CHAPTER VI

AMERICAN INDIFFERENCE TO HITLERISM:
THE SEARCHING WIND
The Searching Wind (1944) is an intelligently written play. In a sense, it is an extension of Watch on the Rhine which Hellman hoped to follow with a play that would be even more scathing in its denunciation of American indifference to the evils of Hitlerism. In The Searching Wind, Hellman advocates anti-fascist activity in an examination of well-meaning, affluent Americans who fail to use their money and influence to halt the progress of Bermito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler.

The Searching Wind, like Watch on the Rhine, sets off the microcosm of manners against the macrocosm of world events. When the two worlds impinged on each other in Watch on the Rhine, the liberal upper class Americans were 'shaken out of the magnolias.' In The Searching Wind, the magnolias are shaking, but the liberals hardly notice until too late. While Watch on the Rhine is a play about action in crisis, The Searching Wind is a play about the inaction of bystanders, which is a cardinal sin in Hellman's morality. The inaction takes the form of appeasement and compromises, in love and war, in the private and public world.

The Searching Wind is a structurally intricate play exploring the reasons for the democratic appeasement of fascism in the thirties and human factors which went to make up this social attitude. It is an attempt to analyse the moral failures which had
led to war, the liberal equivocations, the self-concerned tolerance for the intolerable. It is Hellman's attempt to establish a connection between private and public morality.

In *The Searching Wind*, Hellman makes a serious comment as she ridicules the previous twenty years of American foreign policy. Instead of portraying Germans succumbing to blood-and-soil rationalism, she displays American diplomats conducting unrequired triangular love affairs during the twenty-year rise of fascism. They are conveniently stationed in key European capitals during 1920-40, and rationalize their failure to request diplomatic censure over Mussolini's Putsch, anti-semitic riots and the annexation of much of central Europe.

*The Searching Wind* shows rich Americans hopping, all over Europe from the year 1922-1944, like Hemingway-type intellectuals in exile. Hellman is really attacking a way of life practised by a minority who made their values - or lack of them - the keynote of their age. The play audits the conduct of an irresolute career diplomat, his retired liberal of a father-in-law, his bored wife who broke bread with fascist-minded bigwigs.

Set in Washington, D.C., in the spring of 1944, *The Searching Wind* deals with the family of an American diplomat, Alexander Hazen, an attache at Rome, during the rise of Mussolini and Hitler. A 'liberal,' Alexander Hazen turns out to be one who cannot believe in villainy, and who in the name of caution, and keeping an
open mind, made compromises with evil - with fascism, at the cost of lives of future
generations. Three scenes take place in the present - 1944 - the year in which the
action begins and ends. And Hellman reviews the rise of fascism and the triumph of
appeasement in three flashbacks. These three flashback scenes take place in 1922,
1923 and 1938 respectively. The flashback scenes also represent three personal crises
in the lives of the three major characters - Alexander Hazen, a career diplomat, his
wealthy wife, Emily Hazen and the 'other woman,' Cassie Bowman. At each political
crisis, Alex appeases the fascists, and his wife appeases her rival - her ex-best friend,
Cassie. Alex tries to appease both the women. Outside the trio, as commentators on
the action, are the old man - Moses Taney, Emily’s father and the young man, Sam
Hazen, Emily and Alexander Hazen’s son.

The framework of present time opens and closes with the conflict
between Emily and Cassie. Hellman creates both curiosity and befuddlement in her
audience by having Emily invite Cassie to hers and Alex’s home in Washington -
nobody knows why. Then, through the subsequent flashbacks into the past, until in
the final scene, at the house, a few hours after scene one, we learn Emily’s purpose.
Hellman presents the past as a series of double crisis - confrontations.

In the 1922 scene, Moses Taney, his daughter, Emily, and her best friend,
Cassie, along with Taney’s maid, Sophronia are visiting Rome, where Alex Hazen is
a young diplomat in the American embassy. Mussolini is marching on Rome and
Cassie is marching on Alex, whom Emily expects to marry. Mussolini takes over. Alex agrees with his boss, the American ambassador, that open opposition to the fascists would be intervention in Italian internal affairs. His failure to take a strong political stand precipitates a quarrel with Cassie. This is not known to Emily that Alex and Cassie are lovers and have thought of marriage. Now Cassie decides to return to her teaching job in America for a year to think it over. Emily's response to Cassie and her challenge is that of passive resistance - to stay in Rome where Alex is. It works, and Cassie catches him.

The second political scene is in Berlin in 1923. It is the time of the first organized anti-semitic riots. Emily is married to Alex and Cassie has made it a habit to follow them and meet Alex, when she is on vacation in Europe. The scene takes place in Berlin restaurant where Alex is waiting for Emily and unknowingly being watched by Cassie at another table. The noises of riot and threats against Jews are heard outside the restaurant. Emily comes in shocked by the spectacle she has just witnessed of German ex-soldiers beating up old Jews. Alex's response to the crisis is to clam down the people in the restaurant and to blame the riot on the negligence of the police. He refuses to face the complicity of the police in the anti-semitism. On the other hand, Emily sees Cassie and is polite. Cassie takes the offensive and accuses Emily of having stolen Alex from her. Emily claims not guilty - Cassie and Alex had already quarrelled. Emily offers friendship, reconciliation and appeasement.
The third double confrontation takes place in Paris in 1938 when the Munich agreement - the arch example of appeasement of Hitler by Britain and France- is about to take place. Alex must send his recommendation to the United States Government. Again, he refuses to believe in evil and corruption, even when a Nazi attempts to pressure him into trying to keep France and Britain out of war with Germany. He holds out hope that Hitler may keep his promise not to annex more territory after the Sudetenland, and supports Chamberlain's efforts to keep 'peace in our time.'

Emily also wants peace at any price, now in politics as well as love. She does not want to send her son to war. She and Alex quarrel - then make peace - about her hob-nobbing with pro-Nazi European socialites, including the banker with whom she has deposited some of her money.

But, Cassie, at Emily's invitation, has been to see Alex. Before Emily arrives, they have arranged a rendezvous. Alex has decided that he loves Emily but is 'in love with' Cassie. When Emily comes, she tells Alex that as she entered she saw Cassie in the lobby but was afraid to confront her. And thus, she leaves Alex in the hands of the enemy, as Chamberlain - and Alex-left Europe.

In the last scene, which takes up the 1944 action again, Hellman brings all the confrontations together -- the women, the war, the generations. It turns out that Emily had invited Cassie to the house in act one in order to have it out with her once and
for all to accuse her directly of husband-stealing. Now Cassie breaks down and tells Emily that the accusation is true. She had been out to get Alex away from Emily and to punish Emily for marrying him. Alex agrees to let Cassie go without a struggle, and he relaxes with his wife.

The major confrontation, however, is between Sam Hazen and his elders. This, too, has been hanging fire since the opening scene. We learned there that Sam had been wounded. Now we find that he must lose his leg. In spite of his grandfather’s efforts to educate him, Sam is not an intellectual - he trusts action and sincere human relations, not words. He had felt at home in the army with fighting men, and especially with his friend, Leck, who was killed in the same battle in which Sam was wounded. His war experiences have made him ashamed of his family of ‘bystanders’ and now he tells them why.

Sam is ashamed of his grandfather, the great liberal, who now just sits back and watches. He is also ashamed of his father who went along with Munich, and of his mother with her rich, Pro-Nazi friends. Then, with an almost apologetic patriotism, Sam accuses his parents of damaging the country which he loves: He harshly tells them:

I don’t want any more of Father’s mistakes, for any reason, good or bad, or yours, Mother, because I think they do (the country) harm... I am ashamed of both of you, and that’s the truth... I don’t like losing
my leg... but everybody's welcome to it as long as it means a little something and helps to bring us out someplace.¹

The play ends with Samuel denouncing his parents and their generation for bringing on the war by closing their eyes to what was happening and for feeling ashamed to express their love of country at a time when such an expression was necessary. In this sense, the play is reminiscent of Days to Come, making the point clear that the world is the sum total of each person's personal actions. Thus, The Searching Wind is not a formal play, though it is concerned with a profound truth. There is no true villain in the play. The only villain seems to be appeasement of people. All of the major characters just let things happen stand around and watch the earth and the people on it be eaten. And, as Lederer Katherine observes, "a searching wind blows away the rationalizations of all the characters by the end of the play, as they learn the truth about themselves."²

The Searching Wind is notable for its novel plot with its multiple-scene scheme, bringing as it does some of the film techniques to bear upon its structural unity. Although Hellman never held the movie industry in high esteem, she learned its techniques well enough to use them in her most ambitious play, The Searching Wind. Told through flashbacks, The Searching Wind is the kind of play that puts great

¹ Lillian Hellman, "The Searching Wind," The Collected Plays (Boston - Toronto: Little, Brown Company, 1971), p.337. All further references are to this edition, and the page numbers are given parenthetically at the end of the quotations.

demands on the cast. Act I moves from 1944 to 1922 and back to 1944. Act II moves from 1923 to 1938 and full circle to 1944. The first two acts, showing the onset of fascism in Rome and Berlin, are well done, though both are cluttered by the development of the love triangle. The third flashback is notable for a delineation of the Nazi diplomat who deals with the Munich pact.

However, many critics contend that the multiple scenes and numerous major characters in the play divert the audiences from Hellman's thematic intentions, thereby marring its structural unity. For instance, Richard Moody says that "the segmented structure is loose as a haystack and also reduced the firepower of the political message. It might have held on longer performances, if she had not tried so hard to write two plays at once, one political, the other personal." Casper H. Nannee feels that "The Searching Wind has two centers around which the plot revolves. One is the willingness of American businessmen to do business with Hitler and Mussolini and the other is the pent-up feelings of returned soldiers towards those who brought on the war by closing their eyes to what was going on." The Time reviewer points out that The Searching Wind is "more like two plays - and two very unequal ones." Doris

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5 Time Reviewer, "New Plays in Manhattan," Time, Vol.43, April 24, 1944, p.72.
V.Falk also opines that "neither the theme, nor the plot structure, nor the characters ever came completely clear on the stage - and they take considerable analyzing even on the printed page."6 And Katherine too writes that "the attempt to tell two stories at once makes the impact of the play diffuse, although the theme is clear enough."7 Downer contends that "Hellman was so caught up in contemporary issues that the structure of the drama is faulty."8

Thus, critics feel that the structural beauty of the play is spoiled chiefly because of the simultaneous treatment of two divergent stories within the scope of a single plot as in the case of *The Children's Hour*. The critics seem to have taken a cue from T.S.Eliot's critical pronouncement on Shakespeare's *Hamlet* that the play is a film on which two photographs have been taken.

But, a deeper understanding of the play reveals that Hellman has done an admirable job in solving the technical difficulties arising from resolving the personal problem by way of merging it into worldly problem. It is not fair to stress the parallel too strongly as some critics have actually done. For, it is to be borne in mind that the story is dramatised in terms of 'surface realism' and any attempt to find 'raison d'etre' would destroy the needed illusion. As Barret H.Clark rightly explains, "the

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7 Lederer Katherine, *Lillian Hellman*, p.60.
author, having established on a solid dramatic basis, the personal drama, a drama in itself complete - resists the temptation to point out that what was wrong with individuals is precisely what is wrong with the nations."9 Furthermore, as Sievers, in his *Freudian Fraternity of the Thirties*, rightly observes, "if there is a weakness in *The Searching Wind*, it is that the plot construction is not of the tense cat-and-mouse battle of minds that made Hellman’s Hubbard plays memorable. Charmingly weak characters are more difficult to deal with dramatically than wilfully sadistic ones."10

Like the plot-construction, Hellman’s art of characterization in *The Searching Wind* is met with certain criticism. For instance, Richard Moody thinks that the characters "appear banal and inconsequential. Nor do the characters assume any stature. With the possible exception of Moses Taney, the portraits are little more than line drawings."11

But, a close study of the play reveals that Hellman’s characters in *The Searching Wind* are more vulnerable than the superhuman characters in *Watch on the Rhine* because of their patriotic fervour. We should also remember that in *The Searching Wind* Hellman has painted her characters on a historical canvas. On top of


that she seeks to convey the helplessness of individuals in responsible positions when they cannot take their own stand. She also creates a microcosm-macrocosm relationship between the trio- Alexander Hazen, Emily Hazen and Cassie Bowman - and their times. The compromises that Alex, Emily and Cassie made in their own lives are repeated on an international scale. Alex becomes an ambassador, thereby choosing a life of appeasement. In Emily, he finds the ideal ambassador's wife - apolitical and affluent. Cassie bemoans her generation: "We are an ignorant generation." (333) Yet, she spends her summers in Europe to be near Alex whose weakness she condemns but whose company she needs. Even in 1933, as Jews are being harassed in the streets of Berlin, Cassie and Emily enjoy the security of a cafe where they argue about Alex.

Within the limits of communist rationalizing, Hellman successfully depicts the individuals who are most to be blamed for the unchecked development of fascism. They are people who have outlived an epoch and cannot shake loose from passivity to act effectively either for their own happiness or the national good. And, apart from their politics, they most resemble the figures of Hellman’s ‘Chekhovian’ plays - The Autumn Garden and Toys in the Attic.

Coming to individual characters, Alexander Hazen, the hero of the two ladies, Emily Hazen and Cassie Bowman, may also be said to be the hero of The Searching Wind. He is portrayed as a sincere idealist. As Cassie remarks, he is a man "who
did'nt know what he was doing." (297) He is an American diplomat, an attache in Rome, who follows an isolationist policy during the rise of Mussolini and Hitler in order to escape from the ugly truth. His political philosophy is a carry-over from his unresolved emotional life.

Alex’s life is one of compromise and rationalizing, in spite of his basic good nature and idealism. The pattern extends from his betrayal of Cassie and marrying of Emily to his career as a diplomat. In his political career he contributes significantly to the American policy of appeasement which reached its climax at the time of the Munich Conference in 1938.

Watching as he does fascism become real, bold and imperious, Alex is at once a decent and a muddled man. Though he is dismayed by what he sees he hangs on to the hope that somehow good will come of evil. As his stake is in the status quo, he instinctively makes out a case for appeasement. Despite his now clearer view of what is happening, and despite his aroused conscience, he sends a report back to his government offering equivocal support for appeasement. He defends himself against his conscience by insisting that the individual cannot hope to deflect the course of history. It is his belief that the protest of individual is useless that makes him so weak.

Despite the accumulating evidence of crisis, Alexander remains convinced that things are not as bad as they seem. Cast as a stereotype of Woodrow Wilson, Hazen
refuses to see the threat in Mussolini's rise. He tries to rationalize it. Regarding the
Nazi evil and the threat of war, he is befuddled and confused. The developments in
Europe are 'strange' to him and he does not know what is best for him. Thus Alex
remains one of the most complex characters of Hellman. He is a figure of no real
power himself. Yet, he remains the spokesman for the official blunders, delays and
defections that made Munich no terminus.

The next important and interesting character in The Searching Wind is Cassie
Bowman who is the lover of Alexander Hazen. She is intelligent and idealistic in her
insistence that Alex should take a firm stand. Though John Gassner calls her "high
minded,"12 her actions are certainly not high-minded.

It is to be noted that Cassie has more life and she is more assertive than Emily
and Alexander. Hers is the most forceful dialogue. In Rome, she says to Alex:

A revolution is going on out there. But by this time next year it will
be nothing more than dinner table conversation. Things mean so little
to us, to you.(304)

She says to Emily:

Do stop playing the piano. It doesn't go well with guns. (304)

Cassie appears to be Hellman's spokesman. It is Cassie, who at the end of the play,
explains to herself and the other what they have done with their lives:

12 John Gassner, "Entropy in the Drama," Theatre Arts 35, September 1951,
pp.16-17.
I don’t want to see another generation of people like us, who didn’t know what they were doing or why they did it... We were frivolous people. (333)

Moses Taney is yet another interesting character in the play. He provides philosophical comment on the action like a chorus in Greek drama. He is a charming but disillusioned fighting liberal, retired editor of a once great newspaper. He has cynically abandoned his fighting newspaper and is snorting in the shade. He has withdrawn himself from political decision-making, but comments bitterly on other people’s diplomatic compromises. He closely parallels the wise old man, Joshuva Farrelly, of Watch on the Rhine. He points out Alex’s mistake by giving his view:

that bad men are stupid and good men are smart. (290)

But, this ‘scornful old liberal,’ who knows better the circumstances that led to war, himself behaves worse.

However, the most fascinating character in The searching Wind is Sam Hazen, son of Alexander and Emily Hazen. He is of younger generation and speaks for the author as Julie does in Days to Come and the youngsters in Watch on the Rhine. Hellman obviously intended Sam to show us that the sins of the fathers are visited on the children. Sam was in the army and he saw history taking shape for which he was not responsible in any way, though as an army man he was also taking part in it. He vehemently questions the stance taken by his parents and his grandfather as bystanders without making an attempt to change the course of history. He was proud of his parents until one day when his fellow army man gives a newspaper cutting which
says that many of the self-proclaimed righteous people including his parents had business dealings with Germany.

Like Alexandra in *The Little Foxes*, Sam is bitter about his father, because he is an appeaser. With the full truth spread out for the first time before him, he cries shame upon the parents he loves. What is more, he demands passionately that there are no such mistakes again for any reason. Sam is the heir to the mistakes of his predecessors, that is, his parents and grandparents, who have caused him to fight in war and to lose a leg in the process. He urges his parents:

I don't want any more of my father's mistakes... I am ashamed of you both, and that's the truth. I don't want to be ashamed that way again. I don't like losing my leg... I'm scared—but everybody's welcome to it as long as it means a little something and helps to bring us out some place. (337)

Sam knows that "history is made by the masses of people" (334) not by one or two men and he can only hope that the loss of a leg will make people less frivolous. Thus, Sam is one of Hellman's soldier-boys, who has finally found a purposeful life in the army.

Emily Hazen, the wife of Alexander Hazen, is a one-time best friend of Cassie Bowman. Emily uses her power tactics to win Alexander from Cassie and marries him. She is a woman who derives her pleasure from consorting with those very businessmen and politicians who had facilitated the rise of the forces which eventually wound her own son. Emily, throughout the play, strives to learn how Cassie feels and in what way Cassie's affair with her husband reflects all three participants in the
situation. And at one point she stresses the need for getting things straight, but all that she says is:

    We've started it; let's finish it. ... It's time to find out. (333)

Thus, Emily Hazen too, like Alexander Hazen, is an appeaser, but in her case, she forgives Cassie all through the play.

_The Searching Wind_ is important for its intense realism. Like _Watch on the Rhine_, it is contemporary in its content. The play is set at crucial moments in the history of the rise of fascism: in Rome, in 1922, at the time of Mussolini's take-over in Italy; in Berlin, in 1923, as the first signs of Hitler's rise becomes apparent; in Paris, on the eve of Chamberlain's appeasement. Hellman herself told in an interview:

    Like every other writer. I use myself and the time I live in. The nearest things to a political play was _The Searching Wind_... I meant only to write about nice, well-born people who, with good intentions, helped to sell out a world.\(^{13}\)

_The Searching Wind_, even more than _Watch on the Rhine_, derives its strength from its immediacy. In the words of Richard Moody, "With Eisenhower's invasion of France two months away, with the Nazis still threatening we struggled to know where we went wrong in bringing the civilized world to the edge of disaster."\(^{14}\) The 1920s were a time of debased epicureanism. When it came time for history to test the convictions of the 1920s it turned out that there were none. The endless parties in _The

\(^{13}\) Lillian Hellman, *Winter* 132, cited in Lederer Katherine, _Lillian Hellman_, p. 65.

Searching Wind are spin-offs of Jay Gatsby’s extravaganzas where it made no difference who attended. Such a lack of discrimination may have been acceptable then. But the careless men of the 1920s spilled over into the next decade when frivolous Emilies sat next to Nazis and fascists at soirees, making small talk and never challenging their political beliefs for fear of a breach of etiquette.

With keen awareness of the interaction of psychological and political factors, Lilian Heilman shows the isolationist foreign policy during the thirties as an inevitable expression of the personal escapism of the men who made the policy. As Barret Clark observes, "there is the heart of the problem, Miss Heilman has sought to elucidate, if not to solve."15

Hellman’s attitude to the contemporary political situation is quite clear. The innocent Americans in The Searching Wind win admiration for their simple charm and carefree attitudes. But their ignorance of evil and poverty, their lack of concern for the disturbing events between the wars and their efforts to be nice guys constitute a flawed existence. Innocence is not enough. In the context of twentieth century political developments, it is actually a liability. As N.S.Pradhan rightly observes, "written under the shadow of war, The Searching Wind contains the denunciation of a so-called innocence which makes the American look like a fool in the eyes of the world."16

15 Barret H.Clark, Lillian Hellman, p.133.

16 N.S.Pradhan, "Innocence," Modern American Drama: A Study in Myth & Tradition,p. 38.
The Searching Wind is not only intensely realistic but also extremely satirical. The play is a scathing indictment of a generation of smug American indifference to Hitlerism. The ultimate power of the play rests with the bitter-sad indictment of the appeasers and with the documentary reminder of Munich. It satirises the passive complacency of the generation that could sit idly by and witness the persecution of an entire group of people without active protest.

The ever-seeking playwright, Hellman, is not content with spinning a little fable and tacking an appendix onto it. And so, she conceived a dramatic structure which combines a personal knot of conflicting wills with a roughly parallel knot showing how a world-wide situation is only an amplified personal drama on a large scale. Hellman herself emphasized this in an interview:

there were not only a lot of bastards who fixed things up in the last 10 or 12 years, but nice people, too, (as in their personal lives) can do bad things from the right motives. I know I don’t start by telling myself to write a play about War. What War, whose War? What occurs to me first are the people.17

Hellman employs dramatic irony in The Searching Wind, but not as thoroughly as in her earlier plays. We know before the characters do that Sam must lose his leg. We know before Emily that Alex and Cassie have an affair and physical relation. But, the organization of the play is such that we learn much of the information along with the characters. Strangely enough, Emily, the ‘detective,’ who instigates the search for the truth in their lives, never explains why she wants to know it in 1944, what she has

17 Lillian Hellman, Post Man. March 12, 1944.
But there's a great deal that you don't know, and Cassie doesn't know, and I don't either. It's time to find out. (333)

Hellman also employs 'boomerang irony' in *The Searching Wind*. Alexander went to World War I because no one acted to prevent that war. He feels that his father's description of France did not match with what he saw at first hand. Sam feels that the Italy he fought in does not fit the Italy Alexander describes. And Sam goes to war, of course, because his father's generation let it happen. Cassie, by quarrelling with Alex, loses the chance to influence him to take a definite moral stand. Emily, who influenced Alex to support appeasement because she did not want Sam to go to war, is then indirectly the cause of his being wounded. Like the dowager in *Watch on the Rhine* and the matriarch to come in *The Autumn Garden*, Moses makes ironic comments throughout the play, but he is as guilty as the rest, having abdicated a position of power and responsibility from which his viewpoint might have had some influence.

*The Searching Wind* is not without its symbolic significance. The very title of the play is symbolic. Hellman told an interviewer that she had got the title from a Negro maid:

Some mornings when she came she'd say 'it's a searching wind today'. She meant one of those winds that go right through you to your
backbone. I suppose in my title I was thinking of the wind that’s blowing through the world.\footnote{Lillian Hellman, \textit{Herald Tribune}, April.9, 1944.}

The author’s own explanation of the title, however, makes the play more meaningful. In her memoir, \textit{An Unfinished Woman}, Hellman says:

\begin{quote}
It takes a searching wind to find the tree you sit in who can tell what side you are on if you don’t know your own mind?\footnote{Lillian Hellman, \textit{An Unfinished Woman} (Boston: Little, Brown, 1969), p.12.}
\end{quote}

In the memoir, this sentence is applied to upper class liberal attitudes towards racism.

To conclude, \textit{The Searching Wind} is a highly provocative play of the season. Unlike Hellman’s other great plays -- \textit{The Children’s Hour}, \textit{The Little Foxes}, and \textit{Watch on the Rhine} -- \textit{The Searching Wind} is not predominantly taut and intense. Its span is long and its world spacious. Hellman has pitched a handful of lives into the swirling history of our age. It also delves into the psyche of the young generation which has the moral responsibility, for the sake of humanity, to put all the splintered pieces of the West and rebuild a more humane civilization. They are not responsible for the disaster and yet they have the task of redeeming the situation.

Hellman’s treatment of the liberal crisis is interesting since, despite many setbacks, she never questions the validity of her liberal views. The liberal characters remain shattered, but, at the same time, Hellman also creates other personal situations to make the play more effective. Although the play points to certain social circumstances of a particular stage in history, the universal situation makes \textit{The Searching Wind} timeless in its treatment of the human predicament.