The Little Foxes Study Guide

The Little Foxes by Lillian Hellman

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Introduction

Lillian Hellman's cynical play of family greed and revenge, *The Little Foxes*, is her most popular piece of drama, and it is the one most frequently revived. It was acclaimed an instant hit after a hugely successful opening night in 1939, even though drama and literary critics then, as now, disagreed over whether the melodramatic story of the greed-driven Hubbard family succeeds either as a morality play or as a satire. Certainly moral dissembling lies at the heart of the play: the Hubbard siblings steal, deceive, and plot against each other in their efforts to invest in one of the first cotton mills to industrialize the New South, a plan that stands to win them millions of dollars. Regina, temporarily cheated out of her share by her brothers, even "murders" her sick husband by refusing to fetch his medicine when he threatens to obstruct her from taking part in the investment. Their daughter serves as a moral standard who dislikes the family machinations. Unfortunately, Alexandra is too young to defy them. Nor can her Aunt Birdie, who drinks to anesthetize the pain of having married a bully and lost her family's plantation to the rapacious Hubbards. The satiric element of the play consists of its condemnation of the Hubbards's crimes against society. The Hubbards are a family prone to deceit, caught in a cycle of revenge not unlike Greek classical tragedies. The family forbears harvested their merchant profits by overcharging the newly freed slaves, and now the Hubbards will create a larger dynasty on the toil of poor workers, who will flock to the cotton mill for its paltry wages. The play voices Marxist disapproval of the Hubbard form of capitalism.

Author Biography

Until she was 16, Lillian Hellman lived half of her time in the South New Orleans, Louisiana, where she was born in 1906 and half in New York City. Once she married and began her career as a writer, she never returned to the South, which housed the rapacious immorality she denounced in *The Little Foxes, its "prequel," Another Part of the Forest, and Toys in the Attic*. Nor did she reserve her harsh moralizing for the South most of her plays attack universal moral faults. Hellman's repulsion against the profiteering of people like the Hubbard family of *The Little Foxes* perhaps began as she listened to the scheming of her mother's side of her family, the Marxs. They were a wealthy and elegant family who had risen from immigrant poverty to make their fortune in merchandising in the South, and who later succeeded in banking. Hellman is quoted in William Wright's 1986 book, *Lillian Hellman: The Image. The Woman* as asserting that the Marx family grew "rich from the 'borrowings' of poor Negroes," and that this heritage fueled her lifelong radicalism. She further revealed that great-uncles Max and Isaac Marx and great-aunt Sophie Newhouse Marx served as models for the Hubbard family. When Lillian was five, her father contributed to Hellman's lifelong obsession with the power of money his shoe business went bankrupt, forcing the comfortable family to move in with poorer relatives, the Hellmans, who ran a boarding house. During Max Hellman's entrepreneurial ups and downs, the Marx family wealth was always available for comparison, since each family maintained a home both in New York City and New Orleans.

From an early age, Hellman had a "wild" nature: she skipped school, smoked, and told people exactly what she thought of them. As an adult she had numerous love affairs, including a 30-year relationship with detective fiction author Dashiell HammeU. Her politics were equally scandalous. Disgusted with the alarming growth of fascism she found in Germany in 1929, Hellman, along with many other writers, academics, and intellectuals, became involved in the communist party. For this ideological experimentation, she found herself blacklisted by the film industry in 1948 and was required to appear before the McCarthy subcommittee on communist activity, the House Un-American Activities Committee, in 1952. On the stand Hellman stoutly denied being a member of the communist party, although recent biographer Carl Rollyson has confirmed that she was. However, a (HUAC) party member who was briefly Hellmmann's lover has explained that what really mattered was whether or not the party controlled you and that Hellman was entirely independent. Independent Hellman certainly was throughout her life she voiced her opposition to what she considered wrong, and she used her influence as an American intellectual and public figure to persuade others of her view. Unlike Alexandra in *The Little Foxes*, who does no more than threaten to find out the truth, Hellman wrote plays that made the truth stare her American audiences in the face. She died in 1984.

Plot Summary

Act One

The Little Foxes takes place in the living room of the Giddens house, in a small town in the deep South in 1900. At curtain rise, the black maid Addie is tidying up and Cal, the black porter, is setting out a bottle of the best port. Birdie Hubbard, a well bred but faded woman enters from the dinner party offstage, obviously tipsy. Her husband Oscar follows, scolding her for boring their special guest. His sister Regina Giddens and brother Ben enter with Mr. William Marshall of Chicago, enjoying light-hearted banter after closing a deal to build a new cotton mill that will make all of them wealthy. Marshall is pleased by the Hubbards's promise to prevent labor problems, a "certain benefit" of the southern locale. One family member who stands to gain from the transaction is missing Horace Giddens, Regina's husband, a banker. He is in Baltimore under the care of specialists for a heart condition. Leo, Oscar's toady son, has been "keeping an eye on things" at his bank. Mr. Marshall and Regina flirt openly, and she promises to visit him in Chicago. Apparently her brothers approve of this potential affair, as it cements the business deal.

After Mr. Marshall leaves, the Hubbard family members speculate about how they will spend their millions. Birdie wants two things; to restore to its pre-Civil War elegance her family plantation Lionnet, now under the ownership of her husband and for Oscar to stop shooting the game their black neighbors need for sustenance. Oscar scornfully hushes her. Regina's grand plan is to move to Chicago and become a member of high society. Ben interrupts the wish-making to suggest they assume a fifty-one percent controlling interest, with an investment of $225,000. Ben and Oscar pressure Regina to get her third of the investment money from Horace, who has not responded to Regina's letters. Regina shrewdly manages to turn their skepticism to her benefit by fabricating that Horace is holding out for a larger share. The brothers grant their sister this coup just to keep the deal in the family; the difference will come out of Oscar's share. In return Oscar wants Regina's daughter Alexandra (Zan) to marry his son. Regina promises only to think about it.

Birdie promises Alexandra that she will not allow the family force her to marry Leo, and this earns her a slap on the face from her husband, which Birdie conceals from Zan. Regina announces that Alexandra is to leave the next morning to bring her father home. The curtain closes on Alexandra looking puzzled and frightened.

Act Two

One week later, the family nervously awaits Horace's arrival. Cal makes an offhand remark about the meat Oscar is wasting, but Oscar cuts him off with an ominous threat. Leo and Oscar concoct a scheme to "borrow" $88,000 worth of Union Pacific bonds from Horace's safe deposit box, giving them two-thirds of the investment, thus turning

the tables on Ben. They would replace the bonds before Horace discovers them missing. Ben arrives and the siblings discuss Horace's delay over breakfast offstage.

Addie rushes hopefully to the door at the sound of voices, it is Horace, looking completely exhausted, and Alexandra, covered in soot from the trip. Alexandra asks not for her mother, but for Aunt Birdie. Addie and Horace happily reminisce for a moment, then Horace asks her why he has been called home. She tells him about the plan to become "high-tone rich" and to marry Zan to Leo, muttering "over my dead body." Sobered, Horace is announced. The family rushes to him, Regina greeting him with a warm kiss. It isn't long, however, before the problems between Horace and Regina emerge again. Regina wonders if his "fancy women" caused his bad heart. She then forces a discussion of the investment, in spite of his obvious fatigue. Horace discovers that the Hubbards have promised Marshall low wages and no strikes, he dryly observes that Ben will certainly accomplish this by playing die workers off against each other. Horace intends to obstruct the Hubbards: by not allowing Leo to marry Zan and not giving Regina his money. Regina pursues him as he retires upstairs, even though Ben urges her to wait, to use "softness and a smile." With their angry voices audible, Oscar puts forth his plan to circumvent Horace and Regina by "borrowing" $88,000 from "a friend" of Leo's. Ben, guessing the friend's identity, encourages them to proceed but refuses to shake Leo's hand good-bye. Regina returns downstairs unsuccessful and barely acknowledges Alexandra's plea to stop causing stress to her father. Regina turns instead to Ben, who shocks her with the news that everything is settled and that Oscar is going to Chicago. When Horace comes downstairs to relish the Hubbards's dispute, Regina cruelly accuses him of wishing her ill because of his own impending death. Horace responds that he refuses to help the Hubbards "wreck the town and live on it."

Act Three

On a rainy afternoon two weeks later, Birdie and Alexandra contentedly play a piano duet while Horace is nearby. Abruptly, Horace tells Cal to run to the bank with a puzzling message meant for Leo's ears that he has received the safe deposit box and now wants the manager to bring an attorney over that evening. Birdie's indulgence in elderberry wine causes her to reminisce about the happy days when Horace used to play the fiddle. In her inebriated gaiety, Birdie relates that her mother would never associate with the Hubbards. She explains that she married Oscar because Ben wanted the Lionnet cotton, so Oscar "married it." Birdie hopes Zan will not turn out like herself, unhappily trailing after the power holders. Addie's remark sums up the play's moral: "Well, there are people who eat the earth and eat all the people on it. ... Then there are people who stand around and watch them eat it."

When Regina conies in, Horace announces that they have, after all, invested in the cotton mill. At first she thinks that Horace has decided to join her and she feels triumphant, but she has misunderstood. Horace will let the brother keep the stolen money, her only legacy in the new will he is about to write. In retaliation, she tells him that she has never loved him, ihat his impending death pleases her. This shocks Horace enough that he reaches for his heart medicine, but he drops the bottle and it breaks. He

cannol even call to Addie for another bottle, and Regina makes no move to help him. He falls and is carried upstairs. When the brothers and Leo arrive, Regina divulges that she knows of their crime, and Ben and Oscar let Leo take the blame. Now she and Ben seem almost to relish fencing for the upper hand. If Horace lives, Ben and Oscar will "win," but if he dies, Regina will triumph and send her brothers to jail. Betting that Horace will die, Regina blackmails them for a seventy-five percent share. Ben and Oscar are ready to give it to her to save themselves when Zan comes downstairs. Her posture indicates that Horace is dead; Regina has won. Regina reminds (hem of her sway over Mr. Marshall, who will abort the deal rather than risk a scandal the brothers had better behave. Ben and Regina make amends, being cut of the same cloth. Only after Oscar departs does Ben deal his final blow: he shares Zan's suspicions about Horace's death. After Ben leaves, Regina commands Zan to accompany her to Chicago, then relents, not wanting to force her. She almost timidly inquires if Zan would like to sleep in her room. Zan, seeing a new side of her mother, asks, "Are you afraid, Mama?" Addie comforts Zan as the curtain falls.

Act 1

Act 1 Summary

The stage is set in a living room of a house in a small town in the deep South in 1900. It is the home of the Giddens family: Regina, her husband Horace and their daughter Alexandra. The room is filled with fine, expensive furniture. The first character to appear is Addie, a 55-year-old Negro woman who is moving about closing windows. Cal, a middle-aged Negro man, enters carrying a tray with glasses and a bottle of port. Addie takes the tray from him and arranges the items on the table. She can't believe that Cal has brought in that particular bottle of port. He replies that Miss Regina told him to serve it in honor of their guest.

Birdie Hubbard, Regina's sister in law, rushes in through the dining room doors. She compliments Addie on the delicious meal and tells Cal that she wants him to have one of the kitchen boys run to her house to pick up a music album. Their dinner guest, Mr. Marshall, is interested in that album, and Birdie wants to show it to him before he leaves for his train. Birdie's husband, Oscar, comes out of the dining room and chastises her for making such a fuss, saying there is no need to send anyone for anything. He tells Birdie that Mr. Marshall was merely being polite by talking about her music album. Oscar thinks she has had too much wine and has chattered like a magpie all evening.

Birdie and Oscar's son, Leo, enters and tells them that the dinner guests are coming into the parlor. Regina enters with Mr. Marshall. Alexandra and Ben Hubbard, Regina's and Oscar's brother, follow. Regina tells Mr. Marshall that she would love to live in Chicago because of all the people and theaters. Addie serves the port, and Mr. Marshall comments on the fine quality of the drink. He thinks that Southerners live better than the rest of the country. He says they eat and drink better and it's a wonder they have time to do business at all.

Mr. Marshall also seems surprised and pleased that Regina, Oscar and Ben have stayed in the same town and are raising their families there. His family in the North is much more scattered, he says. Regina mentions that Horace is ill and is at Johns Hopkins for a heart condition. Regina doesn't want to dwell on it, and she suggests that Birdie and Alexandra play the piano for Mr. Marshall.

Mr. Marshall brings up the subject of Southern aristocracy again. He says it's remarkable that aristocrats stay together and keep what belongs to them. Ben challenges that, arguing that they are not aristocrats. Birdie is the only one of them who ever belonged to the Southern aristocracy, Ben says. Her family owned the Lionnet plantation, which was the best cotton land in the South in its day. But when the war came, the men left the cotton and the women to rot. And after the war, the sons came home and ruined it.

Theirs was not the only plantation that went that way, Ben continues. He says the Southern aristocrat can't adapt to anything, and he's too high tone to try. Mr. Marshall tries to rescue the conversation by saying that learning new ways is hard sometimes. But Ben says that may be the reason it's profitable. He says his family learned the new ways and how to make them pay. And to make a long story short, they now own Lionnet.

Ben continues that a man isn't in business only for what he can get out of it. He says it has to mean something to his heart too. Mr. Marshall takes this as his cue to validate that he wants to do business with this family. They convinced him six months before that they wanted a mill built in the town because it would be much more profitable to bring a mill to the cotton than cotton to a mill.

Mr. Marshall has to leave for his train, and Leo and Alexandra are recruited to drive him to the station. Mr. Marshall says his goodbyes, and Regina gives him a hearty commitment that she will come to Chicago to visit.

After Mr. Marshall leaves, Regina throws up her hands in happiness—they're going to be rich! Mr. Marshall is their future. Regina says she can't wait to move to Chicago, and now she'll have the money to do it. Birdie is concerned that Horace might not be up for that big a change, but Regina ignores her. Then they all take turns describing what they want with their new money. Ben wants a stable he has seen in Savannah. Oscar thinks a few trips would be nice, and he says Jekyll Island has great shooting. Birdie wants Lionnet restored to the way it was before the war. The she dares to mention one more wish—she wants Oscar to stop shooting. She says she hates how he kills small creatures and then throws them away. Oscar ignores Birdie, and the rest of them talk about delighting in watching the bricks go up as the building starts.

Ben has been conspicuously quiet, and it is discovered that they still do not have Regina's one third of the money for the deal. For 49 percent, Mr. Marshall will put up $400,000. For 51 percent, the family will put up $225,000. They have all written to Horace about the urgency, but he has not responded. If they don't have the money in two weeks, they will not be part of the deal. Regina suggests that Horace is holding out for more than a third of the deal. The brothers don't think Horace is really interested in the deal or in coming back home.

Regina says she will not be denied this opportunity for wealth and springs into action. She decides that Alexandra will go to Baltimore tomorrow to convince her father to return home immediately and that she and her mother both miss him and want him home with them.

Ben doesn't understand what all the fuss is about because the money will stay in the family. He's not married, so it will all go to Alexandra and Leo eventually anyway. He says maybe Alexandra and Leo will even marry each other someday. Oscar likes that idea because he would be certain then that the share he might be giving up to Horace and Regina would someday return to his son. Birdie is aghast at the thought, but the rest of them ignore her.

Alexandra and Leo return from the train station, and Regina tells Alexandra that she will go to Baltimore to get her father tomorrow. Regina becomes irritated when Alexandra says she will go but she won't bring Horace back if he is too ill to make the trip. Regina bristles and tells her to do what she's told because it is for her father's own good. Regina tells Alexandra the best cure for Horace is to come home and be taken care of.

Birdie pulls Alexandra aside and warns her of the others' conversation about marrying her off to Leo. Alexandra is incredulous because they are cousins, and she says they couldn't possibly marry. Alexandra hugs Birdie and heads upstairs. Birdie moves to get her coat and hat, and Oscar slaps her hard across the face. Alexandra runs downstairs when she hears Birdie cry out. Birdie tells Alexandra it was nothing and that she just twisted her ankle. Alexandra stands on the stairs watching after her.

Act 1 Analysis

The Hubbard family is caught between two eras. They remember the days before the Civil war, yet they are in the throes of rebuilding the South. They revere the past, but they also are opportunists and have found their salvation for wealth in Mr. Marshall, who is from the North. They are quickly divesting themselves of the old ways with their dreams of what their money will buy. Regina has the most drastic of ideas—she wants to move away entirely and doesn't seem too concerned if her ailing husband accompanies her. She is ambitious, and when she finds out that the trio is still lacking her husband's money for the deal she flies into action to get it despite the potential threats to her husband's health.

Regina's and Horace's marriage is not the only marriage with unrest. Oscar is clearly verbally and physically abusive to Birdie. Her plea for him to stop shooting defenseless creatures is really a masked plea for herself, as she is helpless to make him stop and can't even ask him to. This family is manipulative, even plotting the marriage of Alexandra and Leo so that their money will not leave the family.

Act 2

Act 2 Summary

A week has passed, and Alexandra still has not returned with her father. Oscar and Leo are at Regina's house very early in the morning to check on their return. It is time for the family to go to Chicago to make the deal with Mr. Marshall, and they still don't have Horace's money. While they're waiting for Regina to come downstairs, Oscar and Leo have a conversation about the contents of Horace's safe deposit box, which Leo has seen at the bank. The box also contains Alexandra's baby shoe, an old cameo, a piece of an old violin and $88,000 in Union Pacific bonds. Leo tells Oscar that Horace only looks in the box about every six months. This gives Oscar the brilliant idea that they could "borrow" the bonds and make their deal with Mr. Marshall. Oscar says they could repay the bonds before Horace even knows they are gone.

Regina finally emerges from her bedroom and wants to have her breakfast undisturbed, but the men won't leave. Ben has joined them, and they are getting on Regina's frazzled nerves.

Horace and Alexandra return home at last. Addie greets them, and they explain that they were delayed because they spent a night in Mobile because Horace didn't feel well. He is very ill. Addie sends Alexandra upstairs to freshen up, and she tends to Horace. He's been told that the others are waiting for him in the dining room, but he is exhausted from the trip and needs a few minutes to rest before facing them. After he drinks some of Addie's coffee, he is refreshed a bit and ask her to tell the others that he has come home.

The group makes small talk about Horace's health and the trip, and Horace tells Regina that he is touched that she has sent for him. She takes pains to conceal her real intent while the small talk continues. There is animosity between Horace and Regina, but they agree to be civil. Regina tells Horace that she wants his answer for putting up his one third for the mill deal. Horace tells them that he is not interested because he and Regina have enough money and he doesn't want to be a part of this. Regina and Horace argue, and Horace goes upstairs to lie down. Regina argues with him the whole time, following him upstairs where the rest can hear that they're still fighting.

Oscar tells Ben that Leo has found someone who will lend them the money that they don't have because of Horace's lack of interest. Ben realizes where the money will come from but he doesn't want to know. They will "borrow" Horace's money , and they will have about five months to return it. The brothers and Leo leave the house.

Alexandra is distraught because her parents are still arguing and her mother tells Horace that she hopes he dies soon. Horace tells Regina that she will not have the money to make money off the labor of other men who will not be paid a fair wage.

Horace says he is dying and won't leave that mark on the world. He says that if the world is to be made worse, he will leave that to Regina.

Act 2 Analysis

Horace has returned home with Alexandra with the hopes that his wife's summons means more than it actually does. It is clear that there has been much animosity between the two for quite some time, but Horace hopes that his illness has softened her heart and that she wants to be near him. But Horace quickly learns that all she wants is the money for the deal and she needs him to agree to it immediately. When Horace doesn't, Regina's true feelings come out. She is not concerned that Horace is dying. In fact, the sooner the better as far as she's concerned. Her greed drives her but may leave her flat in the end.

The brothers have hatched a plot to get what they need from Horace, unbeknownst to him. Their greed knows no limits. It seems inevitable, though, that their devious plan will be discovered and they will all tumble when their plans and schemes are discovered. Horace and Alexandra seem to be the only ones with any nobility or strength of character, which hopefully will triumph over their devious relatives.

Act 3

Act 3 Summary

It has been two weeks since Horace returned home. He is sitting in a wheelchair, staring out the window and listening to Alexandra and Birdie play the piano. A safe deposit box and some medicine are on a table near Horace. Birdie is reminiscing about how Horace was so nice to her when she first came into the family. She says he was the only one who would play the piano with her. Addie has served them little cakes and elderberry wine, and the mood is almost festive.

Horace tells Cal to take the safe deposit box back to the bank and to tell Mr. Manders, in front of everybody in the back room, thank you for bringing it and could he please come over after supper and bring Mr. Sol Fowler, his attorney. Cal doesn't understand why he has to say something that doesn't make any sense. Cal thinks that Mr. Manders knows the that box arrived just fine because he brought it over himself on Wednesday. But Horace tells him to do just that, and Cal leaves.

The elderberry wine is going to Birdie's head, and she talks about growing up at Lionnet and the first time she saw Oscar. She says she wishes she knew then that Ben Hubbard wanted Lionnet and Oscar married her to get it. She says she hasn't had one happy day since. It is drinking, not headaches, that confines her to her room and makes her miss social occasions. Birdie drinks in her room to dull the pain of her life. She tells Alexandra that in 20 years Alexandra will be just like her. The family will do all the same things to her. Alexandra comforts Birdie and offers to walk her home.

Addie and Horace are left alone, and Horace tells Addie that he wants her to take Alexandra away from this place. He wants her to see and hear all the evil that is going on in the family and take Alexandra away when the time is right. Horace has left some money for her in his armoire. Cal returns and reports that he has returned the safe deposit box and told Mr. Manders thank you. Cal reports that Leo seemed upset when he heard what Cal said.

Regina returns from an errand and glares at Horace. She tells him that they agreed Horace would not be seen in her part of the house. Horace won't leave because he says he has something to tell Birdie. Apparently they have invested in the mill deal after all. Birdie doesn't know what Horace is talking about, and he tells her that he had sent for his safe deposit box a few days ago and the Union Pacific bonds are missing. He knows that Leo took them. Regina thinks this will be a fine story to hold over her brothers' heads. But Horace tells her he is going to let them keep the bonds as a loan from her. They will repay her of course but they will reap the huge profits from the deal, not her.

Horace tells Regina that Mr. Fowler is coming to the house tonight to make his new will. Regina will get the $88,000 in bonds, and everything else will go to Alexandra. Horace and Regina argue, and he starts to have a heart attack. When Horace reaches for his

medicine the bottle crashes to floor and breaks. Horace tries to call for Addie, but his voice is a whisper. He gets out of his wheelchair, but he collapses at the stairs. Regina calls for Addie and Cal, and they get Horace upstairs.

Leo enters the house after no answered the bell. Oscar and Ben soon follow. They have heard that Horace has had another heart attack. Leo tells them that Horace knows that the bonds have been taken. They don't understand why Horace hasn't said anything because he has known about it for several days. They think that Horace probably would have told Regina, but then they decide that wouldn't make sense because Regina and Horace have been fighting a lot lately.

Regina comes downstairs from Horace's room and tells them that he is unconscious. She tells them that Horace has told her about the bonds and that Leo has stolen them and given them to Oscar and Ben for the deal. Leo denies it several times. Regina is mildly amused and tells them that they are safe while Horace lives, but she doesn't expect him to live. If he doesn't live, she wants 75 percent of the business in exchange for the bonds. And if they don't agree, she will have them put in jail.

Alexandra and Addie come downstairs, and it is clear that Horace has just died. Regina tries to console her daughter and tells Alexandra that they can now travel and do so many things. Alexandra, however, is going away. Alexandra says her papa told her to leave this place, and that's what she is going to do. She dismisses her and tells her to go lie down for a while.

Regina turns her attention once again to Oscar and Ben. She tells them that she plans to visit Judge Simmes in the morning and tell him about Leo's theft. Oscar and Ben want to know what proof Regina has. She replies that the bonds are missing and they are with Mr. Marshall. Reluctantly, Oscar and Ben agree to give her the 75 percent because they know they can't fight her. Regina has them backed into a corner.

Oscar and Ben leave, and Regina tells Addie that the only visitor she will receive is Dr. Sloan. Regina says she wants no other condolence visits this evening. She tells Alexandra that they will be leaving in a few weeks for Chicago. Alexandra says she will not go along with her Regina's plan because Horace wanted her to get away from Regina as soon as she could.

Regina is too tired to fight anymore, and she says she won't make Alexandra stay with her. Alexandra won't. Horace told her that there are people who eat the earth and everything on it and those who stand around and watch them. Alexandra won't stand by and watch her Regina. Regina is amused that her daughter has some spirit and tells her that she doesn't want them to be bad friends. Regina asks Alexandra to come upstairs and talk. Alexandra takes a step toward her mother and asks Regina if she is afraid. Regina doesn't answer, and Addie just smiles as she puts out the lights.

Act 3 Analysis

For a short time it seems as if Horace will prevail in foiling the plans of the family. But Horace is so sick and fragile, and good may not triumph over evil in this case. Horace dies, and Regina finally has the upper hand. Regina is ruthless, and she tells her brothers she will have them charged with theft if they don't agree to her demands.

This family has been cunning and manipulative for years, and Regina trumps her brothers in their biggest scheme yet. There may be some spark of hope, though. Regina tries to lure Alexandra into her confidence after her father dies, and Alexandra falters for a moment. Alexandra is a kind-hearted person and fears that her mother may be upset at the death of her father. But when Addie smiles at the end, it is clear that Addie will honor her promise to Horace and help Alexandra leave her mother and her family. Horace saw the goodness in Addie and that Addie only wanted the best for Alexandra. Horace had the foresight to ensure that his daughter would no longer be exposed to this greedy, manipulative circle of people. In the end, good does triumph over evil. Sometimes it just takes a little time.

Characters

Addie

Addie is the Hubbards's black maid and Alexandra Hubbard's nanny; she has a keen sense of justice and she tries to protect Alexandra from the rapacity of the Hubbard family. She considers Ben, Oscar, Regina, and Leo a scourge on humanity, 1 'eaters of the earth," and she scorns those who are too feeble or too uncommitted to stand up to them, saying: "Well, there are people who eat the earth and eat all the people on it. ... Then there are people who stand around and watch them eat it.... Sometimes] think it ain't right to stand and watch them do it." She herself lacks the social status to tight them effectively. Her comments serve as a moral compass for the audience.

Ben

See Benjamin Hubbard

Col

Cal is a slightly bumbling and mild-mannered black servant who very indirectly protests Oscar's monopolization of the area's hunting rights by offhandedly mentioning how his friends would "give anything fora little piece of that meat."

Alexandra Giddens

Seventeen-year-old Alexandra Giddens, or Zan, adores her father Horace Giddens and her Aunt Birdie but mistrusts and, by the end of the play, actively dislikes her mother, Regina. Addie has protected Zan from her family, allowing youthful idealism to carry Zan along, but Horace wants her to "learn to hate and fear" the Hubbard way of life so that she will get away from them. She grows up suddenly after Horace's murder, but it remains unclear in what way she will fulfill her promise to "be fighting ... some place where people don't just stand around and watch."

Horace Guldens

Horace Giddens, Regina's husband, is a man of moral conviction who lacks the physical and emotional fortitude to honor his conviction by fighting the Hubbards. Instead he takes refuge in a Baltimore hospital, nursing a heart ailment and "thinking about" about his unhappy life with Regina. Alexandra fetches him home for his final showdown, wherein he shows some mettle in his elaborate scheme to obstruct Regina's access to his money; nevertheless, when Regina strips away that last shred of his defenses by admitting that she married him only for money, has always held him in contempt, and

cannot wait until he dies, the shock kills him. He dies having done nothing to deter the Hubbards.

Regina Giddens

Regina Giddens, born Regina Hubbard, handsome sister to Ben and Oscar, wife to Horace, and mother of Alexandra, is the central character in *The Little Foxes*. In the first stage production Tallulah Bankhead portrayed her as an inherently evil villainess, but in the 1941 film version Bette Davis created a more sympathetic character who gradually becomes evil.

Regina's flirtation with Mr. Marshall is done as much to seal a business deal as it is to secure a stepping stone into the high society of Chicago she wants to join. She is sexually cold, having scornfully banned her husband from her bed for the last ten years. Money and power are her loves, and she resorts to an unusual method of murder to get them: she shocks Horace, who has a weak heart, with the news that she has never loved him and that she will relish his death, then she fails to aid him when he predictably has an attack. While he lies dying upstairs, she coolly savors a familiar game of blackmail, fencing with her brothers for the stakes of the ultimate control of the family power.

Benjamin Hubbard

Ben Hufabard, eldest brother to Regina and Oscar, is the soft-spoken but callous ringleader of the Hubbard family and one of the predatory capitalists of the New South. Unmarried, he shows no interest in human relations beyond the use he makes of them to achieve financial domination of the "small unnamed town in the south" where he was born. He has built his local empire by cheating and overcharging black customers in his drygoods store and he can guarantee Chicago investor Mr. Marshall low wages and no strikes in their new cotton mill because he knows how to play his workers against each other. Ben vies for power with the cool precision of a chess player who holds a grudging respect for his primary opponent, Regina.

Birdie Hubbard

Birdie Hubbard is a timid, well-bred, but aging Southern belle, a nervous and flighty woman abused and completely dominated by her bullying husband Oscar. She once innocently enjoyed coming-out parties at her parents' plantation, Lionnet, but now she has not had a day of happiness in twenty-two years. A weak woman, she has not prevented her son from becoming even worse than his father, and she drowns her misery in a "secret" drinking habit that the family cloaks under die euphemism of "her headaches." Her only salvation is music and her relationship with her niece, who, she hopes, will avoid her fate.

Leo Hubbard

Leo is the son of Birdie and Oscar Hubbard, a lying toady with all of the greed and deceitfulness of his father and none of his mother's cultural refinement, but having "a weak kind of good looks." His own mother detests him. He foolishly reveals to his father that he has taken an illicit look into his uncle Horace's safe deposit box and tries to blame it on others, but his intimate knowledge of the box's contents and the whereabouts of the keys give away his culpability. Ben can barely conceal his contempt for Leo and makes him take the full blame for the theft when it is discovered. Leo is apparently too stupid to save himself.

Oscar Hubbard

Oscar Hubbard is the sharp-tempered, mean-spirited brother of Regina and Ben who kowtows to his older and more powerful brother, bullies his wife Birdie, and goes hunting daily, only to throw out the precious game he kills, ignoring Cal's hints to share it. He is clever enough to develop a scheme to steal Horace's money but he slavishly hands it over to Ben without realizing that Ben will not let himself be implicated. Although he presumably wants to make millions for his son's sake, he and Ben let Leo take the blame when the theft is discovered. He treats his cultivated wife, Birdie, with disdain, having married her solely to help Ben take over her family's cotton plantation. He advises his son: "It's every man's duty to think of himself."

William Marshall

William Marshall, a Chicago businessman, wants to invest in the industrialization of the New South by building a cotton mill but needs local partners to manage the mill and keep the workers in hand. Although married, he flirts openly with Regina during the one scene in which he appears.

Zan

See Alexandra Giddens

Themes

Greed

Greed drives the Hubbards Regina, Ben, Oscar, and Leo to seek more and more wealth, beyond the very comfortable financial stability they have already secured from their drygoods business. Each of them sacrifices integrity to achieve it. The allure of wealth is a primary force that offers something slightly different to each of them. The expected millions will catapult Regina beyond the domain of the small town in the deep south into the glittering international social life of Chicago and Paris, but she kills her husband to get there and thereby loses the love of her daughter; thus she will go to Chicago utterly alone. Ben lost his integrity long ago; as Regina reminds him, "You couldn't find twelve men in this state you haven't cheated and hate you for it." Ben treats negotiating with his siblings like a game of chess, where the pawns are the future mill workers whom he will play off against each other in order to keep the cotton mill wages low. His greed is an end in itself. Oscar lacks Ben's mastery and Regina's coolness under fire, and therefore exists on a lower level of the family hierarchy. He lets his son steal Horace's bonds, and then has no qualms about letting Leo take the full blame for the theft when Horace discovers them missing. Oscar enjoys his daily game hunt, blithely discarding his catch in spite of the fact that the poor black residents of the town need the meat. Furthermore, he refuses to allow them to hunt in the area. He kills for the sheer pleasure of killing, owns for the pleasure of denying ownership to others.

Hellman warns her audience that not only are the Hubbards destined to flourish, but that they are not alone. According to Ben: "There are hundreds of Hubbards sitting in rooms like this throughout the country. All their names aren't Hubbard, but they are all Hubbards and they will own this country some day." Greed underlies the mentality of unscrupulous industrialists who infiltrated the New South and nourished a form of predatory capitalism that Bellman considered a threat to the American ethic.

Apathy and Passivity

Hellman's herself was an activist who constantly signed petitions and joined committees bent on political change. She deplored passivity in the face of malice and she has the erstwhile heroes of *The Little Foxes* express their disdain for it as well. Addie, who serves a moral compass in the midst of the evil machinations of the Hubbards, expresses more concern about the passivity that allows them to continue than about what they actually do, saying, "Well, there are people who eat the earth and eat all the people on it-----Then there are people who stand around and watch them eat it.... Sometimes I think it ain't right to stand and watch them do it." To Addie the Hubbards are like an impersonal and inevitable plague, a scourge on humanity, and whether one fights them or stands by in apathy, permitting them to feed off of others, is a test of character that most of the others in the play fail. Addie fails too, since, being black, she lacks the social status to fight them effectively. She nurtures Alexandra in the hope that

the young girl will one day escape the Hubbard sphere of influence. Horace also hopes Alexandra will leave; he wants her to "learn to hate and fear" the Hubbards's mean-spirited avarice. Horace himself gets away for a few peaceful months at a hospital in Baltimore. He returns too weak, physically and emotionally, to fight the Hubbards, and the shock of hearing that his wife hates him and wishes him dead kills him. Thus Hellman demonstrates that apathy exacts a price those who fail to strive against evil are devoured from inside. Horace's heart weakens, Birdie resorts to alcohol, and both of their lives are ruined by the Hubbards. Furthermore, their weakness perpetuates the evil they cannot stop. Hellman was surprised that audiences sympathized with Birdie's defeated, drunken passivity. She expected them to scorn her as much as she did: "I just meant her to be.. .alost drunk," Hellman said in a 1958 interview quoted in *Conversations with Lillian Hellman*.

Revenge

If audiences find anything to admire in the detestable maneuverings of the Hubbards's rivalry over money and power, it is in the vengeance one evil character wreaks upon another. This play does not offer the grand satisfaction of a strong and good hero winning retribution for harm done in a dramatic moment of victory. Rather, it displays a series of tiny victorious moments wherein one villain wrests control away from the others, only to lose it again in the next scene In the climax of the action, Regina steps carefully around what she does not know for sure, hinting that she can put Ben, Oscar, and Leo into jail for stealing the bonds. That she puts her winning hand together while her husband dies upstairs proves her to be an evil villainess; but her cool command and deft strategizing make her a very smart villainess, one who commands a measure of respect. She also provides the vicarious pleasure of defeating scoundrels her criminally scheming brothers. The heroic figures in the play are too weak to obtain recompense for their injuries and do little more than irritate the Hubbards Horace dies almost unnoticed before he can have his showdown, Birdie no longer cares, Addie knows better than to step out of her subservient role, and Alexandra chooses to fight elsewhere. Thus the only pleasure of victory available is in the shifting of power amongst the evil characters as the losers seek revenge, prevail, and then are overturned. The viewer sympathizes with these repellent characters long enough to enjoy their moment of vengeance and their prowess in achieving it. One might wonder why Regina and her brothers have developed their contentious relationship in the first place. Hellman wrote another play to answer that question. *Another Part of the Forest* goes back twenty years to reveal a father who cheats and betrays his neighbors and humiliates his children. Ben blackmails his father for his estate, leaving Regina and Oscar at Ben's beck and call, thus beginning the Greek cycle of revenge that continues in *The Little Foxes* and would have evolved in a third play had Hellman completed the trilogy.

Style

Symbolism

The symbolism in this play about the greed and revenge that destroys the Hubbard family and everyone associated with them is subtle but effective. Oscar, the least clever of the three siblings, enjoys his daily sport of hunting wastefully discarding his bounty. He completely monopolizes the local hunting area, thus denying the black population much-needed access to meat. His pastime has symbolic resonances to the "hobby" he and his siblings make of their struggle for power and wealth, both endeavors involve killing for the sheer pleasure of killing and a drive to dominate others and monopolize resources beyond what is needed. Oscar's pillage is an outgrowth of his underdog status since he cannot make his siblings do his bidding, he resorts to pillage of the animal world and bullying men of lesser social status. In another instance of symbolism, Horace has what is loosely termed a "bad heart," a weakened physical condition that presumably results from emotional deprivation. His heart "ache" and a broken violin in his safe deposit box, combined with the fact that he has not slept with Regina in ten years, suggest that Horace cannot thrive in his wife's presence, and he retreats to Baltimore where he lives under the care of doctors, Back home, a few caustic words from Regina push him beyond medical aid and he dies, having failed to stop or even slow down the Hubbards's rapacity. His "bad" or weak heart carries symbolic significance: his association with th Hubbards has ruined him both physically and morally. In other words, Horace "lacks the heart" to fight, an implication that it takes moral strength, or "heart" to combat evil successfully.

The Well-made Play

Some controversy exists over whether or not *The Little Foxes* is what is called a well-made play. A well-made play normally contains a plot based upon a withheld secret, steadily mounting suspense relying on precise timing, a climax in which the secret is revealed, and a logical denouement or resolution of all loose ends. Certainly the central story line here the need for Regina's share of the investment, Horace's refusal, Oscar's secret plan to steal the needed funds from him, and the resolution in which Horace permits the theft as penance to Regina moves to fulfillment with remarkable clarity and speed. However, the play leaves a number of enormous loose ends untied, and these unresolved plot details throw into question the applicability of the label, well-made play. At the final curtain it remains unclear whether Ben will pursue with any success his threat to expose Regina's complicity in Horace's death. (Perhaps Hellman left this open in order to provide closure in the third play of the trilogy, which she never completed.) Other unresolved plot details also belie the category of the well-made play an important character, William Marshall, appears only in Act 1 and never returns to the stage; Leo's culpability in the theft remains officially undisclosed, and Horace never rewrites his will or has his triumphant moment of confrontation over the Hubbard's crimes. Taken together, these loose ends contribute to a sense that the evil of the Hubbards remains

unchecked, a sense that Hellman clearly meant to convey, since it corresponds to her oblique accusation that those who only "stand and watch" are complicitous in the designs of the evil. Hellman concerned herself very little about the applicability of labels to her work, saying, as quoted in *Conversations with Lillian Hellman*: "It's newspaper idiots who make these distinctions between well-made plays, or magazine idiots. It seems to be a very dull idea to worry about."

Melodrama

Throughout its stage life, *The Little Foxes*, full of high intensity and the relentlessly malicious Hubbards, has withstood the charge that it is a melodrama, that is, a play in which emotional sensation holds more importance than character motivation and psychological depth. At the end of a typical melodrama, good characters are duly rewarded while bad characters are punished for their foul deeds. Of course, the purposely unresolved ending of *The Little Foxes*, which was to be followed by a third play in the planned trilogy, does not suit the dictionary definition of a melodrama. Critics have also debated over whether *The Little Foxes* is "serious theater" or mere melodrama, the distinction being that serious theater causes the characters and the audience to reflect on the larger philosophical implications of the central conflict whereas melodrama simply presents the struggle between good and evil as pure entertainment. The extent of introspection inspired by this play is limited to the charge that "it ain't right to stand and watch" the eaters of the earth (i. e., the Hubbards and their like), a criticism vaguely directed at the audience. On the other hand, *The Little Foxes* takes the genre of melodrama to a new dimension with its witty dialogue and taut plotting. Hellman uses all of the stock-in-trade of the melodramatist to expose a social problem, that to ignore the doings of social malefactors is a destructive form of passivity. If this is melodrama, it is socially responsible melodrama.

Historical Context

By the turn of the 20th century in the American South, the period and setting of Hellman's *The Little Foxes*, the Civil War had taught Southerners the wisdom of industrialization and a diversified economy, and now planting was taking second place to merchandising and factory building. The economy was slowly emerging from the depression that followed the war. Cotton was strong in the South because of international trade with the Far East, although the Boxer Rebellion (1898-1900) slowed exports temporarily, recovering just about the time that the Hubbard and Williams cotton mill would have gone into production. Williams's interest in this investment can be explained by the situation in the North, where mill owners were suffering from a decline in the domestic textile market coupled with rising labor agitation for better wages. At first, Northern politicians attempted to chip away at the Southern market advantage by promoting new legislature against abusively long working hours and low wages and by sponsoring bills to guarantee better education for workers, realizing that a more intelligent work force would demand better working conditions and higher pay. But failing to equalize the labor force, Northern investors, like Hellman's Williams, began to build mills in the South, joining ranks with Southern cotton producers to compete more effectively with European manufacturers. At the same time, Southern financiers, from the wealthiest landowners to the family with just a few hundred dollars to spare, conducted fund-raisers to construct mills in almost every town, in an effort "to bring the cotton mills to the cotton." With money coming in from both sides, mills sprang up all over the South, along with other kinds of factories. Factory and mill jobs were highly desirable to poor whites and blacks because the wages, although lower than those in the North, were high in comparison to Southern rural standards. Often mills reserved labor jobs for poor whites, causing competition with the black population; mill owners like Ben played one group against another to keep wages low. Ben knew that the situation in the South almost guaranteed that he would be able to keep his promise to Williams regarding low wages and no labor problems. Although no one mentions convict leasing in Hellman's play, its presence in the South in the early 1900s would have bolstered an unscrupulous mill owner's ability to hold wages at a minimum and prevent labor problems. Convict leasing consisted of hiring out prison inmates as strikebreakers and railroad workers, and since African Americans received the longest sentences, they filled the prisons and became, essentially, another form of slave labor in the South, without the paternalism of plantation owners who cared about the welfare of their slaves. Northern versions of convict leasing existed, but as with other forms of unfair labor practices, the North ended them long before their Southern counterparts did, and it was easy for certain investors to take advantage of this lag in order to make a profit.

Critical Overview

New York theater critics gave enthusiastic reviews to *The Little Foxes*, and Tallulah Bankhead's portrayal of Regina still ranks high on the list of the most brilliant performances on Broadway. The smash hit opening of *The Little Foxes* in 1939 followed Hellman's highly successful *The Children's Hour* (1934) and *Days to Come* (1936), a failure that closed after a handful of performances. Her third effort catapulted her into the New York theater limelight, a status she enjoyed for the rest of her life, even though she wrote only five more original plays. In spite of strong competition from hit plays running at the same time *The Philadelphia Story* with Katherine Hepburn, a Cole Porter musical called *Leave it to Me* that made Mary Martin a star, Laurence Olivier playing in *No Time for Comedy*, and the record-breaker *Life with Father*, a play that would see over 3,000 performances *The Little Foxes* was hailed as "the year's strongest play" by a *Life* magazine critic and ran for 410 performances. The taut engineering of the plot garnered immediate attention. A *Time* critic described it best, saying that Hellman made "her plot crouch, coil, dart like a snake." Over the years, Hellman's deliberate plot craftsmanship has brought reproach as well as praise; in a review of a 1967 Lincoln Center revival, *New York Review of Books* critic Elizabeth Hardwick faulted the play for failing to do justice to the complexities of its underlying story and condemned the plot's intricate construction as "quite awkwardly managed." Hardwick's comments included the accusation that the play lacked the elements of a true tragedy, galvanizing Richard Poirier, Edmund Wilson, and other notable critics to write eloquent rebuttals in the next issue. Hellman's play has been alternatively condemned and lauded as representative of the genre of the well-made play, meaning a play whose tight plot structure leaves no loose ends, where each and every event contributes to steadily mounting tension that is resolved at the unveiling of an important secret. Those critics who dub *The Little Foxes* a well-made play cite the relentless, chess-like move and countermove of the Hubbards's game of blackmail and revenge that cumulates in Regina's apparent triumph over her brothers at the end of Act Three. However, the play leaves someuntidy loose ends that push it out of the neat category of the well-made play, such as the hovering threat that Ben may find proof of Regina's agency in Horace's death. A paradigmatic well-made play would not leave such matters unresolved. Critics have also debated whether the well-made play itself represents good or bad drama, a debate that Hellman chose to ignore; in response to an interviewer's query on the prognosis of the well-made play, Hellman quipped, as quoted in *Conversations with Lillian Hellman*: "Survival won't have anything to do with well-made or not well-made ... I don't like labels and isms. They are for people who raise or lower skirts because that's the thing you do for this year." The other criticism leveled at Helhnan is equally ephemeral, namely that *The Little Foxes* is pure melodrama, that is, a play more concerned with emotional sensationalism than with reflective thought. That the play addresses social issues through the genre of melodrama led one critic to call it a "social melodrama." More recently, Mark Estrin took all of these critics to task for failing to notice the satiric humor of the play; he claimed that early reviewers "tended to take the works too seriously." Hellman admits that humor was her intent, saying in one interview quoted in *Conversations with Lillian Hellman*: "I think Regi-na's kind of funny" and "the brothers

amuse me." The play has certainly withstood the test of time, having frequent revivals to showcase reigning stars such as Elizabeth Taylor (1981).

Over time, critical opinion has shifted from focusing upon the evil inherent in the industrialization of the New South to the more general view of the themes of greed and revenge and the sin of idly standing by as they go unchecked. Literary scholar Warren French wrote that neither *The Little Foxes* nor Hellman's earlier dramatic success, *The Children's Hour*, would ever "become period pieces as long as malice and greed make the world wobble round."

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Hamilton is an educator with significant experience in drama and secondary curricula. In this essay she compares Hellman's play to classic Greek drama.

In interviews Hellman has acknowledged her debt to Henrik Ibsen and Anton Chekhov as models of dramatic structure (she even edited an anthology of Chekhov's letters), but she never articulated her ties to classic Greek theater, the ultimate source of the genre called tragedy. Yet the two plays of her planned but uncompleted trilogy, *The Little Foxes* and its "prequel," *Another Part of the Forest*, show considerable resemblance to classic Greek tragedy, especially to Aeschylus's trilogy, the *Orestiea*. At the same time, Hellman's plays truly represent their time period, the modernist era, in their cynicism and their lack of a true heroic figure. On top of that, the quietly disturbing condemnation of passivity in the face of social ills move the play beyond the realm of pure tragedy to a unique dramatic genre that combines the best of classic tragedy with the best of the morality play.

As in Greek staging, what Aristotle termed the three unities of time, place, and action are respected in *The Little Foxes*: all of the events take place in one setting, over a short three-week period, and no extraneous incidents mar the relentless action of the lean plot. Hellman's trilogy contains a father's betrayal of his children, interference in betrothals, deceit, and murder, all themes common to Greek mythology and drama. There is cyclical revenge whose stoppage is central to the trilogy, and there is at least one character who wishes to end the familial cycle of revenge. But, unlike the typical classic Greek story, no character appears capable of ending generations of deception and revenge.

In the Greek myth that most closely resembles the structure and story of Hellman's planned trilogy, Orestes and his sister Electra put a stop to several generations of vengeance murders in their family, the House of Atreus, by themselves murdering their own mother and her lover. Aeschylus dramatized their story in the Oresteia, which begins with the murder of Agamemnon by his wife Clytemestra and her paramour, Aegisthus. Their motive is not to rid themselves of an unwelcome spouse, but revenge for Agamemnon's sacrifice of his daughter Iphigenia, an act that her mother Clytemestra never forgave. Child killing goes back to Agamemnon's paternal ancestors, when a father killed his son and served him at a banquet. In another case Atreus (Agamemnon's father) serves his brother a dish of his own children as an act of revenge. In a slight departure from this motif, Agamemnon kills his daughter to solicit the gods' help in the Trojan War. He tells Iphigenia she is setting sail to marry Achilles, but she is bound for a sacrificial, not a wedding altar. The cycle of betrayal, child murder, and revenge ends when Orestes and Electra avenge their father Agamemnon's murder through matricide.

The story of the House of Atreus and the plays of Aeschylus would have been familiar to well-educated writers like Hellman. Just a few years before Hellman began to design her Southern tragic trilogy, Eugene O'Neill reworked the last part of this myth into a New

England setting. O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931) is also a dramatic trilogy, and it contains a virtuous character named Lavinia, who, like the Lavinia in Hellman's *Another Part of the Forest*, helps a family avenger. Hellman apparently decided to make her affinities to Greek tragedy more clear when she wrote *Another Part of the Forest*, because she includes numerous references to Aristotle, father of literary criticism about tragedy. She also alluded to her essential departure from Greek purism when she described the Marcus Hubbard mansion as "something too austere, too pretended Greek," in *Another Part of the Forest.*

Hellman's malevolent Hubbard family is a veritable House of Atreus when it comes to revenge and intrigue. However, in place of corporal murder of child or parent, Hellman substitutes financial and emotional "murder," a topic more in keeping with the modernist period in which she wrote. As in the Greek myth, the curse is patrilineal, coming from the line of the father, Marcus, like a depraved king, rules and dominates his Southern domain, which he has won through a relentless siege upon his neighbors' money and land. His worst sin (betraying the location of confederate troops and lying about it) is revisited upon his offspring, who vie with each other over who will prevail as the most devious backstabber. Hellman makes other adjustments to the Greek model of tragedy as well. In her modern story characters seek after power as did Greek characters, but they do so by waging economic war as predatory capitalists cheating the poor, not by conquering lands as mighty warriors battling equally mighty foes. In addition, sacrifice has evolved from a religious sacrament to an empty habit. Animals are "sacrificed" in *The Little Foxes*, not to appease the gods but for base entertainment. Birdie tells Oscar, "I don't like to see animals and birds killed just for the killing. You only throw them away." The theme of a marriage derailed also appears in Hellman's two plays, but, again, with a difference. A father (Marcus) obstructs the marriage of his daughter, but whereas Agamemnon offers bis daughter to the gods, she (Regina) performs her own "sacrifice," offering herself to a man she cannot love (Horace) in order to gain access to his money.

In Hellman's play, money is a source of wealth and also a marker of power. As Hellman said, in an interview reprinted in *Conversations with Lillian Hellman*: "Money's been the subject of a great deal of literature because it ... isn't only money, of course, it's power, it's sex; it's a great many other things." To Regina money equals mobility with the profits from the cotton mill, she will escape the stifling Southern town to Chicago and belong to a smarter social circle, one that measures the status of its members by the clothes and jewels they wear. To her brother Oscar, money is a way to reclaim power from Ben, the older and shrewder brother who pauperized his siblings and their father in *Another Part of the Forest* using blackmail. Power is important to Oscar; he compensates for his submission to his father and Ben by bullying economically and socially stymied black people. Money in and of itself does not answer any of Ben's needs; he intends to remain a bachelor and already owns more than he spends. To Ben, money is an end in itself, and his form of depraved capitalistic dynasty-building is the ultimate target of the Marxist criticism Hellman levels in this play.

The correspondences between Hellman's Hubbard family and Greek myths about the family Atreus drift apart when the last generations are compared, Orestes and Electra are heroes who dare to put a stop to generations of revenge through their courage and

perseverance. In *The Little Foxes*, Alexandra corresponds to Electra; however, Alexandra does not live up to Electra's courageous moral standards. At the end of the play, Alexandra threatens to fight the "eaters of the earth," but her threat is aimed vaguely and indirectly "some place" instead of right here where the eaters have taken hold. Alexandra mumbles her suspicion that Regina killed Horace, but has led too sheltered a life to stand up to Regina in court, or impede her from going to Chicago, nor can she stop her uncle Ben from continuing to cheat the townspeople. Alexandra expresses Hellman's Marxist philosophy, but she lacks the vitality to achieve a revolution. Hellman said of her, in an interview in *Conversations with Lillian Hellman*: "She did have courage enough to leave, but would never have the force or vigor of her mother's family." Even more significantly, there is no corresponding Orestes figure in *The Little Foxes* to avenge Horace's death and end the cycle for good. Alexandra she has no siblings to assist her as did Electra, because Regina has not slept with Horace in 10 years. That Hellman deprives her audience of a strong avenging figure suggests a cynical attitude toward the state of affairs in the South of 1900, the year of the play's setting, an attitude one may easily extend to include the present of 1939 when the play opened, as well as the present of the 1990s. As Ben says early in the play, "Cynicism is an unpleasant way of saying the truth."

The single remaining male Hubbard heir is Leo, son of Oscar and Birdie, who combines the weaknesses of his mother and the lost Southern aristocracy (ineffectiveness in a ruthless world) with the grasping rapacity of his father and the rising class of capitalist merchants (who compromise ethics for wealth). Leo may exceed his father in evilmindeness, but he lacks the family shrewdness and vitality necessary for financial success in the New South. It appears that the family vigor, though dissipated, will not disappear, however, since Leo enjoys his "elegant worldly ladies" in Mobile, and through whoring will populate a world of Hubbards. Even without Leo's contribution, the Hubbard syndrome is already pervasive in the world portrayed by Hellman in *The Little Foxes*. Ben warns that "there are hundreds of Hubbards sitting in rooms like this throughout the country. All their names aren't Hubbard, but they are all Hubbards and they will own this country some day." The Hubbards are like an impersonal scourge on the earth that Addie compares to the locusts of the Bible, and she wonders whether one can consider oneself virtuous while ignoring their presence. She concludes: "Well, there are people who eat the earth and eat all the people on it.... Then there are people who stand around and watch them eat it.... Sometimes I think it ain't right to stand and watch them do it." The passivity Addie deplores but shares is a theme that Hellman will return to again and again in later plays. In *The Little Foxes* a moral message quietly threads its way through the spectacle of the Hubbards' acts of deceit and revenge. In this respect Hellman's work seems more aligned with the morality play than tragedy. In a morality play, allegorical figures representing human vices such as greed and malice struggle for possession of a human soul. To the extent certain Hellman's characters are categorically evil, they fit the description of the fiat, one-dimensional characters of the morality play.

The title of Hellman's play comes from the Bible, an idea consistent with a pervasive moralizing tone expressed mostly by Addie. Hellman includes in the inscription the whole passage from the Song of Solomon: "Take us the foxes, *The Little Foxes*, that

spoil the vines; for our vines have tender grapes." The lines imply that if no one catches them, *The Little Foxes* will despoil the newly budded vines of precious grapes. In Hellman's play, the Hubbards are "little foxes" despoiling the lost glory of the New South in their greedy rise to power, and they are poised to rise even further on the wave of industrialization that swept over the New South in 1900. *The Little Foxes* is what one critic has called a social melodrama, a tragedy with a moral. Aristotle defined tragedy as a dramatic action that excited and then purged pity and fear, a spectacle that cleansed the audience of these emotions. But *The Little Foxes* provides no such service. It contains all of the elements of classic tragedy, but instead of a cathartic action, the play leaves the audience with a nagging sense of unfulfilled moral obligation. Critic Louis Kronenberger's 1939 review in Stage magazine said that the play "denies us all sense of tragedy," leaving the audience feeling "not purged, not released, but still aroused and indignant." It leaves audiences feeling sullied, fearing that they, like the latent and unprovidential heroes Horace, Addie, and Alexandra, lack the fortitude to involve themselves in stopping the plundering of the "little foxes" of the world, and can only stand idly by, being entertained by the spectacle of their rapacity. Herein lies the power of *The Little Foxes*, a play that concerns an age 100 years past and that is formatted in a dramatic structure, the tragedy, that predates Christ. This social melodrama, or whatever term one applies to it, continues to captivate audiences no longer enmeshed in the debate between Marxism and capitalism. The underlying themes of greed and revenge continue to strike a responsive chord in audiences whenever the play is revived, and its terse, witty dialogue and tense, streamlined plot draw each new audience under its remarkable power.

Source: Carole L. Hamilton, in an essay for *Drama for Students*, Gale, 1997

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Watson analyzes Hellman's portrayal of the South in The Little Foxes, examining the varied critical commentary on the subject. Some critics argue that Hellman's play romanticizes the Old South, while others contend that the author offers a realistic and entirely unsentimental portrayal of the South.

If one looks for a copy of Lillian Hellman's *The Little Foxes* in a chain or suburban mall bookstore he is not likely to find it. More often than not, however, the clerk will produce one of the author's memoirs, such as *Pentimento* or *An Unfinished Woman*. The ready availability in bookstores of what critic John Lahr describes as Hellman's "quasi autobiography" testifies to the success with which, beginning in the late 1960s, she transformed herself from a playwright into a prose writer, thus gaining in the final stage of her career "both a new public and new fame." By contrast, the relative scarcity of her plays reflects the decline of her reputation in this genre during the 1970s and 1980s. In recent years there has been a modest resurgence of interest in Hellman's plays. For example, during its 1993-94 season, the Royal National Theater in England mounted a very successful production of *The Children's Hour*. Still Lillian Hellman's reputation as a playwright in the 1990s remains markedly lower than it was in the late sixties, when she abandoned Broadway and its increasingly dismissive critics and launched into her thoroughly successful autobiographical venture.

Robert Heilman, in his analysis of *Tragedy and Melodrama on the Modern Stage*, represented a substantial body of scholarly opinion in 1973 when he observed that *The Little Foxes*, Hellman's most acclaimed and most frequently revived play,"teeter[ed] between the slick and the substantial," with the slick ultimately predominating. Elizabeth Hardwick, however, mounted the most provocative and stimulating, as well as the most damaging, critique of Hellman's plays. In a brief but powerful essay for the *New York Review of Books*, Hardwick used the occasion of the 1967 Lincoln Center revival of *The Little Foxes* for nothing less than a complete reassessment of its author's place in the hierarchy of modern American drama.

In her essay Hardwick observed that Bellman's plays exhibited "an unusual mixture of the conventions of fashionable, light, drawing room comedy and quite another convention of realism and protest," She judged this combination of conventional dramatic technique and equally modish 1930s radicalism to be awkward and unfortunate. Turning to a more specific examination of *The Little Foxes*, Hardwick argued that over the years the play had metamorphosed from a melodrama attacking the rapaciousness of capitalism into a melodrama concerned with "a besieged Agrarianism, a lost Southern agricultural life, in which virtue and sweetness had a place, and more strikingly, where social responsibility and justice could, on a personal level at least, be practiced." In Hardwick's view, a play that in the 1930s had seemed to strike a stylishly leftist pose now evoked in the 1960s a more fundamental, if subtle, nostalgia for an idealized Southern past, a past rooted ultimately in the antebellum plantation system.

Although Hardwick's observations on the conventional nature of Hellman's dramatic approach are apt and penetrating, there is good reason to question her contention that the interpretation of the South's past conveyed in *The Little Foxes* is essentially sentimental, pervaded by nostalgia for a plantation golden age. Indeed, as her research notes for the play clearly indicate, Hellman was concerned almost to the point of obsession with the factual accuracy of her dramatic portrayal of the turn-of-the-century South. She compiled over 100 pages of amazingly detailed material covering every conceivable aspect of both American and Southern economic and social history between 1880 and 1900, with particular emphasis on the South's agricultural and economic development during these decades.

In compiling her notes Hellman drew from period descriptions and commentaries on the South, such as Julian Ralph's *Dixie or Southern Scenes and Sketches* (1896), Philip Alexander Bruce's *The Rise of the New South* (1905), and Clifton Johnson's *Highways andByways of the South* (1913). She also culled information from more contemporary and more leftist works, such as Howard Odom's *An American Epoch* (1930), T. S. Stribling's *The Store* (1932), and Matthew Josephson's *The Robber Barons* (1934). From these sources she compiled information of a general social nature, including the observation that in the South when travelling away from home the mother "must accompany her young lady everywhere." Though this brief social observation may seem inconsequential, Hellman would put it to good dramatic use in delineating Regina Hubbard's materialistic and decidedly unsouthern-lady-like character when, at the end of Act I, she sends her daughter Alexandra unchaperoned to Baltimore to retrieve her ailing husband, despite the obvious disapproval of the black servant Addie. She also collected in her research notes remarkably precise economic data, such as the price for a dozen eggs in the South in the 1890s (10 cents); and she even found a few direct quotes in her sources, most notable Henry Prick's observation that "railroads are the Rembrandts of investments," which were apposite enough to be incorporated into the text of *The Little Foxes*.

If Lillian Hellman was, as Elizabeth Hardwick contends, partially motivated by a compulsion to romanticize the Old South in *The Little Foxes*, the playwright provides absolutely no evidence for this thesis in her research notes. What these pages of detailed observations and facts reveal is a passion for historical accuracy in her depiction of her characters and setting that suggests the saturation realism technique of fellow American writers Theodore Dreiser and Sinclair Lewis.

Turning from Hellman's research notes to the text of *The Little Foxes*, a reader finds plentiful evidence of'the uncompromising realism and the sharp irony in which the author took justifiable pride. Moreover, the play's historical sensibility, viewed from the perspective of the 1990s, seems anything but antiquated, sentimental, or nostalgic. A careful reading of the opening act reveals a subtle, unsentimental, and complex understanding of the South's postbellum history well removed from the naively romantic historical vision that Hardwick claimed to have encountered in the play. Far from using *The Little Foxes* to purvey an anachronistic agrariamsm, the drama's introductory act reveals a sharp understanding of the paradoxical role that the myth of the plantation

South played in establishing a new commercial-industrial order below the Ma-son-Dixon line.

The Little Foxes opens at the Giddens's house, where Regina Giddens and her brothers, Ben and Oscar Hubbard, are entertaining Chicago plutocrat William Marshall, hoping to attract his Northern capital to establish a textile mill in their Alabama town. Oscar's wife, Birdie, excited by Marshall's interest in music, is sending a servant to bring back her album, a record of her parents' musical trips to Europe which includes a program signed by the great Wagner. Birdie is checked, however, by her husband, who scolds his wife for chattering to Marshall "like a magpie" and who observes that he can't imagine that the industrialist "came South to be bored with you," Birdie's hurt and bewildered protest that she talked to Marshall simply because "some people like music and like to talk about it" is confirmed soon after when Marshall asks again to see the Wagner autograph and insists that Birdie play the piano.

It is evident that Hellman is setting up, with considerable dramatic economy, what at first glance may seem a too-obvious contrast between her grasping Hubbards and the genteel Birdie. The Hubbards Regina, Ben, and Oscar are the foxes of the play's title. Rapacious and unscrupulous, they easily crush the fragile Birdie, the delicately nurtured flower of antebellum plantation society. Like Faulkner's Snopes family, they give their allegiance to no creed and serve no interest but their own. As *Another Part of the Forest* later reveals, they not only have not served, but have actively collaborated against their native region's sacred cause during the Civil War. Birdie, in contrast, reflects the breeding and cultivation that has been popularly ascribed to the Southern plantation aristocracy, a cultivation that the wealthy and sophisticated Marshall recognizes and admires.

Given this vivid contrast between Birdie, originally of Lionnet Plantation, and her pile-driving Hubbard in-laws, one may well be surprised when Marshall opines that the Hubbards represent the remarkable capacity of "Southern aristocrats" for having "kept together and kept what belonged to you." It is perhaps the remarkable social opacity which Marshall seems to betray in his observation that prompts Ben Hubbard to reply. "You misunderstand, sir. Southern aristocrats have *not* kept together and have *not* kept what belonged to them." Ben proceeds to explain in some detail the distinction between the Hubbards and the planter-aristocracy that dominated Alabama before the Civil War. Ben observes that Birdie's family, bound as it was to the land, lacked the capacity for adapting to the profound changes brought about by the Civil War. To Marshall's observation that it is difficult to learn new ways, Ben responds in a distinctly hard-bitten manner:

You're right, Mr Marshall. It is difficult to learn new ways But maybe that's why it's profitable *Our* grandfather and *our* father learned the new ways and learned how to make them pay, (Smiles) *They* were in trade Hubbard Sons, Merchandise Others, Birdie's family, for example, looked down on them To make a long story short, Lionnet now belongs to us. Twenty years ago we took over their land, their cotton, and their daughter.

Interest in this scene falls especially on William Marshall. Not only is he willing to accord the Hubbards the status of aristocrats, he seems neither pleased nor overly interested in hearing Ben's cataloguing of the reasons his family fails to measure up to the standards of this exalted class. He ironically observes "*a little sharply* " in Hellman's stage direction that, in emphasizing the difference between Birdie and the Hubbards, Ben makes "great distinctions." Apparently the social differences Ben describes between the old landed aristocracy and the new commercial plutocracy are picayune and irrelevant to Marshall. Though he clearly sympathizes with Birdie, who is the agonized victim of Ben's gloating, his sensitivity to her humiliation does not lead to any doubts about the wisdom of his business association with the Hubbard clan.

A careful analysis of this scene suggests that Marshall is neither so socially opaque nor so naive as his original remark about the Hubbards being "Southern aristocrats" might have suggested. He is astute, sophisticated, and cultivated enough to recognize the difference between the delicately bred Birdie and the rather crass Hubbards; but he is obviously a man who, like his new business partners, allows himself few illusions. Responding in amusement to Ben's piously hypocritical assertion that "a man ain't only in business for what he can get out it," Marshall confesses that "however grand [Ben's] reasons are, mine are simple: I want to make money and I believe I'll make it on you." This brief speech expresses a sentiment worthy of the foxiest Hubbard.

William Marshall associates his new business partners with the old Southern aristocracy, not because he erroneously assumes that they are the real things, but because it suits his economic purpose to label them aristocrats. His impatience with Ben's detailed explanation of the rise of the postbellum Southern nouveau riche comes in part from the fact that Ben is explaining social nuances that Marshall undoubtedly has detected but that, to suit his business aims, he would rather not have articulated. As he tells the Hubbards, they need not labor to justify themselves to him: "Now you don't have to convince me that you are the right people for the deal. I wouldn't be here if you hadn't convinced me six months ago."

If Hellman's opening scene reveals anything, it reveals the irony that the trappings of the aristocratic plantation myth can be manipulated to further the most antithetical of designs. This irony acquires added depth when one realizes that it is the Northern industrialist who invests his partners with the mantle of Southern aristocrat. Yet Hellman demonstrates that the Hubbards are also quite capable of utilizing the Old South myth to advance their ambitions. Regina's Southern belle exterior gracefully masks a savage heart. Marshall's prediction that in Chicago the ladies will "bow to your manners and the gentlemen to your looks" is probably not mere flattery.

It is Ben's farewell toast to Marshall, however, which most effectively illustrates the ability of the Hubbards to use and manipulate Southern traditions with which they have essentially no temperamental identification. Ben explains to Marshall that in the South "we have a strange custom. We drink the last drink for a toast. That's to prove that the Southerner is always on his feet for the last drink." Ben's toast is to Southern cotton mills, which "will be the Rembrandts of investment," and to "the firm of Hubbard Sons and Marshall, Cotton Mills" Only later does he confess to his brother that the Southern

custom he evoked is non-existent. "I already had his signature. But we've all done business with men whose word over a glass is better than a bond. Anyway it don't hurt to have both." One imagines that the only gentlemen in this play whose word over a glass would constitute their bond are Birdie's ancestors, the vanished sires of Lionnet Plantation.

Examining the earliest manuscript version of *The Little Foxes* in which the cast of characters and the plot of the play are definitively established, one is impressed by the numerous minor revisions Hellman made in later versions of her work to heighten its suggestiveness and sharpen its focus. In the early version, for example, Ben responds to Marshall's impatient assertion that Hubbard makes "great distinctions" by countering: "Why not? They are important distinctions." Ben's reply in Hellman's final version is both more subtle and more suggestive: "Oh, they have been made for us. And maybe they are important distinctions."

A similar thickening of dramatic texture and sharpening of focus is achieved a few lines later when Birdie rises to the defense of her family against Ben's implied charge of reckless extravagance. In the early version she responds to Ben's observation that Birdie's family had "niggers to lift their fingers" by sharply interjecting: "We were good to our Negroes. Everybody knew that." In the final version she adds an additional comment: "We were good to our people. Everybody knew that. We were better to them than...." At this point Regma quickly interrupts her sister-in-law by observing, "Why, Birdie. You aren't playing." The audience should have little trouble imagining to whom Birdie was about to compare her family's benevolent treatment of their "people." Hellman's slightly revised exchange works more elliptically and more skillfully to suggest the cruelty and the intelligence of the Hubbard clan as well as Birdie's impotence in the face of their common malice.

If a reader is impressed by the thoroughness and the subtlety of Hellman's revisions of her opening act, he will be equally impressed by the firmness with which Hellman had obviously grasped her Hubbard characters from the earliest version of *The Little Foxes*, by the completeness with which she understood from the very beginning the irony of their role in linking the South's plantation past with its industrial future. In both early and final drafts Marshall has no illusions about his Southern business partners, but he is convinced that the Hubbards are the right people for his purposes. In neither early nor final draft is he interested in fine Southern social distinctions. In both versions his purpose is boldly stated: "I want to make money and I believe I'll make it on you."

In both early and final drafts, Birdie offers her plaintive wish that Lionnet be restored. In both versions Ben indulgently labels her dream a "pretty picture." In both, Birdie goes on to dream of a lost Eden where nobody loses his temper or is "nasty-spoken or mean." In both, the futility of her first wish is matched by the pathetic quality of her second that her husband Oscar stop shooting "animals and hinds." And in both, Oscar brings an abrupt halt to her distracting chatter. In the early manuscript he impatiently and somewhat querulously observes: "Very well. We've all heard you. Now don't excite yourself further. You will have one of your headaches again." In the final version his sentence is shorter and more brutal. "Very well. We've all heard you. That's enough now." Birdie's fragile

dreams of an idealized Old South have been casually smashed by the Hubbards, New South apostles who brush the concerns of this pathetic relic of Southern ladyhood aside so that they can snarl and squabble over the spoils of their prospective partnership with Yankee capital.

From her earliest to her final draft of *The Little Foxes* Lillian Hellman maintained a fine and subtle understanding of the profoundly ironic way that the Edenic myth of the plantation South had come to serve in the promulgation of a new and fundamentally antithetical Southern economic order. Indeed, her play can fairly claim to be prescient in its historical understanding, anticipating by more than three decades the ideas of historian Paul Gaston in *The New South Creed: A Study of Southern Mythmaking*. In his book Gaston investigates the way Southern advocates of a New South sought to tie the articles of their creed (reconciliation between sections, racial peace, and a new economic and social order founded on industry, scientific research, and modern farming methods) with the values of the old plantation South. His book makes clear that during the postbellum Southern economic revival both the mythic Old South creed and the New South creed flourished side by side and that a Northern industrialist and a native New South spokesman alike not only tolerated the romantic view of antebellum Dixie but embraced and promoted it, along with their visions of a new economic order. The explanation of this strange exercise in doublethink is not as recondite as one might assume. In the words of Gaston, "the romance of the past was used to underwrite the materialism of the present."

Gaston's book examines in impressive detail the Southern paradox that C. Vann Woodward had wittily and succinctly expressed in 1951: "One of the most significant inventions of the New South was the 'Old South'." But even earlier, as the text of The Litte Foxes makes abundantly clear, this Old South/New South paradox had been intellectually apprehended and dramatically examined by Lillian Hellman. She understood as a playwright what historians Woodward and Gaston would also come to understand, that the vision of an orderly postbellum South dominated by a strong and enduring antebellum aristocracy provided the sort of picture of traditional social stability that appealed to the conservative temperaments of Northern businessmen like William Marshall and that encouraged the southward flow of Yankee capital to sharp and often unscrupulous Southern entrepreneurs like the Hubbards.

Hellman was probably able to look with clear and undistorted vision at the South and its cherished myths because she was neither fully Northern nor fully Southern in her temperament. As biographer William Wright has explained, her ancestors represented "a fascinating yet little known aspect of American history: the quick rise during the nineteenth century in the deep South of a number of Jewish families from immigrant poverty to mercantile power." Hellman's Marx and Newhouse relations were wealthy Southerners, but they were Southern Jews who had established their fortunes not as slave-owning planters but as merchants. As transplanted Alabamians living in New York, they combined Southern inflected manners and tastes with a ruthlessly pragmatic personal style. Hellman eventually intuited the deep discrepancy between their polished exteriors and the baldly materialistic content of their Sunday dinner conversations, "full of open ill will about who had the most money, or who spent it too lavishly, who would

inherit what, which had bought what rug that would last forever, who what jewel she would best have been without" (*Unfinished Woman*). She would eventually employ this understanding of her relatives in creating the Hubbard clan, characters who achieve both a universally human dimension and a specific social identification as representatives of a new post-bellum Southern class of ambitious and opportunistic nouveau riche.

But even though Hellman had no illusions about her grasping apostles of a modern industrial South, she refused to buy into the counter myth of an idyllic plantation past. Katherine Lederer is correct when she argues that there is a marked degree of ironic detachment in Hellman's characterizations which critics such as Elizabeth Hardwick have been unwilling to recognize. Rather than seeing Birdie as a nostalgic symbol of "besieged Agrariamsm" Lederer describes her more accurately as "a silly, lost, pathetic woman, representative of a class that learned nothing from the Civil War, that felt that being 'good to their people' made them superior to William Faulkner's Snopeses and the Hubbards." Hellman's unique position as a not-quite-Southern offspring of a Deep South Jewish mercantile family made it possible for her as a dramatist to look with equal irony and dispassion on both the South' s rage for progress and its infatuation with a hopelessly romanticized aristocratic past.

Lillian Hellman is guilty, as Elizabeth Hardwick persuasively argues, of her share of melodramatic contrivances of plot and hackneyed leftist postures in *The Little Foxes*, The tone with which she develops characters such as Alexandra and Horace Giddens seems uncertain and unresolved. But Hellman's play also demonstrates considerable dramatic strength and toughness of spirit. There is no reason for burdening it with the charge of historical sentimentality. Far from being intellectually naive, *The Little Foxes* conveys, among other insights, an astute understanding of the way the moonlight-and-mag-nolia vision of a dead Southern past was used in postbellum Dixie to validate a fundamentally restructured but equally sterile Southern present.

Source: Ritchie D. Watson, Jr, "Lillian Hellman's *The Little Foxes* and the New South Creed: An Ironic View of Southern History" in the *Southern Literary Journal*, Vol. XXVIH, no 2, Spring, 1996, pp. 59-68.

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt from his review The Little Foxes, Atkinson calls the play "a deliberate exercise in malice," and asserts that "Miss Hellman has made an adult horror-play. Her little foxes are wolves that eat their own kind."

As drama critic for the New York Times from 1925 to 1960, Atkinson was one of the most influential reviewers in America

As a theatrical story-teller Lillian Hellman is biting and expert. In *The Little Foxes*, which was acted at the National last evening, she thrusts a bitter story straight to the bottom of a bitter play. As compared with The Children's Hour, which was her first notable play, *The Little Foxes* will have to take second rank. For it is a deliberate exercise in malice melodramatic rather than tragic, none too fastidious in its manipulation of the stage and presided over by a Pinero frown of fustian morality. But out of greed in a malignant Southern family of 1900 she has put together a vibrant play that works and that bestows viable parts on all the members of the cast. None of the new plays in which Tallulah Bankhead has acted here has given her such sturdy support and such inflammable material. Under Herman Shumlin's taut direction Miss Bankhead plays with great directness and force, and Patricia Collinge also distinguishes herself with a remarkable performance. *The Little Foxes* can act and is acted.

It would be difficult to find a more malignant gang of petty robber barons than Miss Hellman's chief characters. Two brothers and a sister in a small Southern town are consumed with a passion to exploit the earth. Forming a partnership with a Chicago capitalist, they propose to build a cotton factory in the South, where costs are cheap and profits high. The Chicago end of the deal is sound. But Miss Hellman is telling a sordid story of how the brothers and the sister destroy each other with their avarice and cold hatred. They crush the opposition set up by a brother-in-law of higher principles; they rob him and hasten his death. But they also outwit each other in sharp dealing and they bargain their mean souls away.

It is an inhuman tale. Miss Hellman takes a dextrous playwright's advantage of the abominations it contains. Her first act is a masterpiece of skillful exposition. Under the gentility of a social occasion she suggests with admirable reticence the evil of her conspirators. When she lets loose in the other two acts she writes with melodramatic abandon, plotting torture, death and thievery like the author of an old-time thriller. She has made her drama air-tight; it is a knowing job of construction, deliberate and self-contained. In the end she tosses in a speech of social significance, which is no doubt sincere. But *The Little Foxes* is so cleverly contrived that it lacks spontaneity. It is easier to accept as an adroitly designed theatre piece than as a document in the study of humanity....

As for the title, it comes from the Bible: "Take us the foxes, *The Little Foxes*, that spoil the vines; for our vines have tender grapes." Out of rapacity, Miss Hellman has made an adult horror-play. Her little foxes are wolves that eat their own kind.

Source: Brooks Atkinson, in a review of *The Little Foxes* in the *New York Times*, February 16, 1939, p 16.

Adaptations

Lillian Hellman adapted *The Little Foxes* into a screenplay in 1941 that starred Bette Davis as Regina and won critical acclaim for director William Wyler and cameraman Gregg Toland, later famed for his deep-focus camerawork in *Citizen Kane*. The black-and-white film was nominated for nine Academy Awards, but received none.

In 1949 Marc Blitzstein premiered an opera adaptation called *Regina* with original libretto and music. Although it ran for only a few months, it fared better than the usual Broadway opera.

An NBC television drama based on the play was broadcast in 1956, and starred Greer Garson. It was produced by George Schaefer, with a screenplay by Robert Hartung, and was broadcast as an episode of "The Hallmark Hall of Fame" series.

Topics for Further Study

Investigate the Northern interest in the industrialization of the New South. Is William Marshall a "carpetbagger" ? Explain your answer.

How did the Antebellum South differ economically, socially, and politically from the South before the Civil War? In what ways do the characters in Hellman's play reflect these changes?

Does *The Little Foxes* conform to the conventions of the melodrama or the well-made play? In what ways does it conform to these archetypes and m what ways does it differ?

What were some of the differences in wage and labor conditions between the North and the South at the turn of the 20th century, and what led workers to form labor unions?

What were some of the factors that kept African Americans like Addie and Cal in subservient and essentially powerless positions twenty-five years after emancipation?

Compare and Contrast

1900s: During the industrialization of the New South, Southern labor laws and practices were more exploitative of workers than those in the North, giving owners of Southern factories and mills a decided profit advantage over their Northern counterparts.

1939: After 1935, the National Labor Board assured that workers had the right to organize, a national minimum wage was established by the Wages and Hours Act of 1938, and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) organized workers by industries, giving workers stronger bargaining power with employees; however to many Americans alarmed by the continued intolerable conditions for factory and migratory workers, socialism became an attractive political option.

Today: Union membership is in decline since widespread labor issues no longer exist. However, in spite of vigilance over the enforcement of fair labor laws, inequities still exist for hundreds of illegal immigrants secretly confined to "sweatshops " where they work long hours in substandard conditions at below-minimum wages.

1900: In spite of emancipation in 1865, African Americans were actively disenfranchised by Jim Crow Laws in the South that prevented them from voting or receiving fair trials, and schools and public places were legally segregated. 115 lynchmgs were recorded in this year.

1939: Some Southern African Americans migrated north to escape Jim Crow laws, where they met with resistance from European immigrants threatened by this new source of cheap labor; those who stayed in the South continued to experience the oppression of the Ku Klux Klan and segregationist policy.

Today: The Civil Rights Acts of the 1960s ensure voting rights to people of any race or color and schools and workplaces are becoming more racially diverse, although the effects of long-term oppression continue to plague contemporary African Americans.

What Do I Read Next?

In *Another Part of the Forest*, the "prequel" to *The Little Foxes*, Hellman jumps back 20 years to show the genesis of the family revenge cycle. It portrays a dominating father (Marcus) whom Ben blackmails (with evidence of Marcus's betrayal of neighbor soldiers during the Civil War) to obtain full ownership of his estate, leaving Regina and Oscar virtually penniless.

Hennk Ibsen's play *A Doll's House* (1879) was a model of social realism for Hellman. In it a dutiful wife leaves her husband when she discovers that he has never seen her as a human being, but as little more than a doll.

All My Sons, the 1947 play by Hellman's contemporary and rival Arthur Miller, portrays Joe Keller, a manufacturer who knowingly ships defective airplane parts that kill twenty two American pilots in World War II, and lets his partner take the jail sentence for it.

In Arthur Miller's play *Death of a Salesman* (1949), Willie Loman sacrifices his integrity for expected riches.

The son of Big Daddy, the wealthy cotton plantation owner of Tennessee Williams's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), turns to alcoholism rather than follow in his father's footsteps in this intense drama.

Aeschylus's *Orestiea*, a Greek trilogy concerning a family's heritage of malice and revenge is a fine representative of Greek tragic theater.

Historian Edward L. Ayers's *Southern Crossing: A History of the American South*, 1877-1906 (Oxford University Press, 1995), is a concise account of the daily, public, and cultural life in the South during the years from post-Reconstruction into the Progressive period, including the turn of the century portrayed by Hellman's play.

Further Study

Adler, Jacob. *Lillian Hellman*, Steck-Vaughn, 1969.

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Bills, Steven. *Lillian Hellman: An Annotated Bibliography*, Garland, 1979.

One of three annotated bibliographies of Hellman's work *Discovering Authors*, Gale, 1995

A cd-rom reference source containing an overview of Hellman's works and career.

Estrin, Mark *W Lillian Hellman: Plays, Films, Memoirs*, G. K. Hall & Co, 1980

Estnn's annotated bibliography is the most recent and the most complete one available

French, Warren. *The Thirties- Fiction, Poetry, Drama*, Everett/Edwards, 1969.

A scholarly work that analyzes the key contributions in three genres produced by American writers in the 1930s

Goodman, Charlotte "The Fox's Cubs- Lillian Hellman, Arthur Miller, and Tennessee Williams," in *Modem American Drama' The Female Canon*, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1990.

Makes a strong case that Hellman's *The Children's Hour* and *The Little Foxes* influenced Miller and Williams, who were coming of age in the 1930s when those plays came out.

Kronenberger, Louis "Greed," in Stage, April 1,1939, pp 36-37,55.

A positive review typical of those that greeted the triumphant opening of *The Little Foxes* on Broadway.

Lederer, Kathenne *Lillian Hellman*, Twayne, 1979. An early study of Hellman's life, completed before her death in 1984

MacNicholas, Carol "Lillian Hellman," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Volume 7: *Twentieth-Century Dramatists*, edited by John MacNicholas, Gale, 1981, pp 276- 94.

A biographical entry with summaries and critical analyses of Hellman's plays

Riordan, Mary Marguerite. Lillian Hellman, A Bibliography; 1926-1978, Scarecrow Press, 1980. An annotated bibliography.

Rollyson, Carl. *Lillian Hellman: Her Legend and Her Legacy*, St Martin's Press, 1988.

Rollyson's unauthorized biography traces links between Hellman's plays and her life, some of which had not been noted by earlier critics. Reports the finding that Hellman had been a member of the Communist party, a fact she denied throughout her life.

Turk, Ruth. *Lillian Hellman: Rebel Playwright*, Lerner, 1995,128 p.

A biography written for the young adult reader Contains photographs

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David Galens

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Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
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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:

Editor, Drama for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535