

The Image of Women in Hellman's "The Children's Hour."

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The purpose of this paper is to show how Lillian Hellman has succeeded in portraying female characters as essential, autonomous beings and freed them from the cultural mythology that defines them as inessential "Others." In all of her plays, Hellman has created the rounded portrayals of women which reveal both the unique circumstances common to women and the human condition in which both sexes partake. Hellman has succeeded in portraying her female characters as independent and complex multi-faceted individuals who unfortunately have to function within the limitations of culturally defined roles. The focus is on *The Children's Hour* in particular because it contains a large number of women, deals with the theme of love between women and the characterization of adolescent girls, mature women and women with careers.

Lillian Hellman was born in 1906 and started her career as a playwright in 1934 with the New York production of *The Children's Hour*. She went on to publish a total of eight original plays, including *Days to Come* (1936), *The Little Foxes* (1939), *Watch on the Rhine* (1941), *The Searching Wind* (1944), *Another Part of the Forest* (1946), *The Autumn Garden* (1951), and *Toys in the Attic* (1960). Except for *Days to Come*, all of these plays were chosen among the ten "Best Plays" of their seasons.¹ She also received the New York Critic's Circle Award for the best American drama of the season for both *Watch on the Rhine* and *Toys in the Attic*. Other awards include the Gold Medal for Drama from the National Institute of Arts and Letters (1964), the Creative Arts Award from Brandeis University (1973), the first annual Rappaport Prize at Sarah Lawrence College (1975), and the MacDowell Award for outstanding contributions to the arts (1976).²

Hellman's continued success has prompted Richard Moody, author of *Lillian Hellman: Playwright*, to remark that "among her contemporaries only Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller . . . belong in her league" (p.1). Echoing this assessment, Emory Lewis places Hellman, along with Williams and Miller, among the "Big

Three who remained our best hopes in the bleak fifties."³ In Jacob Adler's opinion, "few American playwrights can equal [her] list [of plays], and few can surpass it."⁴ And John Gassner speaks of her "superiority to most American playwrights."⁵ Like Clifford Odets and Irwin Shaw, Hellman achieved great popularity in the thirties. For Malcolm Goldstein, she is the most impressive of this group "by virtue of her avoidance of the easy answer."⁶ Likewise, Brooks Atkinson believes that "of the many writers opposed to the status quo in American society, the most cleverheaded and the best organized was Lillian Hellman."⁷ Moreover, in contrast to Odets and Shaw, Hellman displayed the artistic growth and ability to write compelling drama for the changing needs of the American public following the Depression years. This continued ability is proof of both her resiliency and skill as a dramatist.

In addition to her eight original plays, Hellman has written four adaptations: Montserrat (1950) from the French play by Emmanuel Robles, The Lark (1965) from the French play by Jean Anouilh, Candide (1957) from the work by Voltaire, and My Mother, My Father and Me (1963) from Burt Blechman's novel How Much?⁸ Her adaptations display her fine sense of theatrical effect, sure ear for dialogue, and skilful use of dramatic economy. Hellman manages to achieve a balance between her own creative intellect and that of the original author; by subtly modifying the ideas and shifting the thematic focus of each play, she stamps the work of art with her own perspective yet retains what was valuable in the original. Hellman also occasionally worked for Hollywood, creating a number of adaptations for the screen. The best known is her screenplay for the 1937 film of Sidney Kingsley's play Dead End.⁹ Hellman has also consolidated her reputation as a skilled, productive artist with three books of memoirs. An Unfinished Woman (1969), winner of the National Book Award, vividly recaptures the political climates of the last fifty years and the spirit of many of the period's leading literary personalities. Pentimento (1973), a masterful book, establishes Hellman's versatility through the originality of approach and depth of meaning she achieves in

prose. She paints a set of delicate, insightful portraits of key people in her life to render obliquely what has been most essential to her. Her latest autobiographical memoir, Scoundrel Time (1976), deftly conveys the essence of the McCarthy Era by a series of impressions based on one individual's history.⁹

In her introduction to Six Plays, Hellman wrote "I am a moral writer,"¹⁰ and indeed, like Ibsen, the "principle individualist,"¹¹ she sees her plays as an opportunity to exercise moral judgement. Although intended for the comfortable middle-class that frequents Broadway, the plays rarely contain excuses and self-justifications and tired platitudes to lull an audience into complacency. Just as Hellman's characters must inevitably confront the truth about themselves and each other, the plays compel audiences to reevaluate themselves and their beliefs in light of Hellman's moral vigour. A rigorous sense of justice informs her work; the plays emphasize the necessity of recognizing the consequences of action -- and inaction -- and insist on the acceptance of individual responsibility. Hellman strives to communicate her belief in both the reality of evil and the dangers of American innocence to that evil. For Hellman, the undetermined and vague thinkers, the cowardly and the apathetic, i.e. those who stand by watching "the people who eat the earth and all the people on it,"¹² are as morally culpable as the sadistic, greedy "little foxes" themselves. Those who waste away their lives deserve to face the stark realization that there is nothing left of them. Although her moral vision often expresses itself through political themes and topical subjects, the plays rarely emerge as political documents or as propaganda. Ultimately Hellman is a rebel, not a revolutionary; she is rebelling against how far society and individuals are from what she thinks they ought to be. Her political themes, embodied in complex characters in particularized situations, serve as vehicles to convey her moral concerns.

In all Hellman's plays, women have a crucial role. Interested in women and sensitive in depicting them, the playwright has always

included major female characters in her dramas. For example, Days to Come depicts an upper middle-class woman's search for identity against the background of labour strife. The Chekhovian Autumn Garden contains an equal balance of men and women, both sexes participate in the universal experience of mid-life. The Children's Hour is composed of all female characters, and presents a broad range of situations, personalities and perspectives. While writing Toys in the Attic, Hellman remarked "I can write about men, but I can't write a play that centers on a man. I've got to tear it up, make it about the women around him."¹³ She could, however, successfully construct The Little Foxes to centre on the powerful, ruthless Regina. Hellman uses her female characters' confrontations with both male characters and other female characters to provide the plays with energy and emotive power; she places women's ideas and values in opposition to those of other women in order to convey her themes. Even when the women are actively in conflict with each other, the contrasts between both their ideas and personalities combine to create a major part of the play's central impression. Thus, Hellman's use of female characters is an essential element of her dramatic method and women an important part of her content. Hellman's women play an integral part not only in terms of plot but also in terms of structure and theme.

Hellman's eight original plays are in the realistic tradition. The evaluation of her characterization depends ultimately on the particular demands of the play being examined: effective characterization hinges on how well characters in a particular play ~~satisfy~~ fulfill the needs of plot, structure, and theme. Characters cannot be regarded as "real people," who may be removed conveniently from the context of the play. Even when the goal of a play is itself the expression of character, the playwright inevitably seeks to convey an idea about universal human experience. However, before ascertaining if the characterization conforms to the intent of an individual play, criteria for assessing successful character portrayal are more broadly determined by the dramatic convention in which the dramatist writes. Wellek and Warren point out that the

distinction between two conventions "is not between reality and illusion but between differing conceptions of reality, between differing modes of illusion."¹⁴ Thus, each dramatic convention defines a particular distance between stage presentation and audience conception of everyday life. In contrast to Hellman's realistic dramas, plays may depict characters who turn into rhinos, converse in blank verse with Mephistophilis, or flee avenging Furies; the audience will not protest if the convention indicates that the characters and their situations are not intended to be circumstantially faithful to the actual. What is necessary is that the execution of a subjective vision be coherent and convincing. Each convention's conception of reality and mode of illusion define requirements for character portrayal which can be critically evaluated. Consequently, the realistic convention must be examined in order to establish suitable criteria by which to assess Hellman's female characters.

Dramatic realism's mode of illusion is to render the subject "in such a way as to give the [viewer] the illusion of actual experience."¹⁵ As Tom Driver points out, if "the art of theater is the art of pretending," then to achieve its illusion, realism "compounds the pretense basic to all theater by pretending that the pretense is not going on."¹⁶ The manner in which the illusion is created masks "the fictitious nature of the representation"¹⁷ by minimizing awareness of ~~what happens on stage as a dramatic event~~ employing theatrical effects. For example, actors in realistic plays "compound the pretense" by pretending to be unaware of the audience's presence; behind an invisible fourth wall, characters move within their own circumscribed world of immediate "real life" experience. This mode of illusion serves the realistic playwright's conception of reality. This conception of reality endorses the notion that a common reality exists. Realistic plays sustain this illusion by portraying what the majority of people, i.e. the middle class, will accept as objectively existing in the world of actual experience. This is not to imply that realism is purely representational, nor that it attempts only to grind out what the audience already knows. What may appear on the surface as factual imitation is always the artist's subjective vision

which hopefully challenges the viewer's preconceptions. Still, the realistic playwright adheres to a particular construct of objective reality: the environment and social milieu which determine character and motivation are balanced by the individual and autonomous nature of human beings. This balance between determinants and the power of the individual to choose freely is the crucial requirement for realistic characterization.

To create the illusion of the actual, the realistic character must be firmly rooted in an environment. This environment includes general cultural and socio-economic background, political climate, immediate physical surroundings, and relationships between characters. The playwright emphasizes these elements in varying degrees according to what he or she perceives as most influential on the characters. Realistic theatre's dramatic power arises from the conflict between this environment and the character's need to maintain his or her individual autonomy.¹⁸ So the environment must not be a static backdrop, but must interact dynamically with the characters. And this interaction creates impression in the mind of the audience, thereby serving as a major method of thematic exposition.

Expressionism's attempt to convey a subjective conception of reality - - either that of the playwright or a character - - contrasts to realism's portrayal of "objective" reality. Expressionism posits an inner reality below the facade of the commonplace and the rational. It employs the subconscious and the irrational to communicate what expressionists perceive as a profound and truthful vision of human existence. Emotional and spiritual meanings are conveyed directly to viewers by means of undisguised theatrical effects. These effects either distort what is known as external reality or completely eliminate it as a frame of reference. For example, Strindberg's A Dream Play (1902) explodes time and space, concepts basic to "objective" reality. The time and space of the dramatic event itself dominate audience awareness. The frame of reference is the

impressions created by the consistent vision which the subjective consciousness projects.

Naturalism also serves as a contrast to realism. While both naturalism and realism stress the importance of the external environment, the two forms differ in the degree to which this environment controls the characters. As Driver indicates, Zola, father of naturalism,

came to believe that it was possible to formulate laws of human conduct as rigorous as those set forth in the natural science, laws that would define the interplay of heredity, environment, and historical forces in the determination of human behaviour.¹⁹

Thus, human beings are pawns determined by an environment of overwhelming forces. Personal autonomy or uniqueness is absent; the focus is on a detailed portrayal of the environment and a thorough examination of its effect on the characters. Such "slice of life" plays as Elmer Rice's Street Scene (1928) and Sidney Kingsley's Dead End (1936) exemplify modified, softened versions of the naturalistic convention.

Unlike naturalism, realism's characters possess the power of authentic choice and the quality of uniqueness while still being representative of a particular group, locale or era. Of course all characters are ultimately puppets in the hands of the playwright. But in a realistic play, the dramatist is obliged to hide the strings and preserve the illusion of autonomy. As particularized characters, they must be multi-faceted and complex. As self-governing individuals, they must be given enough psychological motivation to make their choices believable. A good way to sum up these requirements is to say that the dramatist writing in the realistic convention must create characters who convey the illusion of what E. M. Forster calls "roundedness".

The test of a round character is whether it is capable of surprising in a convincing way. If it never surprises, it is flat. If it does not convince it is flat pretending to be round. It has the incalculability of life about it -- life within the pages of a book. (Aspects of the Novel p.78)

Wellek and Warren add to this idea by seeing round characters as "dynamic or developmental" instead of "static" (Theory of Literature, p.219); John Styron, by describing round characters as three-dimensional figures who "are to be judged as complete beings,"²⁰; M.H. Abrams by viewing rounded characters as "complex in temperament and motivation and . . . represented with subtle particularity, . . . as difficult to describe with any adequacy as a person in real life" (Literary Terms, p.21). Obviously, no characterization is ever completely round or flat, but lies somewhere on the broad spectrum between these two poles. However, the major characters in realistic drama must approach roundness as closely as possible.

Female characterizations based upon the assumption that women's qualities and motivations are determined by innate characteristics common to all women negate the basic premises of the realistic convention. These innate determinants render autonomy impossible and the effects of the environment negligible. Struggles between the individual will and powerful forces within and without the self cannot genuinely exist. Determined by cultural myths about the way women are, such characters exhibit neither genuine development nor uniqueness. Their lack of complexity and individualization results in predictable, undramatic interactions which aesthetically weaken the play as a whole. Despite this, the mythology surrounding women has been equated by too many writers and critics with the actual. Consequently stereotyped female characters are often considered to be well drawn by the critics. Even major female characters have been created as stereotypes, as reflectors for male personalities, and as catalysts to motivate the

actions of male characters. With innate determinants as givens, there is no need for a writer to labour over convincing reasons for a female character's behaviour. From a generalized conception about women comes the notion that their actions simply arise from the way they are. Some playwrights attempt to make women's nature seem complex. For example, O'Neill portrays Nina Leeds in Strange Interlude (1928) in this fashion. But her desire for self-sacrifice, her destructive possessiveness, and her striving for fulfilment are based on nothing but the fact that she is female. The fact that O'Neill considered his Strange Interlude his woman play indicates his use of stereotypes, for it would sound ridiculous if he were to call one of his works his man play. Whatever the label - - complicated formula, complex stereotype, or in E. M. Forster's terms, "flat pretending to be round"-- the unfortunate truth is that this is the primary way of portraying female characters in the realistic convention. Certainly there have always been writers who paint perceptive, detailed portraits of women; however, critics who apply the realistic criteria for characterization differently for female and male characters neither encourage complex portraits of women nor, more importantly, make them aesthetically necessary.

The writings of feminists such as Simone de Beauvoir undermine acceptance of cultural myth as fact by supplying an accurate appraisal of the condition of women and a perceptive analysis of the concept of femininity. Perhaps the greatest accomplishment of feminist critics has been to demonstrate that beyond some basic biological facts and what civilizations in general have imposed, absolutely nothing can be said on the subject of women. Stated more simply, there is no motivation or attribute in women as a group distinguished from the human race that can be posited as innate. Thus by challenging conventional views of women, feminist critics provide the first accurate frame of reference within which the criteria for realistic characterization are operative for female characters. This perspective does not yield a different way of evaluating character from traditional criteria, nor is it correct to see it as an adjunct to it. It is a means by which to see women

as they are, and, by extension, their representations in literature. Simone de Beauvoir's great work on women, The Second Sex²¹, provides valuable insights. She describes womanhood itself as a cultural phenomenon. It is a concept which determines how women are perceived and creates an internalized standard for female behaviour and self-concept. In a world dominated by men, female human beings are initially defined on the basis of gender. The net result has been to rob women of their humanity and reduce them to a position of inferiority. As members of the same culture as men, women are also prone to view all women (including themselves) as inessential "Others." Similarly, a female author can define her female characters by a generalized notion of women's behaviour instead of presenting internally motivated, complex characters. This complexity can be achieved whether or not these characters fulfill the cultural ideas of femininity.

In all of Hellman's plays, women are represented as round, complex characters and whether they have positive or negative traits is not the real issue. Her women are individuals subject to the effects of a socio-economic situation or to universal themes such as aging or the destructive power of love. The Children's Hour, originally produced in 1934 is no exception to the rule and as most of Hellman's plays was a huge success. Its excellence resides in its well-drawn portrait of two women crushed by gossip, in the complexity of their characterization as well as that of the society matron who accomplishes their ruin. Nearly all the play's characters are female, and Hellman provides a wide range of women.

However, this does not constitute an achievement in itself; Clare Boothe's The Women (1936)²² contains a variety of female characters too. But these characters are conceived purely in terms of conventional stereotypes, each different but each paper thin. Hellman's achievement lies in the individualized, rounded portrayals of almost all the female characters in her play. This is enhanced by the fact that The Children's Hour, unlike The Women, is not what could be considered a play focusing on invisible males, around

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In spite of, or perhaps because of its inclusion of the shocking subject of lesbianism, audiences kept The Children's Hour running for 691 performances. However, though banned in Boston, Chicago, and London for its focus on abnormal sexuality, the play's real fascination for audiences lay in the evil character of Mary Tilford, adolescent scandalmonger and complete villain. Daily, reviewers heaped pejorative adjective upon adjective to convey her "monstrous nature." Perceived as the vital centre of the play, and even its chief protagonist, Mary's absence from Act III was viewed by many critics as a loss of dramatic power which seriously weakened the play. during the 1952 revival of The Children's Hours, Hellman, dismayed by this absorption with Mary as "flower of evil"²³ and "juvenile fiend"²⁴ commented that:

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.²⁵

True, the novelty for 1930s theatre audiences of evil in children, especially in a "little girl," as the fourteen year old was often referred to, accentuated Mary's negative traits and diverted audiences from the dramatic focus on the two teachers, Martha and Karen. Hailed as "probably the nastiest and most vicious brat ever created by the drama,"²⁶ she was an inversion of the traditionally innocent, vulnerable child. Despite her protests, this captivation with Mary as monster resulted from Hellman's own portrayal. Mary is a two-dimensional character amongst three-dimensional ones. The consequent imbalance paradoxically causes the flatter character to dominate the stage at the more rounded characters' expense.

Mary Tilford's two-dimensionality arises from the completeness of her evil; her maliciousness remains unqualified by any positive traits. Even the implication of suffering is denied though Mary makes the suggestive statement that her "heart burns" (pp.13, 23,34) numerous times throughout the play, but Hellman quickly undercuts this potentially humanizing element, exposing it as one more manipulative trick. Always victorious in her cruelty, never betraying weakness, Mary is, as one critic put it, "a thousand years old in evil,"²⁷ suggesting her lack of ordinary human limitations. Thus Hellman embodies her belief in the reality of evil in a totally evil character, as well as in characters with potentials for both good and bad. This embodiment conveys the tangible presence of evil with increased force. It emphasizes the culpability of the community for its destructive innocence and credulity in the face of it. But the extremity of Mary's characterization exceeds the boundaries of dramatic realism and her unrelieved nastiness causes her to resemble the villains of nineteenth century melodrama.

Not simply the totality of her evil, but Hellman's depiction of it as innate, qualify Mary for the role of villain. Some critics labelled her psychotic or psychopathic, but those who called her "imp of Satan"²⁸ and "adolescent Iago"²⁹ were more accurate. Mary can hardly be characterized as enslaved to a mental disorder since Hellman provides no psychological factors which adequately account

for her behaviour, no sense of inner forces in conflict which makes her complex. The fact that she has been miserably spoilt by an indulgent grandmother and hence unable to accept discipline proves insufficient. Her reaction to Karen's prohibition is out of proportion to the external situation and unilluminated by internal motives. Instead we learn from her cousin, Joe Cardin, that "she's always been a honey" (p.22) and her inexplicable fury becomes gratuitous. Moreover, Mary's delight in her sadistic powers purely for their own sake suggests the arbitrary, disinterested malice of a disembodied force of evil, rather than a compulsion anchored in a psychological core. She is truly the "Infant Phenomenon" (p.17) Ms. Mortar, Martha's aunt, mentions in another context.

Hellman's portrayal of Mary does not fulfill the requirements for characters in the realistic convention. Though Mary often dominates everyone else in the play, Hellman precludes Mary's own autonomy by giving her inner determinants. Likewise Mary is only incidentally affected by her environment: inborn traits make it impossible for her to develop or change in response to particular situations. Consequently, Mary is exempt from the doctrine of personal responsibility Hellman emphasizes heavily in her plays. Accordingly, the playwright does not have her punished for her misdeeds at the end of The Children's Hour; in fact, there is even some question as to whether Mary will be prevented from future evil acts. Audiences watch Mary with horror, but never with identification, and the eccentricities of her character do not encourage them to re-examine themselves. More importantly, Mary's part in Karen and Martha's tragedy allows audiences to regard the teacher's entire situation as erratic, instead of causing them to focus on the responsibility of the entire community and, by logical extension, themselves.

While Mary's motive, evil for its own sake, is melodramatic and stereotyped, Hellman depicts the manifestations of this motive with variety, accuracy and vividness. For example, Mary's command to one of her victims not to "muss my white linen

bloomers" (p.27) is both particularized and convincing. Her intricate paranoia, her genius for evil improvisation, and her parody of injured childhood innocence captivated audiences, and not just the extremity of her characterization. Sometimes Hellman lingers over these well drawn elements too long, as in the blackmail scene with Rosalie, suggesting that she has been fascinated by her own creation. One possible reason for Mary's extreme characterization resides in the playwright's handling of one of the major themes of the play. The Children's Hour indicts the community as a whole, especially the most respectable among them, for their scandalmongering and narrow-mindedness. But Hellman does not choose to dramatize the mechanics of how the gossip is spread beyond the representative portrait of Ms. Tilford. Instead, Mary serves as a short cut to plausibility for the nearly universal acceptance of the lie: by depicting Mary as possessed of overwhelming powers of evil, as a "*diabolus ex machina*"³⁰ as Eric Bentley called her, the audience is persuaded she could convince anyone of anything. Hellman can then concentrate on the devastating effects of slander rather than on the process. Perhaps her theme of communal responsibility would have been expressed more effectively had she concentrated on dramatizing the townspeople and the children's parents behaving like hysterical sheep at the mere mention of something shocking though unproved. It is interesting to note in this context that Martha, reviewing the events that led to the headmistress's ruin, remarks: "Suddenly a child gets bored and lies" (p.72). This sounds strangely incongruous with the monster Hellman has painted and Martha recognized earlier in the play, and suggests a situation in which the community is more completely at fault.

The audience shares Martha's sentiments concerning Mary: "She's had more attention than any other three kids put together. And we still haven't the faintest idea of what goes on inside her head" (p.14). Mary's characterization, primarily an exterior view qualified only by innate potentials for evil, relegates her to the status of the "Other". As the title indicates, the play undercuts the over sentimentality of Longfellow's "The Children's Hour," a paean to the

charms of sweet young girls. The adorable little ladies of the poem are replaced in the play by the realistic adolescent girls at the Wright-Dobie School, individualized and quite human, and by Mary Tilford, the ultimate refutation of this stereotype. Her actions ironically parallel the action of the poem:

A whisper, and then a silence: Yet I know by their
merry eyes They are plotting and planning together
To take me by surprise.³¹

But in destroying this feminine stereotype, Hellman has erred too far in the opposite direction. Mary's "Otherness" is defined in terms of a kind of mythology of villainy instead of the feminine mythology the dramatist explodes.

Mary Tilford is not the neurotic Hellman intended to create; but in Ms. Lily Mortar, Martha's flighty, incompetent aunt, Hellman achieves an excellent portrayal of neuroticism. Though critics and reviewers hardly mentioned her at all, her overheard remark forms the basis for the slander, and her absence from court during the libel suit insures the teachers' ruin. Unlike Mary, she is not a completely evil character but causes as much destruction; she is unpleasant in a more realistic but less spectacular way. A "tiresome, spoilt old bitch" (p.46), as Cardin describes her, she is terribly self-centered and egotistic and her self-absorption and false image of herself prevent her from genuinely relating to anyone. Her delusions of grandeur about her career as great lady of the theatre make her ridiculous, her cowardice and irresponsibility make her despicable. When she spitefully provokes Martha, her penetrating insight into her niece's weaknesses makes it quite clear that she cannot be excused as merely stupid. But Hellman rounds out this portrait by depicting Mortar as aging, unwanted, though justly so, and ultimately pathetic. Her reaction to Martha's suicide is particularly convincing and skillfully wrought. It separates her from the stereotyped depiction of a neurotic old lady. Just when audiences are ready to quickly condemn and dismiss her, her behaviour elicits

the mixed response suitable for a complex character. Hellman shows her making an honest realization, then descending into rationalizations and theatrics:

What shall we do? . . . (... sobs quietly) . . . (looks up, still crying, surprised) I'm -- I'm frightened . . . But I was good to her. . . . (suddenly) Suicide's a sin. . . . She shouldn't have done it. . . . I'm afraid . . . It's different for you. You're young . . . you going to allow that woman to come in here? . . . How can you be so feelingless? . . . I'll never let that woman -- (Rushes sobbing from the room). (p.73-75)

Though Mortar's actions are reprehensible, Hellman makes her too neurotic and unstable to accept the crushing responsibility for her own actions that a character like Ms. Tilford must face at the end of the play.

Another, more amusing aspect of Mortar's characterization is her pretention to being a lady of quality. Throughout the first act, she makes grandiose pronouncements on what is suitable for ideal femininity:

Make some handkerchiefs or something. Be clever about it. Women must learn these tricks. (p.6)

Eavesdropping is
~~something nice~~ young
ladies just don't do.
(p.18)

Though the content of her words is not far away from traditional notions, her affectation renders her absurd. Moreover, as Martha points out, the true Mortar is "really bad ...around children" and "not for tender ears". (p.21) Her accusation of lesbianism is lustfully

conceived, and many of her ill-timed remarks are in questionable taste:

I think it will throw a very revealing light on the state of the new theater when I tell you that the Lyceum in Rochester now has a toilet backstage. (62)

In her posturings she becomes a vulgar parody of the real lady of the play, Ms. Tilford. But the harm Ms. Tilford herself does, in part from ladylike delicacy and a genuine sense of propriety, makes it evident that in The Children's Hour, Hellman undermines the image of the traditional lady itself and not merely pretensions to it.

The New Statesman and Nation saw the role of Ms. Tilford as "an easy, 'fat' Old Lady part"³², Walter Kerr dismissed her as "well-meaning but too doting" in the Herald Tribune³³ and the New York American called her a "silly old grandmother"³⁴. But Ms. Tilford's characterization transcends the stereotype of the foolish old woman; she demands a more complicated response because unlike Mary and Ms. Mortar, she reveals genuine positive traits. Hellman describes her as "a large, dignified woman in her sixties with a pleasant, strong face," (p.32) and within the limited world of Boston aristocracy, Ms Tilford can be kind, as in her patronage of Karen and Martha's school, and ethical, though according to a stilted, insular code. Hellman judges Ms. Tilford more harshly for her part in the slander than she does Mortar or Mary, since she condemns her for the misuse of potentially good qualities as well as for her weaknesses; at the end of the play it is she who must painfully acknowledge her responsibility for the ruin of two lives.

Since Ms. Tilford condemns Karen and Martha for their alleged passions, it is ironic that she is incapable of controlling her own powerful emotions. Mary's malicious whisper causes hysteria in Ms. Tilford so out of proportion that it implies a revulsion not just for lesbianism, but for sexuality itself. She believes her granddaughter's obscene tales because her own naivete and

overrefinement paradoxically encourage her to perceive sex in pornographic terms. Appropriately, Karen informs her that the "black mess"(p.61) Ms Tilford has created makes Karen feel that she and Martha are "sick, high-tragic people."(p.67) Thus, Hellman undermines the traditional image of the lady by inverting the usual connotations of purity and delicacy associated with it. So, too, powerful emotions, in the form of unrestrained love for Mary, prevent objectivity in Ms. Tilford. Thus, the playwright adds a further motivation beyond typical narrow-mindedness and "old lady" credulity, to make the matron's acceptance of the lie more believable and complex. Early in Act II, Ms. Tilford exhibits clear-headedness and insight when handling Mary:

You know they wouldn't hurt you. (p.34) You musn't imagine things like that, child, or you'll grow up to be a very unhappy woman. (p.34) You're an earnest little coxer, but it's out of the question. Back you go tonight. (Gives Mary a playful slap) Let's not have no more running away from school ever. (p.35) Dreadful? Nonsense. They'll punish you for running away. You deserve to be punished. (p.36) For a little girl you're imagining a lot of big things. Why should they be scared of me? Am I such an unpleasant old lady? (pp.36-37) I think we've had enough gossip, don't you? (p.38)

But overindulgent love and familial pride cause her to relinquish fair-minded-doubt for self-righteous certainty. When she would be forced to acknowledge her granddaughter as a lying manipulator with a smutty mind, a "strange girl, a bad girl"(p.51) as Karen calls her, she loses her impartiality and maintains that she is "absolutely sure" (p.51) of her teachers' guilt in circumstances that render this impossible. In this suspenseful scene, Hellman, depicting her swing from indecision to closed mindedness, provides a realistically drawn character choosing hastily and incorrectly out of complex reasons and suppressed drives.

necessary for her. Thus, perhaps unconsciously, Hellman imbued the fabric of The Children's Hour with sympathy for lesbianism and indignation for its persecutors. Previously, few plays in the commercial theatre had dealt with the sensitive subject of homosexuality³⁹ and none positively, so Hellman was breaking new and rather uncomfortable ground. Broadway reviewers, sensitive to the attitudes of the times, ignored this element of the play. Instead they strove to acquit Hellman of the possible charge of sensationalism by extolling her "sincerity", "honesty", "frankness", "restraint", "good taste", "truthfulness", etc., and concentrated on describing the effects of the lie and the character of Mary Tilford. In justifying its suitability for the public, one periodical review even claimed Hellman "tiptoes across unholy ground with . . . unrelenting loathing of the slime."⁴⁰ Scholarly works as well have neglected Hellman's treatment of lesbianism in The Children's Hour with one exception. In The Changing World in Plays and Theatre, Anita Block, somewhat overstating her case, regards "the crux" of the play to be society's savage treatment of the homosexual" (p.123). She describes Martha as "immolated on the altar of cruelty toward the invert," and maintains that The Children's Hour "raises the important question of . . . the right of the homosexual to the fullest personal happiness" (p.126).

Ultimately, it is by creating complex, realistic, individualized characterizations for the two women accused - of lesbianism, particularly the one who in fact has repressed lesbian desires, that Hellman elicits the most sympathy and understanding for homosexuality. It should be noted that Hellman had a personal opportunity to gain insight into and compassion for a situation like Martha's. Before The Children's Hour was written, Hellman herself had experienced a deep love for her close friend Julia. Describing this relationship in Pentimento, she wrote:

I have had plenty of time to think about the love I
had for her, too strong and too complicated to be

defined as only the sexual yearnings of one girl for another. And yet certainly that was there. (p.114)

Perhaps this friendship made it possible for the playwright to paint a character who was both lesbian and human being, instead of depicting Martha as an alien creature, an "Other" unconnected with ordinary human experience. The playwright reveals her artistic integrity in her portrayal of the two victims as flawed, in contrast to the paragons of strength and virtue that would undoubtedly have emerged if the goal of the play was propaganda. Likewise, while critics often merged Martha and Karen together as, for example, "two active, intelligent, go-ahead young women"⁴¹ Hellman takes pains to differentiate them. The same situations serve to display individual traits for each, preventing their characterizations from blurring. In fact, two distinct victims rather than carbon copy characters heighten the impact of the play's ideas.

After audiences watch the flighty Ms. Mortar incompetently handle the bored students, Karen appears on stage, her positive qualities highlighted by sharp contrast. Hellman describes her favourably as "an attractive woman of twenty-eight, casually pleasant in manner, without sacrifice of warmth or dignity" (p.9 - 10), and her pupils both respect and are fond of her. Karen quickly displays her capacity for direct confrontation, for decisive action, and for reassurance, by disciplining one girl and telling another not to worry about an exam, "you'll come out all right" (p. 11). Thus the playwright initially depicts her as a figure of order and security. Hellman does not permit her to appear too perfect for long, but gradually unfolds a more complete picture. A limited world view forms the basis for Karen's agreeable traits. The teacher's abilities are dependent on a rather idealized conception of a logical, orderly world in which all may be rationally explained and efficiently handled. This conception lends an aura of optimism to the Karen of Act I and is crucial in accounting for her behaviour in the following two acts.

Two scenes in the first act reveal Karen's perspective in order to undercut it. In her confrontation with Mary Tilford, she is unable to recognize the irrational forces of hatred that propel the girl, and tries to deal with the little viper in a civilized manner. "Let's try to understand each other", (p.12) she says hopefully, promising she "won't be unreasonable." Her words only serve to antagonize Mary further, and we sense that Karen is competent but limited, unable to deal with powerful feelings that extend beyond the comfortable world of reason. Suitably, in Act II Karen will not believe Mary is responsible for initiating the slander. Her handling of Martha is equally unsuccessful, revealing her as not just optimistic but unrealistic as well. Without Martha's knowledge, she has decided to marry Cardin soon. Aware of Martha's sorrow and resentment of her relationship with the doctor (in the past she has comforted Martha by promising to postpone her wedding), she tries to placate her (and deceive herself) by announcing the forthcoming marriage as a minor change: "(cheerfully) Well, now there will be three of us. That'll be fun too" (p.15). Just as she could not perceive Mary's unreasoning hatred, she cannot acknowledge Martha's strong feelings of love and jealousy, dismissing her friend's apprehensions as "silly." Thus Karen's imperfections make for a more complex, three-dimensional characterization; at the same time, Hellman's portrayal of her still elicits positive response. Normal human shortcomings do not make the teachers responsible for their ruin, but they do allow the coming upheaval to arise organically from existing conditions.

A number of critics found it improbable that such an able, firm character would fall apart as quickly as Karen does following the lie. But by showing Karen's limitations, Hellman sufficiently motivates her collapse into passivity and inaction when even greater irrationality and stronger emotions prevail in the next two acts. The slander, propelled by chaotic forces of evil, pride, and ignorance, undercuts her world view and consequently the strength she derives from it: "But now it's all the nightmare" she declares, "there is no solid world" (p.61). Fittingly, in Act II Karen behaves as a

paralysed, confused, sufferer while Martha actively challenges Ms. Tilford; however, Hellman does not present her passivity as an inherent female trait, but instead as consistent with an individualized characterization. Hellman also displays her skill when the opportunity for courtroom logic, arising from Mary's keyhole mistake, awakens Karen to bravely fight against the accusation. In Act I, Hellman hints at Karen's dependency on Cardin. The first time Karen expresses powerful emotions occurs when, goaded by Martha, she exclaims "For God's sake, do you expect me to give up my marriage?" (p. 16) suggesting that she places Cardin first and the school second. This is underscored by Karen's allusion in Act III to the couple's plans to have a child as soon as possible. Thus, Hellman implies that Karen may be the less committed teacher of the two. But it must be noted that the playwright employs this relationship as a device to individualize the two women, create internal conflict between them and provide proof of Karen's heterosexuality, thereby emphasizing the groundlessness of the slander to make it that much more terrible. However, in doing so, Hellman uses stereotyped conceptions of romance, relying on typical ways women in love are supposed to act. Particularized motivations for Karen's strong feelings and behaviour founded on specific personality traits are needed. Perhaps, too, a more expressive effect could have been accomplished if the dramatist had left out the love angle, and shown two women without men immediately suspected by the community-- guilty until proven innocent by the presence of male lovers -- of having "something wrong" with them regardless of their actual sexual preferences.

This weak element in Karen's characterization asserts itself again in Act III. Her swing from idealization and optimism to pessimism and depression completes itself, and is in part responsible for her rejection of Cardin. In the interaction between them, Hellman allows complexity of character to become confusing vagueness. The dramatist hints at a number of reasons for Karen's decision: distrust of everyone, including Joe, protective love as Cardin makes it perfectly clear what a sacrifice it will be to his

career to go to Vienna, guilt and impotence resulting from the lie, disillusionment with Joe, and a realistic assessment of their situation. But none of these motives, though each would have been convincing, is sufficiently developed to explain her actions. One suspects when Karen rather vaguely tells Joe: "But we won't be all right. Not ever, ever, ever. I don't know all the reasons why" (p.68), that the requirements of plot were uppermost in Hellman's mind. Cardin originally functioned as proof of Karen's heterosexuality; now her loss of him provides evidence of the damage done to her, increasing dramatic impact. Likewise, as a rather stereotyped masculine character, his interaction with Karen adds little to a complex portrayal of her precisely because of this two-dimensionality.

Karen's reaction to Martha's confession is also disappointing. Hellman concentrates on eliciting dramatic power from the disclosure of lesbianism, and Karen's words are confined to implementing this effect. Crushed by the awful results of the lie, Karen is overwhelmed by the possibility of its partial truth. She feels so suffocated by Martha's admission that she places her hands over her ears in absolute denial. But whether her motivation is simply sheer emotional exhaustion or includes horror of lesbianism akin to Ms. Tilford's remains unclear. Ironically, she tells Martha they'll forget her words just after rejecting the same kind of statement from Cardin. In light of their intimate eight year relationship of common goals and shared deprivations, and after the warmth and good sense Hellman has established as part of Karen's nature, it is hard to believe that all Karen can finally say is "Go and lie down, Martha. You'll feel better" (p.72). Martha's confession is theatrically electrifying; however, a real confrontation, arising organically from both the characters, would have been more deeply satisfying. The complicated responses between the two women are forestalled by the requirements of the play's structure. Martha's suicide must be quickly prepared for, and Karen's rejection of her virtually signs her death warrant. Later in Act III Hellman has Karen declare that Martha "was good to us all" (p.73) but this recognition

is placed conveniently after Martha has destroyed herself, with Karen seemingly resigned, almost relieved, at her death. If it was Hellman's purpose to extend responsibility for the suicide to Karen, it would have been more effective if she'd portrayed her reactions in accordance with the characterization already established.

Following the suicide, Hellman again concentrates on an in-depth portrayal of Karen, focusing less on theatrical effects. Ms. Tilford's announcement of her grotesque error provides opportunity for a subtle touch by Hellman. Karen's response to the older woman is spoken in Martha's more violent language, characterized by her bitterness and vengefulness. Karen's total identification with Martha in this speech signifies an expression of mourning for her dead friend. After these words of rage, Karen emerges purely as herself, communicating new growth from her ordeal. With unexpected sympathy, she tells Ms. Tilford that Mary has "harmd us both, but she's harmed you more, I guess. (*Sits down beside Mrs. Tilford*) I'm sorry" (p.77). Unlike Ms. Tilford, Karen can transcend self-righteousness. She is compassionate in spite of the great harm inflicted on her. In showing Ms. Tilford mercy, Karen fulfills the central ideal of the play. The extent of Karen's development is underscored by her words at the start of the play when, more limited and complacent, she declares she doesn't much appreciate Portia's speech (p.10). Now, having shed her idealized world view, she acknowledges the evil, irrationality, and chaos that are part of the vision of reality Hellman communicates in her plays. Acceptance of this vision makes pity and compassion as mandatory as indignation. Karen's achievement is believable in light of the positive qualities Hellman has established for her character, and the ability to develop convincingly signifies the complexity of the characterization.

But growth has come at too high a price, for the learning process has been a destructive, cruel experience for Karen. Consequently the dramatist portrays the final outcome with deliberate ambiguity. Instead of neat resolution, Hellman remains

faithful to the complexities of character and situation, avoiding a melodramatic finish despite Ms. Tilford's last minute entrance. At the close of the play, Karen vacillates between numb hopelessness and the possibility of healing. Potential recovery is symbolized by her gesture of opening the window to find that "it feels very good" (p.78), while a bleak future is suggested by Karen's promise to write "if I ever have anything to say" (p.78). Thus Hellman creates interest on the part of the viewer for what will happen to Karen even after the final curtain. In contrast to Karen's initial optimism, Martha views the world more negatively. Described by Hellman as "nervous" and "high-strung" (p.13), she exhibits bitterness and protective sarcasm throughout the play until her final confession. The dramatist employs an excellent device to individualize Martha's characterization; the presence of the teacher's neurotic, affected aunt provides a solid psychological foundation for Martha's traits, particularly since the playwright arranges to have Mortar appear on stage first, in preparation. In reference to Mortar, Karen ironically remarks "you must have had a gay childhood" (p.14), thereby informing the audience that Mortar raised Martha. Martha replies bitterly: "Oh, I did. I did, indeed. God, how I used to hate all that --" (p.14). Knowing this selfish woman, the viewer comprehends the extent of Martha's neglect and mistreatment in the past and senses as fitting to her personality as well as to her particular situation the self-hatred and guilt, as well as anger, that Martha displays. Thus, although repressed lesbianism is the key to the emotions Martha expresses, Hellman depicts Martha's motivations with more complexity than this, effectively avoiding a stereotype. The dramatist makes greater use of a psychological perspective for Martha's characterization than for any other character in The Children's Hour; since Martha's situation would tend to be alien to audiences, this is an essentially good method of humanizing her portrayal.

The scenes in Act I which function as preparation for Martha's revelation support Hellman's mastery of psychological realism. The dramatist is neither obvious nor heavy-handed in

conveying repressed emotion; consequently Martha's lesbianism seems inevitable in retrospect, but not predictable. Threatened by the impending marriage, Martha further sublimates her hidden feelings for Karen into anxiety about the continued health of the school after the marriage and into insistence that Mortar leave because, as Martha tells the intruder, "we'll be better off alone" (p. 19). Fear of changing the status quo and pain from the weakening of close ties are depicted as legitimate concerns for Martha and not merely pretences for expressing unconscious desire, so her motivation takes on complexity. Even Martha's jealousy emerges as a facet of her personality rather than a stereotyped ingredient of lesbianism. Mortar ascribes Martha's jealousy to her "unnaturalness", but as the meddling aunt herself points out, Martha was possessive about her friends "even as a child" (p.20). When Martha hurls the electric "God damn you" (p.22) at Cardin, this intense possessiveness operates in conjunction with her homosexual desires, and, happily, her motives are not restricted by the playwright to an *a priori* hostility for men nor to an inability to attract them.

Moreover, throughout the play Hellman takes pains to emphasize the positive aspects of Martha's feelings for Karen, rather than portray these responses as corrupt or destructive. She suggests a close relationship between two women going beyond the accepted limits of expression for one of them, and Martha's gestures towards Karen are never devoid of affection. This undermines the twisted notions the other characters in the play have regarding lesbianism and communicates the idea that love is love between two human beings irrespective of gender. ~~This idea is reinforced by~~ Martha's strong desire for Karen's happiness in Act III as she insistently urges Karen to marry Cardin when it would have been easiest to undermine their relationship. Hellman paints Martha as almost exclusively unhappy and, aside from one or two references to the fun of her college days with Karen, Martha manifests an absence of joy. This prepares the viewer for Martha's suicide, but flattens the characterization, suggesting the stereotyped neurotic.

However appropriate Martha's unhappiness to the tense situation before the slander and the social exile after it, Hellman still manages to endow Karen with a strong potential for happiness despite their circumstances. What is missing is a dramatization of Martha's commitment to her pupils, including both a deep enjoyment of her profession and a display of her competency. This fulfillment would not have caused her suicide to be less believable, but would have provided increased motivation from her loss of it. Though Hellman implies this loss to underscore the destructive effects of the lie, she communicates Martha's relationship with her students only indirectly, via, for example, her comments to Mortar:

This is their home, and things shouldn't be said in it
that they can't hear. (p.21)

Perhaps the heavy focus on the characterization of Mary Tilford in Act I forestalled this necessary interaction. Perhaps, although the playwright was hailed as "frank" and "honest" for The Children's Hour, she wasn't frank enough to portray even a repressed lesbian relating positively to young adolescent girls.

Unlike Karen, Martha expresses strong emotions frequently, and she apprehends them in the other characters as well. Early in the play she perceives that Mary is "bad for the other girls. I don't know what it is -- it's a feeling I've got that it's wrong somewhere" (p.14), and Martha is correct in her intuition. Fittingly, in Act II it is Martha who immediately realizes that Mary is responsible for the lie, and that her motive is pure unreasoning hatred. Moreover, all her reactions in the second act are based firmly on what has already been established for the character. Given Martha's hot temper and her sense of the world as hostile, it is appropriate that she bring rage, belligerence and violent, threatening language to the confrontation with Ms Tilford, while Karen is overwhelmed. Only when Mary's accusations become more specific, drawing on actual events, does Martha, paralyzed with guilt by her unconscious leanings, become silent, and Karen, sure of her own inclinations,

take over. The exciting quality of the scene is due in good part to this intricate plotting on the basis of the two teachers' individual personalities.

In Act III, defeat and exile shatter Karen, while Martha appears stronger, displaying previously unseen kindness and gentleness in addition to her usual bitter sarcasm. This new warmth and protectiveness, directed primarily at Karen, round out her characterization and prepare the viewer for her admission of sexual love. So does the new frankness Martha exhibits when she informs Mortar that she hates her and always has. Martha is sustained by the possibility of escape for Karen by marriage to Cardin and flight to Vienna. The collapse of their relationship crushes Martha with guilt, breaking down her defenses and triggering the confrontation with Karen. Hellman executes the confession with skill and economy. What was repressed in the Martha of Acts I and II, has been half realized and suppressed in the course of her isolation. When the truth finally emerges, Hellman depicts Martha expressing out loud a realistic train of thought. At first rationalizing about how "thousands of women feel about other women" (p.71), she passes through full cognizance of her lesbianism to insistent elaborations and proofs of it and tells Karen:

It's funny; it's all mixed up. There is something in you, and you don't know it and you don't do anything about it. Suddenly a child gets bored and lies - and there you are seeing it for the first time. . . . In some way I've ruined your life. I've ruined my own. I didn't even *know*. (Smiles) There's a big difference between us now, Karen. I feel all dirty and- - (Puts out her hand, touches Karen's head) I can't stay with you any more, darling. (p.72)

Although the slander is responsible for forcing to the surface what would otherwise have remained repressed, Martha irrationally believes she is completely to blame for their ruin. The playwright

epitomizes here one of the most pernicious effects of a lie, that of causing the innocent to perceive their victimization as justified, with themselves at fault.

Other motivations besides guilt help to drive her into committing suicide. Martha is unable to comprehend the contrast between the love, unselfishness and affection she has shown Karen and the negative cultural conceptions about lesbianism she has internalized. Consequently, she believes she loves Karen in a "dirty" (p.72) way. Thus not only Karen and the community reject her, but she rejects herself in disgust. The final motivation for death is fear, exemplified when she tells Karen "I'm more afraid than you". (71) Her sexual inexperience, combined with society's image of lesbianism as a kind of uncontrollable disease, convince her she will be powerless to prevent herself from expressing her newly realized needs - - needs which inspire revulsion in everybody, including herself. She first starts by denying the child's slander but gradually she realizes the truth and tells Karen in a horrified tone "*I have loved you the way they said.*" She insists on confiding her dark secret to Karen, for she believes the latter has to know: "I've got to tell you how guilty I am". (71) In the final scene she insists on relating to Karen the agony she has gone through when she first realized her tendencies: "I've been praying I could convince myself of it. I can't, I can't any longer. It's there. I don't know how, I don't know why. But I did love you, I do love you.... maybe I wanted you all along; maybe I couldn't call it by a name; maybe it's been there ever since I first knew you - ". (p.71)

Thus, the motivations Hellman constructs for Martha's suicide enable it to appear believable. However, powerful dramatic requirements dictate her self-destruction more than individual situation and character do. Structurally, the play demands a climax and Martha's suicide provides it. The playwright hurriedly establishes the causes and proceeds to the suicide, sacrificing the needs of characterization to the larger demands of the play. Insufficient time is allotted between confession and martyrdom to

show the decision arising organically from within the character, thereby firmly maintaining character autonomy. Instead, Hellman relies on depicting such painful circumstances that self-destruction becomes plausible from the sheer awfulness of the situation itself. In his discussion of The Children's Hour, Marvin Felleheim observes that this kind of contrivance is only "theatrically convincing", "true to life" in merely a representational manner while lacking the inner consistencies of "high artistry."⁴²

So, too, thematic requirements play a large part in determining the action. Suicide serves as the perfect though melodramatic climax to the destructive power of slander. But in order to achieve this effect, the portrayal of society's treatment of the homosexual is prematurely terminated. Again it must be noted that Hellman maintained The Children's Hour was about a lie, not lesbianism. But homosexuality is too important a topic to be included merely for the sake of reinforcing another theme. Moreover, the dramatist could instead have portrayed either Karen committing suicide as she's certainly suffered enough tragic losses herself for this to be possible, rather than Martha, or Martha overwhelmed into only mistakenly imagining that she desires Karen sexually. In both cases, Hellman would have eliminated actual lesbianism while still effectively making her point about slander. As written, the revelation scene, especially Martha's "there's always been something wrong. Always - - as long as I can remember" (p. 71) cannot support the possibility of erroneous admission. Richard Moody points out that Martha's homosexuality was made even more explicit in earlier versions of the play, including a scene in which Martha "recalls her fascination in watching Karen undress when they were in college" (Lillian Hellman: Playwright, p.59). Perhaps Hellman tried to encompass too much in her first dramatic work; ironically, she leaves important issues unsettled in attempting to neatly tie up the play.

Sensitivity to audience response also undoubtedly motivated the playwright to include the suicide. Audiences could easily retain

sympathy for a lesbian so horrified by her own inclinations that she punishes herself with death, thereby conveniently relieving the audience of its own burden of distaste and disapproval. Shocked as the viewer may be, he or she can dismiss Martha as a tragic casualty while the play moves on. A more trenchant message would have been communicated had Martha been allowed lesbian existence on stage for more than ten minutes. Instead, quick death avoids the deeper problems of the situation; moreover, it eliminates the need for the audience to really investigate its attitude towards homosexuality and the character who manifests it which is much more problematic than a decision about slander. It is interesting to reflect on the potential results had the situation Martha describes in contrast to her own been the case: "They are the people who believe in it, who want it, who've chosen it" (p. 70). Just as a more serious commitment to her subject than Hellman evinces in this play would have probably been required, so an infinitely more difficult moral judgement would probably have emerged for the viewer. As conceived, Martha's image conveys too much compulsiveness, subtly conforming to the conception of homosexuality as ungovernable perversity which Hellman was presumably refuting. This image of compulsiveness undermines the character's autonomy as well. Appropriately, this portrayal allowed some reviewers to perceive the suicide as caused by neuroticism rather than persecution, and prompted others to believe Hellman intended the suicide as fitting conclusion to a confession of lesbianism, the only viable alternative once the shameful truth was out.

In addition, the revelation of lesbianism simply comes too late in the play for Hellman to deal with it satisfactorily. Consequently, there are unresolved emotional issues as well as ideological ones. Just when the characterization truly begins to sustain a life of its own, Hellman removes Martha and the relationship between the two women along with her. One can empathize with the New York Times reviewer who complained:

The Children's Hour seems to be a play which raises a major emotional issue that is never fully discussed. . . . This is to raise an expectation and to leave it only partly satisfied. . . . I wanted to know more of these women; I wanted Martha's tragic love to be not only stated but as fully grasped and communicated as the love of a man for a woman.⁴³

Perhaps if Hellman had lessened the role of Mary Tilford, this could have been better executed.

Despite these weaknesses, Hellman's treatment of homosexuality is remarkably free of stereotypes and negative images, especially when compared to the two most prominent plays on the subject previous to The Children's Hour. The Captive (1926) by Edouard Bourdet presents two images of female homosexuality, both quite unfavourable. Bourdet portrays one woman, "the captive", a prey to ungovernable passions who describes herself as "crazy" and "sick".⁴⁴ The other woman is an evil, manipulative temptress, deliberately never seen by the viewer so that her awful powers will be enhanced. The play is most memorable for its expression of the "masculine" perspective regarding lesbianism. The black widow's husband advises the lover of the victim caught in her web:

Fly from her, fly from her . . . They are shadows!
Don't go near them . . . they're a menace! . . . It's mysterious-terrible! Friendship, yes - - that's the mask. Under cover of friendship a woman can enter any house-hold, whenever and however she pleases . . . she can poison and pillage everything before the man whose home she destroys is even aware of what's happening to him. When finally he realizes things it's too late - - he is alone! Alone in the face of a secret alliance of two beings who understand one another because they are alike, because they're of the

same sex, because they're of a different planet than he, the stranger, the enemy! (The Captive, pp 148-150)

Lesbianism is perceived as a nasty triumphant reversal of "Otherness", monstrous and threatening, to the playwright as well as to the male characters, since it is men who are regarded as alien inferior beings subject to adverse mythologizing. Ironically, in the process of conveying this idea, this rather hysterical speech and the entire play creates new negative myths about lesbians.

If The Captive's images of homosexuality are of the sick and the evil, those communicated by Mordaunt Shairp's The Green Bay Tree (1933) are of the weak and the evil. The source of the play's title is Biblical and clearly reveals Shairp's attitude towards the male temptor of the work: "I myself have seen the wicked in great power and spreading himself like a green bay tree" (The Green Bay Tree, p.35). In the play, a weak-willed, selfish narcissistic young man, "a taker, a parasite, a bundle of sensations" (p.78), and a wicked, egotistical, scheming middle-aged man "a snake" (p. 61), and "rotten to the core" (p.51) vie on stage for whose characterization can be most loathsome. In contrast, Hellman includes a sympathetic portrait of male homosexuality in The Autumn Garden. Both The Captive and The Green Bay Tree look suspiciously like variations on nineteenth century melodrama's struggle between the Innocent and Vile Seducer. Compared to these plays, Hellman's depiction of Martha is quite an achievement.

The playwright also managed to avoid another prevalent stereotype, i.e. the "butch" lesbian - - mannish, abusive, sadistic -- often coupled with a passive, super feminine, masochistic female partner. As recently as 1966, in The Killing of Sister George⁴⁵ by Frank Marcus, this pair shows up. Alice ("Childie"), prey for both men and women, takes to dolls, while June ("George") fondly recalls her army day attempts to sexually assault two nuns, and forces her mate to eat a cigar butt as punishment for such crimes as yelling

"Take me, Isadore" (p.55) in her sleep. The notion that homosexuals would divide up traditional sex roles, instead, for example, of uniting in order to obliterate them, reinforces the cultural stereotypes of masculinity and femininity at the same time it burlesques them.

It is interesting to note that as late as 1961, the movie version of The Children's Hour had to be heavily censored before it was produced. Pauline Kael called the movie a "portentous lugubrious dirge"⁴⁶ and was probably right, even Hellman hated the movie. But Kael went on to complain:

Aren't we supposed to feel sorry for these girls because they're so hardworking, and because, after all, they don't do anything - - the lesbianism is all in the mind (I always thought this was why lesbians needed sympathy - - that there isn't much they can do). (p.176)

Kael's condescending attitude towards lesbianism contradicts her previous commentary but portrays that the image of the homosexual had not much improved by the early sixties. Hellman still had something valuable to communicate and suggested compassion for what is basically an illness.

Hellman also had something important to say about the economically independent female. She presents two competent, decisive women who are seriously committed to their profession, and does not succumb to the stereotype of the "career woman" for either of them. Instead of this popular myth, with its hollow, harshly aggressive and completely sexless image, the playwright depicts women heavily involved with their work still retaining their humanity and individual personalities. So, too, in The Children's Hour Hellman suggests it is because these women are independent and devoted to their jobs that the community finds them suspect. Thus she makes a vivid point about sexism while adding

believability to universal acceptance of the rumour. It is particularly significant that the playwright ~~makes~~ the central loss of the play that of the profession that the two women have struggled so hard to maintain. Cardin summarizes their tragedy when he indignantly tries to explain to his aunt the harm that she is causing them:

They've worked eight long years to save enough money to buy that farm, to start that school. They did without everything that young people ought to have. You ~~wouldn't know~~ about that. That school meant things to them: self-respect, and bread and butter, and honest work. Do you know what it is to try so hard for anything? Well, now it's gone. (p.49-50)

For Hellman, economic opportunity is the key to woman's independence, the only thing that will truly free her. The message The Children's Hour conveyed in 1936 is in complete accord with her later views that she openly expressed on the position of women in America:

We're fighting a society that won't give you a chance to support yourself. . . . it's not so much a question of being brave as it is a question of a society that will allow you to be brave. It's fine to be brave, but if you ~~can't find a job to be brave with~~, then you can't eat by being brave, and it ~~doesn't mean much~~.⁴⁷

1. See Burns Mantle, et al., The Best Plays of 19-- (New York, annual volumes). New York: Dodd, Mead.
2. See Doris V. Falk, Lillian Hellman, (Frederick Ungar Publishing Co. New York, 1978), pp.viii-ix.
3. Emory Lewis, Stages: The Fifty-Year Childhood of the American Theatre (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1969), pp. 81 and 79.
4. Jacob H. Adler, Lillian Hellman, Southern Writers Series 4 (Austin, Texas: Steck-Vaughn, 1969), p.41.
5. John Gassner, Theater at the Crossroads, (New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), p.41.
6. Malcolm Goldstein, "The Playwrights of the 1930's," The American Theater Today, ed. Alan S. Downer (New York, Basic Books, 1967), p.36.
7. Atkinson Brooks, Broadway (New York, Macmillan, 1970), p.298.
8. See Burns Mantle and Emory Lewis.
9. See Katherine Lederer, Lillian Hellman, (Southwest Missouri State University, Twayne Publishers, Boston, U.S.A., 1979), 1-20.
10. Lillian Hellman, Six Plays, (New York, Vintage Books, 1979), p.viii
11. Tom F. Driver, Romantic Quest and Modern Query: A History of the Modern Theater (New York: Delacorte Press, 1970), p. 298.
12. Lillian Hellman, The Little Foxes, The Collected Plays, (Boston, Little, Brown, 1971), p.182.

13. Lillian Hellman, Pentimento, A Book of Portraits, (Boston, 1973), p.206.
14. Rene Wellek and Austin Warren, Theory of Literature, 3rd ed. (New York, Harvest Book; Harcourt, Brace and World, 1956), p.213.
15. M. H. Abrams, A Glossary of Literary Terms, 3rd ed. (New York, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), p.141.
16. Driver, Romantic Quest, op.cit.p.426.
17. Arnold Hauser, "The Origins of Domestic Drama," trans. Stanley Godman in Collab. with the author, The Theory of the Modern Stage: An Introduction to Modern Theatre and Drama, ed. Eric Bentley (Middlesex, England, Penguin Books, 1968), p.409.
18. For an extended discussion of this idea see: Hauser, "Domestic Drama," and George Lukacs, "The Sociology of Modern Drama," trans. Lee Bazandall, in Bentley, The Theory of the Modern Stage, op.cit. pp.403-450.
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20. ~~I.L. Styan, The Dramatic Experience, ill. David Gentleman~~ (Cambridge, England, The University Press, 1965), pp.67-68.
21. The Second Sex, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952). See also Helen Crowley and Susan Himmelweil, ed. Knowing Women, Feminism and Knowledge, (Polity Press & The Open University, 1992); J. Bardwick, Women in Transition, (Brighton, Harvester, 1980); T. Brennan, ed. Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis, (London, Routledge, 1989); Trihn T. Minh-Ha, ed. "She the inappropriate/d Other", Discourse, (No.8, 1986/87).

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24. Percy Hammond, New York: Herald Tribune, 21 Nov. 1934.
25. Lillian Hellman, New York Times, (14 Dec. 1952, p.3).
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27. Theatre Arts, 19 (April 1935) :269.
28. Robert Garland, New York World-Telegram, (21 Nov. 1934)
29. John Gassner, The Theatre In Our Times (New York, 1954), p.405.
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31. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, The Complete Poetical Works of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Poems appear as edited by H. E. Scudder in the 1886 Riverside edition, (Cambridge Edition, Boston, 1922), p.201.
32. New Statesman and Nation, 12 (21 Nov. 1936): 810.
33. Walter Kerr, Herald Tribune, New York, 19 December, 1952.
34. Gilbert W. Gabriel, New York American, 21 Nov. 1934.
35. Lillian Hellman, New York Times, 14 December 1952, p.3.
36. Malcolm Goldstein: "Body and Soul on Broadway," Modern Drama 7 (Feb. 1965) :412-413.

37.Nora Ephron, "Lillian Hellman Walking, Cooking, Writing, Talking," New York Times book review section, 23 Sept. 1973, p.2.

38. When moderating the American Scholar forum entitled "Women on Women" (41 [Autumn, 1972] : 499-620), Hellman remarked that
"there is still a good living and a great many mink coats to be earned by pretense. Respectable whoredom, Marx wrote about it Upper-class ladies have had a great deal to gain by playing one game The upper-class lady, or the middle-class lady, has made out very well as the weaker and the more fragile of the pair, husband and wife" (p.608). See also "Lillian Hellman's Indignation" in The Dramatic Event: An American Chronicle, (New York: Horizon Press, 1954), pp.74-77.

39. The two most prominent ones are The Captive (1926) by Edouard Bourdet, whose entire New York cast was arrested on obscenity charges and Mordaunt Shairp's The Green Bay Tree (1933) in which homosexual relations are implied but never stated explicitly.

40. Catholic World, 140 (January 1935): 466.

41. Elizabeth Drew, Discovering Drama (New York, W.W Norton, 1937), p.30.

42. Marvin Felheim, "The Autumn Garden: Mechanics and Dialectics," Modern Drama 4 (May 1961) p.192.

43. Charles Morgan, "American Week in London," New York Times, 12 Nov. 1936, sec, p.2.

44. The Captive, trans. (original in French) Arthur Hornblow, Jr., (New York: Brentano's Publishers, 1926), p.169.

45. Frank Marcus, The Killing of Sister George, (New York, Bantam Books, Random House, 1967).

46. Pauline Kael, I Lost It at the Movies, Atlantic Monthly Press Book (Boston, 1965) p.175.

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