The Children's Hour Study Guide

The Children's Hour by Lillian Hellman

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Introduction

Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour* premiered in New York at the Maxine Elliot Theatre, on November 20, 1934, with a cast of relatively unknown actors. The play was based on an essay the playwright had encountered titled "Closed Doors; or, The Great Drumsheugh Case." It related the true story of two female teachers who were condemned by their community when a student alleged that they were having a homosexual affair. It was produced and directed by Herman Shumlin, for whom Hellman had been working as a script reader. Shumlin knew the risks of bringing the work of a novice playwright directly to the Broadway stage without an out-of-. town tryout, but he had great faith in the play. From the outset, he was confident of the work's quality and felt that it needed little of the refinement and rewriting that is generally done during preview performances

The risk paid great dividends. The play was a major commercial success and almost immediately earned the playwright a lasting place in the American theater. It remained on the boards at the Elliot for 691 performances, which, at the time, set the record for the longest single-venue run in theater history. Among other things, it earned Hellman about $ 125,000 and netted her further career opportunities, including a contract for writing the first film adaptation of the work

The production was helped by its reviews, which were generally favorable. Some, like those of Brooks Atkinson and Joseph Wood Krutch, did complain about the last part of the play, which they was felt was too melodramatic in its final array of coincidences and too heavy in its moralizing; but most critics found little to complain of and enthusiastically welcomed Hellman as one of Broadway's newest luminaries.

Because of its theme, *The Children's Hour* also gained some notoriety. Initially, it was banned in Boston, Chicago, and London. The flap over its content also scared off the Pulitzer Prize selection committee, which refused to attend a single per- formance of the play. The uproar and likely censorship by the Hays Office also forced Hellman to turn the central adult conflict into a standard love and jealousy triangle in her film adaptation, released in 1936 as *These Three.*

Ironically, it was the theme of the play that kept it relevant enough to lead to a revision and stage revival in 1952, at which time it also served as an oblique criticism of the hearings then being conducted by the House Un-American Activities Committee. By that time, Hellman had been blacklisted (forbidden employment for her political beliefs) in Hollywood, which added fuel to the continuing controversy over the play. It remained banned in Boston, but by 1962, when another screen adaptation was released, its frank if understated treatment of the lesbian theme no longer fanned the fires of moral outrage, allowing a much more objective assessment of Hellman's considerable achievement.

Author Biography

Lillian Hellman, born in New Orleans, Louisiana, on June 20, 1906, was the only child of Max and Julia Newhouse Hellman. Her paternal grandfather, Bernard Hellman, had emigrated from Germany in 1848 and settled in the city's Jewish community, where her father grew up. Her mother's family, from Alabama, had banking and other commercial interests in New York, where, in 1911, her father, a shoe merchant, moved the family when an embezzling partner forced him into bankruptcy.

While growing up, Hellman made annual treks to New Orleans to stay with her two spinster aunts. Her life in New Orleans was ethnically and culturally insulated from the more rustic (and conservative) life and values of the agrarian South, yet some contact with its traditions was inevitable and these values stayed with Hellman for her whole life. Her schooling was entirely northern, however. After high school, she briefly studied at New York and Columbia universities, but, in 1925, she took a job with a publishing firm as a reader and married Arthur Kober, a press agent. The couple went to Paris to edit the *Pans Comet,* an English-language magazine.

After returning to America, Hellman worked as a writer in Hollywood, where she met her lifelong friend, Dashiell Hammett, the mystery writer. She divorced Kober in 1932 and began work as a reader for the Broadway producer, Herman Shumlin. By then she had already collaborated on a play called*, Dear Queen,* which was never produced or published.

In 1934, Hellman presented Shumlin with a draft of her play *The Children's Hour.* He was much taken with the play, yet, because of its frank content, he had to produce it with a cast of unknowns, a serious risk. The play opened at the Maxine Elliot Theater on November 20, 1934, becoming an immediate hit, lasting through 691 performances, and breaking all previous box office and attendance records.

The production turned Hellman into an overnight celebrity and earned her about $125,000, a considerable sum at the tune. She also wrote a film adaptation for Samuel Goldwyn (the head of the powerful Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer studio) while working on another stage play, *Days to Come,* which, in 1936, turned into a Broadway flop.

After becoming deeply involved in anti-fascist groups and traveling to Europe to witness the atrocities in the Spanish Civil War, Hellman garnered a new triumph with her 1939 staging of *The Little Foxes.* She then advanced her anti-fascist views in *Watch on the Rhine* (1941) and the screenplay *The North Star* (1943). These works, bordering on propaganda, and her association with leftist organizations would eventually lead her into trouble when congressional committees, headed by Senator Joseph McCarthy, began investigating communism in America. By 1948, when she planned to adapt Theodore Dreiser's novel *Sister Carrie* to the screen, she had been put on Hollywood's infamous blacklist (a list of communists and communist-sympathizers who were considered "unemployable" due to their political beliefs), where she remained for almost twenty years.

Meanwhile. Hellman continued to write for the stage. Her 1946 play. *Another Part of the Forest,* was followed by *The Autumn Garden* (1951). an adaptation of French playwright Jean Anouilh"s *L'Akmette* entitled *The Lark* (1955). a libretto for the Leonard Bernstein musical *Caridide* (1956), *Toys in the Attic* (I960), and an adaptation of Burt Blechman's novel *How Much?* entitled *My Mother. My. Father, and Me* (1963). Prompted in part by the deaths of friends, including, in 1961. Hammett and. in 1%7, poet Dorothy Parker, Hellman turned to writing memoirs, completing three such books before her own death on June 30, 1984: *An Unfinished Woman* (1969), *Pentiwento* (1973). and *Scoundrel Tune ([91b).*

Plot Summary

Act I

The Children's Hour opens in the living room of a New England farmhouse that Martha Dobie and Karen Wright have converted into the Wright-Dobie School for girls. A sewing class and recitation arc in progress, under the disconnected control of Mrs. Lily Mortar, Martha's aunt. Student Peggy Rogers reads aloud from Shakespeare, while most of the other girls, somewhat chaotically, carry on with other activities, including sewing, cutting hair, and parsing Latin verbs. Mary Tilford enters very tardily, carrying some discarded, wilted flowers with which to placate the easily flattered Mrs. Mortar. Mary is clearly willful and manipulative, but she seems no match for Karen Wright, who sees through her ploys easily.

Karen enters and quickly disabuses Mary of the belief that she can get away with her lying claim that she picked the flowers. After the other children are dismissed. Mary takes: another tack, complaining about being blamed for everything, but Karen is not very sympathetic and announces that Mary is to be punished and is prohibited from leaving the school grounds for two weeks. Mary then falls to the floor, feigning a heart attack and sobbing that she is unable to breathe. Karen responds by sending Lily Mortar off to have Martha Dobie call Dr. Joe Cardin. Karen's fiance and Mary's uncle.

After Karen carries Mary out of the room, she and Martha discuss the troublesome girl, their problems with Martha's Aunt Lily, and Karen's marriage plans. Joe Cardin enters and almost immediately goes off to examine Mary. After Karen leaves, Martha and Lily talk, gradually working into a heated exchange when Martha suggests thai her flighty and sellish aunt go to London at Martha and Karen's expense. In a lit of pique. Lily accuses Martha of being jealous of Dr. Cardin, calling Martha's feelings for Karen '¦unnatural." The loud altercation is overheard by two students, who are listening from the staircase outside.

Joe returns, announcing that there is nothing wrong with Mary. When he starts talking of his forthcoming marriage, Martha gets very upset and cries on his shoulder. Karen then returns and asks Martha to call in Mary and the two eavesdropping students. She decides to reassign the girls' rooms, hoping to counteract Mary's bad influence. When the girls are left alone, Mary forces the others to tell her what they overheard. She then decides to go to her grandmother's house with her incubating scheme to destroy Martha and Karen, and, as the act ends, she extorts money from one of the girls through physical intimidation.

Act II, Scene 1

The second act opens on the same night, in the living room at Mrs. Tilford's house, just as Mary arrives, having run away from the Wright-Dobie School. She is grilled by Mrs.

Tilford's suspicious maid, Agatha, who is wise to child's devious ways. Agatha informs Mrs. Tilford of her grandchild's return; the grandmother follows up with her own interrogation. At first, she too is incredulous and dismisses the child's complaints of maltreatment at the hands of Karen and Martha as exaggerated nonsense. She believes Mary is simply being foolish and making an emotional mountain out of a mound of childish, irrational fears, and she is determined to make Mary return to the school. Desperate, the girl begins spinning a vicious web of mnu-endos and accusations, gradually arousing Mrs Tilford's doubts. The woman is finally convinced when Mary whispers her charges against Martha and Karen, who, she claims, have actively engaged in a lesbian affair. The scene ends with Mrs. Tilford on the telephone, talking first to Dr. Cardin and then to Mrs. Munn, the first of the parents to whom she will spread Mary's poisonous libel.

Act II, Scene 2

A few hours later, still in the living room at Mrs. Tilford's house, Agatha warns Mary to behave when Rosalie Wells comes to spend the night. Rosalie, Mary's schoolmate, has been taken from school, thanks to the slander passed on to the parents of the Wright-Dobie girls by Mrs. Tilford. Rosalie and Mary do not like each other, but Mary is able to intimidate the other girl because she knows that Rosalie had stolen a bracelet from Helen Burton. Threatened with exposure, Rosalie gives a solemn promise to support whatever Mary says.

Immediately thereafter, Dr. Cardin enters. Mrs. Tilford searches for a delicate way to convey what she believes about Karen and Martha, but before she can explain why she feels that Joe should not marry Karen, Martha and Karen come in to confront Mrs. Tilford with what they have discovered from one of the girls' mothers that they are accused of being lovers. Joe sides with Martha and Karen, insisting that Mary face the women with her story, but Mrs. Tilford initially refuses to allow it, believing that Karen and Martha are the brazen liars. Joe persists, however, and the girl is brought in. Under questioning, her lies become very obvious, but, on the verge of being completely unmasked, she claims that it was Rosalie who witnessed the alleged sexual encounters of Martha and Karen, At the curtain, Rosalie confirms the story, fearful that Mary will carry out her threats to tattle on her.

Act III

The action returns to the school's living room in November, several months later. In the opening conversation between Martha and Karen, it is revealed that the two women had lost a libel suit brought against Mrs. Tilford. The pair are dejected, uncertain as to what to do. They have been ostracized by the small community, their reputations destroyed. After a grocery boy appears with a delivery and they are subjected to his smutty giggles, Lily Mortar arrives from her European tour. Selfish and insensitive, she is surprised that her niece, Martha, is less than delighted to see her. She does not try to understand the anger of Martha and Karen, which arises from Lily's failure to return to America to serve

as a witness in the civil suit against Mrs. Tilford. Martha confesses that she always hated Lily, forcing the woman to leave just as Dr. Cardin arrives.

Joe at first insists that Karen marry him immediately and that they take Martha with them to Vienna, where he had gone to school. He admits that he does not really want to go to Europe but insists that it is their only option. After Martha leaves, Karen forces Joe to ask the question that she knows must trouble him□whether there is any truth behind the slander. Saddened by his lack of trust in her, Karen convinces Joe that they must put their relationship on hold and sends him away.

When Martha returns and learns what Karen has done, she confesses that, in fact, there is some truth in Mary's accusations, that her attraction to Karen has been physical, though she was unaware of it until Mary forced her to face herself honestly. Karen, very upset, sends Martha off to rest, but Martha, burdened with guilt for ruining Karen's life and her own self-discovery, shoots and kills herself.

After Aunt Lily frantically rushes in to announce to the emotionally drained Karen what has happened. Agatha enters, begging that the contrite Mrs. Tilford be allowed an audience. Over Lily's objections. Karen agrees to see the woman. Mrs. Tilford then enters and explains that she has discovered the truth. She promises to make restitution, but Karen tells her that is loo late, that Martha is dead, and that she plans to go away after Martha's funeral. Although she refuses to forgive Mrs. Tilford. at the end she allows her some hope that she and Joe can restore their relationship and that she will accept the older woman's financial help.

Act 1

Act 1 Summary

The Children's Hour is a three-act play set in the Wright-Dobie School for girls in the 1930's in a small town in Massachusetts. The school was founded by two single women, Martha Dobie and Karen Wright. The play was considered very controversial for its time because of its obvious theme of lesbianism.

The first act opens during an afternoon in April in the study-room of the converted farmhouse that houses the school. Several girls aged twelve to fourteen are busy sewing or studying or working on various projects. The room in monitored by Mrs. Lily Mortar, a woman of forty-five who is dressed more glamorously than the situation warrants. Mrs. Mortar, who is Martha Dobie's aunt, sits in a large chair with her head leaning back and her eyes closed as she listens to Peggy, one of the girls, recite a Shakespeare lesson.

As a few of the other girls are working on their Latin declensions, Mrs. Mortar chides Peggy to put more conviction into her recitation. Suddenly one of the other girls, Mary Tilford, enters the room and Mrs. Mortar chastises the girl for her tardiness. Mary presents Mrs. Mortar with a bouquet of wilted wildflowers in the hopes of lessening the older woman's wrath. Her plan has worked, as Mrs. Mortar seems amused and pleased to have received the flowers.

Mary's ploy does not work on Karen Wright, however, who has entered the room shortly after Mary's arrival. Karen reveals that the flowers had been seen in a nearby trashcan that morning, so Mary had not picked them for Mrs. Mortar but retrieved them opportunistically to present to the woman to ease any possible wrath.

Karen dismisses the other girls and reveals Mary's punishment, which is confinement to the school grounds for two weeks. Mary laments her fate and the injustice that is perpetually inflicted on her and falls to the floor claiming a heart attack. Karen carries Mary to another room to rest and sends Mrs. Mortar to find Martha and Dr. Joe Cardin, who is Martha's fiancé and also Mary's uncle.

Martha arrives as the scene and she and Karen discuss Mary's disruptive behavior, which has been apparent ever since the girl arrived at the school. Karen also broaches the subject of Mrs. Mortar and Martha agrees that the old woman needs to leave the school. She too has become a disruptive force by always preaching to the girls and recalling her glory days as an actress.

Karen shares with Martha that Joe has asked her to marry him, a fact that visibly upsets Martha. Karen tries to calm her saying that her commitment to the school will not change. In addition, the school has made enough money so that it can afford to send

Mrs. Mortar back to London to live among her friends and old colleagues. Joe arrives and visits with Mary to determine the source of her latest illness.

Karen leaves the room and Mrs. Mortar, who has been keeping Mary company in the other room, emerges at the request of Dr. Cardin. The old woman's irritation extends to her niece and the two women argue until Martha explains that the school is prepared to send Mrs. Mortar to London. Startled and hurt, Mrs. Mortar retaliates and accuses Martha of having inappropriate feelings toward Karen. Unbeknownst to the two women, their argument is heard by a few of the girls who are listening outside the door. Martha vows to address the issue later, but Mrs. Mortar is not content with this temporary resolution and leaves the room in an agitated state.

Joe emerges from the side room and announces that Mary has not had a heart attack and is in perfectly fine health. Apparently Mary has a history of exaggeration in order to garner attention and this is just another episode. Martha asks Dr. Cardin to speak to Mary's grandmother, Mrs. Tilford, about the girl's behavior. Dr. Cardin resists and Martha is visibly upset. The doctor embraces Martha in an attempt to comfort her.

Karen returns and she and Martha agree to separate Mary and her cohorts, who had been caught listening at the door. Mary launches into a crying fit and Dr. Cardin reprimands her, warning her to stop causing such turmoil at the school with such emotional outbursts. Karen and Dr. Cardin leave the room and Mary throws a pillow at the door, kicking a table, which causes a glass ornament to fall and break. The other girls are frightened, but Mary vows to leave the school in spite of her punishment. Mary is low on funds for her little expedition, so she coerces and physically threatens Peggy to part with her small amount of savings.

Act 1 Analysis

There is important foreshadowing in this act in the character traits of Martha and Mary. Martha is a bit neurotic and unsure of herself and has an unnatural reliance upon her friend Karen. Martha's nervous tendencies suggest a weakened emotional state, which makes her vulnerable to outside forces. Mary's manipulative and cunning behavior have established her as a troublemaker at the school and as the act closes, the girl's determination and defiance position her as a threat and a destructive force.

Mrs. Mortar, whose name suggests a bond-building quality, is actually just the opposite because she alienates the girls. She also creates disruption between Karen and Martha by suggesting that Martha has unnatural feelings for Karen, a friend and business partner.

The geographic location of the school positions it not only in a small town with provincial mindsets, but also in the heart of Massachusetts, an area well known for puritanical value systems. The tension and conflict inevitably create drama when good versus evil plays out within such a backdrop.

Act 2, Scene 1

Act 2, Scene 1 Summary

Mary has followed through on her plan to escape the school and has arrived at the home of her grandmother, Mrs. Tilford. Agatha, Mrs. Tilford's maid, questions Mary on her unexpected appearance at the house. It is obvious that Agatha is used to Mary's cunning behavior and the woman is suspicious of the girl in spite of her protestations that she has become homesick and misses her grandmother.

Agatha summons Mrs. Tilford, who is also wary of Mary's sudden appearance and declares that the child will be driven back to school immediately. At the mention of this fate, Mary launches into claims of mistreatment at the hands of Karen and Martha. Mrs. Tilford passes off such exaggerations and reprimands Mary for her malicious behavior. Mary is relentless in her goal to damage the credibility of the two headmistresses and makes accusations about inappropriate behavior between Karen and Martha.

Initially, Mrs. Tilford ignores Mary's comments, but the girl's insistence arouses her suspicions. According to Mary, all the girls have known about the unnatural behavior as witnessed through a keyhole in a bedroom door. The girls have heard unusual noises coming from the room and their witnessing this behavior has troubled all the girls.

Mary's convictions finally lead Mrs Tilford to at least investigate the claims. Mary is dismissed and Mrs. Tilford phones Dr. Cardin and Mrs. Munn, the mother of one of the other girls who attends the school.

Act 2, Scene 1 Analysis

Mary's behavior in the first two acts would lead the reader to believe that she has come from an abusive or negative environment. Mrs. Tilford, however, who is the grandmother who has raised the child, is a pleasant, reasonable woman and gives no hint of malicious behavior. Mary's cunning and manipulative ways seem to stem from some inner turmoil or emotional disturbance.

Mary symbolizes the evil force, which is the catalyst in all good versus evil dramas. Mary's role is particularly reminiscent of the young girls in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter,* who initiate the famous witch trials that also occurred in Massachusetts.

Act 2, Scene 2

Act 2, Scene 2 Summary

This scene also takes place in Mrs. Tilford's living room, where Agatha is making preparations for Rosalie, one of the girls from the school, to spend the night. Mary is hiding when Rosalie first enters the living room and she makes noises to scare the already nervous Rosalie. Mary does not particularly like Rosalie, but due to Mrs. Tilford's phone calls about the situation at the school, Rosalie's parents, who are in New York, have given their permission for Rosalie to stay at Mrs. Tilford's. This is so she will be away from the inappropriate influences of the headmistresses at the school.

Mary realizes that she needs allies to continue the false charges against Miss Dobie and Miss Wright, so she blackmails Rosalie. Mary threatens to tell the adults that Rosalie has stolen a bracelet belonging to Helen Burton, another girl at the school. Rosalie had only borrowed the bracelet and intended to return it, but has not done it yet.

Soon after, Dr. Cardin arrives and Mrs. Tilford shares the reason for her distress. The doctor cannot believe the allegations against Karen and Martha, especially since they stem from such an evil child as Mary, who is prone to fabrications. Mrs. Tilford continues that she does not want Dr. Cardin to marry Karen and the doctor is outraged at such an intrusion into their lives.

Karen and Martha arrive at the house intent on confronting Mrs. Tilford, in light of the fact that the parents of all the students have removed their daughters from the school. The headmistresses are outraged that the lies of a malicious child can be allowed to continue and create havoc. Dr. Cardin sides with Karen and Martha and questions Mary, who stalwartly sticks to her story of inappropriate behavior. Even though the women catch some flaws in Mary's interpretation of events, the child recovers quickly and is convincing enough to her grandmother, who asks the two women to leave the house.

Rosalie is called in to collaborate Mary's story. When she cannot, Mary threatens her with revealing the stolen bracelet incident and Rosalie complies with the story, which Mary has fabricated against the women. Martha threatens Mrs. Tilford with a libel suit the next day and Mrs. Tilford warns the women that it is in their best interest to leave quietly and move away.

Act 2, Scene 2 Analysis

Mary's venom has spread to not only her grandmother, but to all the parents of the girls who attend the school, who withdraw their daughters. The impact of the words of a malicious child penetrated the structure of the institution so quickly and with such evil intent that it's almost as if acid has been used. It's interesting to note that the parents do not consider addressing the headmistresses before taking such drastic action.

In the time when this play was written, lesbianism was not a public topic and certainly not condoned as proper behavior among those with young people in their charge. The adults adhere to age-old behavior patterns of killing something that is not understood or widely accepted, which ironically validates Mary's behavior and plants the seed for her future successes.

Act 3

Act 3 Summary

This act takes place back in the study room at the school, which is now shut up tightly. It is obvious that it is now a lifeless place. It is ten days after the conclusion of the libel trial and Karen and Martha sit quietly defeated in purpose and spirit. The relentless ringing of the phone and the grocery delivery boy are the only signs of outside life as the women have sequestered themselves in the farmhouse to avoid the ridicule and shame inflicted by the judgment in the trial.

The sense of depression weighs heavily on both women, who cannot project a life outside the one that they had worked so hard to achieve. The trial had been widely publicized, so Karen and Martha know that there are few places they can go where they would be allowed to teach young girls.

Amazingly, Mrs. Mortar arrives as if nothing has transpired, since she went to Europe months ago. Martha chastises the woman for not answering the telegrams asking for Mrs. Mortar to return to testify on Martha and Karen's behalf. Mrs. Mortar's testimony would have been a pivotal point in the trial and her aunt's refusal to return prompts Martha to reveal her hatred for the woman.

Dr. Cardin arrives and announces that he has sold his house, secured a position in Vienna and plans to marry Karen right away, taking Martha along with them. Together, the three can escape the morbid life in Massachusetts and start over in Europe. Karen knows that Dr. Cardin does not really want to return to Vienna, but he insists that it is necessary for all of them right now to escape and start new lives. Martha is almost relieved at the possibility of some reprieve from the dismal situation and leaves to start dinner.

Karen takes this opportunity alone with Dr. Cardin to ask whether or not he truly believed her innocence in the trial and he declares that he does. Karen presses him to know if he really wants to ask the question about her relationship with Martha, which he does. Karen knows at that moment that she cannot marry him. The doctor's ability to doubt her has damaged their relationship and she asks Dr. Cardin to go away for a couple days to reconsider the marriage.

Martha comes back into the room to find Dr. Cardin gone. Karen explains the situation and Martha begs Karen to go after the doctor, but Karen is resigned to the fact that he will never return. Both women are plunged into deep despair at this point and finally Martha admits that there had been some truth in the allegations related to the trial. Martha has had intimate, loving feelings toward Karen. Karen tells Martha that it is the depression that makes her say something like that, but Martha persists.

Mary's allegations have forced Martha to look at the situation rationally and she had to be honest with herself and with Karen. Martha leaves the room to lie down and a few minutes later a gunshot is heard in the house. Mrs. Mortar and Karen discover Martha's lifeless body. Mrs. Mortar is instantly concerned for her own welfare.

Soon after, Agatha knocks at the door asking if Mrs. Tilford may come in. Agatha has called for days but neither Karen nor Martha answered the phone. Karen reluctantly agrees to see Mrs. Tilford. She enters to a cold greeting by Karen, who is now in shock from Martha's declaration of love and her suicide over the matter. Mrs. Tilford admits that she was wrong to let the issue come to trial, because she has found out that Mary had lied and had coerced Rosalie to do the same.

Mrs. Tilford is wracked with grief and Karen informs the woman of Martha's suicide, which only exacerbates the despair of everyone involved. Karen shares with Mrs. Tilford that she will not be marrying Dr. Cardin either, so her life has literally been destroyed. Everything that Karen loved has been taken from her and she is not interested in hearing about Mrs. Tilford's distress.

Mrs. Tilford does offer up a formal public apology, a reversal of the judgment and financial retribution. Karen accepts the offerings so that it will ease Mrs. Tilford and moves to the window, opens it and sits on the ledge to let in some fresh air.

Act 3 Analysis

Good has finally triumphed over evil but there have been some high prices paid. The themes of sorrow and forgiveness do surface when Mrs. Tilford reveals the truth and offers restitution. This woman is in contrast to Mrs. Mortar, who is related to Martha and who has accepted Martha's support, yet could not support Karen and Martha when they needed her testimony. The author presents some hope of redemption for destructive behavior, in that Mrs. Tilford does try to atone for her actions in the only ways she knows how.

Unfortunately, at a time when Martha needed the support normally offered by family members, her aunt was not available to her. The author shows us that there are differing levels of destruction. Mrs. Tilford took aggressive action by taking the issue to court, but Mrs. Mortar was just as guilty by her inaction and refusal to help in the trial when her participation would probably have reversed the decision.

The issue of deception emerges as a strong lesson in this act in the children as well as the adults. Mary and Rosalie's actions have created havoc and ruin to Karen's and Martha's lives by the lies they have perpetuated. Ironically, it is Mary's lies that prompt Martha to question her own true feelings for Karen and had she been able to do that originally, a good amount of distress may have been prevented.

At the end of the play, the author also provides the theme of hopefulness, suggesting that there is redemption after intentional harm and the loss of everything that defines a person's life, when there is strength of character.

Characters

Agatha

A no-nonsense, middle-aged maid in the employ of Amelia Tilford. She is stem and straight-laced with Mary, who calls her "stupid." although Agatha clearly sees through Mary's deceptions. Agatha's attempts to make the child into a "lady" are frustrated by Mrs. Tilford, who is deaf to the maid's common-sense **observations.** Agatha also attempts to support Matha and Karen in their efforts to convince Mrs. Tilford that Mary concocted her story to destroy the young teachers.

Aunt Lily

See Lily Mortar

Helen Burton

One of the girls at Karen and Martha's school, she plays a limited role. It is her bracelet that classmate Rosalie Wells "borrows." an act which allows Mary to blackmail Rosalie into confirming Mary's iies about Karen and Martha. Helen is one of the first to be pulled out of the school when Mrs, Tilford begins spreading the (iction that Karen and Martha are lesbian lovers.

Dr. Joseph Cardin

Cardin, about thirty-five, is a relaxed and amiable doctor and Karen Wright's fiance. His casual dress reflects his warm, easy-going nature. He is also gracious and humorous and seems ideally suited to Karen. Like her. he recognizes that his cousin, Mary Tilford. is a spoiled but troubled child, which makes him a dangerous adversary for Mary because he has influence with her grandmother. However, when Mary poisons Mrs. Tilford's mind with her accusations against Karen and Martha, Mary is able to frustrate all his efforts to convince the old lady that her precious grandchild fabricated her story from pure spite.

Although Dr. Joe stands by Karen and Martha during the slander trial, he, too, finally falls victim to Mary's vindictive lies After the trial, he is troubled by niggling doubts about the relationship of Karen and Martha. Although he sells his practice and makes plans to marry Karen and take her and Martha to Europe, his uncertainty finally causes him to accept Karen's suggestion that they break off their engagement. It is that act that prompts Martha's confessions about her real feelings and her resulting suicide. In the aftermath of Martha's death, there appears no real hope that Cardin and Karen can marry.

Catherine

Catherine is one of the students at the Wright-Dobie School. She appears only in the first scene, where she attempts to help Lois prepare for a Latin test. The Latin lesson contributes to the chaotic lack of discipline in Mortar's classroom, revealing Lily's incompetence as a teacher.

Martha Dobie

Karen Wright's friend and co-owner of their school, Martha is about the same age, twenty-eight. She is described as "nervous" and "high strung" and is certainly far less composed and self-assured than her friend. It quickly becomes obvious that she greatly depends on Karen's emotional stability and good sense to provide her with the confidence needed to make a go of their school. She is thus somewhat jealous of Dr. Cardin, who also places demands on Karen. On the surface, Martha seems pleased that Karen and Joe plan to marry and supports them, but her inner fears of an inevitable estrangement from Karen leads to a growing tension in the play.

Once Mary Tilford poisons her grandmother's mind against Martha and Karen, Martha must confront the possibility that her jealousy springs from a suppressed sexual longing for her friend. Although she joins Karen in the libel suit against Mrs. Tilford, she is finally unable to cope with her complex feelings, which include a strong sense of responsibility for Karen's breakup with Joe. After confessing that her love for Karen has included physical desire, she takes her own life.

Lois Fisher

Another of Karen and Martha's students, she receives Lain tutoring from Catherine at the play's opening, conjugating Latin in hectic counterpoint to Peggy Roger's reading of Portia's "quality of mercy " speech from Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* and Lily Mortar's languid criticism. Like Catherine, she plays no significant role in the rest of the drama

Grocery Boy

The unnamed grocery boy makes a very brief appearance in the last scene, carrying a box of groceries into the school's living room. He is almost mute, but his puerile gawking and giggling are indicative of the damage done to the reputations of Karen and Martha as aresult of Mary's accusations.

Dr. Joe

See Dr. Joseph Cardin

Lily Mortar

Hellman describes Lily Mortar as "a plump, florid woman of forty-five." She is Martha Dobie' s aunt and teaches at the Wnght-Dobie School. A self-centered woman, she lives in romanticized delusions of her past triumphs as an actress. She is also vain and very susceptible to flattery, an easy patsy for a conniving student like Mary Tilford. She refuses to grow old gracefully, dying her hair and dressing too fancifully for her reduced circumstances (and expanded waistline). She is also a thorn in the side of Karen and Martha, who find her pretensions and meddling very annoying. They finally are able to finance her trip to Europe but, for purely selfish and petty reasons, when she is needed home to support them in their civil suit against Mrs. Tilford, she fails to return until it is too late. Martha finally confesses to Lily that she has always hated her, but Lily seems impervious to her niece's feelings. At the end of the play, her concern for her own welfare seems to outweigh her self-righteous grief over Martha's death.

Evelyn Munn

One of the girls at the Wright-Dobie School, Evelyn is first encountered in the opening scene, in which she mangles Rosalie Wells's hair with a pair of scissors. Evelyn, who lisps, is relatively quiet and timid. With Peggy Rogers, she overhears the conversation between Martha Dobie and Lily Mortar; the overheard conversation becomes the keystone in the malicious arch of lies that Mary Tilford constructs. Like Peggy, Evelyn is a victim of Mary's intimidation, which, at the end of the first act, turns to physical abuse. When Mary attempts to extort money from Peggy, Evelyn tries to interfere and is slapped in the face for her efforts. She is one of the first children withdrawn from the school after Mrs. Tilford spreads Mary's slanderous accusations.

Peggy Rogers

A student at the Wnght-Dobie School, Peggy, like Evelyn Munn, is easily intimidated by Mary Tilford. She appears in the opening scene, where, under Lily Mortar's tutelage, she tries to read Portia's famous speech on the quality of mercy. Unimaginative, she shows little interest in Shakespeare Her grandest aspiration is to marry a lighthouse keeper.

Peggy is with Evelyn when they overhear the fateful conversation between Martha Dobie and her aunt. Thereafter the pair confide in Mary, who immediately puts her malicious scheme into operation by extorting money from Peggy, who was saving it for a bicycle

Mrs. Amelia Tilford

A wealthy widow, Mrs. Tilford is a large, dignified woman in her sixties. She has been an influential supporter of the Wright-Dobie School, where her granddaughter, Mary, is enrolled. Although she is a fair and generous person, she lacks good judgment when it

comes to matters concerning her granddaughter. She recognizes that Mary is both spoiled and manipulative, but she dotes on the child and is utterly blind to the girl's vicious nature.

Mrs. Tilford is a key player in the tragic direction of the play. Although she initially resists believing Mary's slander, she is finally convinced that the girl is telling the truth. She comes close to discovering the truth when Dr. Cardin and the accused women question Mary, but once Rosalie Wells perjures herself in support of Mary's lies, Mrs Tilford completely accepts Mary's account Indignant and self-righteous, she then attempts to have the school closed, in turn compelling Karen and Martha to engage her in a libel suit After the civil trial, she discovers the truth. She tries to undo the damage and atone for her actions, but her efforts come too late. With Martha dead and her relationship with Cardin destroyed, Karen gives the contrite and devastated matron little hope of personal redemption.

Mary Tilford

The spoiled granddaughter of Amelia Tilford, Mary is a problem child at the Wnght-Dobie School. She appears "undistinguished," but she is clever and used to having her own way with her doting grandmother. She also attempts to manipulate everyone at the school, resorting to a variety of tricks, including flattery, feigned sickness, blackmail, physical intimidation, and whining complaints. Karen and Martha are not fooled by her behavior. They easily penetrate her lies and schemes and insist on disciplining her, but they do not really understand the depths of the girl's depravity.

Mary responds to her punishment by turning venomous. From Evelyn and Peggy, she learns of the conservation between Martha and her Aunt Lily in which the latter refers to the relationship of Martha and Karen as "unnatural." Mary uses mis to poison her grandmother's mind against the women, leading her to believe that they are lesbians. It is her malicious slander that ruins the lives of Karen and Martha, for she is only exposed as a liar after it is too late to prevent Karen's breakup with Dr. Cardin and Martha's suicide.

Martha is drawn to her because of her strength and stability, qualities that Martha admires because she cannot find them in herself. Dr, Joe Cardin, Karen's fiance, having a temperament much like Karen's, seems to love her more for her charm, gracious wit, and good looks than her emotional balance.

Although she tries to suppress her feelings, Martha fears the impending marnage of Karen and Cardin, believing that it will inevitably lead to an estrangement in her relationship with Karen. Karen and Joe both try to convince Martha that nothing will change, but she is too insecure to accept their reassurance.

Although Karen is a sensitive and caring person, she never detects any sexual desire in Martha's love for her. She has no such feelings herself, repressed or otherwise, thus she cannot fathom the complexity of Martha's jealousy. She loves Martha like a sister

and is devastated both by Martha's confession and subsequent suicide. She is also emotionally crushed by the failure of the lawsuit against Amelia Tilford, which she had vigorously pursued. At the end of the play, her spirits simply sag into a kind of stoic acceptance of her fate, as is evidenced in her listless and mechanical final lines exchanged with Mrs. Tilford.

Rosalie Wells

Rosalie, a student at the Wright-Dobie School, appears first in the hectic scene opening the play, having her hair badly trimmed by Evelyn Munn. Unlike Peggy and Evelyn, she is not cowed by Mary Tilford, whom she does not like. In fact, Karen and Martha plan to move Mary in with Rosalie, hoping that rooming with the stronger girl will put an end to Mary's troublemaking. But Mary finds out that Rosalie has stolen a bracelet from Helen Burton and threatens to expose her crime unless Rosalie does what Mary asks. As a result, Rosalie becomes a key character. She gives credibility to Mary's lies and convinces Mrs. Tilford that Mary is entirely truthful, making a reversal of the harm impossible.

Karen Wright

Karen Wright is Martha Dobie's close friend and partner in the Wright-Dobie School. She is twenty-eight, attractive, warm, and outgoing. She is admired and respected by her students, for whom she has a genuine affection. She is also an emotionally stable woman, at ease with herself and others.

Themes

Good and Evil

With the exception of Mrs. Tilford, it is a simple task to place the principal characters in *The Children's Hour* in the debit and credit columns of a moral balance sheet. The good, decent characters are Karen Wright, Martha Dobie, and Dr. Joe Cardin. The bad are Mary Tilford and Lily Mortar, who, though not in Mary's demonic league, is a vain and selfish parasite who cares only for her own welfare.

Mary is the more perplexing character because her viciousness seems to spring from some inner ugliness that can not be explained away by her class privilege or her grandmother's indulgence. As Karen remarks in the first act, she and Martha always talk of Mary as if the girl were an adult, as if she had never been blessed with childhood innocence. She is a pathological liar and manipulator, capable of any strategy that will satisfy her malicious desire to control everyone with whom she comes in contact.

She cows the other girls through intimidation, inspiring neither love nor respect, and when her influence over her classmates is threatened by Martha and Karen, she sets out to destroy them without a hint of remorse. Her feelings seem limited to fear and anxiety, in evidence only when she is threatened with exposure. Measured against her, Lily Mortar seems more oblivious than wicked or cruel.

Mary is the font of evil in the play, but her grandmother, Mrs. Tilford, is the sociopathic child's unwitting conspirator. Although she pampers her grandchild, Mrs. Tilford is a kind and good woman, but she is also self-righteous and very stubborn. Once convinced that she has uncovered the disturbing truth about Karen and Martha, she closes her mind to the possibility that Mary might have invented her tale. Until the very last she is wholly unaware of the fact that she is the main piece in Mary's evil chess game, a well-meaning pawn in the disguise of an imperious queen.

Clearly, like her spiritual mentor, Henrik Ibsen, Hellman is as concerned with evil arising from good intentions as with evil unalloyed. Virtue adrift from truth can become the ally of such evil and be every bit as destructive, as Mary, Karen, and Joe Cardin discover. Against such a powerful combination, the victim has almost no defense.

Guilt and Innocence

Hellman thus poses at least two perplexing questions with respect to guilt and innocence, the key figures being Mary and Mrs. Tilford The girl convincingly demonstrates that the standard belief in childhood innocence should be held suspect, even if, as she later insisted, Hellman did not intend that Mary should be interpreted as so completely evil as she appeared on stage Once accepting the premise that malevolence can exist in the guise of innocence., Hellman asks the more troubling question of whether a person duped by evil can or should be exonerated for hurtful acts

springing from a failure to penetrate evil's mask. It is a moral dilemma, with no simple solution, and is also the basis of the play's tragic force.

Atonement and Forgiveness

Because she is a moral woman, in the last part of *The Children's Hour,* after she has learned the truth, Mrs. Tilford seeks to atone for what she has done. She confesses that her role in the tragedy will trouble her all her remaining days, and she hopes to make matters right, but, when she finds out that Martha has committed suicide, she is crushed. She knows that full restitution is impossible.

In their final confrontation, Karen at first calls Mrs. Tilford "old" and "callous," but finally holds out some hope that she will accept the matron's offer of help. She acknowledges that the woman has also been a victim of Mary's malice, harmed in an even more lasting way. Fully acknowledging her guilt, Mrs. Tilford promises Karen that she will see to it that Mary is never able to hurt another human being. That painful burden is part of her final penance, the crux of her ongoing atonement.

In contrast, Lily Mortar remains unrepentant for her failure to return from abroad to support Martha and Karen in their suit against Mrs. Tilford. Her self-vindicating vanity finally gives way to a tepid apology, but that only provokes Martha to confess that she has always hated Lily. There is no redemption for those who can not bear guilt, something that Lily Mortar is unable or refuses to do. Unlike Mrs Tilford, she remains blind, unredeemed, and unforgiven.

Deception

Mary Tilford is a treacherous liar whose tactics are effective with her grandmother because she feigns reluctance to divulge what she "knows" and thereby makes her account credible. Mrs. Tilford is convinced in part because she believes that Mary is an innocent in such matters as lesbianism. Like an elfin Iago (a slanderous character from Shakespeare's play *Othello),* Mary is pragmatic, compounding her lies with fabricated details until her deception takes root as truth in Mrs. Tilford's mind. One of HeUman's major themes is that there is often no defense against deceit and slander and that the damage deception can do may be tragically irreversible.

Friendship

It is ironic that Martha and Karen are vulnerable to Mary's poison because they are very close friends. Together, they have fought hard to make a go of their school, and, with the support of Mrs. Tilford, they are on the brink of success when the venomous Mary destroys their dream.

The friendship of the two women, established when they were classmates in college, is very close, but it is clearly more self-defining for Martha than for Karen. Karen provides

stability and verve for the more nervous and timid Martha, who seems to have more at stake in the friendship, even, perhaps, a suppressed sexual attraction. Martha finally admits to such guilty feelings just before taking her own life.

For Martha, Joe Cardin does pose the threat of some estrangement in her friendship with Karen. Despite the reassurances of both Joe and Karen, she obviously believes that their marriage will end (or at least greatly compromise) her close friendship with Karen. Her jealous fears prompt Mrs. Mortar to charge her with "unnatural" feelings, ultimately giving Mary a seed of .truth from which to grow her evil plant.

Style

Setting

The Children's Hour employs two settings. The first, used in the opening and final acts, is the living and study room of the Wright-Dobie School for girls, located in a converted farmhouse about ten miles from Lancet, a rural town in Massachusetts. The second, used in both scenes of the second act, is the living room of Mrs. Tilford's house, presumably in the town of Lancet.

The setting plays a significant role in the play, for it posits a small-town attitude and closeness—a place where news travels fast—which is evident in the snickering of the grocery boy in the third act. The community ostracizes Karen and Martha, which helps create the oppressive atmosphere that makes Martha's suicide believable. Because the women are sensitive to their community's censure, they come to believe that their alleged behavior will follow them wherever they go, that they will be unable to escape from their notoriety.

Structure

The Children's Hour has a conventional, linear plot, consisting of three acts, the usual format employed by playwrights at the time. The formal divisions into acts and scenes is used to demarcate a change of time, but each formal segment also ends at a decisive moment, following the tradition of strong scene closures at the curtain. These elements all contribute to what is referred to as a well-made play. It is a time-honored technique, fundamental to melodrama, whether good or bad.

Within the structural design of the play, time is handled in a strict chronological order. The action covers a period of about eight months, opening in April and ending in the following November. A key event that occurs in the interval is the civil suit brought by Karen and Martha against Mrs. Tilford. It is not presented on stage, but its dreadful impact resonates throughout the last act of the play.

Realism

Hellman works entirely within the limits of the realistic problem play. *The Children's Hour is* very suited to the box set, with the invisible fourth wall through which an audience witnesses the work in progress. It uses no devices or techniques to dispel the total illusion of that reality.

From beginning to end, the characters behave and talk like real people in a situation that seems entirely credible. Their dialogue, although very focused and congruous, captures the idiom and cadences of real speech, and the action, though hardly typical,

is wholly within the realm of the possible. Even Mary's psychopathic behavior, though not accounted for, is uncomfortably realistic and its results entirely plausible.

Foreshadowing

To maintain the complete illusion of reality, Hellman eschews the use of various theatrical devices and conventions. However, she prepares her audience to accept events as plausible from clues or hints preceding them. Hellman foreshadows actions largely through character revelation, particularly in the cases of Lily Mortar, Mary Tilford, and Martha Dobie.

Lily reveals her self-centeredness from the very beginning of the play Her vanity is fed by the flattery of her students, and she proves to be easy prey for Mary. She lives on her imagined triumphs of the past, retreating from present obligations. Her failure to respond to Karen and Martha's request that she return from Europe to testify at the trial therefore becomes almost inevitable.

Mary's lies, cajoling flattery, feigned heart attack, and abusive treatment of her classmates all prepare the audience to accept her vicious slander against Karen and Martha as completely consistent with her character. Although Karen and Martha recognize that there is something seriously wrong with the girl, Mary easily dupes Lily Mortar and intimidates most of her classmates. Agatha, Mrs. Tilford's maid, and Dr. Gardin are also wise to Mary, but their counsel is ignored by the girl's grandmother once she is convinced that Mary could not have fabricated her damning story.

Martha's eventual disclosure of sexual attraction for Karen and her suicide are also partly foreshadowed by her behavior earlier in the play. Her nervous agitation and angry recrimination towards her aunt suggest a troubled soul. It is obvious that she fears estrangement from Karen, as is evidenced in her jealousy of Joe Cardin and her ambivalent feelings towards Karen and Joe's impending marriage Mrs. Mortar's biting remark about the "unnatural" feelings that Martha has exhibited towards Karen and earlier friends also echoes through the play, bearing a grain of truth that erupts in Martha's confused confession of her feelings in the last act.

Irony

Hellman also uses irony in *The Children's Hour,* a device often employed by realists because it need not destroy the illusion of lifelike fidelity while contributing greatly to dramatic impact Dramatic irony exists in scenes in which there is a discrepancy in the levels of knowledge of the characters or the characters and the audience (what the audience expects of the characters). Such scenes are often suspenseful, for the audience awaits an inevitable "recognition," that moment at which a character is made aware of his or her ignorance. The effect can be devastating. The best example in *The Children's Hour* occurs in the third act, when Mrs Tilford confronts Karen, completely unaware that Martha has killed herself. The disclosure breaks down all of Mrs. Tilford's

reserve, for in that instant she realizes the irreversible damage she has caused and the guilt she must carry to the grave.

Irony in a lower key also exists at the end of the second act, when Rosalie Wells confirms Mary's claims that it was actually Rosalie who witnessed the lovemaking between Martha and Karen. The situation is doubly ironic, for Rosalie's credibility gains strength from the fact that she has been no fnend to Mary and was deliberately chosen by Karen to become Mary's roommate because Mary seemed to have no influence over her. That Rosalie is being blackmailed by Mary is a fact known only to the two girls and the audience.

Historical Context

At the time that Hellman wrote *'The Children's Hour,* in 1934, the United States was still mired in the economic doldrums of the Great Depression. Europe, too, was struggling with economic collapse, fomenting a political struggle between fascism and other economic/political systems that would finally erupt into World War II in 1939.

The chief figures in the political upheaval in Europe were Adolph Hitler in Germany, Josef Stalin in the Soviet Union, and Benito Mussolini in Italy, all of whom held expansionist dreams of world conquest. But there were other players, too. It was in 1934 that Austrian chancellor Engelbert Dollfuss sought to stem political opposition on the left by suppressing all political parties except his Fatherland Front, while in Bulgaria, supported by the king, fascists staged a coup and grabbed political control. Even France, a staunch democratic republic, stood on the brink of civil war because of political corruption condemned by factions representing both the extreme left and right. In Germany, meanwhile, the National Socialist Party (Nazis) conducted a blood purge, destroying dozens of party members accused of plotting to kill Hitler and eliminating Ernst Rohm and Gregor Stresser and their more radical wing of the Nazi Party.

Hellman, a cosmopolitan writer who had spent some time in Paris in the 1920s, was very concerned with what was happening in Europe in the 1930s. Her German-Jewish heritage and liberalism made her a dedicated anti-fascist, and she would, in succeeding years, give time, money, and artistic dedication to that cause, returning to Europe in 1937 to witness the loyalist struggle against Franco and the royalists in the Spanish Civil War. However, most of bread-line America was basically disinterested in the increasingly unstable political situation in Europe Many still adhered to the isolationist policy that gained favor in the aftermath of World War I, believing that America should concern itself with solving it own problems before worrying about what was happening abroad. There was a strong "America First" movement determined to keep the United States free of new foreign entanglements.

The nation was also too busy trying to cope with poverty and unemployment. In order to solve the Depression's negative impact on writers, in 1934, as part of the Works Project Administration (WPA), the federal government, under the leadership of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, established the Federal Writers' Project, run by Henry G. Alsberg. It provided work for hundreds of writers, many of whom, from a conservative perspective, were much too radical. By that date, too, the Group Theatre had been in operation for three years, producing plays of "social significance," some of which, like Clifford Odets's *Waiting for Lefty* (1935) and *Awake and Sing* (1935), advanced socialistic views. The new thirst for social consciousness in serious art helped diminish the reputation of play wnghts like Eugene O'Neill, whose works largely ignored political issues while probing the human psyche and becoming increasingly autobiographical in content

Although *The Children's Hour*lacks apolitical theme, it does indicate that Karen Wright and Martha Dobie have had to struggle to make a go of their school, hinting that the

economic situation in America would put such a venture at grave risk. They have in fact had to depend on the support and good will of Mrs. Tilford, a very influential dowager In general, however, the moral focus of the play transcends specific economic and political concerns. In some of her later works, notably *Watch on the Rhine* (1941) and *Another Part of the Forest* (1946), Hellman would evidence her political views.

The frank lesbian theme brought the play its notoriety, not the political views of its author. At the time, various groups, including federal, state, and local agencies, engaged in some form of censorship. An important example was the Hays Office, created in 1934 as a self-policing production code oversight agency by the Motion Pictures Producers and Distributors of American, Inc. (MPPDA) and headed by former Postmaster General Will H. Hays. Hellman, in deference to the dictates of the Hays Office, had to eradicate all traces of the lesbian theme in her film adaptation of the play.

Critical Overview

Two versions of *The Children's Hour* have been staged. The original was used in the play's very successful premier at the Maxine Elliot Theatre in New York, starting on November 20, 1934. The play, produced and directed by Herman Shumlin, ran for a record-breaking 691 performances and immediately established Hellman's durable reputation. It also provoked considerable controversy.

The second version, staged in 1952, failed financially, although most critics and reviewers praised it. Hellman, in addition to making minor revisions in the script, directed the production It opened at the Coronet Theatre on Broadway on December 18, ran for 189 performances, and later went on the road to play in Chicago, a city that had originally banned the work. Controversy still surrounded the piece, but the grounds had shifted away from the lesbian theme to the work's relevance to the congressional anti-communist hearings then in progress. It was in 1952 that Hellman, already blacklisted in Hollywood, was subpoenaed to appear before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC).

Much of the notoriety surrounding the first production was based on what at the time was perceived as its sensational content. Shumlin knew the play would shock the audience, and so did Lee Shubert, the Elliot's owner, who, Hellman recounts in her memoir *Pentimento,* complained during rehearsals that the production "could land us all in jail." However, the New York authorities merely winked, though officials in Boston, Chicago, and London banned public performances of the play outright

The critical judgments passed on the initial staging were mostly favorable Reviewer Ide Gruber, in *Golden Book,* was quick to label it a "powerful and gripping" adult drama, "well-written and well-acted." A few hailed Hellman a new genius of the "well made" play in the tradition of Ibsen and Anton Chekhov *{The Cherry Orchard),* touting, too, her courage as a writer willing to put her new career in harm's way with a frank treatment of a taboo subject. For Percy Hammond, writing in the *New York Herald Tribune,* the play had the power to make the audiences' "eyes start from their sockets," in scenes moving "so fast they almost tread upon one another's heels."

Some major critics demurred praise, however. Negative assessments mostly focused on the third act. According to Joseph Wood Krutch, reviewing the play in the *Nation,* although the first two acts were compelling, the last act was "so strained, so impossible, and so thoroughly boring that the effect is almost completely destroyed, and one is left to wonder that anything so inept was ever allowed to reach production." Other critics, including Brooks Atkinson and Stark Young, concurred, believing that the play was prone to melodramatic excess and engaged in too much postmortem moralizing following Martha's suicide. Even Hellman, in her "Introduction" to *Six Plays,* would later agree with that point, confessing that the last scene "was tense and overburdened," but claiming, as a "moral writer," that she could not avoid "that last summing-up " Audiences, however, seemed far less troubled by the play's final moments than the

critics were, and they continued to flock to the production. There could be little argument over the play's success.

In contrast, the 1952 revival of the play, with a run less than a third as long, fared better in reviews than as a profitable investment for its backers. One common theme of the reviews was the idea that the play had lost none of its forceful impact in the eighteen years separating the productions: its power, as John Beaufort asserted in a review in the *Christian Science Monitor,* "to astound and appall." Even Brooks Atkinson, at best lukewarm in assessing the original version, found the work "still powerful and lacerating" in his *New York Times* column, "At the Theatre."

There were also new naysayers, including Eric Bentley, who, writing in the *New Republic,* complained that, on stage, everything seemed "unreal, inorganic, unrelated," and that there was "an absence of genuine passion." Bentley's bias against Hellman's work was based on his belief, advanced in *American Drama and Its Critics,* that the play was revised as a deliberate, "quasi-liberal" assault on McCarthyism For Bentley, it represented "a type of liberalism that has been dangerous" but, by 1954, had become "obsolescent" Yet other critics who saw a tie between the play's destructive scan-dal-mongenng and McCarthy's witch hunt felt that the play had thereby gained a fresh vitality For example, in *Variety,* Hobe argued that the play had "acquired a stimulating new quality of contemporary significance."

As Doris Falk asserted in her critical biography, *Lillian Hellman,* m the early 1950s "the time was certainly ripe for the revival of *The Children 'sHour* as a political play." Ultimately, however, the true worth of a play must rest on its intrinsic merits, not its relevance to some extraneous events. Although many earlier commentators on *The Children's Hour* tried to approach the play objectively, the furor surrounding it made a detached critical assessment very difficult More recent scholarship, based on the play's text rather than performance, is not burdened with such extrinsic irrelevancies. On balance, *The Children's Hour* is now viewed as a remarkable maiden voyage in commercial theater, a work of extraordinary promise, but one that, as Jacob Adler said in *Lillian Hellman,* "undeniably" remains "an apprentice work." For Adler and other critics, the play points clearly to what would become Hellman's dramatic hallmarks: strong characters, solid dramatic structure, and a moral epicenter that transcends its topical significance. It is the first of Hellman's "well made" thesis plays, on which her lasting reputation as the first important woman playwright in America largely rests.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Fiero is a Ph.D. who teaches drama and play-writing at the University of Southwestern Louisiana. In this essay he discusses Hellman's play as both a "well made" play in the realistic tradition and as a tragedy built on a moral dilemma and pattern of development similar to that of William Shakespeare's Othello.

Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour* is a realistic thesis play, in a direct line of descent from the work of the great Norwegian playwright, Henrik Ibsen *(A Doll's House)* It is a fair example of the kind of serious play that has dominated the American theater through most of the twentieth century. Such plays deal with social issues or problems, usually using one or two families as the center of their thematic inquiry While many very good plays were written in this tradition, a large number have suffered from their connection to past eras and now seem somewhat dated. William Inge's *Come Back Little Sheba* (1950) is an example, as is Robert Anderson's *Tea and Sympathy* (1953), both highly successful plays that are often considered too out of touch with contemporary times to merit commercial revival. In contrast, Hellman' s *The Children's Hour* remains persistently relevant.

That is not to claim that the play is contemporary in its technique or its representation of prevailing social attitudes. It is not. Overt treatment of lesbianism, sensational in 1934, has lost virtually all its ability to shock an audience (homosexuality is discussed frankly and on a regular basis in contemporary pop culture) In that regard, Hellman's play is also long in the tooth, making it difficult to understand now why the play so offended officials outside New York. In fact, as Doris Falk remarked in her book *Lillian Hellman,* "it is ironic that this most outspoken and revolutionary play in its time should now seem so old-fashioned "

Nor did the play cut new artistic trails. Even before Hellman wrote the play, important dramatists like Eugene O'Neill *(Long Day's Journey intoNight)* and Elmer Rice *(Street Scene*) had taken the American theater in new directions, in part as a reaction to the narrow dictates of the sort of realism to which, in *The Children's Hour,* Hellman remained wholly committed Although some critics have carped about its melodramatic effects, Hellman's work carefully follows the formula of the well-made play. It is linear in plot, causal in its logic, and completely life-like in its characters' speech and behavior. Its principal theme, the destructive power of a malicious lie, is drawn out in the ritual recriminations at the end, perhaps too much so, but even that is characteristic of some of Ibsen's plays, *A Doll's House* (1879), for example, *or An Enemy of the People* (1882).

However, as is also true of Ibsen's best work, *The Children's Hour* seems to transcend the limits of its form and technique. From the outset, as is reflected in some reviews of the premier production, commentators found a tragic dimension in the play."Tragedy" is a term often used as a synonym for "disaster," but at least some of the critics used it to describe the play's genre, in the Aristotelian sense of the word. (Aristotle outlined many of modern drama's techniques in his *Poetics.)* While complaining that producer/director Shumlin and Hellman "daubed" the play "with grease paint in the last quarter of a hour"

(made it melodramatic), Brooks Atkinson's *New York Times* review named it "a pitiless tragedy."

The Children's Hour gains tragic weight because it encompasses a timeless moral dilemma Specifically, it asks whether there is a sufficient defense against evil in the guise of truth or innocence. It is the same question addressed in William Shakespeare's *Othello,* and it gives the same perplexing and devastating answer: in some circumstances, no. In both plays, evil is accepted as a fact of life, vested in characters whose darkest motives are hidden, not just to other characters, but even to themselves. They are the plot drivers, working by guile to destroy those who have thwarted their will and deprived them of what they believe is their due.

Shakepeare's Iago and Hellman's Mary Tilford are not equivalent characters, of course, but they do share a narcissistic delight in their malicious manipulation of their victims. Both are also pragmatic and inventive, quickly and cleverly changing strategies to fit changing circumstances, as, for example, when, at the end of the second act, Mary, on the verge of exposure, extorts confirmation of her lies from Rosalie Wells. Also, just as Iago has his stooge, Roderigo, his "fool" who is also his "purse," so Mary has her unwitting dupes, like Peggy Rogers, from whom, at the end of the first act, she extorts money through physical intimidation Granted, such parallels are mostly superficial, but the common plot motif of a vicious lie that is accepted as truth—and its disastrous consequences— cannot be dismissed. Shakespeare works on a grander scale, of course. Othello, his protagonist, is a man of high station and repute. Hellman's protagonists, Karen Wright and Martha Dobie, though wholly decent people, are a pair of characters scratching at life, albeit valiantly. Furthermore, in *Othello* it is the titular character who believes the lie (that his wife, Desdemona, is cheating on him), acts on it (he murders his wife), and, when the truth is revealed, takes his own life. In *The Children's Hour,* it is Mrs. Tilford who believes and acts upon the lie. The chief victims of the slander are Karen and Martha. At the end, Karen may concede that Mary has harmed Mrs. Tilford more than anyone, but it is Martha who is dead and Karen who is left an emotionally-drained zombie, with neither friend nor fiance left to spark her into caring again. All she is able to do is hold out a glimmer of hope to Mrs. Tilford, in what many interpret as a consolation for those unable to confront what the subtext most likely conveys: complete desolation.

It is precisely because Karen and Martha are very ordinary people that arguments against their tragic stature might be raised. Many purists, approaching Aristotle's *Poetics* as an august, prescriptive document, scoff at the idea that real tragedy is possible in a modern, egalitarian society. Some, like Joseph Wood Krutch, insist that even if an elevated stature is not necessary, belief in man's basic nobility—his potential for greatness—is. In his famous essay, "The Tragic Fallacy" (reprinted in *Tragedy: Vision and Form),* Krutch argued that "a tragic writer does not have to believe in God, but he must believe in man," for tragedy is "the triumph over despair and confidence in the value of human life." For Krutch, modern psychology has done more than democracy has to diminish man's stature, for it has diligently, worked to rob humankind of a tragic sense of life, of a residual faith in a compensatory justice that makes amends for human misery.

Playwright Arthur Miller, in his essay "Tragedy and the Common Man" (also printed in *Tragedy),* while admitting that modern tragedies are rare, claims they are not impossible. His defense of the unsung as suitable tragic figures seems as appropriate for Hellman's characters as it does for his own Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman.* For Miller, an insistence that a tragic protagonist must hold an exalted rank is merely "a clinging to the outward forms of tragedy," not its spirit Tragedy, as Miller sees it, arises as a "consequence of a man's total compulsion to evaluate himself justly." Moreover, a tragic flaw may be only "his inherent unwillingness to remain passive in the face of what he conceives to be a challenge to his dignity, his image of his rightful status." Like Willy, Karen and Martha are not passive; they fight, firm in the belief that it is within their power to control their own destinies and that there is recourse to justice. That they are defeated in their attempt "posits a wrong or an evil in... [their] environment." For Willy Loman, that wrong is the badly tarnished Amencan Dream; for Martha and Karen, as for Othello, that wrong is a dreadful malice hidden in other characters, their tragic antagonists.

Compared to *Othello, The Children's Hour* offers a much dimmer tragic vision. It lacks the great intensity of Shakespeare's play, the passion and the majestic language, but it does have a similar pattern and moral base. In Hellman's play, passion is muted and held in check, not expressed in the raging frustration of a single character, as it is in *Othello.* At the end of Hellman's play, Karen Wright is icy and remote, but she is not blasted by grief Strong feelings have simply been dispersed, dissipated in the off-stage suicide of Martha Dobie and the pathetic self-pitying behavior of Lily Mortar. Mrs. Tilford, the guilt bearer, is almost as pathetic in her hand-wringing search for atonement. These are but faint echoes of the grand death of the guilt-laden Othello, but they are echoes nonetheless.

Both *The Children's Hour* and *Othello* are morality plays, terrible in their implication that evil, through deceit, can defeat the unwary. Against evil, even the virtuous have no adequate defense, for evil wears a disarming mask and allies itself with the righteous. It appears as friendship in the "honest" Iago and childlike innocence in Mary Tilford and enlists the unwitting aid of characters who believe they are just, even if, as in Othello's case, that belief is within the tragic protagonist himself.

Curiously, in both plays, this moral center has often been obscured by other matters of less import. In *Othello,* it is interracial marriage while in *The Children's Hour* it is lesbianism, a taboo subject in 1934. Othello, the Moor, is an African, but his racial heritage has little outward importance, lago's racial slurs and epithets notwithstanding. What matters is that it makes him vulnerable to self-doubt in his relationship with Desdemona. Latent fears about her sexual orientation affect Martha Dobie in an analogous way Confronted and compounded with guilty feelings about Karen and Joe Cardm, these doubts overwhelm her with despair and lead to her suicide. Othello's blackness and Martha's sexual doubts simply mark them as susceptible to the evil genius of the villains in the respective plays, but they are matters that no longer carry much shock value Paradoxically, as these elements become less and less sensational, the moral center in both works comes into a much sharper focus. In the case of

Hellman's play, the only question is whether it can long survive the loss of that shock power, lacking as it does the grandeur of Shakespearean tragedy

Source: John W. Fiero, for *Drama for Students,* Gale, 1998.

Critical Essay #2

Armato examines the concepts of good and evil as they pertain to the main characters of Hellman's play. Much as the playwright herself once asserted, the critic concludes that no character exemplifies outright good or evil but rather all possess measures of both.

Critics have often called *The Children's Hour* a melodrama. Those who have done so, see Karen Wright and Martha Dobie as "good" characters who are victimized by "evil" Mary Tilford To Barrett H. Clark and Brooks Atkinson, Mary Tilford is a "monster." Even Hellman's most perceptive critic calls her "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 Barrett Clark's reading of the play's ultimate meaning: "... here is evil .. . make the best of it."

With great patience. Lillian Hellman has defended her play against the attacks of those who have labelled it a melodrama. In a 1965 interview, for example, she said that it is wrong to view her characters as being entirely good or evil: "You [the author] 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". The interviewer reminded Hellman that in the preface to the 1942 edition of her plays she had said that *The Children's Hour* was about goodness and badness. To this she replied,"Goodness and badness is different from good and bad people isn't it?" Her assertions suggest that Hellman did not intend to portray a melodramatic conflict between two "good" teachers and an "evil" child when she wrote her play. To clarify the play's substance, we should ask what, within the world of the play, is good and what evil.

Playwrights seldom underestimate the dramatic value of the visual-aural impact at curtain rise. The opening of *The Children's Hour,* in a study-room of the Wright-Dobie school, seems undramatic. Mrs. Lily Mortar, Martha Dobie's aunt, is sleeping, the students are sewing. The action which would catch the eyes of the audience is that of Evelyn Munn. "using her scissors to trim the hair of Rosalie, who sits, nervously, in front of her. She has Rosalie's head bent back at an awkward angle and is enjoying herself." However, the audience sees this stark visual image of the infantile pleasure of exercising cruelty while hearing about mercy, for the first words are those of a.student reciting Portia's famous speech in *The Merchant of Venice.* Portia's plea for mercy should make an exceedingly strong impression on the audience, for portions of it are interpolated six times between the dialogue of Mrs. Mortar and her pupils. The visual image of cruelty is juxtaposed with the words "pity" and "mercy," which are repeated seven times during the opening moments of the play.

In ***The*** *Children's Hour* Hellman posits mercy as an ultimate good and merciless cruelty as an ultimate evil. But to understand the merciless world of Lancet and its cruelty, one must move beyond the notion that Mary Tilford is the embodiment of it.

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 *Merchant.* This can best be described as a victim-victimizer syndrome, the most concrete representation of which is the relationship between Antonio and Shylock. Antonio is convinced that his harsh treatment of Shylock is "just," because the Jew's interest rates are harsh. As victim. Shylock suffers from spiritual agony, feelings of persecution, and desires revenge. If he is able to consummate his wish, Shylock will become the victimizer of the man who originally victimized him. That the victim-victimizer syndrome is finally self-destructive is seen in the courtroom scene, when each victimizer in turn is reduced to the position of victim Shylock's demand for Antonio's life is turned against him when Portia reminds the court that an alien Jew must suffer the death penalty if he plots against the life of a Venetian citizen. The Duke and Antonio destroy the vicious circle by showing mercy to Shylock

In the first two acts of her play, Hellman develops three relationships which are characterized by the circular form and destructive content of the victim-victimizer syndrome; these pairs are: Karen Wright-Mary Tilford, Martha Dobie-Lily Mortar, and Amelia Tilford-Wright/Dobie. In *The Merchant,* a Jew who is socially inferior to a Christian is mistreated by the Christian and attempts to use the Duke—the land's highest authority—as a vehicle for his revenge. In *The Children's Hour,* an adolescent pupil who is socially inferior to an adult teacher is mistreated by the teacher and proceeds to use Lancet's most influential citizen—the powerful matron Amelia Tilford—as a vehicle for her revenge. Finally, in the much criticized third act, 'Hellman, like Shakespeare, posits mercy as the only solution to the moral dilemma which is created when we deal justly with each other 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" The harshness of her discipline will demonstrate the truth—on a far more literal level than she suspects—of her remark.

Mary Tilford's offense 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 a garbage can, and Mary's stubborn refusal to admit the truth convinces Karen that she must be punished. First, Mary is told to take her recreation periods alone for two weeks; then, that her Friend Evelyn will no longer be her roommate, and that she must now live with her enemy Rosalie. Mary is also ordered not to leave the grounds for any reason.

Hellman emphasizes Karen's harshness by adding details—Mary is specifically forbidden participation in hockey and horse-back ridmg—and by one further prohibition. Mary hopes that Karen's rules apply only to weekdays; if so, she may still be able to attend an event she has been looking forward to, the boat-races on Saturday. Unfortunately, she is told that she cannot attend them. While these restrictions might not be extreme deprivation for an adult, they are so for a child Mary feels—and rightly—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," 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'thave to think they can " She sets out to take her revenge, as is the victim's wont. She accuses Karen and Martha of lesbianism, and persists in her lie. Her behavior is ugly, but has been provoked by Karen's earlier ugliness: she seeks an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth

Karen's inability to deal compassionately with Mary Tilford is paralleled in Act I by Martha Dobie's attitude toward 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 again Hellman emphasizes the rigidity of the decision's administration. Martha not only tells Lily that she must leave, but makes fun of her-—"We don't want you around when we dig up the buried treasure"—and threatens that "You ought to be glad I don't do worse." Mortar pathetically attempts to save face: "I absolutely refuse to be shipped off three thousand miles away. I'm not going to England. I shall go back to the stage. I'll write my agents tomorrow, and as soon as they have something good for me—." This is essentially a plea for mercy cast in a manner that will allow her to retain some semblance of dignity. The old crone is finished on the stage, her "agents" are imaginary, and if she does not leave until they find her a part, she will never leave at all, which is her wish. Her suggestion is brusquely rejected. As Karen isolates Mary, Martha exiles Mortar. Lily's reaction is the same as Mary's: "You always take your spite out on me." As she exits, she casts toward Martha a "malicious half-smile" and the malice of revenge is realized when she refuses to testify on Martha's behalf at the libel trial.

In Act II, 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 lesbian, the dowager immediately phones the parents of the children who are enrolled at Wnght-Dobie and repeats the charges, thus destroying 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.... I 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." 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." Ironically, Karen and Martha now suffer from the same humiliation and ostracism that they so rigorously inflicted on others.

To make the ironic parallel—and thus the lesson—even more explicit, Hellman shows Karen and Martha reacting just as Lily and Mary had. Both think mat they are being unjustly persecuted: "What is she [Amelia] trying to do to us? What is everyone doing to us?" Both feel spiritual agony: "You're not playing with paper dolls. We're human beings, see? It's our lives you're fooling with. *Our* lives." 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."

In Act n, then, Hellman presents a change in relationships, 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 full circle, those who mistreated others are now mistreated themselves. Clearly, Hellman implies that when one mistreats another, he plants the seeds of his own destruction. This insight is made even more explicit in the third act.

Martha admits to herself that she has always been physically attracted to Karen. Her attitude toward her self is just as harsh as it had been towards others—or as Amelia Tilford's attitude had been towards lesbianism. Indeed, Martha's rancorous attitude toward the imperfections of others is but a reflection of her own self-condemnation. Hellman is making the same crucial point that Sartre makes in *Dirty Hands,* when he has Hoederer say to Hugo, "You, I know you now, you are a destroyer You detest man because you detest yourself."

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. She 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. 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 extends mercy.

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 won't have anything to do with it. I'll never let that woman—." Martha's suicide, however, has for Karen been both harrowing and educative. Because of it she is, she tells Amelia, "Not [young] any more." 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 sympathize with the plight of "guilt-ridden" Amelia. In the last moments of the play, she accepts Amelia's atonement and thereby extends compassion—the ultimate good in the world of the play.

MRS. TILFORD You'll be all right? KAREN. I'll be all right, I suppose Goodbye,

now *(They both rise.)* MRS TILFORD *(speaks, pleadingly*) You'll let

me help you? You'll let me try KAREN- Yes, if it will make you feel better MRS. TILFORD *(With great feeling*) Oh, yes, oh,

yes, Karen. *(Unconsciously* KAREN *begins*

to walk towards the window.) KAREN. *(Suddenly.)* Is it nice out' MRS TILFORD: It's been cold. (KAREN *opens*

the window slightly, sits on the ledge.) MRS TILFORD- *(with surprise.)* It seems a little

warmer now KAREN It feels very good *(They smile at*

each other.)

Karen has destroyed the vicious circle that has characterized human relations; her compassion is the ultimate good in the world of the play.

The two traditional criticisms of *The Children's Hour's* last act are that Mary Tilford is the central interest of the play and so should not be missing at its conclusion; and that the final "summing up" (Hellman's words) is tedious. However, Mary Tilford is not the central interest of the play; a certain perverse structure of human relationships is. Moreover, if critics paid more attention to what Hellman is "summing up," they would find that the conclusion of the play is a structurally necessary resolution, not a tedious reiteration of previous materials. Jacob H. Adler has noted that *The Children's Hour,* like *The Wild Duck,* "ends not with... [a] suicide but with a brief discussion pinning down the issues as a result of the suicide."

Works as diverse as Aeschylus' *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 Hellman suggests that adults are too often "children." While infantile revenge is matter of course in men's dealings with each other, Hellman shows a last-act discovery—Karen Wright's discovery of a more mature concept of compassion.

Source: Philip M Armato, "'Good and Evil' in Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour"* in *Educational Theatre Journal,* Volume 25, no 4, December, 1973, pp 443^7.

Critical Essay #3

In this uncredited review, the critic offers a positive appraisal of the debut of The Children's Hour, *calling it a worthy "contribution to the adult theatre."*

Twenty or thirty years ago Miss Hellman's play, enthusiastically received in New York, would doubtless have been stopped by the police. As it is both engrossing drama and a serious and sincere study of abnormal psychology, this change may imply a certain progress in the public's discernment.

The piece shows the tragic effects on two young women school-teachers of poisonous gossip spread by a pestiferous little pupil—one of those "problem" children who can so disrupt the life of a boarding-school that prudent head-mistresses decline to admit them if they know the facts. The two young women, who have built up their school by years of patient work and self-sacrifice, are forced to close it, and although they are objectively innocent, one of the friends loses her fiance, while the other, confessing that she has "felt that way" all along, finally kills herself.

There is an inherent difficulty in the double-headed nature of Miss Hellman's theme which is not successfully surmounted on the stage, although somewhat less apparent in the script. For two of the three acts, the spectator's interest is so centered on the schoolgirls themselves, and in particular the part of the pestiferous little girl—extraordinarily well played in the New York production—that the last act, which consists of retrospective moaning and moralizing, six months later, by the unfortunate teachers, comes as a decided anti-climax. Miss Hellman feels the need, evidently, of showing the tragic results of the child's unfounded accusations, but has not been able to do this without slowing up and clogging action which, up until the end of the second act, marches straight ahead. The play is not for children but is decidedly a contribution to the adult theatre.

Source: *Saturday Review of Literature,* March 2, 1935, pp. 523.

Adaptations

The Children's Hour was first adapted to film in 1936, released under the title *These Three.* It was produced by United Artists and Goldwyn Pictures, directed by William Wyler, and written by Hellman, who was obliged to remove the lesbian theme entirely The film features Miriam Hopkins as Martha Dobie, Merle Oberon as Karen Wnght, Joel McCrea as Dr. Joe Cardin, and Alma Kruger as Mrs. Tilford. The film is available on video from Sultan Entertainment and through the Internet Movie Database (http://uk.imdb.com).

The play was again adapted to film in 1961, released under alternative titles: *The Children's Hour* and *The Loudest Whisper.* It was produced by United Artists and the Minsch Company, and again directed by William Wyler. The film stars Audrey Hepburn as Karen Wright, Shirley MacLaine as Martha Dobie, James Garner as Dr. Joe Cardin, and Faye Bainter as Mrs. Tilford. The film is available on video from MGM/UA Home Entertainment, Facets Multimedia, and through the Internet Movie Database.

A 1995 documentary, *The Celluloid Closet,* based on a 1981 book by Vito Russo, examines gay themes (often subliminal) in motion pictures and covers the 1961 film version of *The Children's Hour.* Narrated by Lily Tomhn, the documentary was directed and produced by Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman and features a host of celebrities offering commentary on the masked and open cinematic treatment of homosexuality. The documentary is available from Sony Classics and through the Internet Movie Database.

Topics for Further Study

Research the fate of *The Children's Hour* in major cities, including Boston, Chicago, and London, where, in the 1930s, community standards led to a banning of the play's public performance.

Research the question of libel and slander in American civil law. Relate your findings to the situation in the play.

Read Maxell Anderson's adaptation of William Marsh's novel, *The Bad Seed,* comparing Mary Tilford with Rhoda Penmark, the child murderess of that work. How are the two girls similar? How are they different?

Conduct a comparative investigation of the public response to the "outing episode" of the television sitcom *Ellen* and the furor raised over the lesbian theme in *The Children's Hour.*

Research the relationship between the 1952 revival of *The Children's Hour* and the congressional (HUAC) investigations of domestic communism then in progress.

Investigate current theory regarding the biochemical origins of criminal behavior and the psychopathic personality, relating your findings to Mary Tilford's character and behavior in *The Children's Hour* Does Mary qualify as a sociopathic criminal

Compare and Contrast

1930s: The Great Depression brings great suffering to America, with attempts to blunt the hardship with the "New Deal" policies of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Reforms include social welfare programs designed to alleviate the plight of the poor and dispossessed. Conservatives condemned such measures as socialistic, and some of the reforms were blocked by the Supreme Court as unconstitutional.

Today: A fairly robust economy and nearly full employment contrast sharply with the conditions current in the Great Depression. Civil rights reforms and social welfare programs, some with a lineage that goes back to the liberalism of the 1930s, are now under attack from moderates and conservatives ahke. Although it re-elected Democrat Bill Clinton president in 1996, the nation revealed its anti-liberal mood by installing a Republican majority in both houses of Congress.

1930s: Private and public agencies exert powerful control over the arts. Common in theaters are "banmngs," particularly in cities like Boston, where the mayor, supported by religious groups, threatens to close down productions that violate the community's sense of moral decorum. In film, the Hays Office imposes strict regulations on movies, prohibiting nudity, suggestions of sex acts or seduction, any unconventional (passionate) kissing, and the use of profane or obscene language.

Today: Although codes for rating films do exist, they serve largely as parental guides and not restrictions on what filmmakers can include in their art. Violent behavior, obscenity, nudity, and graphic sex are now common in R- and X-rated films. Commercial television avoids graphic nudity, sex, and language due to pressure from the religious right and fear of a drop in advertising revenue. The stage, however, freed itself from prevailing community standards even earlier, allowing nudity and vulgarity as early as. the 1960s.

1930s: In America, an open same-sex relationship is impossible Most homosexuals remain "closeted," knowing that public exposure would costs them their livelihoods and community acceptance. Branded as degenerates and perverts, many homosexuals bear a powerful sense of moral shame and self-loathing.

Today: Many homosexuals have been "outed" in the gay liberation movement, and political correctness now argues that "alternative orientations" should be treated with respect equal to heterosexual ones, not just tolerated Although some still view homosexuality as a perversion, there is little public condemnation of gays, and many celebrities, including political figures, have acknowledged their homosexuality. The AIDS crisis has contributed to the public awareness of the gay movement.

1930s: Although public education is on the rise, many children attend sexually segregated private schools, some of which are very small and exclusive. Such institutions proliferate due to poor public school funding

Today: There are still some private, sexually segregated schools left, but the number has dwindled considerably, despite the fact that support for private education was for a time rekindled by the racial desegregation of public schools. The cost of private schooling has become prohibitive for most American families, some of which resort to home schooling as an alternative to public education.

What Do I Read Next?

The Bad Seed, Maxwell Anderson's 1955 stage adaptation of a novel by William Marsh, is a psychological study of a child murderess whose evil, disguised by a mask of innocence, is a genetic inheritance from her grandmother.

The Crucible, Arthur Miller's 1953 drama based on the Salem Witch Trials of the seventeenth century, deals with the tragic havoc created by a vengeful girl and her compliant peers when they begin accusing many of Salem's citizens of witchcraft. By obvious implication, the work was an indictment of the investigations then being conducted by HUAC into alleged communist activities in America

Othello, William Shakespeare's great domestic tragedy, written around 1604, centers on the evil machinations of Iago, whose slanderous lies against the innocent Desdemona turn Othello, her husband, savagely against her and lead to her murder and Othello's suicide.

The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie, Muriel Spark's 1961 novel (also adapted for the stage in 1966 and as a film in 1969) explores life in a Scottish girls' school in the 1930s with a focus on the eccentric teacher, Miss Brodie, and her damaging efforts to control the lives of her favorite students.

Further Study

Adler, Jacob H. *Lillian Hellman,* Southern Writers Senes, No. 4, Steck-Vaughn, 1969

A 44-page pamphlet, this bnef study gives much of its limited space to a discussion of *The Children's Hour,* The work "also analyzes Hellman's artistic indebtedness to both Ibsen and Chekhov and the critical judgment that her plays often "lapse into melodrama "

Estnn, Mark W. *Lillian Hellman, Plays, Films, Memoirs A Reference Guide,* G K. Hall, 1980

A primary source book for research, this is a recent annotated bibliography on Hellman, part of the "Reference Guide to Literature" senes.

Falk, Dons V *Lillian Hellman,* Fredenck Ungar, 1978 A cntical biography gleaned from Hellman's work, this study presents a synopsis of each of Hellman's plays and also features discussions of "theatncahsm," realism, and the impact of the Depression and World War II on Hellman's craft

Lederer, Kathenne. *Lillian Hellman,* Twayne, 1979. A useful bio-cntical study of Hellman, this work provides an excellent base for further study of the playwnght's work. It starts with a biography, then covers all of Hellman's plays and nonfiction It also includes a chronology and selected bibliography

Moody, Richard *Lillian Hellman, Playwright,* Pegasus, 1972 Both a biographical and cntical study, the work covers all of the playwnght's dramatic works. It includes a helpful summary of "Closed Doors, or, The Great Drumsheugh Case" (pp 38-40) on which Hellman based her play.

Rollyson, Carl *Lillian Hellman Her Legend and Her Legacy,* St. Martins, 1988

The most up-to-date, comprehensive and detailed biography of Hellman, this study stresses the playwright's complex character, especially her many contradictions as seen in her vanous affairs and feuds. Several photographs are included.

Roughead, William *Bad Companions,* Duffield and Green, 1931.

This book includes the essay "Closed Doors, or, The Great Drumsheugh Case," which provided Hellman with the idea and basic situation of *The Children's Hour*

Turk, Ruth, *Lillian Hellman- Rebel Playwright,* Lerner, 1995. A study designed for young adults, but useful for the general reader and recommended as a quick overview of Hellman's career It includes several photographs and a brief bibliography of works suitable for younger researchers

Wnght, William *Lillian Hellman,* Simon & Schuster, 1986 Published two years after Hellman's death in 1984, this critical biography, attempting to tie the "image" of Hellman to the "woman," draws an intimate and respectful picture of the playwnght, despite the fact that she fought to obstruct Wright's research.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Drama for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Drama for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from DfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from DfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Drama for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Drama for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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