism of many plays of the 1930s contributed to a critical bias against favourable consideration of these dramatists. As Sam Smiley notes: "The primary purpose of the author of each of these plays was to make a drama worthy of stage production, but his concurrent goal was to awaken the social consciousness of the audience through the communication of ideas". But the combination of political activism, artistic integrity, and a sensitivity to the commercial nature of the American theatre makes a strong case for regarding the playwrights of this period as serious, creative, literary artists who made a major contribution to American letters. They sought to use their pens to create commercially successful dramas which responded to the chaos and uncertainty of their times, and they attempted to do so through plays which would both survive their contemporary audiences and influence other writers and thinkers.

During 1930s plays were produced by professional writers in the American Theatre. They were full-time artists who wrote for a living. Many, like Philip Barry took their training from college courses such as Professor George Pierce Baker's '47 workshop'. Or like Maxwell Anderson, they were practising journalists. Clifford Odets was an undistinguished actor who yearned for the opportunity to see his first play
in production. There were many like Lillian Hellman who simply worked away at their plays until the first script sold. When this younger generation of writers joined the "carry overs" from the Little Theatres, they provided the 1930s with a cadre of experienced, professional writers.

A great number of American dramatists of the 1930s attempted to make their plays sounding boards for social and political reform, setting them, to borrow Krutch's analogy, in front of a backdrop of social issues and moral assumptions which they considered vital to the American public. The protest playwrights, Michael J. Mendelsohn writes, "attempted to interpret their society ... They were angrier; they were generally less subtle; they were humorless".10

The agitation and propaganda plays of the 1920s and the early 1930s were offered as straight propaganda. Their function was only to stir workers into action. Some protest writers wrote plays on social issues in a more universal manner and offered political philosophies and economic theories as panacea for the depression - torn society of their audiences and for mankind in general. When they dealt forcefully with these issues, their work was frequently condemned as propaganda.

The development of the modern American theatre was, according to John Gassner, "a reflection of social realities in the United States".11 Some playwrights such as John Howard Lawson and Clifford Odets offered plays
with strong leftist sentiment and marxist propaganda - plays which dealt with strikes, anti-fascism, and class struggle. Playwrights like Anderson, Hellman and others wrote plays about social evils of a different kind which include political and social corruption, housing problems, and the lack of understanding between the peoples within a social framework. R.C. Reynolds has written in *Stage Left* thus:

> The approach to such problems taken in *The Children's Hour* or *Winterset* is different from that taken in *Waiting For Lefty* or *Marching Song* in that the former group depicts the problems and dramatizes their effects, and the latter group dramatizes the problem and calls for action in a demand for immediate redress. Yet the apologists have treated the entire decade's drama as political didacticism. When selected plays such as Hellman's *The Little Foxes* or Anderson's *High Tor* are singled out for comparison, they are regarded as unique examples of artistic accomplishment in an age committed to political activism.\(^{12}\)

Gassner observed that "a vital theatre is communal drawing its sustenance from the manners and interests of common folk. It explores local customs, finds a common bond in a people's legends and heroes, and celebrates both its labors and its dreams".\(^{13}\) This definition is possibly a more appropriate assessment of the dramatic production of the 1930s. R.C.
Reynolds writes: “certain playwrights made Herculan efforts to wed polemic and literary endeavor, not by masking their social or political arguments with plot and character, but by honestly examining the society they observed around them and by using such techniques as literary naturalism to demonstrate the hopelessness of individual aspirations in the face of seemingly omnipotent social forces of environment, or the futility of dreaming in a world of nightmarish reality.” Occasionally their attempts were wildly successful, as Clifford Odets demonstrated in Lefty and Golden Boy. Sometimes the arguments were not political at all, as Lillian Hellman demonstrated by attacking intolerance in The Children’s Hour. Even the plays of Philip Barry and Maxwell Anderson made social comment, and herein lies the chief literary accomplishment of the decade. These writers sought to unite social commitment with artistic commitment. Although only a few managed to strike the proper synthesis between the two, the continuing search for a play which both entertained and informed marks the decade as a period of major development in the American drama. Not only did the experimentation of these writers in both form and content finally yield a relevant social drama, it also established an identity for the drama in the United States.

Reynolds says that “the playwrights of the 1930s actively attempted to make art an instrument of the people, a spokesman for and arbiter of their problems, and hopefully a source of their ideas for change. The
development of the American drama during the thirties saw the establishment of social drama as a permanent part of the American Stage. Playwrights of this period sought to interpret life by penetrating "the unreal real ... the surfaces of life", by revealing the truth about human relationships and the effects of social institutions on those relationships. By blending the realism of the stage with naturalism and expressionism these writers hoped to expose the modern human condition in order to achieve an aesthetic drama which was at once socially relevant, artistically sound, and commercially successful.

During the first years of the depression three stages of development were evident. The first phase, 1929-1933, saw the failure of attempts at "hard-line" Marxist drama by such writers as Elmer Rice and the success of the social comedy of writers like Philip Barry. The second phase, 1933-1936, saw social critics and communist didacticians. Their plays include Clifford Odets' *Waiting for Lefty* or Sidney Kingsley's *Dead End*. They synthesized the elements of agit prop with the more acceptable forms of the Broadway play. They offered a drama which declaimed, exhorted, and informed its audience but entertained it as well. As this synthesis continued to influence drama, the third phase, 1937-1939, began. Attempts were made to synthesize political and social activism with the "well-made" play such as Odet's *Golden Boy* or Hellman's *The Little Foxes*. The contribution of these playwrights is significant to the development of
American drama in the twentieth century. Instead of being a "retreat" from reality or an exercise in polemic, the social drama of the thirties provided a cornerstone for subsequent writers and brought the American drama into the modern period.

Lillian Hellman, Clifford Odets and Irwin Shaw were the products of the economic depression of the thirties. They were all writers deeply concerned with the fight for social justice. The decade of the thirties began with industrial chaos, collapse of the financial structure, and mass unemployment. It ended with the Second World War. The Theatre during this period became an active participant in the struggle to arouse a disheartened people to renewed conviction. The advent of war restored the economy to full production and united a divided nation in the common struggle against totalitarianism. With the unprecedented prosperity after the Second World War, the theatre of social protest fell into disrepute.

Lillian Hellman has been a considerable figure in the American theatre for forty years. Although she spent enough time in the south, it would be more accurate to describe her background as urban Jewish. For thirty-two years Lillian Hellman was associated essentially with dramatic writing and it is upon that writing that her reputation deservedly rests. In addition to eight original plays, beginning with The Children's Hour in 1934, and four adaptations for Broadway (1934-63), she wrote seven
screenplays (1935-46), resuming briefly with an eighth and final film, The Chase in 1966. C.W.E. Bigsby observes in A Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama as follows:

Hers was a generation influenced by Freud on the one hand and Hemingway on the other...; Martha's bitter denunciation of the woman who is ruining her life in The Children's Hour (1934) is in part an attack on her own failure and that of her own generation. The hard casualties of her first play, indeed, are an assertion of the inadequacy of the stance which she and those around her had adopted. The failure of love, the ironic inversions of affection, the deforming power of the amoral, now become matters of real concern... The failures which she indicts in The Children's Hour are pre-eminently personal moral failures, failures of perception, compassion, imagination and understanding. These are not for the most part sensibilities in recoil from public anarchy; they are individuals who place self before moral value and who are incapable of distinguishing the truth from the lie. And yet part of the play's strength lies in the ambiguity it is prepared to concede to that truth.17

Lillian Hellman's critical reputation is curious. Her fame rests originally upon her eight plays. Her drama has failed to attract the kind of
detailed, scholarly analysis that it deserves. Her best plays are ironic and novelistic. Heilman wrote more hit plays than any other female playwright, all of them on serious themes. The themes include destructiveness of simplicity, effect on character of lies, greed, malice, money, lesbianism, melodrama, blackmail, character assassination, and moral indignation. The first two plays became sign-posts marking the directions to be taken by the later plays. The Children's Hour concerns itself with active evil — 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 play, leading to a violent climax that is the result of evil doing. Most of the characters are clearly defined as evil or good, harmful or harmless. But the so called bystander plays, The Searching Wind, The Autumn Garden, and The Toys in the Attic are different from the despoilers in structure as well as in theme.

The Children's Hour was Heilman's first and most successful play of the decade. It is based on the account of an 1810 Scottish trial. It is set in and around a country boarding school for girls run by two friends, Karen Wright and Martha Dobie who, after years of hard work and sacrifice, have managed to bring the school to a sound financial footing. One of the
students, Mary Tilford, in reaction to what she thinks is unfair punishment and in an attempt to attract attention, convinces her grandmother, Mrs. Tilford, that the two teachers, are lovers. Mrs. Tilford was the main financial supporter of the school. Mary Tilford coerces her classmate, Rosalie, to back up her accusation. Mary’s chief evidence rests on an overheard conversation between Martha and her aunt, Lily Mortar, during which the pending marriage between Karen and Joe Cardin, Mrs. Tilford’s nephew, is discussed. By taking phrases such as “unnatural as it can be,” and “you don’t like their being together”, and “you’d better get a beau of your own now - a woman of your age” out of context, Mary persuades her grandmother not only to remove her from the school but also to withdraw her financial support.

When the two women appear before Mrs. Tilford and Mary, the older woman faces them down and continues to believe Mary’s story even when the teachers attempt to clear themselves. Unfortunately, the only one who can explain the overheard conversation, Mrs. Mortar, refuses to testify on the women’s behalf. They lose their suit, and the school remains closed. Mark Estrin says about The Children’s Hour that “the play that made her (Hellman) an overnight sensation, won initial strong praise for its tight craftsmanship and unusual theme. But tight craftsmanship became immediately associated with the idea that she was essentially a melodramatist, a term that struck throughout her playwriting career.”
"Hellman", writes Doris Falk, “never claimed to be writing classic tragedy but she was writing more than is usually meant by melodrama. Her serious plays are always about good and evil, and evil may seem to prosper unjustly, but the actions and the strivings of the characters have meaning and consequence”. But R.C. Reynolds observed elsewhere that “Every character in The Children’s Hour is defeated either physically or metaphorically.” Martha commits suicide; Karen becomes a wasted person who will always live with the suspicion that others will have for her; Joe loses Karen’s love and trust; Mrs. Tilford loses self-respect; Mary will grow up into an adult who can never be trusted; and Mrs. Mortar who returns just in time for Martha’s suicide loses her single opportunity to prove herself worthy of trust and affection by refusing to testify. Even the minor characters lose significantly. Agatha, Mrs. Tilford’s maid and a surrogate mother for Mary, cannot ever again love or trust the child and Mary’s classmates lose the school where they were happy in their studies.

Days to Come (1936), Hellman’s second play, was essentially attacked for its divergence from the well-made structure. This second play had the dubious distinction of being possibly the shortest-lived play on social themes to open on Broadway during the entire decade. Hellman’s second effort was a complete and unmitigated failure. The place is Callom, Ohio, two hundred miles from Cleveland; the time, the 1930s. Andrew Rodman, a paternalistic small-town factory owner, is forced by lawyer
Henry Ellicott (who owns controlling stock in the company in return for money loaned to Rodman) to call in strikebreakers to force his striking workers back on the job. The workers are fond of their employer but they are unable to live on Depression wages. Rodman’s wife, Julie, a restless woman full of purposeless energy, falls in love with Leo Whalen, a labour organiser, who has come to town to aid the strikers. One of the imported gangsters kills a cohort and dumps the body at the labour organizer’s door. Whalen is arrested long enough for the hoods to incite the workers to violence. Whalen is released when Julie Rodman provides him with an alibi by revealing that she was with him when the body was dumped. In the last scene she confesses to her husband that she has had an affair with Ellicott. Rodman confesses in turn that he has borrowed money from Ellicott to pay her extravagant bills. Cora Rodman, Andrew’s sister, made the loan necessary by refusing her brother a loan, although she had money. The strikers go back to work but the familiar feelings are gone, both in the household and in the community.

The main significance of Days to Come lies in its largest defect. Although Hellman lacked the knowledge and social awareness required to write a protest drama of the working class pitted against its decadent and corrupt oppressors, the play does, especially in the last Act, begin to indicate her understanding of the personal conflicts of the middle class family as they deal with their own set of oppressive forces. Noting the
"burning intensity" in the lines exchanged between the family characters, Moody cites Krutch’s initial reaction to the play: "Miss Hellman is not a specialist in abnormal psychology or in Marxian interpretation of society. She is a specialist in hate, frustration, a student of helpless rage, an articulator of inarticulate loathings".21 Her attempt to combine these themes with Odets’ middle class social concerns had failed principally because she did not fully understand the issues or the kinds of people involved. From the anger and hatred she exhibited in The Children’s Hour against the Tilfords, and the furious underlying evil she shows in the Rodman family in Days to Come, she would “mold another attempt to bring the form of social drama to bear on the plight of the middle class”22.

The play, The Little Foxes, is widely regarded as Hellman’s best play. The theme of this play is money. Hubbards appear funny in their role-playing and scheming but they are dangerous. Anti-social vices like envy and greed motivate them to action. Hellman uses melodramatic devices like stolen bonds, threats and blackmail in this play. The industrial revolution is the backdrop against which the ‘foxes’ play their human or inhuman roles. They are the aggressive ones. The ‘foxes’ are those who despoil the land of the South.

The play concerns two conflicts which grow out of a business deal between a Chicago industrialist and Ben, Oscar, and their sister Regina
Giddens. Having inherited their father's wealth, the two brothers want to conclude the deal to build a cotton mill and to exploit the poor as labour. But Horace, Regina's husband, away in Baltimore, refuses to invest one-third of the money required. Regina tells Ben that her husband wants a bigger share of profits. Ben agrees to her terms, but Oscar objects. However, Oscar finally agrees since his son Leo would be marrying Alexandra, Regina's daughter, keeping all the profits in the family. Birdie, Oscar's wife, is weak and pathetic and counsels Alexandra about the evil motives of the Hubbards.

The second conflict includes Regina's worry about her husband's continued silence regarding the business deal. She sends Alexandra to bring him home. He has no interest to join in the business deal. When he learns that Regina's brothers have stolen money from the safety-deposit box, he threatens Regina that he will disinherit her, leaving all to Alexandra, so she can escape the town, the family and especially a forced marriage with Leo. Regina refuses to help Horace find his medicine, and as a result he dies. Regina triumphs as a force of evil. Alexandra will not receive Horace's money after his death. She resolves to flee the evil represented by the family with or without her father's legacy. She escapes with a hope for a better world, the hope for the future.
Citing Hellman’s interview to the Paris Review, Bigsby observes that the clear logic of The Little Foxes suggests that Alexandra, in leaving, is to bear the burden of a necessary transformation. “The failure to establish the credibility of this is a structural weakness”.23

**Watch on the Rhine** is Hellman’s best anti-Nazi play of the war years. In this play the European - American contrast is skilfully drawn. **Watch on the Rhine** is Hellman’s tribute to Julia and also to the men willing to die for what they believe in. Here Hellman presents Kurt Muller as the lone protagonist because he acts decisively and courageously. Kurt is Hellman’s most eloquent spokesman for human rights and liberty. After killing Teck, he makes an inspiring speech in which he says, “until it gets in shape man will steal and lie and kill. But for what ever reason it is done, whoever does it you understand me - it is all bad”.24 The time is late in the spring of 1940. The place is a spacious home twenty miles from Washington, D.C., where dowager Fanny Farrally lives with her bachelor son David. Refugee Romanian count Teck De Brancovis and his wife Marthe (daughter of a girlhood friend of Fanny’s) are house guests. The Count, a decadent aristocrat who has always lived by his wits, is a hanger-on at the German embassy. Fanny’s daughter Sara arrives from Europe with her children and her husband Kurt Muller who is a member of the underground resistance movement. Kurt is carrying $23,000 in a briefcase, to be used to help rescue political prisoners from the Nazis. The Count
discovers the money, figures out Kurt's identity, and tries to blackmail him by threatening to reveal his identity to the Germans. Kurt is forced to kill him, and Fanny and David, stripped of their American naivety, decide to keep quiet about the murder long enough for Kurt to leave the country and return to Germany where he will attempt to free the prisoners and will almost certainly be killed. Kurt makes a moving farewell speech to his children in which he tells them that killing is always wrong and that he is fighting for a world where he will attempt to free the prisoners and will almost certainly be killed.

Bigsby observes that Hellman's "own contribution to the times consisted of two plays, Watch on the Rhine and A Searching Wind. The former which opened on Broadway in 1941, was an attempt to import the politics of Europe to a domestic American setting. It was also offered as an anxious debate about the utility of art at moments of social crisis."25 In this play some simplistic statements are spoken with a half-embarassed compulsion. Hellman wishes to show that she is aware of the inflated rhetoric and at the same time claim its essential truth.

The Searching Wind (1944) is Hellman's most commonly neglected play. The place is Washington, D.C., the time, the spring of 1944. Diplomat Alexander Hazen and his wife Emily have dinner with an old friend, Catherine (Cassie) Bowman. Emily and Cassie have not met for
years, although Emily knows that Alexander and Cassie have seen each other at intervals. Also at the dinner are Emily’s father, Moses Taney, retired newspaper publisher, and Hazen’s son Samuel who has been severely wounded in the war and who, in fact, will tell them at the end of the evening that his leg is to be amputated. In flashbacks the three former friends relive significant moments in their lives together.

Cassie loved Alex but wouldn’t marry him because they quarrelled about his lack of political conviction. The two women, though girlhood friends, were rivals. Though Emily married Alex, he and Cassie have met secretly through the years. Sam denounces them at the end of the evening for doing nothing to prevent the events that led to the Second World War. Shaken, they face the truth about themselves and their actions.

Bigsby writes that “The Searching Wind (1944) was an attempt to analyse the moral failures which had led to war, the liberal equivocations, the self-cornered tolerance for the intolerable. It was her attempt to establish a connection between private and public morality. It has also another stage in her self-accusation and in her self-justification as a writer ... The play was also offered as Hellman’s defence of her own portraits of unalloyed evil. The play was a mechanical thesis drama. Its characters were simple exemplars dragged from one historical nodal point to another. It lacked both conviction and force”.

26
The play **Another Part of the Forest** evokes some confusing criticism. The place is Bowden, Alabama; the time, June 1880. Marcus Hubbard, father of Ben, Oscar, and Regina of *The Little Foxes* fame, is a self-made man who got his start smuggling during the Civil War. During the war he inadvertently led union troops to an encampment of local boys who were killed. Only his semi-mad wife Lavinia knows his secret. He dotes on Regina and torments his sons. Regina is in love with John Bagtry, ex-confederate officer and plantation owner, who wants to go to Brazil to fight again. Regina wants to marry him and go to Chicago. His cousin Birdie comes to Ben to borrow money. Increasing the amount, Ben proposes the loan to his father as a good business investment, planning to pocket the difference. Oscar wants enough money to go to New Orleans with the local whore, whom he deeply and sincerely loves. Ben invites Birdie and John Bagtry to his father’s “musicale” and has Oscar invite his love, Lawrette. Ben hopes to thwart Regina’s plan and get his father enraged at Oscar. He tells Marcus about Regina’s desire to marry Bagtry. Regina exposes Ben’s finagling. Marcus orders Ben to leave. Ben tells his mother good bye. She wants to go away and start a school for black children. She reveals she knows a secret dangerous to Marcus. Ben coaxes it from her by promising to give her the money for the school, and confronts his father with his knowledge and threatens to tell the townspeople the truth. As the curtain comes down, Oscar has lost his deep
and sincere love, Regina has lost Bagtry and Chicago, and Ben is in command, a position acknowledged by Regina, who moves from her habitual place by Marcus at the breakfast table to sit by Ben. A typical review of the play tells us, "one leaves the theatre exhausted, so intense has been the portrayal of family intrigue, jealousy, contempt, and revenge. It is morbid, ... the exchange of power in the household".27

Hellman's play The Autumn Garden concerns itself with individual persons, bystanders, who try to come to terms with what they have made, or failed to make, of their own private lives. The Autumn Garden has a Chekhovian grace. In this play the moral is within the situation and within the characters, not superimposed upon it by a skilful playwright. The characters move from the world of realism into the world of art. Six people are paying summer guests at the home of Constance Tuckerman. These people try to recapitulate their past. They are confronted with the truth about themselves. The play has the trappings of a family melodrama.

Katherine Lederer makes the point that "some critics complained that Hellman gave them (the characters in The Autumn Garden) no character representing the norm. The norm is the mind and attitude of the playwright revealed in the play, an attitude consistent with the rest of her work."28 In The Little Foxes the guilty are the people who stand around
and watch; in *The Searching Wind*, the people who let Hitler happen; in *Days to Come*, those so blind to the consequences of their private actions that they make possible the strike-breaking and its violence. In *The Children’s Hour*, the guilty are the ‘uncoguid’ who give a child’s lie the power to destroy; in *Toys in the Attic*, those who can’t see the real motivations for their actions - Hellman says more than once, directly or through her characters, that we must do our best. We use that phrase so often as an excuse, an apology for not having done our best, that we miss the force of it in Hellman. She is a humanist and the call to do one’s very best is a high challenge. The characters in *The Autumn Garden* fail to meet that challenge".28

*Toys in the Attic* is the eighth and the last original play of Hellman. Anna and Carrie Berniers have always sacrificed themselves for their younger brother Julian. Through the years they have talked and dreamed of going to Europe. But whenever they have saved money Julian has needed it. Living for him has became a way of life. Julian suddenly turns up with Lily. She is rich and brings gifts including the paid up mortgage to the house the sisters hate and tickets for the long-postponed trip to Europe. With the help of his ex-lover Mrs. Warkins, Julian has bought land vital to a money-making project of Cyrus Warkins, a rich and dangerous man.
Lily's mother Prime lives with her chauffeur, Henry Simpson. Carrie overhears the fact that Mrs. Warkins is Henry's cousin. Carrie calls Warkins and tells him that his wife is part Negro and is behind Julian's land deal. Carrie does all this instinctively. Anna has accused her of incestuous feelings towards him.

Julian gives Mrs. Warkins her share of the money. But Warkins' thugs slash her face, beat up Julian and take the money. When he comes home bruised, Carrie is happy. Lily's mother knows that some day Carrie will turn Julian against Lily by letting him know about Lily's phone call to Warkins. Lily will come home to her, and Henry will leave because Lily hates him. Anna, who has seen the truth about all of them and had planned to go to Europe without Carrie, will take her job back and continue to be a mother to her sister and brother, knowing what she knows and living with the knowledge.

Katherine Lederer notes that there is plenty of 'love' in the play, but love is destructive when the giver and the recipient fail to understand its nature, and their natures. And money is destructive when it forces the characters out of their comfortable, familiar life-lies, lies begun in their childhood, their origins forgotten like toys in the attic, but still subconsciously directing their behaviour. In the now familiar terms of transactional analysis, the degree to which the child is in charge in each
character determines his degree of self-perception. Money is the catalyst that alters the chain of human relationships because it forces the sisters to face the truth. They have always told themselves and Julian that life would have been different had they had money. Money comes too late. When Carrie and Julian ate on the back steps and Anna waited on them, it was already too late.

"In Toys in the Attic Hellman sets out to show us," Katherine Lederer states, "that we fool ourselves. All of us do: we must face that fact and attempt to rectify it. Hellman says those capable of understanding, who refuse to accept the truth about their motives and actions, harm not only themselves but those they claim to love. In this play money has been the catalyst, love has been the rationalization, but self-deception has been the driving force".29 John Gassner says of Toys in the Attic: "... Miss Hellman has proved once more that she can deal with human failure without falling in love with it herself. She remains admirably sane in the midst of the ugliness and confusion she so unerringly exposes".30 The themes of the plays are succinctly summarized by Ellen Moers in the following words:

All the plays (not the four adaptations) 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 Hellman'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*, the fight against Nazism in *Watch on the Rhine* and 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.31

Kenneth Holditch refers to the Southern mold of some of Hellman’s characters. “Hellman’s people often have one or two traits that distinguish them as being of the South, although the qualities that set apart her most remarkable creations are not confined to any region. Greed and ruthlessness are, after all, without restrictions of time or place”.32 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.

Yet another observation to be made about Hellman’s plays is that the plays are more in the realistic mode than in the “theatricalist”. Hellman’s argument is that the stage is a
tight unbending, unfluid, meager form in which to write.... (The author) has three walls of a theatre and he has begun his pretense with the always rather comic notion that the audience is the fourth wall. He must pretend and he must represent.... 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.

As to the criticism that she writes well-made plays, Hellman points out that the theatre itself is a trick and demands that the playwright “trick up the scene”.

In certain respects Hellman does in fact depend upon conventions of the well-made play. She uses these conventions to lure the audience into confrontation with unpleasant truths. Hellman developed a craft of playwriting to tell good stories of suspense, initially in the manner of Ibsenite social realism, where the plot functions as the diversionary avenue by which the dramatist attacks particular contemporary issues. As she freely acknowledges in the Paris Review interview, Hellman often relies upon what she calls “tricks” of the theatre - strong curtains, overheard conversation, blackmail, and such props as Horace’s bottle of medicine and safety deposit box in The Little Foxes to propel dramatic action. These devices and other dramatic coincidences (for example, the convenient proximity of Teck De Brancovis to Farrelly home in Watch on the Rhine)
do periodically test credulity on the printed page, though much less obviously in a well directed production.

Hellman’s dark world of those who triumph through a calculated disregard of moral values is as grim and full of pain as the most extreme theatre of the absurd. Her dramas differ from the theatre of the absurd in the sense that they are portraits of people and not abstract symbols. Events are causative and the individual the product of his environment. Lillian Hellman’s strength lies in the dramatic power she can extract from the realistic form. The Little Foxes, like Ibsen’s Ghosts, is almost flawless in economy and structure, realisation of character and pertinence of dialogue.

Since so many characters in Hellman’s plays commit atrocious acts, early critics alleged that Hellman’s characters represented melodramatic extremes. Her characters are frequently deceptive, complicated beyond their surface impression by her ironic recognition (especially in the Hubbard plays, The Children’s Hour, Watch on the Rhine and Toys in the Attic) that skullduggery can be entertaining, even while it is exposed to ethical condemnation. Modelled on Hellman’s mother’s family, the rapacious Hubbards were intended, for example, as a composite portrait of the comic and evil elements inherent in greed and cheating.

Like Brecht, Hellman expects her audience to be enraged and launch social action. While urging her audience towards political action to correct
social ills, she simultaneously indict them for their complicity in the perpetuation of these social evils. Such attitudes account for John Gassner's charge that Hellman is the "hanging judge of the American theatre", and that her plays extend insufficient compassion to flawed characters like Amelia Tilford, the gullible grandmother of *The Children's Hour*, who discovers her error and seeks forgiveness that is denied to her. Philip Armato argues forcefully about *The Children's Hour* that Hellman seeks to restore compassion to the world of the play and that the final confrontation between Mrs. Tilford and Karen Wright reaffirms the dramatist's central concern with "the dichotomy between primitive justice and mercy".

In the history of the theatre, realism is a phenomenon dating from the late nineteenth century. Realism may include any form of drama, from tragedy to drawing room comedy. Realism assumes that there is a certain logical connection between events, that all actions have consequences. Doris Falk insists on the idea that "Hellman is strictly a well-made realistic playwright. She divides the eight original dramas into categories depicting 'despoilers' who exploit or destroy other figures for selfish ends, and 'bystanders' who behave as passive victims in a group of more discursive plays". Lederer on the other hand sensibly debunks the "automatic genre labelling of the plays, which is precisely the sort of distortion evident in Falk's reading".
Certain reviews, however, reveal key responses that contribute to an evaluation of Hellman’s proper place in the American theatre. She is considered a staunch moralist who attacks the evils of society. But she is often criticised for denoting her universe in exaggeratedly moralistic terms. It is commonly and often erroneously assumed that she employs the devices of melodrama to achieve her ends but ironically the melodramatist’s label is attached both to applaud and to condemn her dramaturgical style.

In *The Children’s Hour* Hellman posits mercy as an ultimate good and cruelty as an ultimate evil. To understand the merciless world and its cruelty, one must move beyond the notion that Mary Tilford is the embodiment of it. In the first two Acts of the play, Hellman develops three relationships which are characterised by the destructive content of the victim-victimizer syndrome. The play recalls Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice*, where a Jew, who is socially inferior to a Christian, is mistreated by the Christian and attempts to use the Duke as a vehicle for his revenge. In *The Children’s Hour*, an adolescent pupil who is socially inferior to an adult teacher, is mistreated by the teacher and proceeds to use the matron, Amelia Tilford, as a vehicle for her revenge. In the third Act, Hellman, like Shakespeare, posits mercy as the only solution to the moral dilemma which is created when we deal justly with *The Children’s Hour*. It suggests that adults are too often children. The last act discovery of Karen Wright shows
on the part of Hellman a more mature concept of compassion. The conclusion of *The Children's Hour*, like that of *The Wild Duck*, shows not a suicide but "a brief discussion running down the issues as a result of the suicide".38

The anonymous *Time* reviewer wrote a characteristic review of *The Little Foxes* wherein he praised Hellman as a 'moralist' and the creator of powerful, exciting "melodrama"39 Richard Watto Jr., claims that this play surpasses even *The Children's Hour*. He considers it a bitter, merciless study of "the relentless emergence of a New Industrialism from the ashes of a sentimental past".40 *The Little Foxes* does, in fact, remain Hellman's most popular and one of the most frequently revived plays in the American theatre. What prompted Hellman to go back to the theme and the characters of *The Little Foxes* was that she intended to do *The Little Foxes* as a trilogy.

Very much a play of a particular time and place in American political history, *Watch on the Rhine* (1941) argues against American isolationism. It opened on Broadway just eight months before the bombing of Pearl Harbour and the United States entry into World War II. Much in the play resists the erosion of time, including the preface of one of Hellman's memorably sharp-tongued figures in the person of Fanny
Farelly. The urgency of its message possibly led critics to overpraise “Watch on the Rhine as Hellman’s best play”.41

The Autumn Garden is a unique play in the American theatre with a Chekhovian ring about it. The play is neither “too well-made” nor entirely melodramatic, if these two characteristics are enumerated as limitations of Hellman’s play. If The Children’s Hour and The Little Foxes present theatrical contrivances which are too obvious in The Autumn Garden, Hellman organises her materials in terms of artistic principles. The realism in this play relates to the essence of human existence, not to the representation of life. The moral in this play is within the action of the play and not superimposed upon it. The characters with their roots in money and tradition show themselves to be a Chekhovian cast. If The Searching Wind and Another Part of the Forest make use of symbolism from nature and emphasize the organic, natural aspects of human existence, in The Autumn Garden the symbolism inherent in the title of the play adds a poetic dimension to it. A typical example of modern tragedy, the play sketches more than the psychological as in the case of Tennessee Williams or the sociological as in the case of Arthur Miller. The play is “poetic” like Chekhovian tragedy. As in Chekhov’s The Three Sisters which Hellman appreciates for its deep social ideals, the central theme of The Autumn Garden is nostalgia for a non-existent past and the individual’s frustrating search for love and the meaning of life.
Many critics have appreciated the multiple character technique, again citing Chekhov as Hellman’s “new source”. In fact, the reflective, rueful voice of the play has its structural roots not in Chekhov, but in the elements within *Watch on the Rhine*, *The Searching Wind*, and *Another Part of the Forest*.

When Hellman was asked, “which of your plays do you like best?”, she replied thus:

*I don’t like that question, you like best the last thing you did, you like to think that you got better with time. But you know it is not always true. I very seldom reread the plays. The few times I have, I have been pleasantly surprised by things that were better than I had remembered and horrified by other things I had thought were good. But I suppose *Autumn Garden*, I suppose I think it is the best play if that is what you mean by “like”.42*

Hellman’s anger reveals a hatred for the cruel mistakes of an unjust order, both natural and political, inflicted on her and others. Like Ibsen, she believes drama to have a function beyond mere entertainment. She believes that drama is an apt vehicle for social commentary and psychological insight. It provides her with an artistic means of probing the festering wounds of a corrupt society. Her conviction is that the theatre is an
instrument of transformation of unethical, unjust and essentially venal world. Money, which is one of her major subjects, functions as a symbolic device in *The Toys in the Attic*. It acquires a concrete, almost organic nature. It is stroked as if it were a domestic animal. In the tradition of a melodramatist, Hellman portrays her confrontations between good and evil with a fierce and savage indignation which is one of the hallmarks of her writing. Her anger, with all its bursts of passion, is a liberating force.

American drama in the twentieth century has been strikingly preoccupied with problems of family life. Its most characteristic moments are realistic scenes of family strife and squabble and bliss wherein conflicting themes of freedom and security recur. American drama is also in a sense domestic drama. The best American playwrights like O’Neill, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, Thornton Wilder, Clifford Odets, Lillian Hellman, Edward Albee, and Lorraine Hansberry are best remembered for their family-centred plays.

In *Another Part of the Forest* (1942) we see the beginnings of the family’s internal struggle for power and domination, a struggle which is meant to particularize the ruthless economic power and domination which they wield over their community. The Hubbards are grasping, vicious predators feeding off the Reconstruction South as they move upward. In *Another Part of the Forest* they are merchants in a broken agricultural
economy, in The Little Foxes they help bring industrialism, which means more power and more profits for them.

In fact, The Little Foxes is a richer play on many counts. The action presents a series of power struggles from which Regina’s daughter, Alexandra, will finally escape. She frees herself from her mother’s domination not to continue the family exploitation but to end it:

“You couldn’t (make me stay) Mama, because I want to leave here.... Because now I understood what papa was trying to tell me”.

The social implications of this speech at the time of her departure from her family, intrinsically strong, were even greater in 1939 with the Depression and the Spanish Civil War on the minds of the audience. Dramatically, the cry for social justice and the demand for action are expressed as an escape from the family. The Little Foxes (1935) was Hellman’s best effort of fusing family struggles with social forces.

Clifford Odets also has family life at the centre of his plays. Although he is a very different sort of social realist from Hellman, he too uses the intolerable family situation as an indicator of the need for social change. As with most American playwrights, Albee’s motive is to show that there is no family harmony. The American stage is typically one of family destruction where escape means freedom from failure and tragic
oppression. In their various ways Hellman, Odets, and Albee manage original variations on a common pattern in which the struggle against the family is equated with freedom or the absence of struggle with defeat. Tom Scanlan observes that

\begin{quote}
what is finally true about this world is a preoccupation with the family which continues even in attempts to escape from it. We are never more committed to the family than when we reenact its destruction.\footnote{44}
\end{quote}
REFERENCES


5. Eleanor Flexner, 12.


