CHAPTER VI
CONCLUSION
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Lillian Hellman is a considerable figure in the American theatre. She arrived on the American stage two decades before absurdist playwrights began effectively. In certain respects she depends upon the conventions of the well-made play. But she uses these conventions to lure the audience into confrontation with unpleasant truths. Hellman is known for her craft of play-writing which enables her to tell her stories suspensefully. This is done initially in the manner of Ibsenite social realism, where the plot functions as a diversionary avenue by which the dramatist attacks particular contemporary issues. She often relies upon what she calls the "tricks" of the theatre like strong curtains, overheard conversations, the use of blackmail and so on. These devices at times test the reader's credulity, though as critics like Mark Estrin point out that they do not appear incredulous in a well directed production. Further, Hellman's use of blackmail in philosophical, thematic and structural terms shows that even while following Ibsen, she goes beyond him by linking blackmail to notions of money and power that define some of her major theatrical preoccupations.
The plays of Lillian Hellman fall broadly into two principal groups based on her view of human action and motivation. The first two plays became signposts, marking the direction to be taken by the later plays. The Children's Hour deals with active evil - here the ruin of two women by the spreading of a malicious lie. The drama points the way towards the three plays whose chief characters are despoilers - those who exploit or destroy others for their own purposes.

The despoiler plays are The Little Foxes, Another Part of the Forest, and Watch on the Rhine. Each is a tightly constructed drama, heading to a violent climax 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 Toys in the Attic - are as different from the despoilers in structure as they are in the theme. The action in these plays is slower, the plot more discursive and low-keyed. It moves more within the characters and the events that befall them than through their actions. For most of these people are unable to act positively or with conviction. They let things happen and they become the passive victims of the despoilers and themselves.
Despoilers and bystanders appear in some form in all the plays, but Hellman clearly differentiates between evil as a positive, rapacious force in the first group, and evil as the negative failure of good in the second.2

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

Hellman uses blackmail more often than Ibsen. In The Children's Hour, Mary Tilford intimidates one of her schoolmates into supporting her vicious, destructive lie by threatening to reveal the other child's petty thievery if she does not conform. In The Little Foxes Regina extorts far more than her legitimate share of the profits in a family enterprise by threatening to reveal that her brothers have stolen her dead husband's bonds. In Watch on the Rhine a penniless Romanian Count warns that he will reveal to the German Embassy the identity of the son-in-law of a wealthy Washington family as that of a prominent member of the anti-Nazi underground
forces unless he is given a large sum of money. While the family agrees to pay the ransom, the son-in-law, who does not trust the Count and who knows that the Count's information endangers not only his own life but that of many of his friends, murders the Count in what he considers a legitimate act of war. In The Autumn Garden a seventeen-year-old girl insists upon blackmailing a wealthy woman for money (by threatening to exaggerate a very minor scandal about the woman's husband), when the woman would be quite willing to aid her financially simply as an act of generosity.

In Watch on the Rhine and The Autumn Garden, the victims of blackmail are guilty of nothing. They are more admirable in their willingness to behave in such a way as to protect others. And the blackmailers too differ from the Hubbards. The Count in Watch on the Rhine would like to be a Hubbard, but he can't because he has the glimmerings of a conscience and the ability to recognise good when he sees it and differentiate it from evil. Sophie in The Autumn Garden commits blackmail only to avoid being patronized. Unlike the Count and the Hubbards she is in no sense evil at all.

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

Blackmail adds to the scope of the Hubbards' capacity for oppression in The Little Foxes. It enables the oppressed (Ben) to rebel and become the oppressor in Another Part of the Forest. It is revelatory of Nazi oppression in Watch on the Rhine. The Autumn Garden shows generosity as a form of oppression that blackmail can counter. In Toys in the Attic what Julian does may show that love itself can become a form of oppression. Hellman makes clear that, for her, greed and oppression are among the worst of evils. While her range of blackmail is such that sometimes it represents neither of these evils in the ordinary sense, nevertheless it would be hard to find another human action so neatly capable of representing both.
However different the story, the place and the people in Hellman's plays, the theme is always the struggle between good and evil. The singleminded devotion to her own idea of what is important and her ability to translate the idea into play form with an increasing power and persuasion are Lillian Hellman's distinctive achievement. The core of all the social anger which is the driving force in Hellman's dramas is contained in the following two speeches. The first is from *The Little Foxes* where old Addie, "a tall, nice looking Negro woman, about fifty-five," a family retainer says:

There are people who eat the earth and eat all the people on it like in the Bible with the locusts. Then there are people who stand around and watch them eat it. Sometimes I think it ain't right to stand and watch them do it.  

The second is from *The North Star*. Old Dr. Kurin, the devoted scientist and physician finds a famous German surgeon whom he knows as a student taking children's blood (so much of it that they die from it) for transfusion to wounded Germans. Kurin goes into the room where Dr. Von Harden and his assistant, Richter, a typical Nazi, are operating. He says to Von Harden:
I have heard about a man like you. The civilized men who are sorry. That (points to Richter), that kind is nothing. They will go when their bosses go. But men like you who have contempt for men like him, to me you are the real filth. Men who do the work of Fascists and pretend to themselves they laugh at those who order them to do it. (With great anger) It is men like you who sold your people to men like him.5

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

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

Fanny: Are you a radical?

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

Sara: Yes, But Kurt works at it. Mama
Fanny: What kind of work?
Kurt: Any kind, any where.6

Moreover, the whole action of *Watch on the Rhine* stems from the characters themselves and their relation to the world around them. The distance Hellman has travelled since *The Children's Hour* is marked by the fact that in *Watch on the Rhine* she has not only a theme and a story arranged to suit her moral purpose but leading characters, who have learned to speak for themselves.7 "Her characters talk and move in a believably realistic fashion," as Jordan Y. Miller observes.8

*The Little Foxes* ends in triumph and defeat for both sides. Horace has been cheated; yet through Regina he is able to cheat Oscar and Ben. Regina now seems in full control, but her victory is no guarantee of permanent power either over her brother or over Alexandra. Alexandra's curtain line is powerful, and yet there is no proof that she will break away. "There is no ending," except Alexandra's question, which probably is more foreboding to Regina than she can possibly admit.
The problem of *The Little Foxes* is broader than the four walls of a home. It represents the misfortune of all human beings who have found themselves deprived of their former self-respect but who are unable to regain strength and confidence to oppose the evil which rushes into the vacuum. Placing the action in 1900 provides a certain aesthetic distance and there may be a temptation to dismiss the events as part of a long-disappeared historical era. This helps perhaps to relieve the intense and taxing severity of the play, but it does not automatically deny the existence of the basic social problem.

The subject matter of *The Little Foxes* indicates Hellman's knowledge of the development of the realistic drama. The nineteenth century would have demanded a full-scale melodrama, complete with punishment for the evil planners and victory for the defenders of justice. Hellman makes her audience know that respectable society will always have Reginas, Oscars, and Bens to fight and further that there are also Horaces and Alexandras to fight them.

Since the characters in *The Autumn Garden* are futile, selfish, unimaginative and purposeless, they do not make a decisive play. By honestly reflecting their nature, the play shares their indolence and aimlessness. As Brooks Atkinson says *The Autumn Garden* is Hellman's most discerning drama:
From the ethical point of view, the characters of *The Autumn Garden* are useless. But Miss. Hellman has made them artistically fascinating because she has created them with sympathetic understanding that is sharpened by her own code of moral values. They are amusing not in themselves, but because she sees them steadily and whole from the vantage point of a critical attitude towards the world.9

So far we have discussed how blackmail constitutes the core of social anger in Hellman's plays. Let us consider another important factor: passivity in some of the Hellman's plays. As Mary Lynn Broe observes, passivity is not a foreign concept to female authors and characters of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. If we look at five Hellman plays (*The Children's Hour*, *The Little Foxes*, *Another Part of the Forest*, *The Autumn Garden* and *Toys in the Attic*), we see that an apparent social disadvantage actually allows a distinct capacity for being as a moral individual or catalyzes action that permits such moral truth to be recognised.

In *The Children's Hour*, Hellman dismantles the social stereotype of passivity in Aunt Lily Mortar and her parodic distortion, Mary Tilford. She suggests
complex new moral possibilities for passivity by giving dramatically central role to the indirect revelations of Lily Mortar. At the same time, she mocks the theatrics of social passivity by linking it with moral disguise in both Lily and Mary Tilford.

Hellman's general theme of duplicity is more specifically focussed on two women characters and their portraits of passivity in The Little Foxes. Regina Hubbard Giddens feigns the role of the inept and demure southern belle. Regina has been systematically juggling her family's lives and fortunes for a long time. She puts her own daughter up for forty per cent collateral in a deal, using her also as a bait to get an invalid husband home. She uses her husband's reticence about committing money, and finally even his death, as bargaining tools that she wields sharply against her brothers. Outwitting the thieving Hubbards, she gets seventy-five per cent of the money for herself, in an actively malignant parody of passivity. Once again, moral disassembling, social passivity, and meta-theatrics are linked in the character of Regina.

The dramatic complement to Regina's feigned passivity is the battered Aunt Birdie. Birdie reveals the play's central and ironic truth. She sets the shadowy standard for moral judgement in The Little Foxes. She
recognises ethical values. In the opening scene, Birdie criticizes the unethical behaviour of the New southern industrialists and hints at what will become of the Hubbards in their ruthless use of one another. The information and influence she provides Alexandra and her allegiance to Horace prompt the younger woman's final refusal. Birdie's words give her "the courage to fight" instead of being "one of the people who stand around and watch" (110). While good may not be rewarded or evil sufficiently punished in The Little Foxes, Hellman does expand and explore the character of those "Little Foxes whose vines have tender grapes" (Song of Solomon - 2:15) through the figure of Aunt Birdie. In Birdie's intoxicated asides, truth is given ultimate, though unlikely, power over apparently active evil. If not redeemed, the passive ones are victims redefined.

In The Children's Hour and The Little Foxes, both Mary's pose as a battered child and Regina's feigned southern belle routine set the stage for a very different sort of passivity. The real moral quality of passivity (which Birdie in particular represents) triumphs over feigned artifice as it exists in Mary and Regina's meta-theatrics.

With The Autumn Garden, Hellman moves to the muted haze of middle-life. Pity and compassion are the
only bonding possible among weak, aging characters. Linked in a socially negligible partnership, Sophie and old Mrs. Ellis support one another both in dramatic action and verbal power. Now we see the collaboration of the passive, dismissible characters. With realistic savvy about money as power, they use the meta-theatrics of their social roles not for moral disguise, as do Regina and Mary Tilford, but as a means to physical escape or greater self-awareness. Through their final comaraderie, we realize that Autumn Garden issues a stern warning "reminiscent of Scott Fitzgerald's early stories." Life is a valuable and precious trust whose capital must be invested early and wisely, set in a committed direction and tended energetically before mid-life, or its returns will never be reaped. If it is squandered, the Sophies of the world will deceive themselves into becoming Rose Griggses.

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

In the introduction to *Four Plays* Hellman makes the following observation:

> I think the word melodrama, in our time has come to be used in an almost illiterate manner. By definition, it is a violent dramatic piece, with a happy ending. But I think we can add that it uses its violence for no purpose, to point no moral, to say nothing in say-nothing's worst sense ... But when violence is actually the needed stuff of the work and comes toward a large enough end, it has been and always will be in the good writer's field ... There is a needed return to the correct use of the word melodrama.
Melodrama as Hellman uses the term is a logical outcome of realism in drama which assumes that life is neither mysterious nor predetermined. In most of Hellman's plays when human beings fail or are destroyed, the powers of destruction are in human hands.

In *The Children's Hour* the defendants know the outcome of the trial before we do, and we learn at the same time as Karen does that Mrs. Tilford wants to make amends. In *The Little Foxes* however we know before Ben and Oscar that Regina knows about the bonds; we know before Regina that Ben and Oscar don't need Horace and that he is charting his own doom when he repeatedly says that Regina won't have her way as long as he is alive.

Viewed solely as a melodrama, solely as the story of Kurt Muller, the play *Watch on the Rhine* may be dated. But if it is the story of some nice, naive, liberal Americans put to the test, if it is a character drama like *The Autumn Garden*, then it has its validity. Until, however, a revival allows us to judge for ourselves, we can view it as probably the best of the World War II anti-Nazi plays. Brooks Atkinson summarizes his response to the play thus:
Since Miss. Hellman has communicated her thought dramatically in terms of articulate human beings, *Watch on the Rhine* ought to be full of meaning a quarter of a century from now when people are beginning to wonder what life was like in America when the Nazi evil began to creep across the sea.  

In *The Autumn Garden*, Hellman gives us an attitude rather than a central character with which to identify. Hellman believes in decency, intelligence, and will, as opposed to moral inertia and irresponsibility. She believes that we must do our best, our human best. We must strive to grow and we must be "committed" in the existential sense of that term. In her plays and in her memoirs Hellman uses again and again the phrase "in space." A person who speaks or acts "in space" has no commitment, no reasoned outlook; he is like a kite, without a string.

Showing the definite influence of Anton Chekhov, *The Autumn Garden* concerns itself with a society that has become static. As in the Russian author's work, there are the ineffectual aristocrats, shorn of much of their wealth and consequently of their power, and the rising class, possessed of an energy that will enable them to establish themselves in the
positions vacated by the others. For most of the characters, the concerns are with what happened in the past, what people will think what is in their own best interest. Some of the same motifs and themes that are central to the Hubbard plays are examined briefly in this work.

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


