CHAPTER – II

THE CHILDREN’S HOUR:
From Private Desire to Public Disorder
II

THE CHILDREN'S HOUR:
From Private Desire to Public Disorder

The Children's Hour been called a melodrama. It presents the theme of lesbianism. Like the other explorations of lesbianism, it both reflects and participates in the cultural revision of women's sexuality that occurred in the early twentieth century. Mary Titus says that "read in historical and biographical contexts, The Children's Hour emerges as a crucial document, for it not only provides insight into Lillian Hellman's complex response to contemporary sexual ideology, but also illuminates the struggles of her female contemporaries".

In the twenties charges of lesbianism had become a common way to discredit women. The new sexual ideology contributed to the decline of feminism. It transformed the New Woman into an old maid. The pressure was powerful as one woman admitted in 1929 that "in my city some business women are hesitating to take apartments together for fear of the interpretation that may be put upon it." The Children's Hour contains Hellman's own complex public and private responses to these contemporary social pressures. Its text seeks simultaneously to confirm and to condemn public opinion. The violence against the one self-admitted
lesbian character in the play points to Hellman's contradictory response to the changing sexual ideology. Her unresolved emotions resurface years later in Julia, an autobiographical text that Hellman repeatedly connected to The Children's Hour.

The Children's Hour is set at a girl's boarding school run by two long-time friends, Martha Dobie and Karen Wright. The two women teachers are assisted by Martha's aunt, Mrs. Lily Mortar, a former actress, who is foolish and impecunious. Karen is engaged to a local doctor, Joseph Cardin, and the engagement appears to threaten Martha who fears she will lose this important friendship. One of the students, Mary Tilford, addicted to lying and frustrated by the discipline at the school, builds on the suggestions of an overheard conversation and accuses Karen and Martha of having a lesbian relationship. Mary also coerces the other students into supporting her accusation. When Mary's grandmother, Mrs. Amelia Tilford, spreads the gossip, parents quickly withdraw their daughters from the school. Martha and Karen bring a libel suit against Mrs. Tilford, but lose in part because Mrs. Morter refuses to appear in court. Although Joe Cardin insists on pursuing his engagement with Karen, his decreased physical attentions to her suggest that he believes that there is some truth in the accusation. Finally Karen breaks off the engagement and Martha, in despair at the ruin of their lives, confesses that she has loved Karen in "the way they said" and then commits suicide.
The Children's Hour is based on a nineteenth-century Scottish lawsuit, "The Great Drumsheugh Case," recounted by William Roughhead in his collection Bad Companions. As Hellman told an interviewer in 1968, "The girls were my age ... It took me two years. I think they started at twenty six and got to be twenty-eight by the time the play was over".4

An "impersonal" Scottish lawsuit offered Hellman a safe medium for exploring very personal issues. She borrowed liberally from the lawsuit's characters and details but with two extremely significant changes. The more important of these is Martha Dobie's confessed lesbianism and violent end by suicide. In the actual lawsuit neither teacher acknowledged a lesbian relationship. Rather, both continued to appeal until poverty drove them to settle out of court. There was no suicide. Hellman also added the young doctor, Joseph Cardin, thus reinforcing the heterosexuality of the surviving teacher, Karen Wright.

The opening scene of The Children's Hour makes clear that authorial gender is on Hellman's mind. The play begins with a line from Shakespeare (Portia on mercy), which establishes this new, female playwright as "one of the boys". By placing Shakespeare at the start of her first text, Hellman affiliates her work with the hitherto predominantly male tradition of dramatic authorship. Over the years, the line has successfully deflected attention from the actual situation in Hellman's text to the more abstract issue of justice. Justice has been the central focus of most readings.
Hellman does more than establish that her play’s concern is with questions of justice. She satirizes both the bored young student and the giddy teacher/actress and, by means of her satire, assumes a superior position to the women in her text.

Hellman’s opening not only expresses her disdain for a “feminine” relationship to art, it also conveys her abhorrence of the feminine “arts”. Mrs. Mortar can be read as an artist figure in the play. Her response to literature is emotional and romantic. She speaks “dreamily” of Portia. She represents more the tenor of the playwright’s vision. Mrs. Mortar advises the girls to practise still other feminine arts. When one student confesses her inability to sew, Mrs. Mortar suggests that she “make some handkerchiefs or something. Be clever about it. Women must learn these tricks”. (5)

Hellman thus associates the feminine with deception and insignificance, both of which she rejects and condemns. As she once told an interviewer, her first efforts at fiction were unacceptable because they were too feminine: “They were very lady writer stories ... The kind of stories where the man puts his fork down and the woman knows it’s all over”. (5) Her notes made while writing the play suggest that she undertook this exploration through three characters: Mary Tilford, Mrs. Mortar, and Martha Dobie. Of the three, Hellman publicly connected her childhood self with Mary Tilford. In the introduction to her Six Plays Hellman recalls
how she “reached back into my own childhood” when she created Mary “and found the day I finished Mlle de Maupin; the day I faked a heart attack; the day I saw an arm get twisted. And I thought again of the world of the half-remembered the half-observed, the half-understood”.\(^6\)

Hellman’s personal notes show that she connected these three female characters with each other. Beneath the surface, Mrs. Mortar, Mary Tilford, and Martha Dobie are similar. She writes that all three are “abnormal”. “Abnormal” appears frequently in the notes, and in the case of all three women the world is connected to qualities of incompleteness, ambiguity, and marginality.\(^7\) The “child” (Heilman speculates about the names for her: “Cora, Mary, Sonia”) who will accuse the teachers, for example, is described as “abnormal, slightly unable to adjust”, possessing a “confused purpose” and a “mixed, half-grown mind”. Heilman compares her to Iago adding however that she lacks Iago’s knowledge of his own desire for evil. Mary lacks “the meaning, the intention of Iago”, her actions seem to bubble up out of her formlessness, generated in the confusion, disorder, or incompleteness, she represents.\(^8\)

The language of Hellman’s notes suggests further that she did not reject the idea of lesbian desire as the source of Mary’s actions. The nature of Mary’s “abnormality” - her “mixed” and “half grown” identity - becomes clearer when the same terms are applied to Martha Dobie’s unacknowledged lesbianism. The teacher, an “unconscious lesbian” as
Heilman described her in an early draft, is also "unrealised": "half one thing, half another". Although physically a lesbian appears in no way different from a heterosexual person, they argued, she possesses "a more or less distinct trace of masculinity" that is part of an "organic instinct". She is a "mannish" woman.9

Like Mrs. Mortar, Mrs. Tilford finds the idea of Martha and Karen making love easy to believe. Mary's uncertain descriptions of "funny noises" and "funny things", communicated to her grandmother in "fast, excited" whispers, seem to confirm something perhaps unacknowledged but already present in the older woman's mind. Mrs. Tilford only hesitates a moment before picking up the phone and spreading the news.

Mrs. Mortar is a nuisance at the school undermining discipline and irritating the teachers. For respite from her, they offer Mrs. Mortar a trip to England. In her anger at this plan, the aunt accuses her niece of opposing Karen's impending marriage to Dr. Joseph Cardin. This is a sore point for Martha because there is some truth in it. She is afraid of loneliness in spite of Karen's reassurance that the three of them will be together and that Martha and she will continue to run the school. The aunt's accusation is explicit:
Mrs. Mortar: I know what I know every time that man comes into this house, you have a fit. It seems like you just can't stand the idea of them being together. God knows what you'll do, when they get married. You're jealous of him, that's what it is.

Martha: I'm very fond of Joe, and you know it.

Mrs. Mortar: You're fonder of Karen, and I know that. And it's unnatural, just as unnatural as it can be. You don't like their being together. You were always like that even as a child. If you had a little girl friend, you always got mad when she liked anybody else. Well, you'd better get a beau of your own now—a woman of your age. (24-25)

Two of the school girls overhear this conversation. Armed with this information and the memory of some passages she had read from Mlle de Maupin (Gautier's titillating novel describing some varieties of sexual experience, including inversion), Mary runs away to her grandmother's.

Mary tries to convince Mrs. Tilford that she is being persecuted at the school, but her lies are so transparent that the grandmother sees through them. Even after Mary's wheedling flattery, "I love you, grandma" and so on. The old lady still insists that the child return to school. Then, when nothing else works, Mary plays her ace. She tells Mrs. Tilford about the overhead quarrel between Martha and Mrs. Mortar, placing emphasis on
the word “unnatural”. Mary elaborates on the situation from her imagination and the episodes from Mlle de Maupin, suggesting sexual goings-on between Karen and Martha in Karen’s room.

Submerged in jealous and half-acknowledged desires, the two men in the play schoolmates, aunts, and grandmothers, together surround the one heterosexual couple: Joe Cardin and Karen Wright. In this context, Karen’s last name seems suggestive. She is Karen “right” surrounded by all the “wrong” who seek to disrupt and finally succeed in destroying her “right” relationship. The slander that builds around her quickly extends beyond the school to the community where belief and condemnation are again immediate.

The movement of the play from private desire to public disorder also reflects the contemporary discourse on lesbianism. Hellman’s language in her notes for The Children’s Hour resembles the terms of this discourse, for it not only links Mary and Martha’s state of being “half one thing, half another” with sexual difference, but also associates the two women with a marginality that threatens the dominant social order. Mary is “unable to adjust” to the school community. More pointedly, Martha feels excluded from “normal” bourgeois life. Hellman describes her in these terms: “A tough childhood, a secret yearning for all the comfortable values in the lives around her at college” (110). In Hellman’s notes, the evil in The Children’s Hour is overtly the evil of difference, social and sexual.
Although Hellman does not follow her source completely - as when she departs from Roughhead’s attribution of Jane Cumming’s evil to a racial difference - she does keep the essential paradigm. She retains sexual difference, but shifts the terms from race to class and from excessive to “abnormal” desire. The addition of Joseph Cardin to the text further emphasizes her efforts to present sexual difference as disruptive of “normal”. Karen Wright’s engagement to the earnest, hard working Doctor allows Hellman to set Martha Dobie, Mary Tilford, Mrs. Mortar directly in contrast to an established, clearly defined, heterosexual, middle-class order, what she describes as the “Normals”. Her notes sum up the conflict:

First Act the overture, and distinctly the overture, to the end. The ordered hard gotten at life, built by people who see and expect no world but their own, Normals. The abnormal will begin to work her way, slowly and without knowing it against the normals having as unconscious allies the one teacher, the aunt, too .... All people ruined by having been forced to deal with the abnormals whom they could never understand. The Child, the aunt, untouched.10

An early draft of The Children’s Hour more obviously displays Mrs. Tilford’s unacknowledged desires, suggesting that her affections shift at the end from Mary to Karen the “right” who has perhaps been the object
of everyone's desire throughout. In this version, the two women kiss twice during their final conversation, a potentially dangerous act given the slanderous atmosphere of the play. Mrs. Tilford not only offers Karen support, but confesses that she "loves" her:

Karen (smiles): You love me?

Mrs. Tilford: It's odd, Karen; you're all I have left.

Karen: It's over for me now, but it will never end for you.....

(Sits down beside Tilford and kisses her). I'm sorry, I will do what ever I can.

Tilford (Clings to her, kisses her): Then you'll try for yourself.11

Hellman's published 1934 text masks this desire. Lacking both kisses and confession, it ends with a muted optimism.

Mrs. Tilford: You'll let me help you? You'll let me try?

Karen: Yes, if it will make you feel better.

Mrs. Tilford (timidly): And you - you'll take the money?

Karen (tired): If you want it that way.

Mrs. Tilford (with great feeling): Oh yes, Oh yes, Karen.

(Unconsciously Karen begins to walk toward the window). . . . . .

Karen: If I ever have anything to say. Good-by, now.

Mrs. Tilford: You will have. I know it. Good-by, my dear. (114-15).
The last lines suggest that Martha's death makes fresh beginnings possible. With one "abnormal" dead, another banished, and a third restricted and under permanent observation, the old, cold days are over: it is time for better weather. Language becomes positive, windows open, and the survivors smile at each other. Rather than a tragic end, what we have here are glimmerings of renewed order.

But Hellman was never happy with the end of The Children's Hour and revised the final lines of it in every edition of the play up to 1970. In a 1960 preface she complained that the final scene was too "tense and over burdened" and wondered if the play "should have ended with Martha's suicide". Certainly this ending would have fulfilled her earliest plan for the play - the danger is over when the lesbian is dead. The last scene creates discomfort, emphasizing all that is unresolved. The "normals" have not re-achieved order: Mrs. Tilford hovers a little too near, and, perhaps, more significantly, Joe Cardin remains absent, his return doubtful.

The same lack of resolution surrounding feelings of guilt and desire reappears in a later, related text: the "Julia" portion of Pentimento. Turning briefly to this complex mix of memoir and fantasy, it is interesting to note its parallels to The Children's Hour. Hellman herself connects the two, dating the journey in "Julia" through references to progress on her first play. Both works appropriate history: in the play, "The Great
Dramsheugh Case," and in "Julia" experiences from the life of American psychoanalyst Muriel Gardiner, which Hellman both embellished and attributed to Julia.\(^{13}\) Moreover, both works make one significant alteration to the original material: both murder the lesbian.

The use of blackmail is an Ibsenite influence. If Hellman uses blackmail more often than Ibsen, she uses suicide less, only once, and that too in *The Children's Hour*. On the one hand, there is one murder in each of her next three plays (*Days to Come, The Little Foxes, Watch on the Rhine*). There are of course no murders in Ibsen. The blackmail is in some respects at least as various as in 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 comply. Hellman uses blackmail for different dramatic and moralistic purposes when compared to Ibsen. In Ibsen, it is the naive who are blackmailed. In Hellman, it is the naive only in *The Children's Hour* and *Rhine*. In the Hubbard plays blackmail is crucial to the turning of the tables.

In *The Children's Hour* Rosalie Wells is a pathetic child who is little more than an instrument, since without her some sort of corroboration of Mary's slander would not have the necessary effect. The blackmail is another example of Mary's destructive evil, her urge to tyrannize. But its primary purpose is as a plot necessity, to be defended only on the
assumption that in a girl’s school there is almost certain to be some misbehaviour open to blackmail.

Lillian Hellman’s first and in many ways the best play was The Children’s Hour. The play’s third act is crucial. It turns the play from an Ibsenite account of integrity assailed by private and public self-interest into a drama about the repression of truth on a number of levels. On a naturalistic level, it is hard to believe either in the convenience of the old woman’s repentance, which brings her to the school on cue moments after the death of the school teacher, or the calm acceptance of the dead body in an adjacent room. On a moral level it is hard to reconcile this response with the deeply concerned character so carefully established earlier in the play. Everything which she values has been destroyed. While shock and personal disaster may in some degree account for her response, the manner in which the final scene is contrived works against such a conclusion. The failure relates more directly to an inability to sustain tension rather than its casual exploitation.

The Children’s Hour is concerned in part with the degree to which behaviour is a consequence of the individual’s desire to see himself or herself in the best light. That is, it is concerned with an egotism which may disguise itself in many forms, not least, as Ibsen observed, in the form of self-righteous idealism. Hence Karen assails the old woman who now wishes to right the wrong she has done. It is not primarily a play about the
power of society to enforce its moral norms and a warning against witch hunt. It is more concerned with the destructive effects of insisting on one's innocence at all costs.

The relationship between the two women is drawn with sympathy. And though it is usual to disavow any connection between Lillian Hellman and her characters, her story of Julia, a childhood friend, contained in Pentimento (1974) - a story which she had found herself unable to tell until then -- suggests the origins of this friendship. Like her characters in The Children's Hour, Hellman too had been accused in public of having such a relationship. The point is, of course, not that there was a definable source for the play, but that in The Children's Hour the aimless guessing game carries much of the play's tension and that tension is to some degree discharged by too explicit an announcement of that passion by Martha. Her death may follow precisely from her own realisation of what she had formerly suppressed, but the clear articulation of that knowledge is required neither by the play's dramatic strategy nor by her own development as a character.14

At the centre of Hellman's plot is Mary Tilford, spoiled and vindictive, willing to impugn her schoolmates and schoolmistresses at the expensive private school run by Karen Wright and Martha Dobie. For the play to rise above the simplistic portrayal of a nasty pre-adolescent, the character of Mary must be more than just a wicked little conniver. She
must carry credibility and she must be able to deceive with a craftiness that is acceptable for her age level. If she acts beyond her years, she risks the rejection of the audience. She cannot appear too far fetched and must do her worst within a play that maintains the realistic illusion. Hellman succeeds in her characterization of Mary as a tyrannizing bully. Fortunately for all concerned, both onstage and offstage, Mary does get her "comeuppance" when Mrs. Tilford finally realizes the damage her granddaughter has done and resolves to keep her under strict control in the future.

The exposure and punishment of this wicked little villain were considered acceptable, but what bestirred the censors was the lesbian question and Hellman's use of it. The immediate reaction of the audience is to deny Mary's suggestion to her grandmother that Karen and Martha have an unnatural relationship. There is nothing whatever in the course of the play to support her accusations. It is clear that Mary has latched on to something more by accident than by intent. Her immediate sensing of the power of her suggestion enables her to pursue the point and get her vengeance against those who would discipline her. Confident that her blackmailing keeps her power unchallenged, Mary's innuendos succeed in ruining the school. Hellman does, however, some what dull the evil child theme by having Martha admit to Karen that she may have loved her "the way they said" before killing herself. The question then arises as to
whether or not Mary spoke sublimated truth. Although the two teachers are innocent of any demonstrated lesbian relationship, Martha's admission undercuts the whole thesis that a malicious child can wreck innocent lives.

This unexpected turn raises serious criticism about the ambivalence of Hellmans' purpose. Is her thesis that two women, unaware of any sexual content to their friendship, can become aware of it through this personal catastrophe? Martha is not completely sure about her feelings and there is nothing to indicate any reciprocation on Karen's part. And is this enough motivation for the drastic act of suicide? Or is the play about the gullibility of those who believe and act upon a child's unfounded rumour, as do the grandmother, Mrs. Tilford, and the parents who withdraw their children from the school? Is it a play about trust, shown in Karen's "loyal" fiancé, Joe, who vows to stand by her but then ruins everything by asking if the charge is true? It is, as a matter of fact, a little of each one of these and it may keep the focus blurred, but that is not entirely outside the province of dramatic realism. Catastrophe such as befalls the women in The Children's Hour can not be the result of a single factor nor does it necessarily add up to the neat sum of all the parts.15

There was another aspect to this particular story that would attract Hellman. Many years later in her Memoirs she would reveal a fascination with malice, the human capacity to cause hurt to others for little or no reason. In her reminiscences about her childhood she alludes several times
to the appearance of this quality in herself and in others. When she reports to her nurse that she has seen her father with another woman, Sophronia angrily tells her not to go through life making trouble for people. A striking story in the memoirs about the lesbian Mrs. Smith is a rumination on gratuitous malice. A central theme of Hellman’s last work, the novella *Maybe*, is the malice lurking behind so many mysteries. The destructive effects of malice and unprovoked evil are very much the theme of “The Great Drumsheugh Case”. Further the malice in the case was implemented by a lie - the story hangs on a lie. In the work of both Hammet and Hellman there is a fascination with lies and the devastation they can cause.

Lesbianism was of course a social issue and credit is often given to Hellman for dramatizing such a daring theme, particularly in her first play, breaking barriers and forcing broadway audiences to address an important but taboo subject. But she was not in that regard a pioneer. Eight years earlier New York had seen a play about lesbianism, *The Captive*, which was a translation of a French success, *La Prisonniere*, by Edouard Bourdet. Despite good reviews, including from Brooks Atkinson in *The New York Times*, the police closed down the play and arrested the leading ladies. As the scandal had been well covered in the newspapers, Hellman and Hammet were surely aware of *The Captive*’s fate, but were undaunted by it.
Whatever other virtues The Children's Hour may possess, it is a powerful and gripping story as was “The Great Drumsheugh Case”. Many plot elements are true of both. The two women started the school, they have invested all their assets in it and are making a success of it. An aunt of one, a former actress, teaches at the school. The women are accused by a student of having sexual relations with each other. The girl tells her grandmother, a woman of sufficient influence, to cause all the students to be withdrawn from the school within two days. The headmistress sues for libel. Testimony is given that the two women were seen embracing through a keyhole. At the trial the door is shown to have no keyhole. Even with such testimony, the libel action fails. The school never reopens. All of this is true of both the play and the actual case.

There are, however, important differences. In Hellman's version, she gives one of the women a fiancé and to make plausible young girls knowing about adult lesbianism, the aunt, Mrs. Mortar, is overheard by some of the students alluding to it. Hellman gives a motive to the student, Mary Tilford, who makes the trouble. She feels disliked by the two teachers. To reinforce Mary's accusation, Hellman introduces a blackmailing hold that Mary has over another student, Rosalie, so that the girl falsely corroborates Mary's slander.

Perhaps the biggest difference between the drama and the actual case (aside from moving it from the early nineteenth century to the present)
is the suicide of one of the teachers at the play’s end and the almost immediate arrival of the grandmother, who having learned that her granddaughter was lying, seeks to atone for her injustice. While the real grandmother never changed her attitude, the Scottish teachers finally succeeded in having the verdict overturned - but many years later, too late to salvage their lives.

In an early draft Hellman introduced a fictional character, the judge who would try the libel case. Later, deciding that the character added little and suffered with the action, she eliminated him. Hellman also gives the story a surprise twist by having one of the teachers, admit that there is truth in the accusation, that she does harbour erotic feelings toward her friend Karen. The apparent reversal annoyed some critics who felt Hellman was trying to have it both ways by presenting a play about two heterosexual women wrongly accused of lesbianism and an altogether different story of a lesbian persecuted by a cruel and unjust society.

Hellman, who would often be accused of writing melodrama, was in this instance being penalised for subtlety. She goes to substantial pains to show that Martha is confessing to something about herself that she has only just then realized. The child’s unfounded accusation has made her confront an aspect of her own nature that she has until that moment managed to suppress. Martha’s unconscious attraction to Karen may also have prompted behaviour on her part that was noticed by the students (as it
appears to have been by the aunt, Mrs. Mortar). Heilman makes this intention clear in the play's text when Martha says, "I never knew it until all this happened" (104). In addition, Hellman, in her notes for the play, describes Martha as "an unconscious lesbian". She later elaborated on the same idea by ruminating that Martha, if it hadn't been for the little girl's accusation, would have lived out her life unaware of her sexual nature.

To the Roughhead outline Hellman also adds vivid characters that establish with remarkable speed and economy the qualities she wants us to recognise. Before we are very far into the first Act we know that Karen and Martha are intelligent, decent young women who are working hard to establish a business they believe in. They have humour, warmth, strength, and patience. We know too that Mrs. Mortar is a trouble-making self-pitying hanger-on delicately poised between being a laughable nuisance and a serious menace. Mary Tilford is pure menace. With great inventiveness, Heilman makes us acknowledge little Mary as a villain of breath-taking nastiness.

Despite her close adherence to an actual situation, Hellman, while writing The Children's Hour, was contemplating the material in the broadest artistic terms. In her notes she compares the troublemaking lie of Mary with that of Shakespeare's Iago, making the distinction that while Iago had nothing to gain by his treachery, Mary did have
something to gain. Hellman terms Iago’s actions “unconscious wrong
doing” as opposed to Mary’s “perfect and complete villainy”.

When, in an interview, Hellman was asked where the character of
Mary had come from, she replied, “from my head”. Almost immediately
someone commented, “she should have said, from her Roughhead”. Funny
as the remark was, it was unfair. The accusing school girl in Roughheads
text comes across with little clarity. Hellman’s Mary is sharply etched. Her
style, her methods, and her evil are portrayed vividly and precisely. She is
as much a “creation” as any character in fiction.

In fact, there is an enormous difference between the real “Mary” and
Hellman’s character. The girl in “The Drumsheugh Case” was a Mulatto,
an illegitimate daughter of the aristocratic old woman’s deceased son.
Roughhead makes clear that the girl, whom he refers to as “black,” felt odd
and unwanted at the Scottish boarding school and hints that those feelings
prompted her ruinous lie.

The real Mary’s race might have provided a strong twist to the plot
and possible motivation that would have had a particular intensity during
the period in which Hellman moved the action, a period when sexual
deviance and racial antagonisms were problems looming in the public
consciousness. But Hellman gives a motive other than pure malice to
Mary. She may have felt a black student in a New England boarding school
would be hard to believe in 1934. But it is most likely that she changed the
girl to white from a fear that a specific resentment would weaken Mary as a
symbol of pristine evil.

Perhaps the best example of Hellman’s deftness of making bad
characters persuasive is Mrs. Tilford in *The Children’s Hour*. By the
conclusion of the story it is clear Hellman loathes Mrs. Tilford. At the
same time she has given her dignity, intelligence and a degree of
elocution. Hellman’s primary motive seems to be to make her evil
characters vivid and engaging as well as plausible so that perhaps they will
be worthy adversaries to whatever force she has set in opposition to them.

Doris Falk in *Lillian Hellman* says that in the 1930s *The
Children’s Hour* was a success. In 1952, the play was successfully
revived. Then it spoke to the audience about the events of those times –
the ruin of careers and lives by the “McCarthy” technique of smear, the
blacklist, and the “big lie”. But between the two productions of *The
Children’s Hour*, the world had seen the rise of Hitler, the Nazi holocaust,
World War II, the founding of the State of Israel, the increasing power of
Russia and Communism, and the Korean “military action”.

In the early 1930s the world had already been divided into
ideological and political camps, leading toward world conflict. American
attitudes toward Communism were confused. The Russian Revolution of
1917 had been followed eventually by the American recognition of the Soviet Union in 1934; then with the Nazi-Soviet Pact in 1939, Russia had become a villain and potential enemy. A few years later Russia was to be an ally in World War II. Concern with the Great Depression and unemployment as well as fears of involvement in another war kept most Americans from acknowledging the threat of events in Germany, Spain, and Italy. Lillian Hellman knew at first hand the destruction of human life and freedom left in the wake of fascism. In the late 1952 and early 1953 the time was certainly ripe for the revival of The Children's Hour as a political play. McCarthy was riding high and his technique of the blatant lie or rumoured suspicion caused the same kind of devastation in the play also.

Two major objections were raised to the play by well-known critics, among others, Brooks Atkinson of the New York Times, reviewing the 1934 production, and Eric Bently, reviewing the 1952 version. The two agreed that the play should have ended with the pistol shot, or even before. Atkinson said, "when two people are defeated by the malignance of an aroused public opinion, leave them the dignity of their hatred and despair."16

In her introduction to Four Plays Hellman acknowledged that perhaps the play should have ended with the suicide but added, "I am a moral writer, often too moral a writer, and I cannot avoid, it seems, that last
summing-up". Bentley was unhappy that Hellman supposedly established the premise that the two women were "innocent", and then shifted ground by making one of them "guilty." In the 1952 revival Hellman directed the play herself to point up the analogy between the destructive forces in *The Children's Hour* and those represented by McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee.

By 1934, whatever was sexual in the Lillian - Julia relationship had been outgrown or suppressed or sublimated. Hellman was living with Hammett and Julia was studying medicine in Vienna (where Dr. Joe Cardin of *The Children's Hour* also studied). But when Julia was maimed in an explosion and Hellman sat at her bedside, her complicated, half-understood feelings must have given her some insight into Martha Dobie — one of the few Hellman characters whose fate could be called tragic. For if the villainy of Mary was, to Hellman, like that of Iago, then the suicide of Martha, in her self-hatred for what she could not help, was like that of Othello, who could not live with what he had seen in himself. *The Children's Hour*, and possibly *Watch on the Rhine*, are the only plays that approach the definition of tragedy in the Aristotelian sense. Hellman's customary detachment from her characters is related to the genre in which she writes - not tragedy, but melodrama. For tragedy requires a protagonist whose fall, partly through his own fault, partly through circumstances
beyond his control, can excite a cathartic effect of pity or terror in the spectator.

Hellman never claimed to be writing classical tragedy, but she was writing more than is usually meant by melodrama. Her serious plays are always about good and evil. Evil may seem to prosper unjustly, but the actions and the strivings of the characters have meaning and consequence. Violence is there for a purpose, not just for sensational effect. In the introduction to Four Plays Hellman makes this distinction:

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. It is only then the critic will be able to find out whether a writer justifies his use of violence, and to scale him against those who have used it.

Melodrama, as Hellman used the term, was a logical outcome of realism in drama. For in tragedy, some mysterious, often supernatural
force, hovers over the action, partly at least controlling human destiny. Realism, however, assumes that life is seldom mysterious, seldom predetermined. When in most of Hellman’s plays human beings fail or are destroyed, the powers of destruction are in human hands. They are not functions of a higher necessity or fate. However, one reason why The Children’s Hour seems closer to tragedy than most of Hellman’s plays is that the evil motivation of Mary and the psychological drives of Martha are both outside immediate logical human understanding or control. But it is clear enough that these forces are allowed to triumph by human machination and human weakness. Mary is the first of the despoilers - the foxes who “Spoil Our Vines”. And her accomplices in evil are the self-righteousness in Mrs. Tilford and cowardice in Mrs. Mortar. In summary, then, The Children’s Hour has many of the qualities of Hellman’s later plays. Its mode and setting are realistic. Its characters are strongly etched and its theme is serious and its tone indignant. The object of that indignation is both social and individual.

It is not until the curtain falls on The Children’s Hour that one realizes the irony of the opening lines quoted from The Merchant of Venice: “It is twice blest; it blesseth him that gives and him that takes ...” The reference, of course, is to mercy lacking in those who implement the destruction of others. Mercy has nothing to do with political persuasion or social strata: “it droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven” and is “an
attribute of God himself'. The principle is ethical, moral, and Christian — not political. But for many playwrights in the 1930s human suffering and exploitation was political in origin and political reform alone could do battle with it. It is in her next play, Days to Come, that Hellman makes a brief foray into the issue of class struggle.

In the 1930s the boldness of the subject matter of The Children’s Hour diverted critical attention from the true theme, although even then some critics understood it. Burns Mantle, for instance, said that “the true theme is the curse of scandal mongering and the whispering campaign, the kind of vicious lying that may easily wreck the lives of innocent persons.”

Hellman said of the revival, “... and now the big lie is more fashionable. I’ve tried this time to take the emphasis off the child and make the play into the story of the two girls.... To my mind, the theme of lesbianism is less this time and what comes out stronger is the power of a lie and what it can do to people when it has even one little ounce of truth”.

In the 1950s critics understood the theme, spoke of its contemporary pertinence, and sometimes applied it specifically to the McCarthy witch hunt. They used such phrases as the “brutal impact of false testimony,” “exposure of the evils of character assassination,” “an impelling
psychological story of the havoc a lie can cause”. Brooks Atkinson thought that the play “might have grown a bit in stature” since we have learned that “lives can be destroyed by other types of slander. Having been intelligently written for the values of 1934, The Children’s Hour fits the world of today just as accurately”.\(^{21}\)

John Gassner appreciates the play thus:

*Although it is not difficult to discover the flaws in this work, a critic must develop a special resolve to denigrate American drama before he can resist the power of The Children’s Hour, especially in the throbbing second Act ... we may view with some perturbation the fact that the plays written in recent years have so rarely possessed the power that belongs to The Children’s Hour.*\(^{22}\)

At the time of revival Hellman said about Mary, “On the stage a person is twice as villainous as, say, in a novel. When I read that story I thought of the child as neurotic, sly, but not the utterly malignant creature which playgoers see in her. I never see characters as monstrously as the audiences do — in her case. I saw her as a bad character but never outside life. It’s the results of her lie that make her so dreadful - this is really not a play about lesbianism, but about a lie. The bigger the lie the better, as always”\(^{23}\)
Some critics felt that Mary is the centre of the play. Her speeches are unlike those of anyone else in the play. She is established as a liar and a bully by concrete dialogue about a missing bracelet and allowance money and a broken vase and wilted flowers and a specific book read furtively. The concrete dialogue is reinforced by concrete actions: arm twisting, a fake heart attack. And just as important for her characterization, when she is offstage during the first two Acts, she still dominates the play because the other characters talk about her.

In a minor way, the same devices of characterization are used for Lily Mortar. Both she and Mary are established immediately for us, Aunt Lily through her recitation and fatuous remarks to the girls, Mary through her entrance with the wilted flowers and subsequent stubborn defence of her lie. Aunt Lily's references to her past glories as an actress, to Sir Henry Irving, to the Infant Phenomenon, to the toilet backstage in Rochester give a concrete image of her character. And, like Mary, when she is offstage she is the subject of discussion between the two teacher friends.

The characterization of the teachers on the other hand is developed more slowly. Most of their conversation tells us more about Mary and Aunt Lily than it does about the teachers themselves. But the teachers too finally become realized characters for us in that much-criticized third Act. Many reviewers called this Act too long, even unnecessary. Some argued that the
play should have ended with Martha’s suicide. This criticism apparently half-convinced Hellman. She wrote:

_The play probably should have ended with Martha’s suicide. The last scene is tense and over-burdened. I knew this at the time, but I could not help myself. I am a moral writer, often too moral a writer, and I cannot avoid, it seems, that last summing up. I think that is only a mistake when it fails to achieve its purpose, and I would rather make the attempt, and fail, than fail to make the attempt._

But should the play end sooner than it does? To begin with, it is in the last Act, before Martha’s suicide, that we finally see the two teachers as individuals, talking not about Aunt Lily or Mary but about themselves, their lives and their feelings, a development indirectly acknowledged by the frequent critical praise of the writing in the last Act, particularly the dialogue between Karen and Martha and Karen and Mrs. Tilford.

Martha : I have loved you the way they said.
Karen : You’re crazy ....
Karen : [deliberately] You are guilty of nothing.
Martha : I’ve been telling myself that since the night we heard the child say it; I’ve been praying I could convince myself of it. I can’t, I can’t any longer. It’s there. I don’t know how, I don’t know why. But I did love you. I do love you. I
resented your marriage; may be because I wanted you; may be I wanted you all along; may be I couldn’t call it by a name; may be it’s been there ever since I first knew you, -

Karen : [tensely] It’s a lie. You’re telling yourself a lie. We never thought of each other that way.

Martha : [bitterly] No, of course you didn’t. But who says I didn’t? I never felt that way about anybody but you. I’ve never loved a man - (Stops. Softly) I never knew why before. May be it’s that ……

Martha : Its funny, it’s all mixed up. There’s something in you, and you don’t know it and you don’t do anything about it. Suddenly a child gets bored and lies – and there you are, seeing it for the first time … In some way I’ve ruined your life. I’ve ruined my own. I didn’t even know…. (104-105)

But the real justification for the third Act lies in an application of Francis Ferguson’s discussion of dramatic rhythm in The Idea of a Theatre. He identifies the movements of a realistic play as being from purpose to suffering to new insight, with the protagonist on a search for his “true human condition.” The end of the quest brings an understanding of the past brought up in the light of present action. Examining Ibsen’s Ghosts, Ferguson finds this rhythm truncated by its abrupt ending. The ending of The Children’s Hour prevents a similar truncation. Martha’s
suicide is the end of her quest, but Karen and Mrs. Tilford must acquire new insight as a result of that suicide. Thus, with the final scene, the acceptance is there and the rhythm complete.

Hellman couldn't avoid that last summing up because it was necessary, necessary to a play written in the tradition of realistic drama. But The Children's Hour is in many ways an atypical Hellman play. Lillian Hellman does not thereafter write in the Ibsen tradition. The later plays do avoid that last summing up because they grow out of another tradition altogether, that of the novel, and employ the techniques of irony.

The ability to tell a story is a unique gift of Lillian Hellman. That gift is a major reason for the survival of the play The Children's Hour. Critics who tried unsuccessfully to fit Hellman into the mould of the social protest playwrights of the 1930s forget that as Hellman said, The Children's Hour "isn't about a time or a movement. It's a story."25

It also is an example of her consistent effort to go beyond the limitations of the realistic form. Hellman has been charged with writing melodrama and the well-made play. An examination of Hellman's works shows that she attempted a form which, for lack of a better term, can be called stylized realism. This technique, perfected in The Little Foxes and Toys in the Attic, had its beginnings in The Children's Hour, still a
memorable contribution to the American theatre. What a reviewer wrote in 1953 is still true of the play in the 1970s:

What I should like to underline.... is the immense theatricality of the work - the sheer exhilarating sense it conveys of a positive dramatic talent, of a playwright who is not afraid to calculate her exits and entrances, to drop her curtains at a provocative moment, or to expose her characters to passion and violence. It is this imaginative boldness which has carried Miss Hellman past the failures of realism to a secure and irreproachable ground.26

Hellman said in an interview that the villain of the piece was not Mary Tilford who told the lie but her grandmother and all the others who believed and acted on it. In this statement Hellman seems to be positing the play's strongest statement: "evil as exemplified by Mary exists and will always exist. It is up to fundamentally decent people like Mrs. Tilford to recognise it, thwart it if possible, but certainly to avoid furthering it."27

Philip Armato observes that "works as diverse as Aeschylus's Oresteia, Shakespeare's Measure for Measure, and Melville's Billy Budd have dealt with the dichotomy between primitive justice and mercy. Although The Children's Hour is certainly a less monumental work of art than any of these, it is within its limits a wholly successful moral play."28
REFERENCES


