CHAPTER II

THE CHILDREN’S HOUR - THE LIE AND ITS RAMIFICATIONS
The play, *The Children's Hour*, has often been called a melodrama. It seems to present the theme of lesbianism though in the 1942 edition of her plays Hellman says that the play is more inclusive and deals with the theme of goodness and badness. *The Children's Hour* reveals Hellman's ability to tell a story.

Hellman challenges the conventions of a society that destroys those who deviate from it. As Hammet was finishing the *Thin Man* in the spring of 1933 he came across a noteworthy British court case in a book titled *Bad Companions* by William Roughhead. Hammet was particularly struck by one chapter "Closed Doors or The Great Drumsheugh Case." It concerned two Headmistresses of a girls school in Scotland who were accused by a student of having a lesbian relationship. The scandal forced the school to close. When the Headmistresses sued for libel, the case became public. Hammet thought the story had the dramatic intensity for a good play and considered writing it himself. He then decided it would make a better project for Lillian Hellman. The destructive effects of malice and unprovoked evil are very much the theme of "The Great Drumsheugh Case." The malice in this case is made manifest by a lie. With little provocation,
the girl tells a deliberate, calculated falsehood that she imagines will destroy the lives of the Headmistresses. In her choice of the subject matter, Hellman here is attracted to a theme that has nothing to do with the issues that were of increasing concern to liberals in those depression years — failure and corruption, capitalism, war profiteering, pacifism, economic and social injustices.¹

While the theme of *The Children's Hour* was unconventional enough to cause a stir among moralists, it was hardly revolutionary on the stage. Homosexuality had been portrayed in the Renaissance English drama. It made its appearance on the modern American stage by about 1920. The best known play on lesbianism was *The Captive* (1926), a translation from the French play by Edouard Bourdet. In *The Children's Hour* the terms of good and evil do not apply to the theme of homosexuality, but to that of destructive scandal-mongering.²

In *The Children's Hour* Hellman did not intend to portray a melodramatic conflict between two "good" teachers and an "evil" child when she wrote her play. Philip Armato observes that the opening of the *The Children's Hour*, in a study room of the Wright-Dobie School, seems undramatic. Mrs. M.Lilly Motar, Martha Dobie's aunt, is sleeping, the students are sewing. The
action which would catch the eye of the audience is that of Evelyn Munn

> Using her scissors to trim the hair of Rosalie, who sits, nervously, in front of her, she has Rosalie's head bent back at an awkward angle and is enjoying herself.\(^3\)

The visual image of the infantile pleasure of exercising cruelty while hearing about mercy is invoked in the words of a student reciting Portia's famous speech in *The Merchant of Venice*. The visual image of cruelty is juxtaposed with the words "pity" and "mercy" during the opening moments of the play.

In *The Children's Hour*, Hellman posits mercy as an ultimate good and merciless cruelty as an ultimate evil. The rancorous structure of inter-personal relationships is patterned after the structure of human associations in the Venice of Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*. This can be best described as a victim - victimizer syndrome. In the first two acts of her play, Hellman develops three relationships which are characterized by the circular form and destructive content of the victim-victimizer syndrome. These pairs are Karen Wright-Mary Tilford, Martha Dobie-Lily Mortar, and Amelia Tilford-Wright Dobie. In *The Merchant of Venice*, a jew who is socially inferior to a
Christian is mistreated by the Christian and attempts to use the Duke — the land's highest authority — 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 Lancet's most influential citizen, the powerful matron, Amelia Tilford, as a vehicle for her revenge. Finally, in the much criticized third act, Hellman, like Shakespeare, posits mercy as the only solution to the moral dilemma which is created when we deal justly with each other.

Karen Wright's treatment of Mary Tilford has never been sensitively evaluated. Immediately preceding their initial confrontation, Hellman suggests that Karen is perhaps not as compassionate as a teacher of young children should be. For when Mrs. Mortar complains that one of her students does not "appreciate" Portia's plea for mercy, Karen replies: "Well I didn't either. I don't think I do yet" (11). The harshness of her discipline will demonstrate the truth at a far more literal level.

Mary Tilford's offence is a minor one. She attempted to demonstrate her tardiness by saying that she was picking flowers for Mrs. Mortar. The flowers, Karen knows, were "picked" from the top of a garbage can, and Mary's stubborn refusal to admit the truth convinces Karen that she must be punished.
Karen: Well, there doesn't seem to be any other way with you; you'll have to be punished. Take your recreation periods alone for the next two weeks. No horse back-riding and no hockey. Don't leave the school grounds for any reason whatsoever. Is that clear?

Mary: Saturday, Too?

Karen: Yes.

Mary: But you said, I could go to the boat races.

Karen: I'm sorry, but you can't go. (13-14)

While these restrictions might not be extreme deprivation for an adult, they are so for a child. Mary feels and rightly that she is being prosecuted. From wanting to tell her grandmother "How everybody treats me here and the way I get punished for every little thing I do" (13), she moves to a sense of her inner agony, objectified in her hysterical "heart problems," and finally to a rebellious attitude:

Mary: ..........They 'are scared of Grandma - she helped, 'em when they, first started, you know and when she tells 'em something, believe me, they'll sit up and listen. They can't get away with treating me like this, and they don't have to think they can. (37)
She sets out to take her revenge. She accuses Karen and Martha of lesbianism and persists in her lie. Her behaviour is ugly, but has been provoked by Karen's earlier ugliness. She seeks an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.5

The machinery leading to the downfall of the two teachers, Karen Wright and Martha Dobie, is set in motion in Hellman's version by the neurotic child, and completed by the grandmother, as in the Drumsheugh case. Although Mary is the initiating force of evil in the play, other characters, by their pride, weakness and gullibility, execute her purposes. Mrs. Tilford and Mrs. Lilly Mortar are receptive to Mary's lies. Mary's schoolmates are terrified of her. The terror of one child Rosalie (who Mary knows, has stolen another girl's bracelet) accounts for Mary's success through blackmail and intimidation.

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 to 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 everytime 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 are jealous of him, that's what it is.

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

Mrs. Mortar: You are fonder of Karen and I know that. And its 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 and Mary bullies them into telling her what was said. Armed with this information, Mary runs away to her grandmother.

Karen's inability to deal compassionately with Mary Tilford is paralleled in Act 1 by Martha Dobie's
attitude toward her aunt Lily. As Karen isolates Mary, Martha exiles Mortar. Lily's reaction is the same as Mary's: "You always take your spite out on me" (24). As she leaves, she casts towards Martha a "malicious half smile" and the malice of revenge is realized when she refuses to testify on Martha's behalf in the libel trial.

In Act 2, Karen and Martha suffer an ironic reversal of fortune. The victimizers become victims themselves. Amelia Tilford, an influential figure in the community of Lancet, misuses her authority over Karen and Martha just as surely as they had taken advantage of the weaker position of Mary and Lily. When Mary tells Amelia that her two teachers are lesbian, the dowager immediately phones the parents of the children who are enrolled at Wright-Dobie and repeats the charges, thus destroying the school.

The two teachers and Joe, Karen's fiance, confront the grandmother and Mary, and almost succeed in breaking down the child's story: she said that she had seen "things" through a key-hole in Karen's door, and heard "things" through the wall in Martha's room. But as the grandmother begins to waver, Mary claims that she got the story from Rosalie. And Rosalie, afraid that her "borrowing" of another girl's bracelet will be
revealed, confesses falsely that she had seen and reported the damaging evidence to Mary. When Karen and Martha come for an explanation, Amelia makes it clear that she does not want them in her house.

I don't think you should have come here ...
I shall not call you names, and I will not allow you to call me names. It comes to this: I can't trust myself to talk about it with you or ever. (67-68)

Her condescension and her revulsion in the face of her visitors pervades the scene: "This - This thing is your own. Go away with it. I don't understand it and I don't want any part of it" (69). Ironically, Karen and Martha now suffer from the same humiliation and ostracism that they so rigorously inflicted on others.

To make the ironic parallel and thus drive home the lesson, Helman shows Karen and Martha reacting just as Lily and Mary had reacted. Both think that they are being unjustly persecuted. Both feel spiritual agony: "You're not playing with paper dolls. We're human beings, see? It's our lives you're fooling with. Our lives" (68). Finally they feel the need for revenge:

What can we do to you (Amelie)? There must be something - something that makes you feel the way we do tonight. You don't want any part of this, you said. But you'll get a part. More than you bargained for. (71)
In Act 2, Hellman presents a change in relationship, but not a change in the structure of relationships. Those who mistreated others are now mistreated themselves. Clearly, Hellman implies that when one mistreats another, he plants seeds of his own destruction. This insight is made even more explicit in the third act.

The teachers bring a libel suit against Mrs. Tilford, but lose it because of the absence of Mrs. Mortar who refuses to return from her trip to testify. She is afraid of being involved in a scandal. The teachers become social outcasts, unable even to leave the house. The school is ruined, and distrust has tainted Karen's engagement to Joe in spite of his protestations to the contrary. Joe departs, at Karen's insistence, on the note that their marriage would never work and that his suspicions would never be laid to rest. When Martha hears this, she suddenly admits to Karen - and herself - that she, Martha, has indeed loved Karen "that way" and in fact the aunt's accusation is true, but Martha herself was not conscious of her feelings until all the trouble.

It's funny, it's all mixed up. There's something in you, and you don't know it. Suddenly a child gets bored and lies - and there you are seeing, it for the first time ... It all seems to come back to me. In some way I have ruined your life. I've ruined my own. I didn't even know ... (105)
Karen is shaken by the confession, weeps, and unconsciously in the Shakespearian manner suggests Martha's fate:

"Go and lie down Martha. You'll feel better." Martha goes and a few minutes later a shot is heard. She has committed suicide. Shortly afterwards, when Karen and aunt have discovered Martha's body, Mrs. Tilford arrives. (114)

As in the other two acts, there is a parallel action but this time it is the difference that is instructive, not the similarity. Martha's self-condemnation is matched by a new found self-disgust in Amelia Tilford. She discovers that Mary has lied about her two teachers. She realizes that her hasty phone calls have destroyed two people who are innocent of the charges. Her discovery propels her into the same kind of guilt and self-laceration that drives Martha to suicide. Amelia begs Karen to allow her to "do something" for her so that she can in part expiate her sin. Karen extends mercy. Martha's suicide, however, has for Karen been both harrowing and educative. Because of it she is, she tells Lily: "Not (young) any more" (108).

This brief statement suggests that Martha's death has introduced a new note of maturity. Her horror at the guilt that caused Martha's suicide leads Karen to
sympathise with the plight of the guilt-ridden Amelia. In the last moments of the play, she accepts Amelia's atonement and thereby extends her compassion, the ultimate good in the world of the play. 

Mrs. Tilford: You'll be alright?
Karen: I'll be alright, I suppose, goodbye, now.

(They both rise. Mrs. Tilford speaks, pleadingly)
Mrs. Tilford: You'll let me help you? You'll let me try?
Karen: Yes, it will make you feel better.

Mrs. Tilford: (with great feeling) no; yes, Oh, yes Karen (unconsciously Karen begins to walk towards the window)
Karen: (Suddenly) Is it nice out?
Mrs. Tilford: It's been cold.
(Karen opens Tilford with surprise)
It seems a little warmer now.
Karen: It feels very good (they smile at each other). (114)

Karen has destroyed the vicious circle that has characterised human relations. Adler has noted that The Children's Hour, like The Wild Duck, ends not with a suicide, but with a brief discussion pinning down the issues as a result of the suicide. 

8
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 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.
Hellman dismantles in the play the social stereotype of passivity in Aunt Lily Mortar. Early in the play, the decaying ex-actress Lily Mortar is overheard calling the relationship of the headmistress of a school "just as unnatural as it can be." Her words, distorted by Mary Tilford, bring about the suicide of one of the women. By shrewdly calculating the cliche of social passivity, Mary blackmails and manipulates both her grandmother and a fellow student into the character assassination of Karen and Martha. She engineers her "great awful lie" into acceptable truth by exaggerating a social stereotype.

In the course of the play, Aunt Lily Mortar makes a career out of absence, omission and inadvertence. For Lily, the natural thing is the socially customary. Courtesy for her is a mere matter of breeding and passivity an unconscious and uncritical way of life. In the play's opening scene, Lily and the school girls are involved in a "great show of doing nothing" (30). Haphazard sewing and basting complement the fake social graces. Theatrics replaces the candor of labour. Unwittingly, Lily herself points out the deception by calling their labours simply women's "tricks."
Perhaps the most "critical meta-theatrical moment" in this opening scene is Lily's hammy reading of Portia's "Mercy" speech from Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. On Lily Mortar's lips these celebrated lines dwindle into a mere elocutionary exercise just as the truth she utters, central to the outcome of the action, is but an overheard perception. But ironically it is the three lines Lily omits that seem to anticipate the outcome of the dramatic action of *The Children's Hour*: "therefore, Jew/though justice be thy plea, consider this/That in the course of justice none of us/Should see salvation."  

Moreover, Lily's verbal omissions in the first scene foreshadow her crucial absence when Karen and Martha need her witness for their trial. Lily's words in the form of muttered asides emerge only indirectly as uncanny truth about the other characters: Lily's comment, "one master passion in the breast ... swallows all the rest" (9), accurately describes Mary's maliciousness.

Just as metatheatrics permits moral disguise in Lily's incomplete Portia and Mary's failed Inquisition, so too does it become a metaphor for other forms of playing in *The Children's Hour*. Even structurally the play subtly
suggests the deceptive. All the truth-revealing scenes are interrupted so that the continuous action of dramatic unravelling and revelation are missing from the play. By such sleight of structure, Hellman shifts the focus from blackmail, extortion and lesbianism to the business of redefining the moral possibilities by giving a dramatically central role to the indirect revelations of Lily Mortar. At the same time, she mocks social passivity by linking it with moral disguise in both Lily and Mary Tilford.12

One reason that The Children's Hour is closer to tragedy than most of Hellman's plays is that the evil of motivation of Mary and the psychological drives of Martha are both outside immediate logical human understanding and 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 lives" — and her accomplices in evil are the self-righteous Mrs. Tilford and cowardly Mrs. Mortar.

Lawson actually criticizes Hellman for not writing a social document: "the situation gives the impression of being implausible because it is not placed in a solid social framework. The play ignores
time and place. The prejudice against sexual abnormality varies ..." We are not shown the conditions in the environment which explain the little girls' demoniac hatred and the suffering of the two school teachers. In later years it became customary to describe the play as a criticism of the rich and the powerful. Hellman said about the 1952 revival of *The Children's Hour* thus:

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.

The 1950's critics understood the theme of *The Children's Hour* and spoke of its contemporary relevance and sometimes applied it specifically to the McCarthy witchhunt. They used such phrases as the "brutal impact of false testimony," "exposure of the evils of character assassination," "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." Atkinson objected to the last ten minutes in the original production as unnecessary and
found that "She (Heilman) is entitled to show that the slanderer is doomed as thoroughly as those who have been slandered, and that righteousness is a ruthless form of vanity and that there is no way of undoing a wrong committed out of a sanctimonious attitude."

John Gassner has a special word of praise for the play. He stresses its importance in the American theatre: "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 the some perturbation the fact that the plays written in recent years have so rarely possessed the power that belongs to the *The Children's Hour.*"

Some critics feel that Mary is the centre of this play. By examining the dialogue, one finds that her speeches are different from others. 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, and fake heart attack. And when she is off-stage during the first two acts, she still dominates the play because the other characters talk about her.
Both Lily Mortar and Mary are established immediately for us — Aunt Lily through her recitation and fatuous remarks to the girls and 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 give us a concrete image of her character. And like Mary, when she is off stage, she is the subject of discussions between the two teacher friends.

The teachers' characterization on the other hand is built more slowly and most of their conversations tell us more about Mary and Aunt Lily than about the teachers themselves. But the teachers too finally become dramatically realized characters for us in the third act.

The real justification for the third act lies in the application of Francis Fergusson's discussion of dramatic rhythm in *The Idea of a Theatre*. He identifies the "true human condition," with the end of a quest for the past brought to a focus in the light of present action. 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 dramatic rhythm is complete.
Many reviews of the original production contended that the third act seemed anti-climactic, though well-written. Misled by the impact in the theatre of the Mary-centred dialogue, they misunderstood the playwright's purpose. The play is not about a psychopathic child or about lesbianism. The subject of the play is character assassination and the theme is damage done in our world by the so-called good people, through self-righteous judgement, selfishness, blindness to their own weaknesses. The havoc is created not by Mary's lie, but by the adult reaction to it. When the child's lie is once released on the world, the liar ceases to matter.

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." 20

In *The Children's Hour* the opening lines quoted from *The Merchant of Venice* refer to mercy, a quality lacking in those who implement the destruction of others. Mercy has nothing to do with political persuasion or
social strata "it dropeth as the gentle rain from heaven" and is "an attribute of God himself." The principle is ethical, moral, Christian, not political.\textsuperscript{21}

Philip Armato observes that "works as diverse as Aeschylus's \textit{Oresteia}, Shakespeare's \textit{Measure for Measure}, and Melville's \textit{Billy Budd} have dealt with the dichotomy between primitive justice and mercy. Although \textit{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."\textsuperscript{22} Hellman suggests that adults are too often "children" while infantile revenge is matter of course in man's dealings with each other. Hellman shows a last-act discovery — Karen Wright's discovery of a more mature concept of compassion.
REFERENCES:


5. Ibid., p.445.


10. Ibid., p.81.


