CHAPTER IX

DESTRUCTIVE SPRINGS OF LOVE RELATIONSHIPS:

TOYS IN THE ATTIC
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**TOYS IN THE ATTIC**

If I did not hope to grow, I would not hope to live.

Lillian Hellman

*Toys in the Attic* (1960) is Hellman's last original play which is most textured and complex. We may also say that it is Hellman's most Freudian and mordant play. It ran for 556 performances, second only in popularity to *The Children's Hour*. It won the Drama Critics Circle Award for the best American play of the season. Small wonder if many of the critics wrote enthusiastic reviews for *Toys in the Attic*, calling it 'vivid' and 'vigorous.' It is less Chekhovian than *The Autumn Garden* and more like the earlier Hellman full of mystery and melodrama. Regarded by many critics as Hellman's finest work, *Toys in the Attic* achieves the magnitude and human revelation that have always been the mark of serious drama. It reflects the influence of Tennesse Williams's psychosexual dramatic terrain. It is a play that expresses a sympathy for its damaged characters which had hardly characterized her previous work.

*Toys in the Attic* is about two things -- the effect of money on people's lives and illusions, and the destructive springs which run under the surface of love relationships. As in *The Autumn Garden*, Hellman has moved to a consideration of more private, intimate concerns, human emotions and motifs than materialism,
secularism and amorality. She has advanced from human greed to human need which is a far more universalized theme than that found in her earlier works. If Hellman dramatizes the effects of wealth on the strong, in the Hubbard Plays, she portrays its impact on the weak - a wastrel brother and his doting sisters in *Toys in the Attic*. The Berniers of *Toys in the Attic*, like the Hubbards hanker for worldly comforts, but they are driven by love not by avarice and greed.

*Toys in the Attic* is a play about a man, who deliberately squanders his fortune when he discovers his family's resentment to his new found wealth. Hellman clearly defines the universal theme that man enjoys dreaming of the unattainable but, once the goal is within reach, he finds it less desirable.

The play engages the individual psychologies of characters whose failure to understand themselves is the origin of their pain. Instead of presenting straightforward relationships of love or domination, she examines ambivalent ones of mutual dependency. It illuminates the injuries that people with time's help inflict upon each other in the name of security and love. Like the sad dreamers in *The Autumn Garden* they are bound in a web of self-deception. The theme of the play thus relates the ideas presented in *The Autumn Garden* and repeats the motifs of human futility. But, at the same time, *Toys in the Attic* presents a fuller examination of the notion that individuals fashion their destinies by the accumulation of their acts and that dreams, which are inconsistent with these acts, are merely self-deceiving. Gradually the
characters come to varying degrees of awareness of their self-delusions and go on their way with little hope for any future change.

Set in New Orleans, *Toys in the Attic* revolves around the obsessive and destructive relationship between spinster sisters - Arna and Carrie and their younger brother, Julian Berniers, whose sudden wealth and marriage to Lily threaten their domination of him. The scene is the Berniers home in New Orleans. Julian Berniers, an easygoing drifter, has been supported by his two doting spinster sisters. Julian, to the dismay of his sisters, had married a peculiar, immature young heiress, Lily Prine, whose mother, Albertine Prine, gave Julian ten thousand dollars as a wedding gift.

As the play opens, the Berniers sisters know Julian and Lily have returned to New Orleans from Chicago and think that he has probably lost his money. Julian brings Lily home and then showers Anna and Carrie with expensive gifts including two steamship tickets for Europe, a trip Anna and Carrie have always planned to take. Julian opens a large envelope filled with money and admits that he has been involved in a real estate deal and that half the cash is for his partner, whom he does not identify. Instead of being happy, Anna and Carrie are miserable for their happiness has always depended upon Julian’s need for them.

Mrs. Albertine Prine, Lily’s mother, has an affair with a Negro, Henry, whom Carrie calls Mrs. Prine’s ‘fancy man,’ and who poses sometimes as her chauffeur,
other times as her butler. Lily confesses to her mother that she had been happier after Julian had spent their wedding money and they were poor.

Bit by bit, the audience learns the details of the business deal. Julian has had an affair with a Mrs. Charlotte Warkins, whose husband believes that she is white. Julian, however, has known that she is part coloured and is Henry’s cousin. To escape from her husband, who has treated her brutally, Mrs. Warkins has helped Julian to buy land which Mr. Warkins wanted. Julian has then resold the property to Mr. Warkins for a high profit, and Mrs. Warkins plans to use her share of the money to escape from her husband.

The knowledge of Julian’s past sexual relationship with Charlotte Warkins throws Carrie into a frenzy and heightens Lily’s hysteria. Carrie over-hears Mrs. Prine and Henry discussing the business deal of Julian and Charlotte and after they leave she begins railing at Anna until Anna finally accuses Carrie of being vindictive because she has always had an incestuous desire for her brother. Carrie’s feelings turn into hatred for her sister when Anna makes Carrie face the truth of her behaviour. She says:

You want to sleep with him and always have.¹


All further references are to this edition and the page numbers are given parenthetically at the end of the quotations.
Much infuriated, Carrie quarrels with Anna, who decides she will go alone on trip to Europe.

Lily’s wild jealousy is intensified by the fact that Julian has been impotent since they have been in his sister’s house. Whatever may be the clinical cause, Julian thinks that the emasculating presence of his sisters in the house is only a temporary condition. He loves Lily, who had never threatened his manhood, and thinks that all will be well when he and Lily have gone away together, the house has been sold, and his sisters dispatched abroad. He goes happily off to wind up the transaction to meet Charlotte and give her, her share of the money.

Carrie and Lily, who are left behind, are apprehensive. Lily feels that Julian may not come back to her at all. And Carrie thinks that he will leave with Lily. Anna determines that she will go to Europe without Carrie and makes her exit to pack. In the tense scene that follows, Carrie still vehement, satisfies her jealousy by allowing Lily to believe - without actually saying so - that Julian married her for her money and will now leave her for Charlotte. With pathetic, childlike reasoning, Lily decides to beg Charlotte to give her one more year with Julian, and if he still loves Charlotte, after that she can have him. Carrie stands by while Lily telephones Cyrus Warkins to ask him to give her message to Charlotte. Lily reveals the whole story including the fact that Charlotte is of mixed blood. Carrie is silent except to supply the crucial information that Julian and Charlotte are now meeting at Sailor’s lane near the depot.
Warkins sends his men there, and they slash Charlotte on her face and beat Julian and
snatches away the money. Julian limps home in a state of collapse. All his new-found
confidence is gone. He cannot understand how he could have 'assed up' this simple
deal.

Hellman distances us from the final scene because we have known about Lily's
call to Warkins and because we are more interested in the effect of the beating on the
other characters. Carrie is so happy that Julian says:

Why you start to purr at me? (785)

Albertine knows that Carrie will tell Julian that Lily telephoned Warkins and she tells
Carrie to let her know first so that she can come for Lily. Henry had already said that
he would not be there if that day comes.

The curtain closes on Anna, who has been ready to make a definitive break
with Carrie, picking up her valise to bring it back inside. Carrie has just bustled
happily off to the store to get the ingredients for soup for Julian, who has 'always
liked' soup. Carrie's parting line is Scarlett 'O Hara's:

Tommorow's another day. (786).

The conclusion of the play reveals that there is a profound pathos as well as
an ironic judgement of petty lives in the misunderstandings and entanglements that
produce the catastrophe. A man's life is ruined by his overprotective spinster sisters one of whom has desired him incestuously. And the catastrophe that results in his disfigurement is brought about by his frantically jealous child-wife, who also wrecks her mother's life.

Hellman places the burden of evil on Lily as well as on Carrie, just as she does on all of the moral weaklings in her plays. Her judgement is summed up in the speech which Albertine considers to be her "good-bye present" to Lily:

The pure and the innocent often bring harm to themselves and those they love and, when they do, for some reason that I do not know, the injury is very great. (782)

There is plenty of 'love' in the play, but love is destructive when the giver and the recipient fail to understand its nature and their natures. And money is destructive when it forces the characters out of their comfortable, familiar life-lies, lies begun in their childhood, their origins forgotten like toys in an attic, but still subconsciously directing their behaviour. Money is the catalyst that alters the chain of human relationships because it forces the sisters to face the truth. They have always told themselves and Julian that life would have been different had they had money. But when once money comes to them, they face the truth of their real feelings.

Revelation of truth, which Hellman shows, is not always good and sometimes it is even ugly. It is this telling of the truth of Lily which causes her husband's injuries. It is this truth, which Anna tells Carrie, about her incestuous behaviour
towards Julian, arouses Carrie’s anger. This is the reason why Albertine advises her daughter Lily not to tell the truth of her betrayal:

Can you have enough pity for him not to kill him with the truth. (785)

But like O’Neill’s *The Iceman Cometh, Toys in the Attic* is finally less concerned with debating the relative value of truth and illusion than with assenting the central need for compassion.

*Toys in the Attic* is a three-act play tightly constructed covering less than twenty-four hours. Like Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* it is the only play of Hellman which follows the dramatic unities. It is constructed with all the rigidity and tensile strength of a steel girder. Nothing is superfluous. Every gesture contributes to the central action. Even the props, sets, and costumes have an illustrative function. The characters are enmeshed together like the threads in a tapestry and the literate dialogue - even when it seems to wander - is always secretly rolling towards the inevitable catastrophe.

In the first act of the play, Hellman makes something of a mystery of how Julian contrives to become rich. The suspense is there until it reaches calamity in the second act. At the end of the second act, Hellman gets around more quickly in exposing the twisted nature of Carrie’s devotion for her handsome brother, and the reasons for Anna’s austere awareness of how a household survives by protective deception.
The play progresses steadily to its conclusion. A series of schemes, psychological abnormalities, sexual alliances and psychic experiences constitute the structure. The action of the play actually develops towards Carrie's recognition of her unspoken desires. The recognition comes in the crisis at the end of the second act when Anna confronts Carrie with her incestuous desire for Julian. The climax of the play is the accomplishment of Julian's ruin.

Although, *Toys in the Attic* is a great success on the stage, as literature it appears to be too incomplete and elliptical on its own - without the knowledge of The Memoirs --- *Pentimento* and *An Unfinished Woman*. This accounts for contradictory judgements of the play to which D.V.Falk rightly draws our attention.² Some critics think that the first two acts are over-plotted whereas others say that they are dragged and nothing happens until act three.

However, critics like John Gassner and Richard Watts have positively responded to the ingenuity of the plot. The first act is undoubtedly somewhat slow and meandering, but as Gassner rightly points out, "Hellman has prepared us suspensively with this act for the mounting passions and the tightly coiled spring of doom to be found in the rest of the play."³ Yet another virtue of this sort of deliberate opening

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of the play is that "by the time you are faced with the secret horrors seething within them, you feel you know so much about all the characters that there is something inherently dramatic in the discovery that what you have seen is nothing more than 'their surfaces."

One more reservation raised about the play by Kenneth Tynan is "The trouble with Toys in the Attic is that it changes horses in midstream. It starts out as an inquiry into the moral consequences of wealth and ends up as a treatise on abnormal psychology. The more the focus narrows, the more the governing theme gets blurred." But, this criticism "indicates a misunderstanding of the play's true theme. Subject matter and plot are not necessarily to be identical with the theme, as one sees in an analysis of Toys in the Attic." However, Richard Moody's view of Heilman's theme is more appropriate in defending Tynan's allegation. As he explains, "Heilman is less concerned with stirring our human sympathies than in exposing the quality of life as she saw it, in showing us the destructive powers of love, showing us that well-meaning souls can often inflict more harm than those possessed with evil."

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5 Kenneth Tynan, New Yorker, March 5, 1960, p.117.
Toys in the Attic is to be appreciated not only for its skilful plot construction but also for its superb art of characterization. After a sequence of plays in which character had been forced to serve symbolic purposes, Toys in the Attic engages the individual psychologies of characters whose failure to understand themselves is the origin of much of their pain. Like those in The Autumn Garden, the characters in Toys in the Attic muddle their way towards a kind of self-insight, but the truth about them turns out to be bizarre and the plot ends with a violent climax. In contrast to Hellman's active villains like the Hubbards and heroes like Kurt Muller, these characters are 'bystanders,' who do not intend evil or opposition to evil. They are hungry only for love, and their need for it, sometimes confused with the need for money, accomplishes their fate.

Always sharp at characterization, Hellman, in Toys in the Attic has become more probing and wideranging about character. She seeks to expose the weaknesses of her characters in picturing their neurotic behaviour - the jealousy of the sisters, the sadistic trickery of the brother and the deranged helplessness of his bride. But, the characters are original creations. They may not be lovable. They are believable and brutally alive. We may not find comfort in their company, but we are fascinated by their pathetic neurotic lives. We may never stake a full emotional investment in them. Yet, we can never turn our eyes away from them.
When the individual characters are examined, we notice that Hellman uses a character contrast in the two sisters - Anna and Carrie. Carrie is a romantic who lives in her dreams. But Anna is a realist who is quiet and resigned to her life. What they have in common is their love for their brother, Julian. Lily, the child-heiress wife of Julian, brings the catastrophe to the plays in her love to Julian. Mrs. Albertine and her companion, Henry, are mysterious figures who seem to know everything about the characters and the situation, but do not function within the plot. Like the chorus, they are intended to act as commentators.

Anna, the elder sister is more stoic and self-sacrificing than Carrie, the younger sister. The opening scene between Anna and Carrie gives a picture of the futility of their life and their meagre existence. Anna, the more sensible and honest of the two sisters, knows the fact that they have always lived for Julian. Anna, the most sympathetic character, though caught in her own self-sacrifice, expresses a clear insight into her own life. She is quiet, placid and is resigned to her life which is living for Julian as she herself declares to him: "You are our life." (736) Hellman's description of Anna as "a nice-looking woman, calm and quiet" (717) fits her temperament. When Julian showers Anna with expensive gifts she is not happy, for her happiness has always depended on Julian's need for her. She is a stereotyped woman, whose life revolves round her loved ones. Anna is like a beacon of hope to Julian in the dark hours of his crisis.
Anna is the surrogate mother of Julian and Carrie to whom they turn for comfort and consolation. Sometimes, she wonders at her multiple role as mother and sister, as the bread-winner and servant of the household. At one such moment, she voices her opinion loudly:

I am a woman who has no place to go but I am going and after a while I’ll ask myself why I took my mother’s two children to be my own. (781)

Her love to Julian is so intense and deep that she is yearning to play the role of a grandmother.

I wanted to be around the children he will have. I wanted something nice to grow old for, I hold onto that and prayed for it. (771)

But, her love for her brother is not self-demanding. It is the kind of love which makes both happy, the giver as well as the receiver.

Anna’s sacrificial nature is evident in her strong sense of morality which overrides her personal wants. When she senses that Julian is in trouble, she is ready to help him, forgetting all her cherished dreams of going to Europe. She never complains and is never critical. She is always submissive and yielding. When Carrie finds faults with Julian for paying off the mortgage of the house which they hated, she supports Julian. Being angelic and kind she is happy when everybody seeks her help, including Lily.

To the confused Lily who is not sure of her husband’s love, Anna gives the solace and comfort she needs:
A woman who marries a man she loves should have a little more happiness from it and talk a little more sense. (772)

Anna is a realist who faces all the calamities boldly. The two sisters have self-revealing monologue and on one such occasion, Anna confronts Carrie with the bitter truth of her incestuous love for Julian:

Don't know what's the matter don't you? You want him and always have. Years ago I used to be frightened and I would watch you and suffer for you. (766)

Throughout her life, Anna suffers, not for herself, but for her beloved brother and sister. Though Carrie gives the picture of the 'frail, the flutter, the soft, it is Anna who fits in the description. It is Carrie who dominates her and Anna knows that Carrie has made her acquaintance at the office only to make them think that she controls Carrie's life. It is as if Carrie has created a role for Anna which she insists that Anna should play. Anna is a mere puppet in the hands of Carrie who is very dominating.

Anna is a quiet woman who finds salvation in life by living for others. Yet, in one rare moment her regrets at having wasted her life for the sake of her brother dawns on her:

The leaf came in the spring stayed nice on the branch until the winds would come to blow it in the snow. Mama said that in the little time of holding on, a woman had to make ready for the winter ground where she would lie the rest of her life. A leaf cannot rise from the ground and go back to the tree, remember that. I remembered it. But when it came, there was nothing I could. (769).
The play ends as Anna picking up her valise brings it back inside after cancelling the trip. Anna is once again back to her role of playing mother to the spoiled children, Carrie and Julian. According to Gassner she has "a truly gratifying role as the older sister who combines an affectionate nature with a forbidding exteriors."  

Carrie, the younger sister of Julian, is described by Hellman as a woman of thirty-eight, still pretty but the prettiness is wearing thin and tired. Like Anna, she too loves her brother Julian, but unlike Anna, she wants her brother's entire love to her only and she cannot imagine the scene of Julian's independence and caring for others.

Carrie is a repressed woman, who by her childish desire to be pampered by Julian, becomes demonically possessive of him. She complains that he no longer pays attention to her since his marriage. She is hurt when his gifts seem inappropriate even though he bestows on her everything she claims she has always wanted -- the mortgage to the house, a new piano, a trip to Europe. Her obsession has developed sub-consciously to the point of incest. When Anna is driven to telling her of this abnormality she refuses to listen, but seeks devastating revenge. She renounces her love for her sister and cruelly informs Lily of Julian's past relationships with other women. Her intention is to destroy Julian's marriage and bring him back to her alone. But, the implications of her actions are more extensive than she knows. She destroys

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8 John Gassner, *Dramatic Soundings*, p.483.
the illusory basis of her life with Anna and reinforces Julian's status as a dependent failure.

The germ of the character of Carrie is in Hellman's Cora in *Days to Come*. Carrie wants to wake up and find that it is 'years ago.' She wants to be able to go back to the 'secret place' with Julian, where the children got away from the grown-ups, that is, from reality. She wants to repeat all the rituals developed in childhood when she says to Julian:

I can still jump, shall I jump and you will catch me. (730)

Carrie cannot accept Julian's having sexual relations with any woman, perhaps not so much because she wants him for herself but because the act makes Julian a man, not a boy. Carrie is willing to destroy Julian - the human being to preserve her Julian-in-Never-never-land.

Although, Julian's life is ruined by Carrie, we cannot label Carrie as a 'destroyer' or a 'villain.' Hellman reveals that Carrie's fears about Julian's freedom are the forces which motivate her self-centered actions like jealousy towards Lily and other women. The expression of her fears forces her to discover that she and Anna have locked themselves away from the world, perhaps, because they were frightened of saying or hearing more than they could stand. Hellman herself is in sympathy with Carrie's desperation, when she makes Carrie cry:
There are lives that are shut and should stay shut, you hear me, and people who should not talk about themselves, and that was us. (773).

The uncontrovertible truth of Carrie is that she cannot change. She will not learn how to deal with her fears from this one episode in her life. As Hellman's vision of human behaviour allows, Carrie will remain as she is, finding other ways to carry on the pattern of her unrealized life. She resists the pattern of deception in the last speeches of the play after Julian has been beaten and Anna returns. She rejoices saying:

Let's be glad, nothing worse has happened. We're together, the three of us, that's all that matters. (786)

Carrie seems to be almost a neurotic. Although Carrie's desperation leads to the grim and final downfall of her brother, the misfortune she precipitates, however, is not a result of pre-determined malefaction on her part, but comes from a blind compulsion to protect her own neurotic needs. In fact, the real villians of the play are love, in its most selfish aspects, and the human weakness to allow the need for it to consume others.

Allan Downer sums up her character when he says that Carrie is no capitalist dragon, no Satan lusting for revenge, no more incestuous than Ferdinand of The Duchess of Malfi. Nevertheless she too is a victim. "She is what evil must always be the other side of good, tragic because she cannot know of her enslavement, because
she can never have the opportunity to escape. She is the most memorable figure of a memorable work."9

The next important character in *Toys in the Attic* is Julian Berniers, the brother of Carrie and Anna. He is a good-looking young man who has been raised by his two doting older sisters. After several business failures, Julian marries Lily Prine, a rich young girl, whose mother, Albertine Prine, has given them $10,000 as a wedding gift. The couple moves to Chicago and Julian invests the money in a shoe factory, which like his previous ventures, fails. But he returns to New Orleans mysteriously wealthy, carrying $150,000 on his person. He and Lily arrive at the sisters’ home laden with gifts. Julian is still a little boy with a little boy’s dreams of making his big sisters proud of him. Julian is now in command. He has even taken it upon himself to write letters of resignation to his sisters’ employers. Like Nick Denery in *The Autumn Garden*, he has something of the meddling do-gooder in him -- another weak man married to a rich wife.

Julian’s money, with his new independence, threatens to undermine the lives of all the women who claim to love him. Carrie, along with Lily bring the calamity in his life by informing Mr.Warkins of Julian and Mrs.Warkins meeting in a park. Fully beaten by Mr.Warkins’ people, Julian returns home bleeding and broken. Julian,

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after being brutally beaten and robbed as a result of Carrie's manipulations to hold onto him, eventually recognizes that he will always be weak and dependent.

Though we feel sorry to see Julian's toys shattered, our moral sensibilities are not really shocked. As Allan Downer rightly observes and succinctly puts it, "it is not that, like the hero of Death of a Salesman he had dreamed the wrong dream, that his values had been corrupted by a materialistic society. It is not that, like the heroes of whom Miller complains, he is the inadequate male who must yield to the all-powerful female. His life is shattered by a force unknown to the artist-sociologist or the artist-psychologist, by a force known only to the artist-moralist, the force of evil."10

Another fascinating character is Lily, the child wife of Julian. She is chronologically twenty-one, but mentally and emotionally about twelve. She is torn between satisfaction in the knowledge that her money had originally made Julian dependent on her, and fear that he might have wanted only her money. The thought that her mother might have sold her to Julian to get rid of her is intolerable, second only to her fear of losing him. Sometimes, she sounds like Hellman's Joan of Arc remembering her moments of glory. Lily is in a state of near hysteria throughout the play never knowing where she extends with either her mother or her husband. Her terror and her fanatical attempt to discover what she calls 'truth' accidentally bring about the catastrophe at the end of the play.

10 Allan. S. Downer, Ibid., pp.41-42.
The next important character in the play is Albertine Prine, the wealthy but recluse mother of Lily. She is emotionally detached from her daughter yet engrossed in a love affair with her Negro Chauffeur, Henry Simpson. She always finds her daughter a nuisance. In an interview, Hellman explains that "Albertine is a very rich lady, she’s always wanted to get rid of her daughter... So the marriage has delighted her. And she’s the only one who feels sort of sorry for this poor bastard (Julian) and she’d like to see him keep the money and keep the girl for that matter." A reviewer calls Albertine a character without a history. Along with Anna, she has the most literate, ironic, perceptive dialogue in the play. She seems to function primarily as a choral character, almost at times as a persona for Hellman when she says:

But I have bad news for you Julian - it’s not simple being happy, and money doesn’t seem to have much to do with it, although it has to do with other things more serious.(759)

Using another favourite Hellman phrase ‘in space,’ Albertine says to Lily "you have been saying you are sorry in space, for many years," (748) meaning without purpose or commitment. In the end, Albertine is clever enough to request Carrie, to inform her, before Carrie reveals to Julian about Lily’s phone call, so that she can come and take her daughter, Lily back to her home.

Henry, Albertine’s lover, is perhaps the most shadowy and yet the most complex character. He is almost too worldly, too dignified to be content to live in

New Orleans or to be self-effacing when he poses as Albertine’s chauffeur. In climactic scenes, however, Hellman emphasizes Henry’s importance to the plot. His knowledge of the Negro quarters enables him to recover Lily’s ring. When Mrs. Warkins is in danger, it is Henry whom Julian asks to help her. And it is Henry who tells Albertine that he must leave her home when Lily returns.

The next character, Mrs. Warkins, although never appears on the stage, Hellman makes her as real as any character on the stage. She is a woman whose hatred for an unscrupulous husband and desire to get away from him at all costs lead her into a shoddy scheme for mulcting him of a small fortune in exchange for a piece of swamp land he needs for one of his speculations. When we learn that she has been mutilated along with Julian by her racketeering husband’s henchmen because he has been led to believe she is running away with Julian as her lover, our pity for her can be as considerable as if we had always known her.

The characters in *Toys in the Attic* do not change, and as Carrie says to Lily, "There are lives that are shut and should stay shut... and people who should not talk about ourselves, and that was us." (773). Carrie as much a child as Lily, has made sure that Julian won’t grow up. Anna, who knows better, will be forced to go on playing mother to the spoiled children. Mrs. Prine, who in a sense had sought her own escape from the sunlight of reality, must take responsibility for her strange daughter. And so they will live unhappily even after.
All the characters of *Toys in the Attic* are based on real people. Readers of *Pentimento* and *An Unfinished Woman* know that the two sisters of *Toys in the Attic*, Anna and Carrie derive in part from Hellman’s aunts, Jenny and Hannah. The character of Julian is derived from Hellman’s father. Like Julian, Hellman’s father too failed in the shoe business because he was cheated by his partner. Hellman’s father is also partly dependent on her sisters, if not fully like Julian. And the character of Lily, whom she intended to be ‘not crazy but fey, and disjointed and sweet and lost, may be a little of Hellman as a girl, a little of her mother. "The panic stricken jealousy - the fear of losing love, the ambivalence toward money and its power, the simplistic, fanatical allegiance to what she called ‘truth’ - all were stages in Hellman’s own adolescence."¹² Mrs. Prine and her fancy man Henry are like Hellman’s Aunt Lily and her Chauffeur Peters. The memoirs contain other hints about other characters and situations in *Toys in the Attic*. We may say that many of them started out as toys in Hellman’s own attic.

Hellman in *Toys in the Attic* takes a fresh and realistic view of the tie that binds husband and wife, brother and sister, mother and child. Conventionally its name is love and its end security and respect for the individual. But Hellman’s dramatic method proceeds by balancing the opposing forces within a small group and by showing how the failure of an individual, a household group or a social set comes to reverberate throughout society. As a social thinker, moralist and a theatrical

playwright, Hellman is concerned with human hypocrisy and evil in *Toys in the Attic*. She suggests social criticism in the off-stage character of Cyrus Warkins, the respectable businessman who uses thugs to beat up Julian and Mrs. Warkins, although even Cyrus’ motivation may mix jealousy with outrage at being bestowed in a business deal. Hellman creates a society of desperate beings, destroyed by the myths and values of their society and by the passions which lead them to betray one another as well as to reach out across the social barriers.

The principal virtue of *Toys in the Attic* is Hellman’s use of irony. In order to show the harm wrought in the name of love by those who lack self-knowledge, Hellman uses the devices of irony witnessed in the earlier plays with an ever-deepening skill. An arrival precipitates a change in the lives of the characters. There are characters who pass judgement on themselves. Much more obviously than in earlier plays, characters function as a chorus. Again, like any other ironic play, the title is symbolic and there is no single protagonist.

There is irony in the dialogues of the characters. For example, Mrs.Prine is ironic in her speech. Her words carry weight because they are ironic and seem to convey Hellman’s ironic view of the other characters. Both the sisters, Anna and Carrie have self-revealing monologues, which are ironic.
Then, the irony of character comes, when in Carrie, Hellman gives us a character who assumes a role when dealing with others. We discover also that Anna and Carrie have reserved roles, or, perhaps more accurately that Carrie has created a role for Anna, which she insists that Anna play.

The dramatic irony arises from characters who have insights other characters lack and thus speak ironically. Told that Julian has paid off the mortgage on the house, Carrie says: "Didn't he know we hated this house, always, always, always?" (741) Anna replies, "You used to tell him how much we liked it, and the garden, and the street, and the memories of Mama and Papa." (741). To this Carrie replies, "you know very well I said all that to keep him from being ashamed of the house." (741) Albertine says to Julian when he complains that no one is happy about the money:

Nobody should have cried about your good fortune, nobody should have been anything but happy. (756)

At the end of the play, Julian still does not know who foiled his scheme. The audience, with its superior knowledge, knows that eventually he will find out and both sister and wife will lose him causing Albertine Prine in turn to lose Henry.

Hellman also employs 'boomerang irony' in the plot. 'Again the gods are just and of our pleasant vices make instruments to plague us.' Had Albertine not had her strange relationship with Henry, Carrie could not have learned that Mrs. Warkins was black. Had Lily not made her nightworld trip to the quarter when Julian couldn't have
sex with her, Henry and Albertine might have been around to prevent Carrie's manipulation of Lily instead of being of retrieving her ring. The most traumatic boomerang is Julian's return with the money, forcing the recognition from all his women that they preferred him poor.

Another element found in ironic drama, as we have seen, is the calm before the storm, the moment of false happiness before the catastrophe. In *Toys in the Attic*, not only is Julian's return with cancelled mortgage, new cloths and furniture and tickets to Europe a scene of false happiness in the usual ironic sense, we see the double irony that Julian is the only one made happy even at the moment, his women are dismayed. Julian is the agent of his own destruction. The gifts he brings, his new independence force the others to act to recreate the old order. Ironically, then, the scene that might close a traditional comedy-the prodigal never-do-well returns a success and they all live happily even after - is the beginning of the action in this play.

To enhance the dramatic effect, like in any other play of Hellman, she uses imagery in *Toys in the Attic* also. In this play, the setting South becomes less a place than an image. It becomes an apt expression of unrealized hopes and misdirected passions. The social and racial divisions underscore a natural gulf between people who are locked inside their own myths, dreams and memories. The action takes place in a decaying mansion. The characters are trapped by circumstance. Hellman's gothic
figures bear the marks of an experience of loss and failure. They cling together united by situation and a need which they dare not articulate. And these alliances generate the potential for pain and consolation alike.

Heilman's mastery of irony makes *Toys in the Attic* both character drama and a dark comedy. Some critics misunderstand the play to be melodramatic. The theatre review of the play, pointed out the weak points in the play, saying that "the play is melodramatic." Yet some more critics like Adler, said that "Heilman developed it as a fable about money, as startling as artificial, as theatrical, and as true as *The Pardoners Tale*. This is not merely an attempt at realism, which fails because of the artificiality. A fable does not have to apologize for artificiality... In *Toys in the Attic*, then, the genre is not problem play but fable and the technique is not realism but what might be called realism stylized." But, Heilman neither intended *Toys in the Attic* to be a fable nor a melodrama. Although, the play ends with a melodramatic beating and knifing, the play is realistic. As Lederer Katherine says, "*Toys in the Attic* is a dark comedy. Hellman is interested in how the characters react when their bluffs are called about their dreams for the future." 


As in *The Autumn Garden*, Hellman makes an attempt to go beyond the realistic form, and to write a novelistic play and accordingly *Toys in the Attic* is almost novelistic. It contains the descriptions of offstage events which could have been developed into full scenes. We are told about the way Julian and Lily lived in Chicago, about Julian's big scene with Warkins, and about the scene in sailor's Alley when Julian and Mrs. Warkins, are attached and robbed by Warkins' thugs. And in addition we are given descriptions of scenes from the past, important because they affect the present and are more real to Carrie, at least, than the actual present. Carrie and Julian eating on the back steps, Julian giving food to Gus, winning marbles from Gus, and being forced to return them, Anna's eye operation, Julian's wedding all these descriptions are fit to a novel.

It is interesting to draw some comparisons between Hellman's *Toys in the Attic* and Chekhov's *The Three Sisters*, Tennessee Williams's *Sweet Bird of Youth* and Lorriane Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*.

Hellman's story *Toys in the Attic* is out of Chekhov, bearing various resemblances to the story of *The Three Sisters* although she has made it her own. In an article entitled *Miss Hellman's Two Sisters*, Jacob Adler pointed out that Hellman has drawn much of the material for her play from Chekhov's saying "that while, Miss
Heilman possibly return to Ibsen's technique in *Toys in the Attic* her basic material comes from Chekhov's *The Three Sisters.*  

The broad outlines of the connection are clear enough. In both plays, we find unhappy sisters and a brother who is a failure. In both plays, the family is of genteel origin and the sisters live in the family home which they all own in common. In both plays, the brother marries, against the wishes of his sisters, a silly woman who increases the family's stock of unhappiness. In both plays, the sisters want, or think they want to go somewhere else-Moscow & Europe, and finally discover that they never will. In both plays, money is blamed for a good deal, but does not deserve all the blame. In both plays, an act of violence near the close return the situation to a state of more or less, equilibrium. Above all, both the plays convey the same meaning that in spite of moments of insight, the characters will continue as they were before because people are as they are, like Chekhov's Prozoroffs, ultimate irony for the Berniers of Hellman is that there is no where else for them to be but where they are. Hellman has learned from Chekhov's work to take no sides, urge no actions or attitudes as she portrayed the Bernier sisters in a situation similar to that of the Prozoroff sisters.

There are also two basic differences between these two plays. One is in the action of the plot. The action of *The Three Sisters,* covers a period of almost four

16 Jacob.H. Adler, "*Miss Hellman's Two Sisters,*" p.43.
years, whereas Hellman's *Toys in the Attic* is very tightly plotted and covers less than twenty four hours. The other contrast is in the characters of both the plays. While in neither play, do the characters want what they think they want, or even get it, in *Toys in the Attic* they come to realize the truth and in the *The Three Sisters* they do not. It seems possible to say that "Miss Hellman takes a story from Chekhov in order to help herself toward qualities which have clearly not been easy for her to achieve - sympathy, objectivity and universal truth."17

Although, Hellman strives for a Chekhovian complex of frustrated and unhappy people, her use of violence and sexuality brings her closer to Tennesse Williams. "*Toys in the Attic* also strays some distance into Tennesse William's territory."18 With its portrait of a woman kept in thrall by her rich gangster or businessman husband, of two sisters who live a life dominated by the past, of a mentally damaged but sexually liberated young girl and of a man whose battle for success is constantly thwarted, it is close in spirit to *Sweet Bird of Youth*.

*Toys in the Attic* and Lonaine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* have one basic plot similarity - business deals that result in a loss of money. Mr. Warkins hires hooligans to rob Julian of his fortune. Walter Lee Younger in *A Raisin in the Sun*

17 Jacob. H. Adler, Ibid., p.49.

enters into a business deal with a shiftless character who absconds with the Youngers' insurance money. Both plays also involve dreams that come true, but the treatment of the theme differs. Hellman's characters are more content when their dreams are unattainable. Hansberry's characters are discontented until their dreams become reality.

There is also a Brechtian touch when Julian almost discovers the true nature of Carrie's love for him and then subsides into defeat and ignorance, as if his own inner self didn't want the insecurity and trouble that would result from facing the true nature of his predicament. This may be how it usually happens in life, but truthfulness's gain is drama's loss.

*Toys in the Attic* is one of Hellman's most hard-driving plays. Among her earlier works, only *The Little Foxes*, her masterpiece of the strenuous thirties, possesses as much penetration and dramatic vitality. In *Toys in the Attic* Hellman has dealt with a number of unlovely or painful states of being, from incest to miscegenation and to retardation. It is a play about the failure of growth through a failure to change, a dark and despairing playground on which eternal children wither and die. The play binds us to it with a cold, serpentine grace that is born of a clear head, a level eye and a fierce respect for the unchanging color of the precisely used word.
Although Hellman’s corresponding view of life is ironic and is trenchantly expressed, there is no gloating over human misery, no horror-mongering, no traffic with sensationalism in Toys in the Attic. And, unlike some well-known contemporary playwrights, Hellman has proved that she can deal with human failure without falling in love with it herself. She remains admirably same in the midst of the ugliness and confusion she so unerringly exposes.

Small wonder, therefore, if Toys in the Attic has proved to be distinctly superior to the other new plays of the 1959-60. The decisive factors that give the play its superiority are many. Hellman displays controlled artistry in this work. It contains excellent dialogue with vigour and virtuosity, incisive characterization and above all, a mature understanding of human attitudes, relationships and drives.

Thus, a close study of Toys in the Attic reveals that Hellman’s talents - her talent for original characterizations, her hard-headed knowledge of the intricacies of human relationships and her realism about the meanings of life reap their rewards. Furthermore, Hellman "marshals her dramatic powers, tempers the melodramatic excesses, enriches her characters with a luminous, if neurotic, humanity and binds them tightly and irrevocably to their destructive course."¹⁹ Thus, Hellman is able to combine all her earlier strengths with compassion, truth, detachment and dramatic

power. It would be in fitness of things to conclude with Hellman’s own view of the play:

I guess that’s what the play says, too, to live by your own standards, even if you’re going to be lonely and unpopular.20