CHAPTER II

INTERPLAY OF GOOD AND EVIL:

THE CHILDREN’S HOUR
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Between the dark and the daylight,
when the night is beginning to lower,
comes a pause in the day’s occupations,
that is known as the Children’s Hour.

- Longfellow

Taking its title from Longfellow’s poem, The Children’s Hour (1934) dramatises an evil quality in people. It is based on an actual British Court Case in which two headmistresses of a Scottish Girls’ Academy were falsely accused of homosexual activity by a student. The play shocked many with its almost forbidden theme, but suggested very clearly the bold quality of Hellman’s approach to drama. It is neither a lesbian play nor even a play about lesbianism as some critics think. As Hellman herself states, the play is really about a lie, "the bigger the lie, the better as always."¹

Although Hellman contends that the theme of The Children’s Hour is not lesbianism, it is unconventional enough to cause a stir among the moralists.² What


² Historically speaking lesbianism is hardly revolutionary on the stage. Homosexuality had been portrayed in the Renaissance English drama and it appeared on the modern American stage in about 1920. The best known play on lesbianism was The Captive (1926), a translation from the French, of Edouard Bourdet.
Hellman does in the play is to challenge the conventions of a society that destroy those who deviate from its sexual mores. In writing *The Children's Hour*, Hellman could have been influenced by other plays on the subject such as *These Days* by Katherine Clugston which deals with life in a girls' boarding school and an adaptation of Christa Winsloe's German play, *Girls in Uniform* (produced in 1933) just one year before *The Childrens Hour*.

The theme of *The Children's Hour*, as the author herself tells us is "good and evil"\(^3\) though some critics contend that the play is concerned with evil only. For instance, Barret H. Clark says:

> Rather I believe evil alone, the evil here as in the character of 'Iago' is a kind of unattached and almost meaningless power. It is like a phenomenon of nature, which cannot be eradicated, hardly perhaps even dealt with.\(^4\)

The terms, good and evil, however, do not apply to the theme of homosexuality but to that of destructive scandal-mongering 'the smear and the big lie,' and simultaneously to "the power of the old and rich to rob, to despoil others of livelihood and life."\(^5\)

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Hellman is concerned with the universal problem of human evils, gossip and scandal mongering\(^6\) which cause unjust punishment. The theme is supported by the revelation of the shocking power of gossip and the diseased nature of evil. The upright people of the world are disclosed as foolish tragically blundering because of their own self-righteousness and ignorance. As Judith Olauson comments:

The ascendance of the wickedness which springs from the lie of the child is weighed against the descending capacity for the truth to survive. With relentless momentum, deception outbalances truth and the irreparable damage is done to the two main characters.\(^7\)

*The Children's Hour* is both an engrossing drama and a serious study of abnormal psychology. It demonstrates the playwright’s ability to weave tough-minded expressions of liberal social attitudes into a suspenseful plot. It is not primarily a play about the power of society to enforce its normal norms. It is more concerned with the destructive effects of insisting on one’s innocence at all costs.

*The Children's Hour* is in many ways, Hellman’s atypical play. It is set in and around a Country Boarding School for girls run by two friends - Karen Wright and Martha Dobie who, after years of hard work and sacrifice, have managed to bring the

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\(^6\) Gossip and its handmaiden scandal have been fascinating themes in drama since the seventeenth century when Shakespeare sent ‘Iago’ in *Othello* about his baleful whispering business to profit of the box office. Sheridan in the eighteenth century with his *The School for Scandal* was followed by Goldoni with his *Women’s Gossip*. Echegaray in the nineteenth century with his *El Gram Galeoto* (*The World and His Wife* in the later local adaptation). Lady Gregory in the early twentieth century with her *Spreading the News* and later various other playwrights dealt with the subject.

school to a sound financial footing. One of the students, Mary Tilford, creates a lie and wrecks the lives of the two headmistresses. In an attempt to attract attention, she convinces her grandmother, Amelia Tilford, the main financial backer of the school, that the two teachers - Martha and Karen - are lovers. She also coerces her classmate, Rosaile, to back up her accusation. Mary’s chief evidence rests on an over-heard conversation between Martha and her aunt, Lily Mortar, during which the pending marriage between Karen and Joe Cardin, Mrs. Tilford’s nephew, is discussed. Lilly Mortar, a narrow-minded aunt of Martha, is dependent on her. And Martha tolerates her for economic reasons as a teacher in the school. Conscious of her aunt’s unfitness, Martha informs her that she must leave the school. The aunt blames Martha’s action on the grounds that Dr. Joe Cardin, Karen’s fiance, is in the house at the moment. She says:

I know what I know. Everytime that man comes into the house, you have a fit. It seems like you just can’t stand the idea of them being together. God knows what you’ll do when they get married. You’re jealous of him that’s what it is... And it’s unnatural just as unnatural as it can be...you were always like that even as a child. If you had a little girl friend you always got mad when she likes anybody else...

Startled by a noise at the door, Martha discovers some eavesdropping girls, who promptly report what they have over-heard to Mary. To the astounded question of her classmates:

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*Lillian Hellman, "The Children's Hour" The Collected Plays (Boston-Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1971), pp.18-19. All further references are to this edition and the page numbers are given parenthetically at the end of the quotations.*
what are you going to tell your grandmother?

Mary replies:

Oh! I’ll think of something to tell her. (26)

And we have little doubt at that time that she will create a story of lesbianism about her teachers. But Mary, out of context of the over-heard conversation, persuades her grandmother not only to remove her from the school but also to withdraw her financial support, thus bankrupting and closing it.

Hardened by the ignorant repulsions of millions like her, Mrs.Tilford is incapable not only of the shadow of doubt but also of the shadow of pity. Overcome with disgust, she telephones the shocking news to all the mothers she can reach, so that they may hurry their daughters away from the school. All her previous knowledge of the two admirable young women is at once blotted out by the mention of what to her uniformed mind is unpardonable moral depravity. Karen and Martha appear incredulous and together with the doctor they insist on questioning Mary. And when Mary’s story is finally shaken, she shrieks that it was another girl who saw them. As the girl has been previously terrorized by Mary’s threats, she corroborates Mary’s vindictive lies. But, determined to be cleared publicly Martha and Karen inform Mrs.Tilford that they will sue her for libel. Unfortunately, the only one who can explain the over-heard conversation is Mrs.Mortar. As she is fired from the school, she refuses to return to testify on the women’s behalf because she is afraid of being involved in a scandal.
When the last act opens, their 'libel' suit has been lost and Karen and Martha have hidden themselves away in a vacant school. They are publicly branded and they feel that wherever they may go they will be pariahs. The doctor, Joe, who is outwardly cheerful, has a plan for their all going to Vienna, where he studied and can get work. But, Karen knows how he longs to stay in his hometown with his own practice. And to her bitter grief she knows that in the heart of the man she loves, there lurks a doubt about their lesbian relationship. So, she clearly tells him:

No, Martha and I have never touched each other.(61)

But as she is shaken, she feels that he and she can never again have faith in each other and be natural and joyous together. So, she sends him away 'to think this all over', although, she is convinced that their relation is at an end.

It is Martha, however, who is the real victim of the tragedy. Whether she has been shocked by her experiences into a clarifying knowledge of her true nature, or whether she has been so shattered as to believe herself abnormal, Martha now confesses to Karen that she does love her. Feeling that she ruined Karen's life and her own, and above all, that they can no longer stay together, Martha steps quietly into the next room and shoots herself.

A few moments later, Mrs. Tilford herself appears at the school. She has come to tell them that Mary was finally compelled to confess her diabolical lies and that her grandmother is there then to make amends including a public apology. But Martha is
dead and Karen finds no reason to live. Yet, when she sees the remorseful woman, Karen's bitterness towards her subsides. She understands that Mrs. Tilford, who is herself a victim of society's ignorance, could not have acted otherwise. Finally, she promises not only to accept her help, but even to go back to the doctor later. As the play ends, "we are left with the consolation that Karen will find her way out of this nightmare of medieval torture into a life and love enlarged by new understanding."  

_The Children's Hour_ basically presents the conflict between vice and virtue. Karen Wright and Martha Dobie are not women of simple virtue for Martha confesses that Mary's accusations have made her realize that she may be a potential homosexual. Nevertheless, they are presented as relentlessly as any of the virtuous heroines. Mary Tilford is the symbol of vice, for she is completely evil, not only in her malice toward her teachers but also in her persecution of Rosaile, one of her schoolmates, whom she terrorizes because Rosaile has stolen a bracelet. To prevent Mary's exposing her as a thief, Rosaile, although unwilling to do so, finally blurts out the shocking lies which Mary forces her to tell. Thus, "Miss Hellman emphasizes the effect of the malicious slander to make audiences sympathize with the helpless teachers who are ruined by a vicious child."  

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The relationship between Martha and Karen, is drawn with sympathy, perhaps because of Hellman's own experience in her life. As C.W.E. Bigsby states:

And though it is usual to disavow any connection between Lillian Hellman and her characters, her story of Julia, a childhood friend contained in Pentimento (1974) - a story which she had found herself unable to tell until then - suggests the origins of this friendship which trembles on the brink of something else. Like her characters in The Children's Hour, she too had been accused in public of having such a relationship.  

Hellman considers the relationship between the two feminine characters on social and psychological levels. Once college friends, Karen and Martha, are now colleagues in self-made positions of authority. In placing two women in such positions and by forcing the action against them, Hellman is indicating her point of view and exposing a social prejudice that women in authority have always been vulnerable to slander. In this position, as victims of society which can be blinded by implacable evil forces, the characters, emotionally and mentally take a tragic stature. As Judith Olauson points out, "the two women seem to personify Hellman's view of the hopeless struggles of human beings who contend against evils, as well as the unresolved incompatibilities of human nature, particularly women's nature with society." Supporting this opinion, The Literary Digest stated "that there had not been in the theatre in years any two characters more tragic than the two teachers


whose lives are ruined as a result of the evil brought on by such an unlikely source."

The rancorous structure of interpersonal relationships in *The Children's Hour* is patterned after the structure of human association in the Venice of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. The Victim-Victimizer syndrome in which each victimizer in turn, is reduced to the position of victim is finally shown to be self-destructive. Hellman develops three relationships which are characterized by the circular form and destructive content of the victim-victimizer syndrome: (i) Karen Wright-Mary Tilford (ii) Martha Dobie-Lily Mortar and (iii) Amelia Tilford - Karen Wright/Martha Dobie.

Karen Wright's treatment of Mary Tilford has never been sensitively evaluated. No one has noticed that immediately preceding their initial confrontation, Hellman suggests that Karen is, perhaps, not as compassionate as a teacher of young children should be. For, when Mrs. Mortar complains that one of her students does not 'appreciate' Portia's plea for mercy, Karen replies:

Well I didn't either. I don't think I do yet. (10)

The harshness of her discipline demonstrates this truth.

Mary Tilford's offence is a minor one. She attempts to excuse her tardiness by saying that she was picking flowers for Mrs. Mortar. The flowers, Karen knows,
were 'picked' from the top of the garbage can, and Mary’s stubborn refusal to admit the truth convinces Karen that she must be punished.

Karen : Well, there doesn’t seem to be any other way with you; you’ll have to be punished. Take your recreation periods alone for the next two weeks. No horse back-riding and no hockey. Don’t leave the school grounds for any reason whatsoever. Is that clear?

Mary : Saturday, Too?

Karen : Yes

Mary : But you said. I could go to the boatraces.

Karen : I’m sorry, but you can’t go. (11-12)

These restrictions and punishment may not be of extreme deprivation for an adult but they are so for a child. Mary rightly feels that she is being persecuted. From wanting to tell her grandmother:

how everybody treats me here and the way I get punished for every little thing I do. (12)

She moves to a sense of her inner agony. Objectified in her hysterical 'heart problems,' and finally to a rebellious attitude:

They can’t get away with treating me like this and they don’t have to think they can. (26)

Mary accuses Karen and Martha of lesbianism and persists in her lie. Her behaviour is ugly but has been provoked by Karen’s earlier ugliness. She seeks an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.
Like Karen, Martha is also not free from certain drawbacks. Karen’s inability to deal compassionately with Mary Tilford is paralleled in Act I by Martha Dobie’s attitude towards her aunt Lily. Karen and Martha decide that she must be relieved of her teaching duties and literally thrown out of school. Their decision is just for Mortar is a nuisance and an incompetent. Yet they do not consider for a moment the effect such a dismissal may have on an old woman whose life has been the school. Again, justice is untempered by mercy and Hellman emphasizes the rigidity of the decision’s administration. Martha not only tells Lily Mortar that she must leave but also makes fun of her:

We don’t want you around when we dig up the buried treasure.(17)

and threatens that:

You ought to be glad I don’t do worse.(17)

Mortar pathetically attempts to save face:

I absolutely refuse to be shipped off three thousand miles away... I shall go back to the stage. I’ll write my agents tomorrow. (17-18)

Everybody knows that her agents are only imaginary and she is really pleading for mercy. As Karen isolates Mary, Martha exiles Lily Mortar. Lily’s reaction is the same as Mary’s:

You always take your spite out on me. (18)

As she exits, she casts towards Martha a ‘malicious half smile’ and the malice of revenge is realised when she refuses to clarify the over-heard conversation which will free Karen and Martha from the scar of lesbianism.
Karen and Martha suffer an ironic reversal of fortune: the victimizers become victims themselves. Amelia Tilford, an influential figure in the community of Lancet, misuses her authority over Karen and Martha, just as surely as they had taken advantage of the weaker positions of Mary and Lily. When Mary tells Amelia, that her two teachers are lesbians, the dowager immediately phones the parents of the children who are enrolled at the Wright - Dobie school, and repeats the charges thus destroying the reputation of the school. When Karen and Martha come for an explanation, Amelia makes it clear, that she does not want these two lepers in her house:

I don’t think you should have come here...shall not call you names and I will not allow you to call me names. It comes to this. I can’t trust myself to talk about it with you now or ever. (44)

Her condescension and her revulsion in the face of her visitors suspected abnormality pervades the scene:

This-this thing is your own. Go away with it. I don’t understand it and I don’t want any part of it. (45)

Ironically, Karen and Martha now suffer from the same humiliation and ostracism that they so rigorously inflicted on others - Mary and Lily. Thus, Hellman makes the ironic parallel and the lesson-even more explicit. Karen and Martha think that they are being unjustly persecuted:

What is she trying to do to us?
What is everyone doing to us? (44)
Both feel spiritual agony:

You are not playing with paper dolls. We're human beings, see? It is our lives you are fooling with. Our lives. (44)

Finally, they feel the need for revenge:

What can we do to you (Amelia)? There must be something—something that makes you feel the way we do tonight. You don't want any part of this. You said. But you'll get a part. More than you bargained for. (45-46)

Clearly, Hellman implies that when one mistreats another, he plants the seeds of his own destruction. Hellman presents a change in the relationships in Act II, but not a change in the structure of relationships. The rancorous victim-victimizer syndrome is as pervasive in this act as it was in the previous one, the difference being that relationships have now come to a full circle.

In the third act, this insight is made even more explicit, when Martha admits to herself that she has always been physically attracted to Karen:

It's funny, it's all mixed up. There's something in you and you don't know it. Suddenly a child gets bored and lies and there you are seeing it for the first time... It all seems to come back to me. In some way I have ruined your life. I've ruined my own. I didn't even know... (66)

Karen is shaken by the confession, weeps and unconsciously in the Shakespearean manner suggests Martha's fate:

Go and lie down Martha, you'll feel better. (66)

Martha goes and a few minutes later a shot is heard. She has committed suicide. Martha's attitude towards herself is just as it had been towards others— or as Amelia...
Tilford’s attitude had been towards lesbianism. Indeed, Martha’s rancorous attitude towards the imperfections of others is but a reflection of her own self-condemnation. In the words of D.V. Folk:

If the villiany of Mary was, to Hellman, like that of ‘Iago,’ then the suicide of Martha, in her self-condemnation for what she could not help was like that of ‘Othello,’ who could not live with what he had seen in himself.  

As in the other two acts, there is a parallel action, but this time, it is the difference that is instructive, not the similarity. Martha’s self-condemnation is matched by a new found self-disgust in Amelia Tilford. Amelia discovers that Mary has lied about her two teachers and realizes that her hasty phone calls have destroyed two people who are innocent of the charges and even leads one to commit suicide. Her discovery propels her into the same kind of guilt and self-laceration that we have just seen driving Martha to suicide. Amelia begs Karen to allow her to ‘do something’ for her so that she can in part expiate her sin. Karen accepts Amelia’s atonement - and thereby extends compassion—the ultimate good in the world of the play.

Hellman counterpoints Karen’s new-found benevolence with the by now familiar infantile hostility of Lily Mortar, who protests against Amelia Tilford, even setting foot in the school:

With Martha lying there? How can you be so feelingless? ... I won’t stay and see it. I’ll never let that woman-------(68)

14 D.V. Falk, Lillian Hellman, p.4.
Martha's suicide, however, has for Karen been both harrowing and educative. Because of it, she is, she tells Amelia:

Not(young) any more. (70)

The brief statement implies that she feels sadness at the loss of her own innocence but also suggests that Martha’s death has introduced her to a new maturity. Her horror at the guilt that caused Martha’s suicide leads her to sympathise with the plight of guilt-ridden Amelia. So, Karen shows mercy on Amelia by accepting her atonement:

Mrs. Tilford: You'll be all right?

Karen: I'll be all right, I suppose. Good-bye, now.

(They both rise. Mrs. Tilford speaks, pleadingly).

Mrs. Tilford: You'll let me help you? You'll let me try?

Karen: Yes, if it will make you feel better.


(Karen walks toward the window)

Karen: (suddenly) Is it nice out?

Mrs. Tilford: It's been cold (Karen opens the window slightly, sits on the ledge.

Karen: It feels very good. (They smile at each other). (71)

Karen has destroyed the vicious circle that has characterized human relations. Her compassion is the ultimate good in the world of the play.
Thus, *The Children's Hour*, deals with malicious gossip that accuses two women of an unnatural relationship and brings in its wake the wreck of their personal lives retaining all the suspensive drive it initially had. It is a striking example of a vital play with considerable merit as a piece of playmaking. It is a tightly constructed play with a good beginning, a middle, and an end. Beginning with Mary Tilford's malicious lie, the play reaches climax with Martha's suicide and ends with Amelia's confession and atonement of her guilt.

But, critics like Bentley feel that the structural unity of *The Children's Hour* is marred by the telling of two conflicting stories at a time - "the first is a story of heterosexual teachers accused of lesbianism: the enemy is a society which punishes the innocent. The second is a story of lesbian teachers accused of lesbianism: the enemy is a society which punishes lesbians." He feels that Hellman supposedly established the premise that the two women were 'innocent' and then shifted ground by making one of them 'guilty.'

Just as it is difficult to fall in line with T.S. Eliot's view that *Hamlet* is 'an artistic failure', because the focus of the play is divided between Hamlet's taking vengeance on the death of his father and his obsession with his mother's guilt, it is

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15 Eric Bentley, "Hellman's Indignation," *New Republic*, 5 Jan, 1953, P.30-31. Bentley's charge against the plot structure of *The Children's Hour* invariably reminds us of T.S. Eliot's celebrated remark regarding Shakespeare's *Hamlet* that it is "a film on which two photographs have been taken."
difficult to agree with Bentley’s view that *The Children’s Hour* is a play which tells two conflicting stories because Hellman carefully prepares her audience in act I for Martha’s final revelation. Martha is portrayed as depressed and “fearful” at the prospect of Karen’s marriage. Moreover, in Hellman’s source *Bad companions* the author-editor, William Roughead, had declared emphatically that his interest in the case resides in the fact that the charge was false.

Also, the structural unity of *The Children’s Hour* is said to be greatly affected by the third act which is considered an unnecessary intrusion into the play. The third act in general and the final scene in particular have come in for a good deal of criticism. Some contemporary critics fault them on various grounds. To cite but a few instances, Joseph Wood Krutch feels that while the first two acts are powerful and increasingly gripping, the third act is:

so strained, so improbable and so thoroughly boring that the effect is almost completely destroyed.\(^{16}\)

Laufe Abe in his ‘Anatomy of a hit’ comments that the play must have ended before the final scene. He says that "this weak and ineffectual offer of restitution cannot undo the harm already done."\(^{17}\) C.W.E. Bigsby, a noted critic of Hellman, in his compact

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survey, *Twentieth Century Drama*, observes that "the manner in which the final scene is contrived works against the conclusion."18

Thus, some critics feel that the play should have ended with the gunshot and that all that follows it ruins the effect of Hellman's social statement. Interestingly enough, Hellman herself subscribes to this view. She explains why she does so:

The play probably should have ended with Martha's suicide; the last scene is tense and overburdened. I know this at the time, but I could not help myself. I am a moral writer, often too moral a writer and I cannot avoid; it seems, the last summing up. I think that is only a mistake when it fails to achieve its purpose, and I would rather make the attempt and fail than fail to make the attempt.19

If Hellman feels that the last act is necessary for moral reasons, some other critics too defend it for various other reasons. For instance, R.C.Reynolds feels that "to have left the audience unaware of Mrs.Tilford's discovery of Mary's treachery might not have achieved the complete despair which marks of the last act."20 Philip.M.Armato also notes that "the conclusion of the play is a structurally necessary resolution, not a tedious reiteration of previous materials."21

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observes that the last summing up of Hellman is necessary lest the play should be reduced to a sense that "here is evil and make best use of it." George Jean Nathan also subscribes to the view that the last scene is necessary for the play. He says that "What Miss Hellman has written down is essential to the integrity of her theme, even if in stage practice it be discommodious to an audience's patience."\(^{23}\)

However, the real justification for the third act seems to lie in an application of Francis Fergusson's discussion of dramatic rhythm in *The Idea of a Theatre*.\(^{24}\) He identifies the movements of a realistic play -- movements from purpose to suffering and from suffering to new insight -- with the protagonist on a search for his true human condition. Examining Ibsen’s *Ghosts*, Fergusson finds his rhythm truncated by its abrupt ending because of the lack of the catastrophe. The ending of *The Children's Hour* also prevents a similar truncation. Martha’s suicide is the end of her quest, but Karen and Mrs. Tilford must acquire a new insight as a result of that suicide. Thus, because of the final scene, there is acceptance, and the rhythm is complete. Therefore, the last summing up is necessary to *The Children's Hour* which is written in the tradition of Ibsen’s realistic drama.

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So, like *The Wild Duck*, *The Children's Hour* ends not with a suicide but with a brief discussion on the issues that led to the suicide. Thus, the third act is crucial in that it turns the play from a sub-Ibsen account of integrity assailed by private and public self-interest into a drama about the repression of truth on a number of levels - naturalistic and moral.

Once we agree that the last act is completely necessary, we can easily understand why many of the reviews of the original production of *The Children's Hour* comment that the third act seemed anti-climatic, though well-written. Misled by the impact of the Mary-centred dialogue, they misunderstood the playwright’s purpose. The play is not about a psychopathic child or about lesbianism as subject or theme. The subject is character assassination and the theme is the damage done in our world by the so-called ‘good’ people through self-righteous judgement, selfishness and blindness to their own weaknesses. What we have to bear in mind is that the havoc is created not by Mary’s lie, but by the adult-reaction to it, even finally, that of good old Joe, whose doubt topples the last domino. His doubt is the last in a chain of events causing Martha’s suicide. Once the child’s lie is released on the world, the liar ceases to matter. Thus, properly approached, *The Children’s Hour* comes to us as a well knit play with a structural unity of its own.

*The Children’s Hour* is distinguished not only by its structural excellence, but also by its superb art of characterization. The most notable character in the play is
Mary Tilford on whom the whole of dramatic interest is centred. Hellman has drawn her character so brilliantly that she seems to be the sole concern of the audience. Once she enters the play with a petty lie on her lips she dominates the first two acts with her plots and inverted craft as well as with her mad dissembling.

Mary Tilford is presented essentially as a perverse child and a vicious maid. She is drawn with brilliant understanding of the vagaries of a child’s nature. Her capacity for lying is tremendous. Her cruelty and sadistic leadership are captivating. Small wonder, therefore, if Mary is considered to be a ‘Satanic Child’ and ‘a poisonous young viper’, whose whole disordered life is devoted to cruelty, falsehood and appalling mischief. As Atkinson rightly observes, Mary is "a miniature genius of wickedness." 25

An orphan under the guardianship of an indulgent grandmother, Mary makes the days of her schoolmates hideous with horrible deeds of evil. She traps them in childish thefts and thereafter enslaves them through threats of exposure. She takes their money, the pitiful little allowances sent by their parents, and she bullies them when they revolt and refuse further to be hurt by her. This type of child magnifies all discipline into the shape of injustice. Thus, when punished for a small fraud and threatened with further thwarting of her demoniac acts, she runs away and goes back

to her grandmother, and invents a monstrous accusation against her teachers. The grandmother, first, is contemptuous, but the sly, forceful brat becomes so hysterical that the old woman virtually is browbeaten into belief.

At first, Martha, Karen, and Joe regard Mary’s behaviour as childish capriciousness and petulance, but they are unaware of the fear which Mary inspires in the other girls. By the time they realize how dangerous and disturbed the child is, it is too late for anyone to believe them. Later, however, when Mrs. Tilford realizes how evil Mary really is, Karen repeats that something is ‘wrong’ with the girl and that she should be sent away, but for Mrs. Tilford, the presence of her grand-daughter will serve to remind her of her guilt. Mrs. Tilford tells Karen:

No, I could never do that, whatever she does, it must be to me and no one else. She’s …she’s.

Karen finishes for her:

Yes. Your very own, to live with the rest of your life. (70)

Mary can also be considered an allegorical character. On one level she is a child who imitates the wrong role model in her elders, but she carries that imitation so far as to come to represent pure evil. But, on another level Mary symbolizes something more than simply a particularly evil child who uses violence and threats to get her way. She also stands for something pernicious in society, an element which is innocently disguised as ‘right,’ but, in reality is utterly destructive. As
R.C. Reynolds points out, Mary can "spread suspicion and destroy anyone or anything she wants to in the name of morality." 26

However, Mary Tilford, cannot be dismissed as a mere malevolent character as some critics have done by comparing her to Shakespeare's 'Iago,' who is traditionally considered to exemplify 'motiveless malignity.' For instance, an anonymous critic in Literary Digest says:

In all reasonableness, there has not been a more malevolent character in the theatre in years than this twelve year old marplot. 27

A major critic of Hellman, C.W.E. Bigsby, also feels that Mary represents 'simple malignity' which

functions rather too unambiguously in the play a malevolence which exists not so much as a psychological truth, as an image of implacable hostility which is then compounded by those incapable of conceiving the existence of pure evil. 28

Perhaps, a better way of looking at Mary's character is to regard her as a neurotic, adolescent girl. This is borne out by Hellman herself, when at the 1952 revival of The Children's Hour, wrote of Mary:


On the stage, a person is twice as villainous as, say in a novel. When I read that story I thought of the child as neurotic, sly, but not the utterly malignant creature which playgoers see in her. I never see characters as monstrously as the audiences do - in her case I saw her as a bad character but never outside life. It's the results of her lie that make her so dreadful.\(^\text{29}\)

Yet another character who closely resembles Mary Tilford is Lily Mortar, aunt of Martha Dobie, who is a consummate liar and fake. She tells the girls long fabrications about her successful theatrical career. She also feels unwanted and out of place in the school knowing that she lives off of Martha's largesse, and that she really cannot make her own way in the theatre or elsewhere. She exhibits her unhappiness through malicious accusations eliciting a reply from Martha at one point:

Aunt Lily, the amount of disconnected unpleasantness that goes on in your head could keep a psychologist busy for years.\(^\text{18}\)

Another time, her niece tells her:

When you're at your best, you're not for tender ears.\(^\text{18}\)

Lily Mortar's references to her past glories as an actress, to Sir Henry Irving, to the Infant phenomenon, to the toilet backstage in Rochester, give us a concrete image of her character. And like Mary when she is offstage, she is the subject of discussion between the two teacher friends.

The characterization of the two teachers - Karen Wright and Martha Dobie - who are the victims of Mary Tilford and Lily Mortar, is built more slowly.

Interestingly enough, most of their conversation tells us more about Mary and Lily Mortar than about themselves. However, the teachers finally become realized characters for us in the third act, where we finally see them as individuals talking not about Mary or Lily, but about themselves and their lives and their feelings, particularly the dialogue between Karen and Martha and Karen and Mrs. Tilford. Martha questions:

What is it Karen?

Karen: What are we going to do? It's like that dark hour of the night when half awake you struggle through the black mess you've been dreaming. Then, suddenly you wake up and you see your own bed or your own nightgown and you know you're back again in a solid world. But now it's all the night-mare, there is no solid world. Oh! Martha, why did it happen. What happened? What are we doing here like this?

Martha: Waiting.

Karen: For what?

Martha: I don't know. (55)

Perhaps, the causes for Hellman's rage, the results of which manifest themselves in the characterizations of Martha and Karen, are to be found in the social injustice brought about by the prejudicial and circumstantial evidence which has condemned the two women. The grounds for belief in the allegations are flimsy but, nonetheless, believed first by the town, then by friends and finally by the two women themselves.
Martha, like Shakespeare's Othello, pronounces a pathetic judgement on herself and shoots herself.

Although, Mary is the initiating force of evil in the play, other characters execute her purposes by their own pride, weakness, and gullibility. The most important of such characters is Amelia Tilford, Mary's wealthy grandmother, who is rigid, self-righteous, and status-conscious. The problem with this old woman is two-fold: she is rich and she is old, a member of a generation used to having its own way of creating its own truths. The ending of the play reveals the extent of her power.

Thus, in *The Children's Hour* Hellman makes every character defeat herself or himself either physically or metaphorically. Martha commits suicide; Karen becomes a wasted person, who will always live with the suspicion that others will have for her; Joe loses Karen's love and trust; Mrs. Tilford loses self-respect; Mary will grow up into an adult who can never be trusted; and Mrs. Mortar, who returns just in time for Martha's suicide loses her single opportunity to prove herself worthy of trust and affection by refusing to testify. Even the minor characters lose significantly: Agatha, Mrs. Tilford's maid and a surrogate mother for Mary, cannot even again love or trust the child, and Mary's classmates lose the school where they were happy in their studies.
Like Bernard Shaw's *St. Joan*, Hellman's *The Children's Hour* has often been called a melodrama. Those who have considered the play a melodrama, generally see Karen Wright and Martha Dobie, the two teachers, as 'good' characters who are victimized by the 'evil' student, Mary Tilford. To Barret H.Clark and Brooks Atkinson, Mary Tilford is a 'monster.' Hellman's most perceptive critic, Jacob H.Adler, calls Mary "the embodiment of pure evil." If *The Children's Hour* is the story of a 'sweet little teacher done to death by a tyrannical child' then we must concur with Barret H. Clark's reading of the play's ultimate meaning as:

... here is evil .... make best use of it.\(^{31}\)

Hellman herself has defended *The Children's Hour* against the attacks of those critics who have labelled it a melodrama. She says that it is wrong to view her characters as being entirely good and evil:

You have no right to see your characters as good or bad. Such words have nothing to do with people you write about. Other people see them that way.

Again in a reply to a question, Hellman says:

Goodness and badness is different from good and bad people isn't it?\(^{32}\)

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So, Hellman’s assentations suggest that she did not intend to portray a melodramatic conflict between two ‘good teachers’ and an ‘evil child’ when she wrote *The Children’s Hour*.

From this it is clear that Hellman in *The Children’s Hour* offers more than is usually meant by melodrama. As Doris Falk points out Hellman’s plays "are always about good and evil, and evil may seem to prosper unjustly, but the actions and the striving of the characters have meaning and consequence."33 The moral assumptions against which Martha and Karen fruitlessly struggle manifest themselves as one single abstraction - the ‘big lie.’ And the ultimate defeat of these characters with each attempt seemingly increasing the strength of the force, makes them play the roles of tragic heroines of what Krutch calls, ‘Modern Drama,’ that is protagonists who are defeated by the moral assumptions of society. So *The Children’s Hour* may be said to be closer to tragedy than any other play of Hellman.

One reason that *The Children’s Hour* is closer to tragedy than most of the other plays of Hellman is that the evil motivation of Mary and the psychological drives of Martha are both outside the immediate, logical human understanding and control. But it is clear that these forces are allowed to triumph by human machination and the human weakness. Mary Tilford is the first of the despoilers - the foxes who

33 Doris V. Falk, *Lillian Hellman*, p.44.
'spoil our lives' - and her accomplices in evil are the self-righteous Mrs.Tilford and the cowardly Mrs.Mortar.

The tragic dimensions *The Children's Hour* have been perceived by both critics and creative writers alike. To cite but a few instances, the anonymous reviewer of *Literary Digest* feels that Karen and Martha are the most tragic characters in the American theatre in the recent past. In their insightful reviews of *These Three*, the first film adaptation of *The Children's Hour*, Alistair Cooke praises the adaptation for its Aristotelian effects. The world famous novelist, Graham Greene, writing in *Spectator*, speaks of its realistic representation of 'nothing less than life.'

To enhance the tragic intensity of *The Children's Hour*, Hellman makes use of dramatic devices like blackmail which is an Ibsenite influence. If Hellman uses blackmail more often than Ibsen, she uses suicide less - only once, and that too in *The Children's Hour*. On the other hand, there is one murder in each of her next three plays - *Days to come, The Little Foxes, Watch on the Rhine*. The blackmail in *The Children's Hour* is, in some respects, at least as various as in Ibsen. Mary Tilford intimidates one of her schoolmates into supporting her vicious, destructive lie by threatening to reveal the other child's petty thievery if she does not comply.

Hellman uses blackmail for different dramatic and moralistic purposes when compared to Ibsen. In Ibsen, it is the naive who are blackmailed. But in Hellman,
only *The Children's Hour* and *Rhine* the naive are blackmailed. In the Hubbard plays - *The Little Foxes* and *Another part of the Forest* - blackmail is crucial to the turning of the tables. In *The Children's Hour*, Rosaise Wells is a pathetic child, who is little more than an instrument since without her some sort of corroboration of Mary's slander would not have the necessary effect. The blackmail is another example of Mary's destructive evil, her urge to tyrannize. But its primary purpose is as a plot necessity to be defended only on the assumption that in a girls school, there is almost certain to be some misbehaviour open to blackmail.

What further contributes to the tragic intensity of *The Children's Hour* is the way Hellman links social passivity with moral disguise. Hellman dismantles in the play the social stereotype of passivity in Aunt Lily Mortar. Early in the play, the decaying ex-actress Lily Mortar is over-heard calling the realtionship of the headmistress of a school 'just as unnatural as it can be.' Her words, distorted by Mary Tilford, bring about the suicide of one of the women. By shrewdly calculating the cliche of social passivity, Mary blackmails and manipulates both her grandmother and a fellow student into the character assassination of Karen and Martha. She engineers her 'great awful lie' into acceptable truth by exaggerating a social stereotype.

In the course of the play, Aunt Lily Mortar makes a career out of absence, omission and inadvertence. For Lily, the natural thing is the socially customary. Courtesy for her is a mere matter of breeding and passivity, an unconscious and
uncritical way of life. In the play's opening scene, Lily and the school girls are involved in a 'great show of doing nothing.' Haphazard sewing and basting complement the fake social graces. Theatrics replaces the candor of labour. Unwittingly Lily herself points out the description by calling their labours simply women's 'tricks.'

Perhaps, the most 'critical metatheatrical moment' in this opening scene is Lily's hammy reading of Portia's 'Mercy' speech from Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice. On Lily Mortar's lips these celebrated lines dwindle into a mere elocutionary exercise just as the truth she utters, central to the outcome of the action, is but an over-heard perception. But ironically, it is the three lines that Lily omits which seem to anticipate the outcome of the dramatic action of The Children's Hour: "therefore, Jew/Though justice be thy plea, consider this/That in the course of justice none of us/Should see salvation."\(^{34}\)

Moreover, Lily's verbal omissions in the first scene foreshadow her crucial absence when Karen and Martha need her witness for their trial. Lily's words in the form of 'muttered asides' emerge only indirectly as uncanny truths about the other characters. Lily's comment, 'one master passion in the breast...swallows all the rest,' accurately describes Mary's maliciousness.

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Just as metatheatrics permits moral disguise in Lily’s incomplete Portia and Mary’s failed inquisition, so too does it become a metaphor for other forms of playing in The Children’s Hour. Even structurally, the play subtly suggests the deceptive. All the truth revealing scenes are interrupted so that the continuous action of dramatic unravelling and revelation are missing from the play. By such a sleight of structure, Hellman shifts the focus from blackmail, extortion, and lesbianism to the business of redefining the moral possibilities by giving a dramatically central role to the incident revelations of Lily Mortar. At the same time, she mocks social passivity by linking it with moral disguise in both Lily and Mary Tilford.

As in Shakespeare’s tragedies, irony widens the tragic dimensions of The Children’s Hour. Although, Hellman makes less use of irony in The Children’s Hour than in her later plays, she makes the most of it by positing mercy as an ultimate good and merciless cruelty as an ultimate evil. She clearly indicates this in the opening lines by quoting from Shakespeare’s The Merchant of Venice:

It is twice blest: it blesseth him that gives and him that takes.(5)

Here, the reference, of course, is to mercy singularly lacking in those who implement the destruction of others. It is not until the curtain falls on The Children’s Hour that one realizes the irony of the opening lines.

The missing bracelet provides the ironic denouement necessary for the tragic effect of the play. In many of Hellman plays, the plot hinges on a trivial object: a pen
knife (*Days to come*), a medicine bottle (*The Little Foxes*), a briefcase (*Watch on the Rhine*). In *The Children's Hour*, it is bracelet. At first, Karen's reference to a missing bracelet seems almost gratuitous. Then, when Karen and Martha have almost succeeded in refuting the charge, Mary claims it was not she who saw them together but Rosaile Wells, stressing the fact that it was on the same day that a student's bracelet disappeared. Rosasile, who stole the bracelet, corroborates the lie. A bracelet leads a frightened child to testify against her teachers. It is the same bracelet that provides the ironic denouement when Rosaile's mother discovers it among her daughter's possessions. But it is too late for redress. Martha has committed suicide and Karen has lost her fiance.

Thus, Hellman's maiden attempt as a playwright proved to be a great success as *The Children's Hour* was received well by the critics. The critics of the 1950s understood the theme of *The Children's Hour* and spoke of its contemporary relevance and sometimes applied it specifically to the McCarthy Witchhunt. They used such phrases as the 'brutal impact of false testimony,' 'exposure of the evils of character assassination,' 'impelling psychological story of the havoc a lie can cause.' Brooks Atkinson thought that the play "might have grown a bit in stature since we have learned that lives can be destroyed by other types of slander. Having been intelligently

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35 This theme of the whole community's eagerness to accept the children's stories, though they are shown to be improbable and this same amusity to spread the scandals resulted in McCarthy Witchhunt, in which, the same kind of pressure caused people to exaggerate and falsely accuse Hellman before House Committee on un-American Activities.
written for the values of 1934, *The Children's Hour* fits the world of today just as accurately. 36

John Gassner, the well-known dramatic critic, has a special word of praise for the play, stressing its importance in the American theatre:

A critic must develop a special resolve to denigrate American drama before he can resist the power of *The Children's Hour* especially in the throbbing second act... We may view with the same perturbation the fact that the plays written in recent years have so rarely possessed the power that belongs to *The Children's Hour.* 37

However, *The Children's Hour*, has come in for a good deal of criticism. For instance, Lawson actually criticizes Hellman for not writing a social document. He says that "the situation gives the impression of being implausible because it is not placed in a solid social framework. The play ignores time and place. The prejudice against sexual abnormality varies." 38 Besides, we are not shown the conditions in the environment which explain the little girl's demoniac hatred and the suffering of the two school teachers. Furthermore, in later years it became customary to describe the play as a criticism of the rich and the powerful so much so that Hellman herself had to clarify the import of the play saying:


To my mind the theme of lesbianism is less this time and what comes out stronger is the power of a lie and what it can do to people when it has even one little ounce of truth.\textsuperscript{39}

Nevertheless, we may say that \textit{The Children's Hour}, is a daring step forward in the theatre's humanizing power to create understanding and empathy for unconscious deviation as a tragic flaw, rather than a loathsome anomaly. Only a playwright as skilfully restrained and impatient with sentimentality as Miss Hellman could have handled such a theme successfully. To exorcize the inexplicable malignancy of the human soul seems Miss Hellman's special gift.

What is more, \textit{The Children's Hour} is profoundly integrated with its own time. It is to Hellman's credit that she makes the crux of her play not the question of homosexuality itself, but society's savage treatment of the homosexual, arising out of cruelly persisting ignorance. Also, we can see in the play, how an individual conflict may serve to focus attention on its crucial social implications. The play has broken down in thousands of audience their antipathy against its subject and aroused in them the desire for further knowledge. The suicide of Martha, raises the important question of the tragic needlessness of her death and of the right of the homosexual to the fullest personal happiness.

Above all, the chief significance of *The Children's Hour* lies in its social statement. The question which remains is whether the gangster or the child is more culpable for the result of such evil than the passive society which permits it to take control. In the final scene of the *The Children's Hour*, Hellman defiantly points the finger of guilt at society as a whole. She suggests that adults are too often 'children' while infantile revenge is a matter of course in man's dealings with each other.

Thus, *The Children's Hour* is a striking example of the vital play profoundly integrated with its own time. It is not flawless but the playwright deals with a subject of grave human import in such a way as to carry the theatre forward and to give it its deepest meaning and significance. Looking at *The Children's Hour*, now fifty years after its original production (1934), we find it still a powerful play, indeed a remarkable play for a beginning playwright. Great works of art like Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* and Melville's *Billy Budd* have dealt with the dichotomy between primitive justice and mercy. Although *The Children's Hour* is certainly a less monumental work of art than any of these, it is within its limits, a wholly successful moral play.

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