CHAPTER V

THE MALIGNANCY OF NAZISM:

WATCH ON THE RHINE
THE MALIGNANCY OF NAZISM : WATCH ON THE RHINE

Widely hailed as the best of the anti-Nazi dramas, Watch on the Rhine (1940) is the most human, the warmest, and, in some ways, the most understanding of all Hellman's plays. It is an American political drama, arguing against American isolationism during World War II. It is a vital, eloquent and compassionate play about an American family suddenly awakened to the danger threatening their liberty. It is a moving story about the betrayal of a resistance worker by a cynical German exile. The play asserts the necessity of struggle against both evil and the passivity of bystanders.

Watch on the Rhine concerns itself with the theme of ethical responsibility, a theme also touched upon in The Searching Wind. Here, Hellman turns to the current political situation in order to awaken the Americans to the growing menace of fascism. The title of the play, taken from a German marching song, suggests that Nazism must be watched and fought not only in Europe but in the U.S. Accordingly, Hellman brings the anti-fascist struggle into an upper-class American home.

Hellman's prescient dramatization of the slow-awakening of an American family to the realities of Nazism is depicted powerfully. The enemy is not capitalism, or the privileged members of society, but fascism at its melodramatic worst. Hellman chooses Watch on the Rhine as the framework for the expression of the European
tragedy and of the hidden sense of guilt which those who were too much outside it will never lose. The malignancy of Nazism played out by a group of German refugees and Nazis in the United States and a non-Jewish German anti-Nazi activist who leaves the safety of the U.S. to return to Germany to resume clandestine anti-Nazi work is depicted with skill in *Watch on the Rhine*.

*Watch on the Rhine* is set in a spacious home, twenty miles from Washington D.C., where Dowager Fanny Farrelly lives with her bachelor son David Farrelly. It is an average American middle-class family. The first act opens with one group of characters -a black Butler Joseph, French house-keeper, Anise, Wealthy Dowager, Fanny Farrelly and her son David who are anxiously awaiting the arrival of Sara, the daughter of Fanny, her husband Kurt Muller, and their children. The gravity of their anxiety is revealed in the conversation between Amise and Fanny:

Anise: (Looking at the watch) It’s now twenty seven minutes before nine. It will be impossible to continue telling you the time every three minutes from now until Miss Sara arrives. I think you are having a nervous breakdown. Compose yourself.

Fanny: It’s been twenty years. Any mother would be nervous. If your daughter were coming home and you had not seen her and a husband and grand children.1

---

1 Lillian Hellman, "*Watch on the Rhine,"* *The Collected Plays* (Boston, Toronto: Little Brown and Co.,1971), p.215. All further references are to this edition and the page numbers are given parenthetically at the end of the quotations.
The wealthy dowager Fanny Farrelly is the widow of a liberal judge and diplomat to whose memory she constantly refers and whose portrait hangs on the living room wall throughout the play. Fanny has been an arbitrary dictator over her son, David, and she would have been one over her daughter, Sara, if Sara had not declared her independence twenty years ago by marrying a German, Kurt Muller.

Sara arrives with her anti-fascist husband, Kurt Muller, who fought in Spain as well as in Germany, and also with their children Joshuwa, Bodo and Babette. Kurt’s family arrives hungry and ill-clothed at the Farrelly mansion. Kurt carries the marks of torture by fascists - scars and broken hands. Kurt tells Fanny that he was ‘an anti-fascist, and that does not pay well.’ Although Fanny and David cannot understand the fanatic political consecration of Kurt, which has caused much physical suffering and hardship to himself and his family, they greet him warmly and attempt to make him and his family feel at home. Kurt explains to Fanny how he became an anti-fascist:

On that day I saw twenty seven men murdered in a Nazi street-fight. I say, I cannot just stand by now and watch. My time has come to move. (Looks down, smiles). I say with Luther ‘Here I stand. I can do nothing else. God help me. Amen.’ (233)

Kurt has managed to bring his wife and children to visit her mother and brother. But, he himself is on a mission - he is carrying $23,000 in cash, collected from ‘the pennies of the poor who do not like fascism.’ He will soon have to leave.
his family in Washington and take the money back to Europe where it is needed to free other anti-Nazi prisoners.

Staying with the Farrellys when the Mullers arrive are a different group and breed of Europeans Romanian Count Teck de Brancovis and his wife Marthe. Teck is a Nazi sympathizer and a gambler -- a professional Romanian aristocrat. Marthe has lived in Europe most of her life and dislikes Nazis. The couple is visiting Fanny because Marthe's mother and she were friends. Even while Teck stays at Farrelly's house as guest, at the time of Sara's and Kurt's arrival, he becomes inquisitive about Kurt and wants to know more about him. The marriage of Teck and Marthe has disintegrated. They are in debt and are living on credit. What little money they have is lost in Teck's gambling with his Nazi friends at the German Embassy in Washington. Marthe falls in love with David Farrelly, Fanny's thirty-nine year old son. She tries to find a way of leaving her husband.

The conflict, however, is provided by Teck. A weak character and a failure in his own career, he is jealous of Kurt Muller and also sees in him a chance to make a small fortune. Kurt knows Teck's identity and his past, and Teck is suspicious of Kurt. Teck's curiosity becomes more evident towards the end of the first act. When Teck has picked up the brief case of Kurt and is trying the lock, Marthe questions him:

Teck: Wondering why the luggage is unlocked, and a shabby brief case is so carefully locked.
Marthe: You're curious about Herr Muller.

Teck: Yes. And I do not know why? Some thing far away ... I am curious about a daughter of the Farrellys who marries a German who has bullet scars on his face and broken bones in his hands. (235-36)

At the end of the first act, Marthe warns Teck against harming Kurt. She tells him she will leave him if he makes trouble. The Count discovers the money which Kurt is carrying and figures out Kurt's identity. He pilfers Kurt's luggage for evidence which he takes to the German Embassy and as a result several of Kurt's companions are arrested in Europe. When the news breaks that three prominent anti-fascists have been caught, imprisoned and tortured by the Nazis, Teck discovers that they are close friends of Kurt and that he is a missing fourth on the Nazis list. Teck tries to blackmail him by threatening to reveal his identity to the Germans:

Teck: (turns, crosses up to get newspaper from the Secretary) It is in the afternoon paper, Herr Muller...the Zurich papers today reprinted a despatch from the Berliner Tageblatt - on the capture of Colonel Max Freidank. Freidank is said to be the Chief of the Anti-Nazi underground movement.

Sara: (Crying it out) Max -
Kurt: Be, still, Sara

Teck: They told me of it at the Embassy last night. They also told me that with him they had taken a man who called himself Ebber and a man who called himself Triste. They could not find a man called Gotter. I shall be a lonely man without Marthe. I am also very poor one. I should like to have ten thousand dollars before I go. (254 - 255).

At the end of the second act, Teck asks Marthe to leave with him. But she refuses, saying
You won't believe it, because you can't believe anything that hasn't got tricks to it, but David has'nt much to do with this. I told you I would leave some day, and I remember where I said it and why I said it. (252).

Soon Kurt finds himself at the complete mercy of Teck. Kurt tells Fanny and David that Teck has discovered the $23,000 he is carrying gathered from the poor anti-Nazis. When Fanny asks whether it is not careless of him to leave twenty three thousand dollars going around to be seen, Kurt answers:

No, it was not careless of me. It is in a locked briefcase. I have thus carried money for many years. There seemed no safer place than Sara's home. It was careless of you to have in your house a man who opens baggage and blackmails. (257).

Here Hellman's parable is clear. The confrontation between pro and anti-Nazis literally enters an American parlour as the refugees force their hosts to take sides.

David and Fanny take the first step towards joining Kurt's side when they offer to pay Teck themselves. But, they still don't understand the actual situation completely. David tells Kurt that he will be safe and asks him whether his passport is all right. When Kurt says that it is not quite so, Fanny asks why it is not so. Kurt says:

Because people like me are not given visas with such ease. And I was in a hurry to bring my wife and my children to safety. Madam, Fanny, you must come to understand it is no longer the world you once knew. (258).

Still failing to understand, David tells Kurt: 'It doesn't matter. You're political refugee. We don't... turn back people like you.' (258) Sara says 'you don't understand David,' (258) and explains that Kurt has to go back to Germany.
In Act III, Teck reads from a German embassy list of wanted men a description of Kurt’s underground activities. When Fanny says she is sickened by Teck, Kurt makes a key speech:

Fanny and David are Americans and they do not understand our world - as yet. (Turns to David and Fanny) All Fascists are not of one mind. There are those who give the orders, those who carry out the orders, those who watch the orders being carried out. Then there are those who are half in, half hoping to come in. (265).

When Fanny and David leave the room to get the money, Teck says:

The New World has left the room. We are Europeans, born to trouble and understanding it... They are young. The world has gone well for most of them. For us--- we are, like peasants watching the big forest. Work, trouble, ruin - But no need to call curses at the forest. There it is, it will be again, always - for us. (268)

Kurt at first promises to comply, but he knows that cooperation with the unprincipled Teck is useless. Only violence can resolve the situation. When Fanny leaves the room to get the money, Kurt attacks Teck and knocks him unconscious. With gun in hand, Kurt carries Teck out to the garden, where he shoots him. After Kurt kills Teck, he says:

I have a great hate for the violent: They are sick of the world. May be I am sick now, too. (272).

Sara knows what is happening and knows that it is inevitable. She calls the airline and reserves a seat for Kurt under another name on the next plane to Texas where he will cross over to Mexico and then to Europe. When Kurt returns from the garden, they explain to Fanny and David, who come to understand that Kurt has done what he had to do. The killing of Teck was an act of war, except that "when you kill in a war, it is not so lonely." (272) Farrellys who, of course, indignant at Teck's
perfidy, are nevertheless shocked at first by his act but finally realize that evil based on violence, that is, Nazism, can be fought only on its own terms.

A man of peace driven to murder to protect the cause he is fighting for, Kurt says to his children as he prepares to leave them, in a touching farewell scene:

The world is out of shape, we said, when there are hungry men. And until it gets in shape, men will always steal and lie and (a little more slowly) kill. But for whatever reason it is done, and whoever does it - you understand me -- it is all bad. I want you to remember that whoever does it, it is bad. (275).

Fanny and David make their decision when Kurt tells them that they can either phone the police or wait for two days to give him a head start, making themselves, in effect, accessories to murder. Fanny and David give Kurt their support. The children and Sara will stay with them there with little hope that Kurt will ever return. Kurt leaves and Sara goes upstairs to comfort the children. At the end of the play, Fanny tells David:

We are shaken out of the magnolias, eh? (276).

David asks her if she understands that they are going to be in for trouble. Fanny replies in a line reminiscent of The Little Foxes, but spoken to a much different purpose:

I understand it very well, we will manage. I am not put together with flour paste. And neither are you - I am happy to learn. (276).

Hellman says in Penimento that this is her purpose to write Watch on the Rhine:
to write a play about nice, liberal Americans whose lives would be shaken up by Europeans, by a world the new Fascists had won because the old values had long been dead.2

The foregoing brief summary reveals that *Watch on the Rhine* offers a fine contrast between two ways of living --- American and European. While cloaking in nobility of spirit, the European and American sensibilities are strongly contrasted to make a cogent point about the difficulty of living in compromise. Kurt Muller and his three children represent the European maturity and experience in the midst of Nazi evil. As against these, the American Fanny Farrelly and her son, David, live in a strange insularity. The Farrellys not only do not understand, but also, don't care that the world is up in flames. In their nineteenth century attitudes life still consists of breakfast on the terrace and love intrigues in high society. Moreover, they do not understand Muller's poverty. One of the Muller boys has sensed this:

Grandma has not seen much of the world. (241).

Referring to the American ignorance of the Nazi evil, Kurt remarks:

Fanny and David are Americans and they do not understand our world - as yet.(265)

The life that the Farrellys lead is easy and luxurious, secure and comfortable in the American style. They know the world in a way, the American way, though they are by no means prepared for what comes to them from Europe, which amounts to saying they know the world very little. For all their contacts with the world, abroad

and with Washington, the capital of the U.S., and for all the number of words they must have heard and read on international subjects, they still have the American innocence of what Europe is like, of what European living is and of what Europeans are. This American family now must pass through the classic pattern of American involvement with European fascism, first failure to recognise its existence, second failure to see it as a personal threat and third appeasement.

Then, we can also see a sharp contrast between two European and American marriages. The two sets are Kurt Muller - Sara and Teck - Marthe. In the first set, Hellman does create something like a successful family with the Mullers when Sara Muller returns to her childhood home with her husband and children. This is a family whose bonds are not merely those of flesh and blood but of an implicit, never-spoken of and perpetual act of faith. The second set of marriage of Teck and Marthe has disintegrated. They are in debt, living in credit. Marthe married Teck at seventeen to fulfil her mother’s fantasies. Now only Teck’s threats hold this marriage together. Marthe falls in love with David Farrelly, who has previously flirted with her, but after the realization of European honour, accepts her sincerely.

The plot of Watch on the Rhine is not so tightly constructed as those of Hellman’s previous plays — The Children’s Hour and The Little Foxes. The dragged first- half consists of over-emotional padding, but most critics describe it as ‘pleasantly discursive’ or ‘spontaneous’ and ‘witty.’
The first act is a cliche and shows the wit and broad humour of the characterization and actions. One group of characters are anxiously awaiting the arrival of another group of characters. In expressing anticipation and anxiety they provide the audience with details about the new-arrivals. When the guests arrive, we have a fine family 'recognition scene' of the good people, full of happy surprises and further information. This is followed by an ominous scene of suspected recognition between two old enemies. The act concludes with evil just about to get the upper hand over good, before the intermission in which the audience can relish its suspense. This mechanical structure continues in the subsequent act, through a series of confrontations, crises and resolutions between various characters ending in a climactic confrontation and catastrophic denouement but on a lofty note.

Some critics feel that Watch on the Rhine is somewhat faulty in structure. For instance, Rosamind Gilder opines that "Hellman's exposition is slow in Watch on the Rhine and her sub-plot is cumbersome. She does not come to grips with her subject till well on in the second act and she permits herself a number of lapses from the probable."3 However, the same critic feels that "yet with these faults the play, in its authentic passages, has so successfully translated into dramatic terms a fundamental human ideal that its shortcomings are forgotten."4 Brooks Atkinson also is of the

4 Rosamind Gilder, Ibid.
view that "the narrative of Watch on the Rhine drifts into generalities before the main action is well started." But again he praises the play as a whole saying that "commenting the plot is only carping at technicalities, and it does not destroy a general impression that Watch on the Rhine is the finest thing she has written."\(^5\)

With all its shortcomings, we may concur with Basil Wright when he says:

"Apart from a slightly machine-made opening to the first act, the author manipulates her plot and characters with an assurance, an economy and a sense of human values to which only an exceptionally talented cast could do justice."\(^6\)

The 'exceptionally talented cast' in Watch on the Rhine reveals Hellman's remarkable gift for characterization. The various characters in the play are observed with a keen eye to the exact kind of detail that will convince us of their actual existence and difference in their relationships and mutual reactions to each other. The characters are also well-drawn out of affection for people of integrity. The writing is enormously skilful, humorous, witty and also forthright when the time comes for plain speaking.

In fact, the whole action of Watch on the Rhine stems from the characters themselves and their relations to the world around them. They take on a life of their own and at times their speeches seem to come only through the author's fingertips.


\(^6\) Basil Wright, "Watch on the Rhine," The Spectator, 168 May 1, 1942, p.419.
This shows how the characters are alive and integrated in the author's mind. Hellman draws a vivid contrast between the simple good-will of a normal American family - Fannry Farrelly and David Farrelly - and the dark callousness of Europeans -- Kurt Muller and Sara and their three children, and also the evil Teck de-Brancovis and his wife Marthe - who have grown accustomed to honour, intrigue and desperation.

Kurt Muller, the protagonist of the play, is modeled on Julia, a childhood friend of Hellman. He is about forty-three, a good looking former engineer, who, having left Germany in 1933, has become an outstanding fighter against Nazism in Germany and against the insidious spread of fascism throughout the world. Julia, the model for the character of Kurt Muller, herself, was a saintly woman who shared her wealth with the poor and lost a leg and finally her life in the fight against fascism. Just like her, Kurt's hands are also broken, his face is scarred when he and his family enters Fanny Farrelly's house.

Hellman makes Kurt Muller a radical and an anti-fascist for the justice of his cause. Her task is to make the American opponent of World War I and a German national and a likely Communist, and create a hero with whom American audiences can identify. To do this, she invests him with typical American heroic virtues. To begin with, Kurt is a man of action, not talk. Because opportunities to demonstrate

---

7 Hellman herself acknowledges this fact in Pentimento and her early manuscript drafts of the play. See Doris V.Folk, Lillian Hellman (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co, 1978), p.65.
anti-Fascist heroism in an upper-class living room are necessarily limited, Hellman assigns the task of explaining Kurt's attitudes to others. When we want to know what Kurt's beliefs are, we need only listen to his children:

Bodo: Did Mama write that Papa was a great hero? He was brave, he was clam, he was expert, he was resourceful, he was -

Kurt: (laughs) My unprejudiced biographer. (227).

Bodo: He likes to know how each thing of everything is put together.
And he is so fond of being clean.(234)

We may say that in the character of Kurt, Hellman draws a rounded and appealing being, a man at once heroic and human, brave and fearful. Kurt is by nature thoughtful, peace-loving, gentle and compassionate. He hates violence. His mind is repelled by brutality. His nerves cry out against pain. That is why, the character of Kurt, the resistance fighter, has received utmost attention by critics. For instance, Lederer Katherine says that Kurt is the lone protagonist "not only because Hellman wrote the role with passion and admiration but because he acts with decision and courage and is Hellman's most eloquent spokesman for human rights and liberty."8 Rosamind Gilder says how Kurt becomes the prototype of all those who, like Hamlet, revolt against the cursed spite that calls upon them to set right by violence a world gone out of joint."9 Barret H.Clark succinctly sums up Kurt's character when he says:

9 Rosamind Gilder, "Prizes That Bloom in the Spring."
Kurt, the little German who gives up his work, his wife, children and is ready to give up his life in order to crush what threatens all we believe in, could scarcely have been anything but sympathetic.\textsuperscript{10}

If Kurt is an anti-fascist, Teck is a Nazi sympathizer and a gambler.\textsuperscript{11} He is a somewhat mysterious and penniless Romanian Count. He is presented as an effete German aristocrat and is offered as representative of those who had seen Hitler's rise as offering an opportunity for their own aggrandizement. He is a world-adventurer, not the direct Nazi, but the assiduous jackal, the Nazi type without the Nazi faith.

Teck is obviously presented as the antithesis to Kurt. He is a dracula challenging Kurt's Parsifal, acknowledging no commitment beyond himself. Both Teck and Kurt make judgements about National Socialism. Whereas Kurt correctly evaluates its evil and enlists in the fight against it, Teck underestimates Nazi strength. Kurt rightly interprets him:

\begin{quote}
(Some Fascists) come late; some because they did not jump in time, some because they were stupid, some because they were shocked at the crudity of the German evil, and preferred their own evil and some because they were fastidious men. For those last, we may well some day have pity. They are lost men, their spoils are small, their day is past. (265).
\end{quote}

But Teck is clever, patient and ruthless. He wants only to be on the winning side. And he will not play his hand recklessly. In spite of his cleverness and schemy nature,


\textsuperscript{11} Hellman modelled him on a Romanian Prince whom she had met and played poker with him in London in 1936. See Doris. V.Falk, \textit{Lillian Hellman}, p.66.
Teck gets killed by Kurt Muller. Teck is no more than a pitiful little rat, himself a victim.

But Hellman wastes no hatred upon him. She even goes out of her way to make Teck understandable and she likewise endows him with some remnants of human decency. Teck is not quite an active evil figure. His corruption grows directly out of the passivity and cowardice of his half-commitment to fascist activities. Teck exploits others only to gain acceptance by the Nazis. In the words of Barret H Clark, "Hellman has learned that to symbolize a situation it is not necessary to assume the manner or dramatize the gestures of contempt. The fact speaks for itself when the fact is wholly and understandingly embodied in speech and action."12

Thus, the two European men, Kurt and Teck, are contrasted. Kurt Muller is a full-length hero, a man who works for others. He is articulate in a wholly winning manner and he goes out of his way to stress his unimportance. Whereas Teck de Brancovis is a villain, the Romanian aristocrat blackmails his hosts into buying him off when he discovers Kurt's identity. Teck is no lay figure; he does not even represent fascism. In this way, the two men, although both are Europeans, differ completely in their mentalities.

12 Barret H. Clark, "Lillian Hellman."
Like Kurt and Teck, Sara Muller and Marthe-de-Brancovis are sharply contrasted with each other. Although both of them are American-born ladies, they are married to Europeans - Kurt Muller and Teck-de-Brancovis respectively. If one is anti-Nazi, the other is Nazi sympathizer. Sara shows immense courage in sending her husband back to Germany to fight for his cause. She is rather proud of his activities. Whereas Sara is proud of her husband, Marthe, who knows her husband's evil nature, develops a kind of hatred towards him.

Fanny Farrelly and her son David Farrelly make interesting characters. Fanny is the widow of Joshuva Farrelly and she keeps her husband's portrait in the drawing room of her house. As her husband is a liberal judge, Fanny measures everything with his judgement. She bosses over her son David. As bossy as she is, Fanny's wit gives her charm. Part of her function in life is to find out the local gossip and improve on it -- 'wit it up' and the rest is to keep her family in order according to her own upper-class lights. Though a strong woman, given to raising her voice when she does not get her way, she is generous, loving and liberal. David Farrelly never asserts himself but allows his mother to attempt to make him into his father's image. Hellman makes these two characters develop gradually and become aware of the necessity to take active part in fascist movement. Both Fanny and David assist Kurt whole-heartedly, although they realize that the eventual revelation of the murder will cause trouble for them.
Thus, the characters in *Watch on the Rhine* really carry us along with the play, however much or little the anti-Nazi connotations may stick in our minds. To Hellman’s restraint and precise ability at characterization, she adds for the first time in warm emotional feeling within the family which makes *Watch on the Rhine* one of the finest plays to come out of the war years. With the characters portrayed with dignity and taste, the play was and will always be deeply touching.

*Watch on the Rhine* is important not only for its memorable characters but also for its intense realism and contemporary relevance. Written in 1940, and produced eight months before Pearl Harbor, the play is understandably more patriotic than eloquent. The rise of Hitler and sadism of the Nazi regime, the brutality of Fascism which Hellman has witnessed in Spain, seemed to her a manifestation on a monstrous scale of the same evil in human nature that motivated the Hubbards. She felt on her return that the people in the United States were but dimly aware of the danger of Nazism to the entire world. She summed up her attitude in a few sentences in *Pentimento*:

> I am a writer, I am also a Jew. I want to be quite sure that I can continue to be a writer, and that if I want to say that greed is bad or persecution is worse, I can do so without being branded by the malice of the people making a living by that malice. \(^{13}\)

And so, she started writing the play, *Watch on the Rhine*.

---

*Watch on the Rhine* opened in 1941 when the whole world was being forced to support liberal ideas actively or default into the dynamic religions of Nazism and other forms of fascism. The play brings the subject home fiercely to those Americans who imagined materialism a possibility. Perhaps, the play is offered as an anxious debate about the utility of art at the moments of social crisis. Hence she has one of her characters insist that there is "Too much talk. By this time all of us know where we are and what we have to do. It is an indulgence to sit in a room and discuss your beliefs as if they were the afternoon’s golf-game."(240)

Although many critics feel that *Watch on the Rhine* is Hellman’s best play, Hellman in her discussions of her work, usually dismissed it as the best anti-nazi play of the war years. So, *Watch on the Rhine* has a topical relevance as one of the best anti-Nazi plays. Brooks Atkinson makes this clearer when he says:

> Since Miss Hellman has communicated her thoughts 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.14

Thus, *Watch on the Rhine* has a strong contemporary appeal by virtue of its successful reconstruction of the anti-fascist atmosphere.

In spite of its realistic flavour and authenticity, *Watch on the Rhine* has more often than not been taken for an old-fashioned melodrama by some critics because of

the pervasive cruelty and violence in the play. For example, Brendan Gill, reviving the 1980 production of *Watch on the Rhine*, says that "Miss Hellman has always been a champion of the well-made play and it's true that one detects in the net plotting of *Watch on the Rhine*, a taint of melodrama that grows less and less tolerable with age."15 Leonard Ungar feels that "of all Hellman's plays, *Watch on the Rhine* comes closest being melodrama of the monochromatic school where the villain is unspeakably black and the hero angelically white."16

But a clear understanding of the play reveals that the melodramatic element is an integral part of the anti-Nazi play. It holds mirror up to a world which is boiling with melodrama. Cruelty and villainy are not figments of the playwright's imagination but stark realities of the existing situation with which the play is concerned. However, as a dramatic artist, Hellman knew that her fiction must do more than demonstrate the strange and awful truth that screened from the front pages of every daily paper. She, therefore, tried, as Richard Moody notices, "to shift from the massive melodrama of life to the heroic human story of one family behaving like thoroughbreds in an agonizing situation, by making us aware of the blinders we still wore, blinders the European had long since discarded, by alerting us to our own vulnerability."17


as Joseph Wood Krutch rightly points out, "such things as Hellman has made the basis of the play do actually go on and that it is not her fault if this is a melodramatic world in which accredited dignitaries of the German Government behave like villains." 18

A close study of Watch on the Rhine, however, reveals that it is not a melodrama, but a Comedy of Manners. American and European characters are thrown together in order to say something about their differing values and customs - not only about good and evil. Mark. W. Estrin notes in the play "Hellman's memorably sharp-tongued figures in the person of Fanny Farrelly and the recurrent tone and dialogue of a Jamesian Comedy of Manners." 19 Quantitatively too, there is more comic and romantic by-play in Watch on the Rhine, than there is tense melodrama. The children provide some of the comedy in their relationship with their gruff, basically sentimental grandmother. By juxtaposing the warmth between members of the Muller family and the building romance between Marthe and David, Hellman satirically indicates that love will prevail over decadence and hate.


In Pentimento, Hellman herself acknowledges that she is surprised to discover that she had Henry James' two novels on this subject - The American and The Europeans - in the back of her mind at the time of writing Watch on the Rhine.
To enhance the dramatic effect further, Hellman introduces blackmail in *Watch on the Rhine* in order to create suspense in the spectators. However, the victim of blackmail, Kurt Muller, is not guilty of anything as in *The Children's Hour* and *The Little Foxes*. He is, indeed, more or less admirable in his willingness to behave in such a way as to protect others. Also, the blackmailer, Teck, is different from Mary in *The Children's Hour* as well as from Hubbards in *The Little Foxes*. Teck is an opportunist, thief, and a petty power-seeker. He would like to be a Hubbard but cannot, partly because, like Oscar Hubbard, he lacks the brains, and partly because he has the glimmerings of a conscience and the ability to recognize good when he sees it and differentiate it from evil.

Yet, we may say that blackmail is apparently essential to *Watch on the Rhine*, though, in contrast to the Hubbard plays, more for the sake of theme than plot. If not for Teck's blackmail, nothing else would drive Kurt to murder. And this murder is essential to Hellman's philosophic purpose to show that war and oppression can drive to violence the most philosophically and temperamentally non-violent of men. She also wants to show that not even a wealthy and cultured family on a country estate in a non-combatant country, three thousand miles from war, is safe from war's violence. And also Hellman's view is to show the heroism of the anti-Nazi underground. Except that the murder sends Kurt back to Europe sooner and that too more dangerously the blackmail is necessary to plot in *Watch on the Rhine* only to the extent that it results in the murder of the Count, leaving his wife free to marry the son of the household,
David Farrelly. It is also true that the Count might have been a real Nazi who planned to report to the embassy simply out of a sense of duty, without attempting blackmail, but Kurt has a much less ostensible choice, and the necessary point that he chose murder when there seemed to be, from his wife’s family’s point of view, a viable alternative, would have been lost. Thus, the blackmail forms an integral part of *Watch on the Rhine* and it is not added for the sake of spectacle.

The dramatic effect of the ingenious *Watch on the Rhine* is enhanced also by Hellman’s use of metaphors. Properly understood, Teck represents old Europe with its cynical, manipulative, effete aspects which, Hellman believed, made it easy for the fascists to take power. Teck is also a site onto which American audiences can project all their anti-European prejudices, leaving the hero, Kurt, as the New Man of Europe, free for admiration.

The Farrelly living room serves as metaphor for America, in its early nineteenth century origins, its space, its simplicity and above all, in its eclecticism. It is to the credit of Hellman’s genius that without even leaving this living room or introducing a single bonafide Nazi into it, she brings home to America the realities of the war and makes the best possible case for our participation in it.

The marriages in *Watch on the Rhine* also serve as metaphors for contrasting models of political relations between the United States and Europe. Marthe’s marriage
to Teck stands for the aspects of European culture which must be rejected, while Sara’s marriage to Kurt stands for those aspects of European culture which must be repatriated into an internationalized version of liberal American ideology. While the childless De-Brancovis marriage represents the depletion, cynicism and amorality, the marriage of Kurt and Sara with its three children, operates as a mediation, a bonding between the best of the old and the new worlds.

A notable feature of *Watch on the Rhine* is that it is free from flat didacticism and sermonizing which are usually evident in thesis plays like Maxwell Anderson’s *Key Largo*, Robert Sherwood’s *There Shall Be No Night*. Earnest Hemingway’s *Fifth Column* and Elmer Rice’s *Flight To The West* were prominent in the theatre at the time when *Watch on the Rhine* was staged. It demands greater attention because it deals with the fundamental issue of America of that period with “dignity, insight and sound theatrical intelligence.” As a dramatist, Heilman believes in free will and personal responsibility for one’s actions or failure to act. Heilman’s concern with ethical choices has caused her to study the behaviour of the well-to-do because their money gives them the freedom to make moral choices and to deal with moral responsibilities.

To conclude, it is clear that with *Watch on the Rhine*, Heilman can use Ibsen’s methods and strict realism and money as dominant motivation, symbol to present a

---

theme of universal significance and power. Viewed solely as a melodrama, solely as
the story of Kurt Muller, the play may be dated. But, if it is viewed as a story of
some naive, liberal Americans put to the test, as call to arms for middle-class
Americans, as an exhortation to fight or help those who fight against evil and as
character drama like The Autumn Garden, then Watch on the Rhine still holds validity.
It is still charged with meaning and the moral and political questions with which it
deals continue to torment us. It is a play of burning intensity for every American who
cherishes his life and his country and who believes that human decency could prevail.