PREFACE

Hellman’s dramatic work has been generally approached as ‘well-made play,’ ‘melodrama’ and drama of ‘social protest’. If some critics like Eric Bentley give her plays a political label, other critics like Kimball King offer a Freudian interpretation. But, one can hope to gain a fuller appreciation of Hellman’s plays by approaching them from a moral point of view. For, Hellman’s vision, in the final analysis, seems to be rather moral than social, political, or psychological.

The aim of the present thesis is to make a close study of Lillian Hellman’s plays, with a view to showing that she is a playwright with a deep moral concern. Hellman is strongly moral and she writes with a sense of righteous indignation. She is greatly concerned with evil in society. Her plays explore the corruptive nature of evil and the decay of morally deficient characters. With a highly moral view, she interprets both action and failure in terms of good and evil.

The thesis is divided into ten chapters based on Hellman’s eight original plays. The introductory chapter seeks to show how Hellman emerged as a bright star in the cloudy horizons of the Great Depression, with an overwhelming preoccupation with social issues like Ibsen. It is discussed how Hellman, like the major dramatists of the period -- Lawson, Rice, Anderson and Odets -- is concerned with the political and social issues raised by the Depression and the rise of fascism. It is revealed how
Heilman was influenced by great dramatists like Ibsen, Brecht and Chekhov, to shape herself as a committed playwright, pre-eminently concerned with the moral implications of drama.

The second chapter deals with *The Children's Hour* (1934) in which two headmistresses of a Scottish girls academy are falsely accused by a student of homosexual activity. It is shown how the play, which shocked many with its almost forbidden theme, is not about lesbianism, but about a lie. It is revealed that the play is at once an engrossing drama and a serious study of abnormal psychology, demonstrating as it does the playwright's ability to weave tough-minded expressions of liberal social attitudes into a suspenseful plot.

The third chapter is concerned with Hellman's second play, *Days to Come* (1936), in which she unsuccessfully attempts to incorporate themes regarding the evolving character of labour unions and the conflicts between members of family. The play presents a family of more or less well-intentioned Americans confronted by the problem of dealing with organised labour when their employees undertake a strike. The significance of the play lies in Hellman attempting to develop a theme common to all her plays that the world we live in is the sum total of the acts of each individual in it.
The fourth chapter is devoted to *The Little Foxes* (1938) which depicts greed and sibling rivalry among members of the affluent Hubbard family who seek to expand their wealth by exploiting the cheap labour force available in their community. With its scathing criticism of the vindictiveness and rapacity of bourgeois society, the play is concerned with social degradation and moral decay as inescapable consequences of the inordinate appetite for money and power.

The fifth chapter is about *Watch on the Rhine* (1940) which centres upon a family involved in the anti-Nazi movement. It is a vital, eloquent and compassionate play about an American family suddenly awakened to the danger threatening their liberty. The play asserts the necessity of struggle against both evil and the passivity of bystanders.

The sixth chapter concerns itself with *The Searching Wind* (1944) in which 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 Mussolini and Hitler. It is shown how the play is reminiscent of *Days to Come*, making the point that the world is the sum total of each person's personal actions.

The seventh chapter pertains to *Another Part of the Forest* (1947) in which Hellman returns to the Hubbard family, twenty years prior to the action of *The Little Foxes*, in order to trace the origins of their obsession with money and power. Though
the play is not as successful as *The Little Foxes*, it is important for Hellman's fresh insights into the sources of human behaviour.

The eighth chapter relates itself to *The Autumn Garden* (1951) which presents a group of middle-aged individuals, vacationing on the gulf of Mexico, who discover the ramifications of the decisions and compromises they have made. It is revealed how as an unusually introspective work in Hellman's canon, the play draws comparisons to the works of Chekhov for its emphasis on characterization and dialogue.

The ninth chapter deals with *Toys in the Attic* (1960) which is a Southern Gothic piece revolving around the obsessive and destructive relationship between spinster sisters and their younger brother whose sudden wealth and marriage threaten their domination of him. It is shown how Hellman's mastery of irony makes *Toys in the Attic* both character drama and dark comedy, as it combines all of her earlier virtues as a dramatist with compassion, truth, detachment and tremendous dramatic power.

While offering a summing up of the main argument of the thesis, an attempt is made in the concluding chapter to assess the achievement of Lillian Hellman as a dramatist, highlighting her significant contribution to the development of social drama in the American theatre.
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