CHAPTER IV

SOCIAL DEGRADATION AND MORAL DECAY:

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Take us the foxes, the little foxes that spoil the Vines; for our vines have tender grapes.

- Song of Solomon II, 15.

Generally regarded as Hellman’s best play, The little Foxes (1938) is a tense and biting drama. Like Ben Jonson’s Volpone and The Alchemist, it is based on human greed and rapacity. Taken from ‘Song of Solomon’ in the Bible, the title refers to greedy and avaricious human beings who spoil the vineyards of the world to get the grapes of their desire. Hellman’s little foxes are rapacious and are wolves that eat their own kind.

Hellman was stimulated by the social upheaval of the 1930s in writing The Little Foxes. It offers a scathing criticism of a class of people who manipulate society and the lives within it with a ruthless eye toward greater personal wealth and power. The play implicitly condemns the vindictiveness and rapacity of bourgeois society. It is a sombre study in the psychology of evil. Thus, The Little Foxes is concerned with social degradation and moral decay as inescapable consequences of the inordinate appetite for money and power.

As the title suggests, The Little Foxes is a gripping story of the Hubbards, who, like the little foxes, are noted for their greed and covetousness. The Hubbards
are, indeed, a menace to the vineyards of the world, preying upon society and tearing
at each other. The parable is directed towards those who watch the little foxes at their
work but who build no fences and set traps too late to ensnare them. Undoubtedly,
in the playwright’s mind, as the play took shape was the underlying idea that the
actions of the Hubbards exemplified the inhumanity and vices of capitalism.

Set in the home of Regina and Horace Giddens, in a small Southern town in
1900, The Little Foxes, concerns itself with the conflicts which grow out of a business
deal between a Chicago industrialist, Marshall, and Ben and Oscar Hubbard and their
sister Regina Giddens. It would be difficult to find a more malignant gang of petty
robber barons than Miss Heilman’s chief characters. Heilman did her home work on
the rise of the Southern industry, which was beginning at that time to compete with
the industry of New England. The industrial revolution is the backdrop against which
the ‘foxes’ play their human or inhuman roles.

The two brothers, Ben Hubbard and Oscar Hubbard, have inherited their
father’s wealth and are anxious to build a cotton factory along with Regina Giddens
in partnership with Mr. Marshall, a Chicago businessman. Marshall has put up forty-
ine per cent of the money, and the three Hubbards will put the remaining fifty one
per cent, Regina’s, of course, will come out from her banker husband, Horace. This
is revealed to us in their conversation:
Regina: (slowly) And what does that mean?

(Ben shrugs, looks towards Oscar)

Oscar: (Looks at Ben, clears throat) Well,

Regina, it's like this. For forty-nine percent Marshall will put up four hundred thousand dollars. For fifty one percent (smiles archly) a controlling interest, mind you, we will put up two hundred and twenty five thousand dollars besides offering him certain benefits that our (looks to Ben) local position allows us to manage. Ben means that two hundred and twenty thousand dollars is lot of money.

Regina: I know the terms and I know it's a lot of money.

Ben: (Nodding) It is.

Oscar: Ben means that we are ready with our two thirds of the money. Your third, Horace's I mean, doesn't seem to be ready. (Raises his hand as Regina starts to speak) Ben has written to Horace, I have written and you have written the answers. But he never mentions this business. ¹

¹ Lillian Hellman, "The Little Foxes" The Collected Plays (Boston - Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1971), p.152. All further references are to this edition and the page numbers are given parenthetically at the end of the quotations.
But Horace, who is being treated for a heart ailment in the hospital at John Hopkins, has not come up with his share of money. The brothers threaten to cut Regina out and find another partner if the money is not forthcoming. But, Regina knows that they do not want to take in a stranger. When the brothers put pressure on Regina, she sends her daughter, Alexandra, to Baltimore to bring Horace home. She bargains with the brothers for a larger share. She and Ben agree that it will come from Oscar’s share. When Oscar objects, they suggest to him that Alexandra may marry his son Leo. Birdie, Oscar’s aristocrat wife, whom Oscar married for the cotton and the land, over-hears this conversation. Thus, in the first act, Hellman draws a picture of greed and corruption among middle class characters whose only thoughts are of profits and personal gain.

The second conflict in the play occurs when Regina, worried about Horace’s continued silence regarding the business deal, sends Alexandra to bring him home in spite of his illness. Horace comes home and is informed about the Hubbard machinations by the faithful servant Addie. Horace refuses to give Regina the money. Now close to death, Horace has no interest in joining Regina and her brothers in exploiting the town’s cheap labour force. He rails at her:

I’m sick of you, sick of this house, sick of my life here, I’m sick of your brothers and their dirty tricks to make a dime. Why should I give you the money? To pound the bones of this town to make dividends for you to spend? You wreck the town, you and your brothers. (183)
With Leo’s help, the brothers steal bonds worth $88,000 from Horace’s safe-deposit box, bonds which are negotiable as money, and Oscar takes them to Chicago to make up the missing third share of the investment.

And, when Horace learns that the two brothers have stolen money from his safe-deposit box to finance his share of the deal, he strikes back through Regina, telling her that he will disinherit her, leaving all to Alexandra so that she can escape the town, the family and especially a forced marriage with Leo. Horace prevents Regina’s getting the upper hand by telling her he will say that he lent the bonds to the Hubbard brothers. Regina will get only the bonds in his will. Regina is trapped. She will receive nothing from her brothers except as they choose. But the next move is hers. Regina challenges:

But I won’t let you punish me. If you won’t do anything I will now.
(she starts for the door) (194)

In the course of their quarrel, she and Horace go over their past. She tells Horace that she has always had only contempt for him:

I told you I married you for something. It turned out it was only for this. (carefully) This wasn’t what I wanted, but it was something. I never thought about it much, but if I had (Horace puts his hand to his throat) I’d have known that you would die before I would. But I couldn’t have known that you would get heart trouble so early and so bad. I’m lucky, Horace, I’ve always been lucky. I’ll be lucky again.(195)

Thus, Regina manages to defeat Horace in the end. When Horace asks her to call the maid, Addie, to get the medicine bottle from upstairs, Regina, without
moving an inch and even without blinking her eye, stares at him. He calls Addie in panic, then tries to climb the stairs, and collapses. When she is sure that he is unconscious, she calls the servants. Thus Horace’s conversion to good comes too late to save either his town or his daughter. Regina has triumphed as a force of evil, and whatever intensions Horace had, to thwart her and her brothers’ plans, die along with him.

The brothers arrive. Leo tells them that Horace knows about the theft. Regina tells them that she knows about it also. She confronts her brothers with the theft and threatens to send them to jail, unless she gets the lion’s share of the new business. Now she has the upper hand. She says:

I’m smiling Ben, I’m smiling because you’re quite safe while Horace lives... I shall want seventy five percent in exchange for the bonds... And if I don’t get what I want, I am going to put all three of you in jail. (201)

She apparently wins, but at the end of the play Alexandra asks her mother: "What was Papa doing on the staircase?" (203) The implications of her questions are not lost on Ben who threatens to use them eventually against her sister. But Regina is still the queen. Alexandra, refuses to stay with her, to watch the foxes ‘eat the earth.’ The only suggestion of vulnerability in Regina now is her invitation to Alexandra to sleep in the same room with her. To this her daughter replies:

Are you afraid Mama? (207).
While the optimism expressed in Alexandra’s final rejection climaxes the final conflict in the play - the conflict between Alexandra and a future champion of evil - it is cautiously tempered. The point of the play, therefore, is that the battle between those who are evil is possibly more significant than the possibility of the triumph of good over them. Neither Horace nor Alexandra is victorious as a force of good, for his struggle has killed him and she lacks a full understanding of how ruthless the forces of evil can be.

*The Little Foxes* is known for its best plot construction. Hellman carefully structures the action in a close-knit progression of events. Crescendos of violence are prepared for and built toward as the suspense rises within each act and in the play as a whole. The action is a series of power struggles from which Regina’s daughter, Alexandra, will finally escape.

The plot of *The Little Foxes* consists of "a series of crises, each one partly resolved so that the audience is kept waiting for the resolution to be completed, only to be surprised or shocked by a reversal leading to a new crisis."² The climax is reached in the quarrel and the death of Horace.

The entire first act is an outstanding example of dramatic exposition. The revelation of the past weaves naturally and unobtrusively through the opening

dialogue. From the moment of Birdie's breathless, overgay entrance and Oscar's sadistic smashing of her pleasure, the strains of personal antagonism become immediately clear. In front of their guest, the vicious clan display their ignorance, their hypocrisy and their greed, while Marshall the outsider, serves as catalyst to bring out details which the audience must know.

The remaining two acts maintain this well-built structure as each scene further intensifies what has already been adroitly established. There is not a single loose end throughout the entire play to distract or mislead at any point. Hellman has made her drama air-tight.

Although the structure of *The Little Foxes* is unanimously praised, some critics feel that the ending of the play is ambiguous. For instance, Richard Lockridge, reviewing the 1939 production of *The Little Foxes*, says that "toward the end the movement falters and the pivotal character (Regina) goes slightly out of focus."3 What the critics seem to have missed to note is that Hellman has consciously made the ending ambiguous. It is clearly an example of her 'open-ended technique.' Hellman deliberately ends her plays on an intermediate note with a view to leaving the audience to wonder as to what the characters do with their lives. As Smiley rightly observes "the play remains unfinished, because Hellman's mode does not move

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completely into art which interprets life, but remains art which imitates life, translated through the 'drama as weapon' mood of the thirties."4

The ingenuity of plot construction of The Little Foxes is happily matched with Hellman’s superb art of characterization. Her characters talk and move in a believably realistic fashion without seeming to be arbitrarily led through mechanical paces for the mere creation of an effect. The concentrated evil of her central characters, whose lack of any saving grace of human compassion makes the sordidness virtually unrelieved.

The characters of The Little Foxes, are conceived and remain as a natural part of society in which they live, unattractive and repugnant as human beings, fascinating in their horror as 'snarling beasts.' Moreover, the Hubbards are in complete control of their destinies. Outside influences work on them with great strength, but there is no evidence of any compulsion or raw force of nature that has placed them where they are contrary to their own desires. Nothing around them in their physical or social world compels them to act as they do. As opportunists, vicious and without conscience, they proceed entirely on their own, make their own decisions, and have no one but themselves to whom they must render account. The drama of their ugly

lives is believably real. Hellman sees the Hubbards as funny in their role-playing and scheming but dangerous.

The individual characters in The Little Foxes uniformly maintain their convincing identities as dramatic creations because their baseness has emerged from plausible reality and is explained in logical fashion.

Regina is the most prominent character in the play. As the curtain goes up, Hellman describes Regina as handsome, self-assured lady, who along with her brothers Ben and Oscar, takes part in the business deal with Mr. Marshall, a Chicago capitalist. She knows what she wants and is determined to get it, at any cost. When Horace discovers that the bonds were stolen by her brothers and tells her that he is not going to take any action on them, thereby rendering her powerless, she does not lose her courage and will-power. In turn, she allows her husband to die, without giving him the necessary medicine. She confronts her brothers with the theft of the bonds and threatens to send them to jail unless she gets the lion’s share. She regains her power over her brothers and rules over them like a queen.

Though Regina does not love her husband, she is clever enough to fight his battles for him in his absence, for her selfish interest. Like Tennesse Williams’ Magi, the cat, Regina, the little fox, fights her own battle. Although Regina does not have
any love for Horace, circumstances forced her to marry Horace, a small town clerk. But, being a cunning little fox, Regina tries to get money and power through Horace.

Regina is too selfish a mother to take interest in her daughter's welfare. In her pursuit of money and power, she loses her daughter Alexandra's love. Alexandra loves her aunt Birdie more than her mother. But at the end, when Alexandra sees her family as they are - her mother and uncles, she wants to get away from this den, as she knows that her father would want her to go. Thus, Regina stands alone, isolated and alienated even from her daughter.

Small wonder, therefore, if Regina has been considered a villain, and a 'monstrous creature' and one of the most formidable woman characters in the history of American drama by some critics. For instance Lederer Katherine says:

Before woman's liberation, Regina would have been considered masculine, if anything she is like Lady Macbeth, unsexed.5

Other critics like Allen Lewis have dismissed Regina as "a scheming woman, or as the vixen of the den deprived of the understandable human qualities of her sex."6

But, a close study of the play reveals that Regina is a woman in every physical sense, a beautiful, gracious and dignified hostess, and one who seeks the things a

woman is expected to desire — elegance, social position, public respect. Regina is portrayed in three different roles— as sister, wife and mother. As Regina means 'Queen,' whatever role she assures, she makes sure that victory is hers. And to achieve her goal, she does not mind playing whatever role she wants.

Regina's character can be properly understood and appreciated once we look at her from the feminist angle. Interestingly enough, Hellman herself has done so while portraying Regina. Although, she exposes the wrongdoings of her protagonist, she also wants her audience to comprehend what motivated the unscrupulous behaviour of this character. After *The Little Foxes* was produced, Hellman insisted that she had not conceived of Regina as a villain. Hellman might have disapproved of Regina, but she did not dislike her. Hellman observed on another occasion:

> I think Regina's kind of funny. If anything, I amused with her.7

What amused Hellman was Regina's cleverness and tenacity, her ability to hold her own with her scheming brothers who are determined to keep her helpless and dependant. Like Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*, Regina is frustrated by her lack of power and autonomy. Despite being her father's favourite, she is cheated of her inheritance when he leaves his money to her brothers. After she has helped to hasten her husband's death she says to Ben:

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Ah! Ben, if papa had only left me his money. (205)

Hellman's generation wrote for a populist theatre where feminism was not yet common currency though the issue is clearly at stake in her own work. The figure of Regina Giddens both demonstrates and exploits the familiar politics of repression - racial, economic and sexual. Little foxes, like Regina, do not come from nowhere. Though Regina is clearly as rapacious as her brothers- Ben and Oscar- the methods she is forced to employ reveal the limitations imposed by the 'secondness' of her sexuality. Hellman's woman rises above these unacceptable conditions, but she does so by achieving no new consciousness and no new sense of her world. The grapes are there to be seized, not shared. A daughter rather than a son, Regina has no access to the power that money, which passed on from father to son, provides. The patriarchal society in which she is raised in effect disinherits her and consequently she must depend on the largesse of her brothers or her husband. In 1968 Hellman said:

Money has been the subject of a great deal of literature because it ... isn't only money of course, it's power, it's sex, it's great many other things. 8

So, without any money of her own, Regina cannot hope to escape from the stifling small town in Alabama where she was born and go to live in Chicago. Although she longs to begin her life again in the more sophisticated city of Chicago, it seems as

distant to her as the 'Moscow' for which Chekhov's provincial three sisters constantly yearn. Thus Regina becomes one of the primal spoilers, a Southern, white male patriarchal figure in drag. Though Hellman ultimately does not sanction the lengths to which Regina is willing to go to acquire money and power, she nevertheless enables us to comprehend what motivates this frustrated woman whose aspirations have been thwarted at every turn. Goldstein observes that "seldom has the evil of materialism received such detailed characterization as in Miss Hellman's protagonist."9 The impulse behind Regina's power hunger is precisely her own belief in the mediocrity of her social position. Rather than a victim of her society, like Karen and Martha of The Children's Hour Regina is its product.

The next most important character in the play is Ben Hubbard, the eldest of the 'foxes,' who is very intelligent, cunning and rapacious. He tells Regina about South industrialization:

The world is open. Open for people like you and me. Ready for us. Waiting for us. After all, this is just the beginning.(204)

Hellman describes Ben as "rather Jolly and far less solemn than the others and far more dangerous."10 Full of false 'joviality and platitudes which mask the shrewdness


with which he operates, Ben blandly tells Zan good bye before her trip to bring Horace home from Baltimore:

Have a nice trip, Alexandra. The food of the train is very good. The celery is so crisp. Have a good time and act like a little lady. (158)

Regina’s decision to get Horace home is instigated by Ben himself with a bitter argument about her share. The gentility with which he coaxes Alexandra is all hypocritical gentility. Ben, just as Lophakin in Chekhov’s play, The Cherry Orchard, displaces the aristocrats from their home, as he announces that he had brought ‘Lionnet,’ the family plantation, and taken over ‘their land, their cotton and their daughter.’ It is he who invented that scheme and also manipulates Leo to steal his uncle’s bonds while arranging to extricate himself from any blame in the affair. Also, the plan of arranging marriage between Leo and Alexandra, is Ben’s malice for the sake of money. In another quick plot turn, when Alexandra implies that she is suspicious about her father’s death, Ben says with a smile:

Alexandra, you’re turning out to be a quite interesting girl. (205)

Ben and Regina find each other amusing, even when one is being outwitted by the other.

The other two Hubbards - Oscar and his son Leo - are both weak-willed persons. They lack individuality and are dictated by the elder brother, Ben. Oscar often has to interpret Ben to the not - too - quick - witted Leo. In turn, Ben interprets
their sister, Regina, to Oscar. With their lust for power and money, they, along with Ben, descend to perjury, theft and even to wild threat of murder accusation to dislodge Regina from power and money.

Hellman differentiates the villains from each other. Marshall knows that the Hubbards will make profits by paying low wages to unorganised workers and is honest about his motives. Leo, who beats horses, is naive and more slow-witted than his father Oscar, who beats his wife. Oscar is less intelligent than Ben - who spouts high-sounding motives, lets others act illegally and protects himself by refusing to hear details - and then Regina differs from Oscar and Leo in more than intelligence. They bend Oscar to their wills, are composed during emergencies, and appreciate each other's manoeuvrings. As in Shakespeare's *Richard II*, and Ben Jonson's *Volpone*, the villains - Ben, Oscar, Leo and Regina - have their own callous charm.

Pitted against these cunning Hubbards in the play are the people who allow them to rise - Birdie, Horace, Addie and Alexandra. Birdie, the faded aristocratic sister-in-law of the heroine, Regina, is described as 'a woman approaching forty, with a pretty well-bred, faded face. Her movements are usually nervous and timid. (152) Birdie, falls a total contrast to Hubbards in general and Regina in particular. Caught in the den of the foxes - Ben, Oscar and Regina - is the poor lamb, Birdie. Oscar married Birdie because of her social standing and property. Birdie who has great
similarity to both Laura and Blanche of Tennesse Williams, is a gentle, weak ineffectual relic of the old plantation. She is a submissive wife whom Oscar married in order to acquire the family plantation, Lionnet. It is clear in the play that Oscar is the Lord and Master of Birdie who possesses not only her body but also her mind. Birdie, as her name itself suggests, is totally "ineffective, a fluttering bird like creature, wholly cowed by her husband." In the words of O'Hara:

Birdie is an echo of the old South of plantation aristocracy and noblesse oblige; she moves through the new ways like a remembered refrain which recalls the dignity and grace and pride of less hurried days but loses its identity among the strident notes of uncompassionate new industries and insatiable new greeds, Birdie knows her place among these Hubbards. When she married Oscar, she literally married into the family different from her own with its stately seat at Lionnet.

Birdie, who is desperately frustrated, tires to live in the past clinging to the memories of a gentle, lovely mother and brave, kind, soldier father at the old plantation. Her cherished memories of the past sustain her to endure her present life amidst the Hubbards. Birdie looks down in humiliation on hearing herself described as a chattel who is owned by the Hubbards along with the cotton plantation. Birdie always persuades her husband Oscar, to stop shooting:

I want you to stop shooting, I mean, so much. I don't like to see animals and birds killed just for the killing. You only throw them away. (151)

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Birdie's sensitive mind is hurt by this brutal act of Oscar. Cruelly indifferent to her, Oscar finds an outlet for his sadism by going hunting every morning, having only missed one day in eight years. The delicate sensitive bird like Birdie is also a poor prey caught by the cruel hunter Oscar.

And in this forest of little foxes, the only shelter for Birdie is the warmth and love of Alexandra - daughter of Regina and Horace Giddens. In Alexandra or Zan, she finds a kindred spirit. Suppressed and dominated by the Hubbards, yearning for love and affection in this wood of darkness, Birdie loves Alexandra more than her son Leo. She says:

But you are more to me - more to me than my own child. I love you more than anybody else.(159)

Again this intense love for Alexandra prompts her to give a warning to Zan to escape from the den of foxes. Though she submits meekly to her bondage, she wanted Alexandra to cut the fetters and soar high. For this she risks the wrath of Oscar. On another occasion she scolds Zan not to love her more:

Because in twenty years you'll just be like me. They'll do all the same things to you. (189)

With this prophecy, Birdie leaves the stage.

The only time Birdie is happy is when she is in the pleasant company of Horace and Alexandra. As Falk observes, "Birdie is the pathetic victim, she may be weak-willed, but she is also sensitive and musical, with longing for beauty and
affection. Horace and Alexandra understand Birdie, they have some of the same longings."¹³ Hellman, who portrayed the character of Birdie, after her mother, said that she "had meant people to smile at, and to sympathize with, the sad, weak Birdie and certainly I had not meant them to cry."¹⁴

Horace Giddens, Regina's husband and a member of the fallen aristocracy, represents the people, who allows the Hubbards to take over. Horace works for them and makes money for them and for himself before his illness forces him to soul-searching. When once he is brought home from Baltimore, he refuses to participate in what he considers to be the destructive scheme to bring in northern industry and its concomitant evils. Horace predicts that whites and blacks will be turned against each other when the mill is in operation and will take even lower pay. He says:

You can save little money that way, Ben, and make them hate each other just a little more than they do now. (177)

Horace opens his eyes in the end and outwits Regina but at the cost of his life. He sincerely tries to save Alexandra from the wicked and 'cunning foxes.'

Addie, who, in a way, speaks for the Negro, is carefully, sparsely, beautifully sketched. Addie is helpless because she is a servant and moreover a black. But still, Addie predicts the decline of the town owing to industrialization and comments on the

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nefarious means whereby the Hubbards come into wealth and power and indirectly encourages Alexandra to escape from the claws of Hubbards. Hellman makes Addie to voice the central theme of the spoilers when she says:

there are people who eat the earth and eat all the people on it like in the Bible, with the locusts. And other people who stand around and watch them eat it. Sometimes I think it ain’t right to stand and watch them do it. (188)

The significance of this comment is understood only at the end of the play, when Alexandra repeats it to her mother. The special pleading of Addie’s introduction in the play, is resolved by Hellman, into a simple, almost casual line of dialogue. When Horace tells her that he is going to leave her something when he dies, Addie answers:

Don’t you do that, Mr. Horace. A nigger woman in a white man’s will, I’d never get it no how! (190)

Alexandra, daughter of Regina, is a new woman who resists her mother’s ways and walks out of the Hubbards. She is an independent woman who frees herself from the pattern of maternal love and the threat of marriage with Leo. Hellman said that "in Alexandra, she meant to half mock (her) own youthful high-class innocence."\(^{15}\)

Alexandra is perceived as a commodity for exchange in a business venture of the Hubbards. Just as Oscar brought Birdie, along with Lionnet, the Hubbards think of acquiring Alexandra along with the business. But unlike Birdie, who stays back

in her cage, Alexandra escapes the imprisonment of the Hubbards. According to O’Hara,

She is of a new generation with some of the old way and some of the new way in her the best of each.16

At the beginning of the play, Alexandra is very innocent. She is not aware of the machinations taking place in the household. Bigsby observes that "the only character that stands from the corruption is Regina’s daughter, Alexandra."17

But, gradually Alexandra turns out to be a clever girl. The conversation between Birdie and Alexandra reveals Alexandra’s independent nature. She is a girl of her own will and nobody can make her do anything against her will. She is not timid and weak like Birdie, but is bold and strong. O’Hara thinks that "The thorough bred strain is dominant in Alexandra, but through most of the play, her mother and her uncles confuse docility with weakness, eventually they can no more manage Alexandra than they can change them."18

After her father’s arrival, Alexandra fusses around him taking good care of his health. In spite of her care and concern, her father dies as a poor victim of her


mother's brutality and callousness. When Alexandra sees her father lying dead on the staircase, she asks her mother:

What was papa doing on the staircase? (203)

She is suspicious of her father's death and is determined to find the cause and in spite of her mother's entreaties, remains firm. Her father's death acts as a catalyst which changes Alexandra from a guy, happy, teenage girl into a shrewd and mature woman.

All of a sudden, Alexandra realizes the horror of her situation and escapes in time. Alexandra is provided with emotional support not only by her father whom she admires, but also by two other women - Birdie, her aunt and Addie, her old black servant. It is Horace's intention that Zan leaves and for that reason, he changes his will so that she will have her own money with which to start a new life, away from the Hubbards. Alexandra tells her mother, Regina:

Mama, because I want to leave here I've never wanted anything in my life before. Because now I understand what papa was trying to tell me. All in one day: Addie said there were people who ate the earth and other people who stood around and watched them do it. And just now uncle Ben said the same thing. Really, he said the same thing. Well, tell him for me, Mama, I'm not going to stand around and watch you do it. I'll be fighting as hard as he'll be fighting...some place else. (206)

Listening to the daughter's challenge, Regina realises that she has lost her forever. Although it is by no means 'a call to action' in the manner of Odets' closing speeches, Alexandra's escape from her mother and the reasons she gives for wanting
to escape represent the hope for a better world, the hope for the future. In an
interview in the *Paris Review*, years later, Lillian Hellman said:

Alexandra was to have become may be a spinsterish social worker,
disappointed another angry young woman.19

Winfred Dusenbury rightly feels that in creating Alexandra’s character, Hellman made
"a humanitarian with the tenderness of Birdie and forcefulness of Regina, who arises
to sound a new war cry."20 Small wonder, therefore, if Alexandra is the most
admired of all Hellman’s characters.

*The Little Foxes* is an extremely realistic play. As Allen Lewis points out,
"Hellman’s strength lies in the dramatic power she can extract from the realistic
form." 21 The method that Hellman adopts is ‘straightforward Realism.’ She wants
her characters, particularly Hubbards, to be representative of something beyond
themselves. We sense that we are seeing the old south as it truly was at the turn of
the century. We recognize in the Hubbards the fascists who had begun to devour the
earth. We find in the defeated Birdie, decayed European aristocracy, in the dying
banker Horace, European capitalism too weak to intervene effectively and in young
Alexandra, hope that America would fight.

19 Lillian Hellman, "Interview with Lillian Hellman: The Art of the Theatre I,"

20 Winfred L. Dusenbury "Socioeconomic Forces," *The Theme of Loneliness in

21 Allen Lewis, *American Plays and Playwrights of the Contemporary Theatre*
The Little Foxes offers a highly realistic portrayal of the Hubbards - Ben, Oscar and Regina, who are based on real people. A general quality of Hellman's playwriting is her use of biographical detail. Hellman's mother, Julia Newhouse, is Birdie. Her black nurse, Sophronia is reflected in her portrait of the black servant, Addie in The Little Foxes. With the publication of Pentimento, it was revealed that the Hubbards were indeed inspired by Hellman's mother's family who were wealthy Southerners. Making the play Ibsen like Hellman worked over a play again and again until the characters were sharp and real.

A close study of the play reveals that the social implications go beyond the story of the Hubbards. For instance, as Richard Watts observes, "Through its thoughtful indignation, The Little Foxes becomes a scornful and heartfelt parable of the rise of the industrial South in all its ruthlessness, its savage sense of realism and its fine scorn for the older trappings of Confederate romanticism."22 The play admirably reflects the devastating effects of those socio-economic changes in both the old families and the wealthy new families.

Ultimately, The Little Foxes may be interpreted as a rational assessment of the historical forces it dramatizes. Given its dramatic premises, the play stringently adheres to causality and probability and thus reflects the spirit of objectivity which

Emile Zola considered imperative to dramatic realism. The final scene prominently manifests this rational process by offering no facile resolution of the complex moral conflict which structures the play or of the democratic dilemma which that conflict represents. Thus, Hellman's rational process serves to strengthen the validity of play's moral stance. As Eatman observes, "by a synthesis of rational formulation and moral commitment, *The Little Foxes*, gains particular authority in casting an image of American destiny - the continuing dialectic of the privileges versus the responsibilities of liberal democracy."  

We must remember that *The Little Foxes* was produced at the end of a committed decade in which the writer was pressed to declare his or her allegiance in ideological terms. The play reflects almost all of the anger and frustration of social playwrights of the thirties felt toward the corrupt forces of the power-conscious and exploitative middle class and it does so as an explosive and dynamic work of dramatic art.

Then, as a dramatic expression of Hellman's political views, *The Little Foxes* may be considered as an action on capitalism. Its essential reductivist politics can be described as tenets within the Marxist doctrine: The conflict of base and superstructure, the exposure of social Darwinism, the condemnation of capitalist self-

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interest, the view of an alternative world by some of its characters in rebellion against their harsh surroundings.

To heighten the dramatic effect of the play, Hellman employs not only the realistic and satiric mode of presentation, but also the ironic, a dramatic device, that calls for an objective and amused detachment. Through the dramatic device of irony, Hellman raises the level of impersonation in the play by giving us characters - Ben and Regina - who assume roles when dealing with other people. They playact above the level of simple impersonation of the character by an actor and we have the character assuming a hypocritical role. The character of Ben is ironic whose ruthless exercise of power is frequently funny as it catches the irony that in this society undisguised malevolence can be more effective than guilt - weakened under-handedness.

We have another kind of irony in characters who have knowledge other characters lack and who consequently speak ironically. Regina explains Ben to Oscar. Ben explains Regina. They talk for his benefit. There are situations where one or more characters who are conscious of the ironies produces by ironic words and visible means a sense of cross-purposes.

Enclosing these ironies is dramatic irony. The audience knows more than the characters. In The Little Foxes, we know before Ben and Oscar that Regina knows
about the bonds. We know before Regina that Ben and Oscar don’t need Horace’s money and we realize that Horace is charting his own doom when he repeatedly says that Regina will not have her way as long as he is alive.

Hellman also employs what is known as boomerang irony to achieve the satiric effect. The stolen bonds which temporarily free Ben and Oscar from Regina put them in her control when Horace dies. And Regina, apparently freeing herself completely by allowing Horace to die, is left at the end with the threat of disclosure when Alexandra questions the death place of her father. This question arouses Ben’s suspicion. Even Horace’s effort to outwit Regina boomerangs. His threat to make a new will leaving only the bonds to Regina causes his death.

Like any great dramatic artist, Hellman makes use of imagery in her attempt to achieve artistic excellence. She employs a strong ‘Darwinian imagery’ of the jungle, to express the concern of the Hubbards for the mad pursuits of money and success. Hellman actually makes no direct reference to Nature or Garden of Eden except in the implied meaning in her title - *The Little Foxes*. By doing so, she gives to her view of life a pattern and a design which is related, in a way to the original myth of Eden. Each member of the Hubbard family is an animal in a lawless jungle where he is expected to look out for himself. Oscar advises his son Leo:

It’s everyman’s duty to think of himself. (164).
The Hubbards in their avarice and rapacity are like 'the little foxes that spoil our Vines: for our Vines have tender grapes' - an image that was evoked by a description in the Bible (Song of Solomon II, 15). Like the Snopeses of Faulkner and Babbitt of Sinclair Lewis, the Hubbards are the new generation of animalistic Adams who are ruthlessly exploiting and destroying the innocence and weakness of the lesser animals of the jungle. The situation is slightly redeemed by people like Alexandra who declares at the end that she will fight those who eat up the earth and its people like the locusts.

Hellman adds another jungle image to the play in her description of the Hubbard family as 'a nest of particularly vicious diamond-back rattle-snakes.' In this kind of vicious set-up, the loss of an original arcadia is symbolized by the cotton estate, Lionnet, that was once owned by Birdie's family. As Birdie described it:

the lawn was so smooth all the way down to the river, with the trims of zinnias and red-feather plush. And the figs and blue little plums and the scuppernongs. (150)

Symbolically, the 'little foxes' have plundered this fruitful garden and destroyed its 'tender vines.'

*The Little Foxes* is laudable for its stage-worthiness. The play conforms so perfectly to the nature of theatre. Although one may never have seen the play performed, one knows how it will look and sound on stage. Hellman has an instinctive sense of rhythm, knowing when to accelerate the action and when to let it
subside. She excels at group scenes which intimidate most playwrights because they find it difficult to achieve the multiple rhythms that such scenes require.

The first act of *The Little Foxes* begins with an exchange between two domestics - then the rhythm accelerates as Birdie enters, babbling excitedly. When her husband, Oscar, checks her effusions, the pace slackens. As Regina enters with her brothers and their guest, Mr. Marshall, the conversation proceeds evenly for the purpose of exposition. Gradually the pace quickens as Ben describes the rise of the Hubbards in the rhetoric of conquest, boasting that his family wrested Lionnet, the plantation, from their owners. To divert sympathy to Birdie, who has just been described as chattel, Hellman balances Ben's swinish oratory with a gesture of courtesy from Marshall:

May I bring you a glass of port, Mrs. Hubbard? (145).

No scene in *The Little Foxes* is gratuitous. Leo's theft of the bonds comes as no surprise because Regina had alluded earlier to his petty thievery. When Oscar slaps Birdie's face, it is not merely to stun the audience. A man who wantonly kills animals could easily mistreat his wife, especially when there are no witnesses. When Alexandra remarks that her father's medicine bottle must not break, the question in the audience's mind is not 'will it break?,' but, 'how will it break?' What seems to be chance events must be motivated dramatically so that the accidental becomes an extension of character. Crucial to the plot are the bonds Leo steals from Herace's
safe-deposit box. Horace must learn of the theft, as he does, in a perfectly natural way. He sends for the box because he wishes to draw up a new will. The medicine bottle must break and Regina must make no effort to replace it. Horace drops it immediately after Regina tells him that she despises him. Thus, every scene comes naturally to conform the play to the stage enactability.

Though a brilliant, sardonic comedy like Ben Jonson's *Volpone*, *The Little Foxes* has more often than not mistaken for a melodrama by some critics. For instance, J.W.Krutch feels that "in view of the violence of the actions, *The Little Foxes* be called a melodrama, which ends with the triumph of villiany."24 William.T.Going in his "Essays on Alabama Literature" comments that "Hellman, by avoiding 'happy ending' may save her plays from an indiscriminate labelling of melodrama, but despite the concern of her main characters with basic moral issues, the outcome is not quite the tragedy that offers resolution to emotional tension, nor is the ending inevitable in a Sophoclean sense."25 Even the most notable critic of Hellman, C.W.E. Bigsby, in his compact study of American drama, noted that "*The Little Foxes* is a melodrama."26


But a close reading of the play reveals that *The Little Foxes* is not a melodrama. It is true that it has a certain melodramatic quality. Any intensely exciting stage action developed primarily for the sake of a thrill and strong emotional impact through terror, shock, fear, or suspense is melodramatic. As Lederer observes "when one thinks of melodrama, one thinks of a play with artificially heightened emotion ... and improbable turn of plot, leading to a conventionally happy ending with vice punished and virtue rewarded."27

But *The Little Foxes* does not fit the definition. No doubt, *The Little Foxes* makes successful use of scenes of melodrama that are natural, acceptable parts of drama itself. They arise from established character and situation and further the movement of the play without distraction. Two important scenes are vividly melodramatic. The first begins in Act II with the tense exchange between Regina and Horace and ends in the violent upstairs argument while the other jungle beasts plan to divide the spoils. The second is, of course, the heart attack, a harrowing event of pure melodrama from the start of the argument through the broken bottle and the collapse on the stairs.

But these scenes of melodrama are skilfully used so as to further the effect of a realistic style. So, the use of melodramatic scenes need not necessarily make *The

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Little Foxes a melodrama. This is made clear to us by Hellman herself when she says:

I almost meant The Little Foxes to be a kind of dramatic comedy... I think most villains are funny... I was amazed to find much about The Little Foxes that I hadn’t intended—aristocracy against the middle class and so on. I had meant the audience to recognize some part of themselves in the money dominated Hubbards: I had not meant people to think of them as villains, to whom they had no connection. I began to think that greed and the cheating that is its usual companion were, comic as well as evil.28

It is at once interesting and profitable to draw a parallel between The Little Foxes and other plays of the contemporary playwrights - Chekhov, Strindberg, Arthur Miller, Tennesse Williams, Clifford Odets and Kafka. The Little Foxes is, in many senses, close to Chekhov’s The Cherry Orchard. Both plays are concerned with dispossession, with the collapse of old myths and the denial of supposed verities. Just as Lophakin in The Cherry Orchard, Ben in The Little Foxes announces that he had brought the family plantation Lionnet along with their daughter Birdie. The only difference is Lophakin is an ambiguous figure, willing to destroy the old cherry orchard in order to build villas for the rising bourgeoisie, but showing respect and compassion for those he is displacing whereas, the Hubbards are single-mindedly cruel.

The similarity between the Hubbards of Bowden and Vaidens of Florence in Strindberg's, *The Store*, is striking. Both families' store is the key to their acquisition of decaying plantations of the aristocracy, both families' fortune is founded on theft and profiteering both families seek through marriage social respectability and acceptance. Just as Miltiades Vaiden marries Synda to acquire the appurtenances of aristocracy, so does Oscar Hubbard marry Birdie to possess their land.

Hellman's *The Little Foxes* is also reminiscent of Miller’s *All My Sons* as a social drama. Both plays dramatize the sinful acts of parents and the coming of age of idealistic offspring who ultimately feel they must separate themselves from the tarnished world of their elders. The protagonist of Hellman's *The Little Foxes*, Regina Giddens, and the protagonist of Miller’s *All My Sons*, Joe Keller, are both preoccupied with money. In their efforts to acquire it, however, both commit misdeeds that their children cannot forgive - Regina sins against society as well as the family-Miller’s Joe Keller also sins both against society and the institution of the family. Not only are Regina and Joe parallel figures, but so are Alexandra and Joe’s son Chris. Both plays conclude with a dramatic confrontation between a parent and a child.

More obvious than the similarities between *The Little Foxes* and *All My Sons* are the parallels between *The Little Foxes* and the two plays of Tennesse Williams' - *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*. As William Wright has implied, "Williams like Hellman a Southern Writer, might well have based two of his
most memorable Southern female characters, Amanda Wingfield and Blanche Dubois, on Hellman’s fragile, alcoholic Birdie.” It is precisely the combination of silliness and pathos that one finds in Hellman’s Birdie is also seen in Williams’s Amanda and Blanche. Also reminiscent of The Little Foxes is Amanda’s warning to Laura that unless she makes an effort to control her life, she will end up helpless and dependent, just as Birdie’s warning to Alexandra. In Williams’s A Streetcar Named Desire, Blanche recollects the loss of family plantation, as Hellman’s Birdie does in The Little Foxes. Hellman’s use of South as setting, the character types she introduces, her creation of various speech patterns to differentiate her characters, and her pungent blend of humour pathos and irony are also found in Williams’s plays.

Hellman’s The Little Foxes can also be compared to and contrasted with Odets’s Awake and Sing. Hellman’s realism in The Little Foxes has an historical setting in the rural South while Odets’s is contemporary, urban and Jewish. Hellman deals with the agents of social injustice as well as their victims, while Odets is concerned only with the latter. In spite of the difference between the dramatic worlds, these two plays share a dramatic pattern by which each puts family struggles at the service of an indictment of social and political conditions. In both plays the destructive family is dominated by strong mother, who is in some sense villainous and against whom the father is ineffective. Again in both the plays, the death of a father -

figure, who knows truer values but cannot act educates and liberates the young person. Both plays have a triumphant resolution in which the young person declares opposition to the family’s values.

Yet another play that stands comparison with Hellman’s *The Little Foxes* is Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*. In *Metamorphosis*, the story of a man’s change into an insect, Kafka interprets human psychology in terms of animal symbols. Kafka’s pathos is the pathos of loneliness and exclusion from the family and, beyond that, the estrangement of man from his human environment. Although Regina has not the self-recognition of herself that the hero of *Metamorphosis* has, and so does not appear to herself as a despicable insect, it can be questioned whether in a sequel to *The Little Foxes*, she might not have some self-revulsion, for there is a challenge in her young daughter’s last words. Certainly by this time Regina is suffering from a feeling of estrangement from everyone from whom she normally might expect affection.

Thus, *The Little Foxes* is a powerful and fascinating play and a highly charged theatrical experience. It is, indeed, a rich play on many counts. Better crafted than Hellman’s other works, it is varied in characterization and language. The play is effective because of the humanity of its inhuman characters. It is the most successful and also the most durable of Hellman’s plays. It successfully combines Hellman’s powers of dramatic entertainment and social concern into a play which so completely captivates its audience and so decisively makes its point.