

Lillian Hellman: From Ibsen to Chekhov

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Abstract

Lillian Hellman is the lone female dramatist who carved a niche for herself amongst the extremely talented male dramatists of her time like Clifford Odets, Eugene O' Neill, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller and others. She started her dramatic career as a moral and social dramatist during the depression period and was inspired by Henrik Ibsen and George Bernard Shaw. In her earlier plays she dealt with various societal issues. In the course of her long dramatic career covering three decades, she slowly veered towards the Chekhovian model of writing. Her later plays especially *The Autumn Garden* and *Toys in the Attic* are reminiscent of the Russian dramatist's plays. In these plays the internal conflict of the characters are given more importance than the external plot. This gradual evolution of Lillian Hellman marks her progression both as an artist and as a human.

Key Words: *American Theatre, Racism, Social Realism, Fascism, Chekhovian Model*

Lillian Hellman led a life that... encompasses the freewheeling days of the 20s, the fervent years of the 30s, and the war... (CLH 84) Women playwrights like Vicki Baum, Zoe Atkins and later Clare Boothe Luce were popular playwrights during the early 1930s. However, all these women playwrights, wrote light comedies or romances. Unlike other women playwrights Lillian Hellman was not involved with women's issues and their rights and duties, their equality with men and their independence. Rather than being concerned with women's problems alone she went beyond all these to deal with the issues of humanity as a whole. She dealt with tough, serious themes that were usually considered to be a male forte. Her themes were of the modern individual who is in continuous struggle with the materialistic surroundings. She wrote purposeful plays which illustrated the destructive nature of the evil factors in social, personal and political life. It was not enough for Hellman to be a good playwright or even to be identified as a woman playwright. She wanted to be acknowledged as a great playwright.

Emerging as a playwright in the depths of the deepest economic depression the United States had ever known, Hellman considered the period had '...a group of extraordinarily talented writers...Most remarkable people – Eugene O' Neill, George Kelly, Sidney Howard, George

Kaufman, Elmer Rice...- breaking new ground, going new ways and having something to say” (*CLH* 45). Although she began her career in a traumatic decade, she was neither influenced by the Provincetown Players nor the Group theatre that was providing ample scope to the dramatists of the late twenties and early thirties. Hellman took no part in the theatre of protest nor was she a part of the New Theatre. The Provincetown Players had turned to direct social criticism during the twenties, whereas the Group theatre founded by Harold Clurman, Cheryl Crawford and Lee Strasberg saw the emergence of experimental theatre with its innovative scripts and acting methodology.

The contemporaries of Hellman like Elmer Rice, Clifford Odets and John Howard Lawson used the Group theatre to politicize real life issues and characters. Just a year after the opening of *The Children’s Hour*, the Group theatre enacted two of Clifford Odets’ plays – *Waiting for Lefty* and *Awake and Sing* – which not only criticized the American experience, but also called for political action. These playwrights used stage as a tool of propaganda and instigated the audience to rise in action in response to their communist ideologies. Even as Hellman considered herself to be a moral playwright, and held theatre to be ‘a place for the expression and exchange of ideas,’ a stage where she could “present an idea for the consideration of intelligent audiences” (Meyers 306), she did not use it as a pulpit for denunciation. While critics considered her as a “specialist in hate and frustration, a student of helpless rage, an articulator of inarticulate loathings” (Krutch 769), Arthur Miller, one of her contemporary playwrights felt that her plays were not angry enough and felt that there was a “certain eloquence in her dialogue that set her apart from the theatre of protest which was so brash and exciting.” Considering her plays to be “pre-eminently Broadway,” he viewed them as “impassioned, challenging plays” lacking the sting in the anger that characterized the political plays of the day (Miller 230).

It was truly her genius that she could write serious plays and yet enthrall audience. Hellman felt that the dramatist should be an intellectual writer trying to influence and shape the minds of the people. The artist in Hellman was more concerned with the major distress felt by her generation than the political issues of the day. Hers was the generation tasked with sorting out the meaning of social justice, racism, fascism, of good and evil in a dangerous and insecure

world. Hellman felt that the world would be a better place if there was individual integrity and ethical responsibility. Her plays were regarding the morality of the ordinary people, on issues such as how the pursuit of wealth distorted the human relationships inside and outside the family. She fought for liberty and freedom of the individual against ideological disagreement and societal bullying, and wanted the individual truth and integrity to be upheld against the culture of fear. To her, a good society must be built on the principles of social justice eradicating poverty and racism. However, she did not advocate for these by calling her audience to arms or urging political action; nor did she turn to abstract questions about the human condition unlike some of her contemporaries. Her plays exuded such power, zeal and urgency of conviction and consisted of realistic characters set in plausible situations. The momentum of her play was caused by their reaction to the issues in the daily lives. She was more interested in discussing ideas on stage than experimenting with dramaturgy. Hence, she followed the social realism of Henrik Ibsen and George Bernard Shaw. Hailed by Jacob Adler as “the single most important American Ibsenian outside of Arthur Miller,” Hellman produced problem plays – plays in which she believed that “to reveal a problem is a step towards correcting it” (Adler 6).

Hellman belonged to an era in which a writer could enlist with confidence themes of good and evil. It is certain that the difference between the two would be readily apparent to the audience. She identified herself as a creature of her time and considered herself to be bound to the moment. Like any other playwright of her time, she felt herself swayed by the economic instability of the Depression years and the resultant evolution of the new order. She set out in her early plays as a moralist writer and considered her plays as fundamentally moral plays, as plays that flailed at injustice. They reflect the fundamental core of her being. For her, “writing is oneself” (CLH 86). Her first play, *The Children’s Hour* (1934) was a morality play about good and evil; she questioned the impact of rumour, the failure of justice in the face of crowd action. “*The Children’s Hour* was designed as drama of morality first and last and everyone who reads too much cynicism into them is being misled” (CLH 7). The plot of her first play was suggested to her by her mentor and friend Dashielle Hammett, who read it in *Bad Companions*, in the chapter “*Closed Doors: or, the Great Drumsheugh Case*” written by law historian William Roughead. Hammett felt that the topic of lesbianism would be novel enough to captivate the audience’s interest about a debutant dramatist, and the high moral content of the play would

make it a solid narrative for the moralist in Hellman. Hellman's quaint upbringing, colourful background, and staid morality all found their culmination in her first play. It brought her bouquets and brickbats alike. Mark W. Estrin in his *Critical Essays on Lillian Hellman* remarks:

The controversies surrounding *The Children's Hour* thus deflected much of the critical attention that more properly should have been addressed to the play itself, one of the most compelling works to emerge from the serious American theater before Blanche Dubois and Willy Loman arrived on Broadway in the 1940s. (2)

And the fact that unlike other woman playwrights she has not confined herself to feminine themes also made her an unusual target in the male dominant theatre. Throughout her career she hated the sobriquet, "woman playwright" and refused to be portrayed as a feminist. In the face of being accused of being a melodramatist and a moralist, she shot back:

Everybody is concerned about society...you would have to be a sort of lap dog, it seems to me, not to be concerned with society and the world you live in. There are many levels of being concerned...I don't see how you could live and not be concerned with the world around you, whatever it was. What I meant was that I didn't deliberately set out to write any propaganda. (CLH 103)

She acknowledges of being a moral writer only as a means of propagating truth and for her propaganda "in the proper use of the word, is about good writing and I like to imagine my plays are good writing" (CLH 7). She defines "that some sort of truth, profound or trivial, but the truth must be the object of anyone who seeks a form of literary expression...If a person doesn't want to involve himself with the truth he has no business trying to write at all" (CLH 9). She did not believe that "all literature must have social or economic implications." Yet, she considered that, "unless you are a pathological escapist there must be some sort of propaganda in everything you write" (CLH 9).

She refutes the charge of melodramatist, "...charge of too well-made, too neat, too well put together... a rather foolish charge against anybody." She justifies that the greatest dramatists like Becket "whom I very greatly admire, writes remarkably well-made plays...Ibsen, of course, wrote the best-made plays of all" (CLH 115).

In her earlier plays like *The Children's Hour* (1934), *Days to Come* (1936), *The Little Foxes* (1938) and *Another Part of the Forest* (1947), we can see the moralist in Hellman taking charge of the situation. These plays are purely theatrical in the sense that the characters and

actions are contrived to unravel the main incident. Each of these plays had a direct enemy, a tangible vice, that could be isolated and should be annihilated. The characters of these plays though true to life are dominated by their settings and they react to their limited surroundings. Her war plays, *Watch on the Rhine* (1941) and *The Searching Wind* (1944) are considered to be outwardly political but are innately ethical in tone. Even, here the villain is not the general ideology like Fascism or Nazism, but the evil inherent in powerful men which might sway them to become autocratic. While commenting on her war plays, Timothy J. Wiles opines:

It was a sign of Hellman's mature realism that she never proposed a native pacifism as a means to oppose the Nationalist Socialists. Her war drama stems from the late 1930s and early 1940s period of the United Front when communists and various liberals united against fascism. It avoids a doctrinaire explanation for the Nazi's evil ascendancy based simply on economics, and dramatizes social forces like the authoritarian personality and ideas like the banality of evil with skill and flair, against a backdrop of diplomats, spies, agents and resistance fighters. Fascism represented to her more than just an enemy of Soviet Union; It was a psychological force that could be unleashed in the mass mind by its proponents' conscious manipulation of racial hatred. (CELH 93)

There is a strong moral thread that binds all her plays, whether they are clothed in regional aspects, as in her earlier plays or propagate a political scenario as in her war plays. But in her later plays, like *The Autumn Garden* (1951) and *The Toys in the Attic* (1960), she probes incisively into the core of her characters, now shorn of all the unnecessary trappings that had burdened her earlier plays. Jacob H. Adler in his *The Chekhovian Hellman* points out:

Critics have spoken frequently of Miss Hellman's debt to Ibsen, and less frequently of her debt to Chekhov. The pattern they have seen, and roughly a correct pattern, is that Miss Hellman was a disciple of Ibsen from *The Children's Hour* to *Another Part of the Forest*; that she turned to Chekhov for her theme and plot technique in *The Autumn Garden*; ...and ...in *The Toys in the Attic*, her basic material comes from Chekhov's *The Three Sisters*. (CELH 43)

Discarding the moral overtones and the well-constructed plots that had been forte so long, she turned towards Chekhov, whose plays she admired and whose letters she was editing for publishing as a book around the time she wrote *The Autumn Garden*. This gradual movement towards Chekhovian model is not a contrived shift but the natural evolution of a mature dramatist and as Mark W. Estrin points out in *Critical Essays on Lillian Hellman* "the leap from Ibsen to Chekhov...was merely a slight jump" (5), because she had always admired Chekhov, and like him, she believed that it is the individual who has the power to transform the society.

She admired him for his honesty, intelligence and optimism. She admired his ability to keep his head, to act on principle and deal with things based on common sense. Marvin Felheim in his essay, “The Autumn Garden: Mechanics and Dialectics” succinctly points out this difference:

...In *The Children’s Hour* and *The Little Foxes*...the contrivances are too obvious, they are *theatrically* convincing, but they do not have the high artistry which makes them consistent with themselves, true not to life but to dramatic art; the contrivances in these pieces render them merely realistic, good enough for exciting (even meaningful) theater, but not great art...*The Autumn Garden* does this and more. Without seeming to, in this play Miss Hellman organizes her materials in terms of artistic principles, dramatic principles...The realism is to the essence of human existence, not to the representation of life. (CELH 51)

For the first time she renounced the presentation of her favourite topic – social criticism in one form or another, and concerned herself with a human problem that is not bound to social conditions. The vehement attitude she had towards evil or injustice in the early plays was now replaced with a general irritability and peevishness toward human inadequacy. Her earlier plays had all possessed a tightly knit structure, a sense of overt conflict and *The Autumn Garden* also did not disappoint in these qualities. It seemed a deliberately different effort to widen the horizon and its seeming indirectness was intended to place the emphasis on the characters, on their inner conflicts and relationships rather than outward drama. The retelling of their stories was not meant to further the plot, but to relive their experience in the present. *The Autumn Garden* with its authentic dialogue, brilliant character studies, and less strident moral, remains one of Hellman’s most popular plays. She called it her “favourite play.” As Marvin Felheim opines:

In her earlier plays, she took sides; one can list the characters she admires and those whose behaviour and belief she dislikes. In *Days to Come*, for example, she admits she even tried to balance characteristics: good against bad, well against sick, complex against simple. In *The Autumn Garden*, she does not make this kind of break-down. The result is true complexity, both in dialectics and mechanics. (CELH 51)

It is about a motley middle aged crowd which assembles in the summer house every year – aimless drifters – without any real sense of direction in life. The retired Army General (Griggs); his wife Rose, Ned Crossman, an amiable drunkard, Nick Crossman a painter and his wife Nina, Mrs. Ellis, the old matriarch, her daughter-in-law, Carrie and her doting son, Frederick all come to stay in the house of the self-deluding spinster, Constance Tuckerman. Then there is Sophie Tuckerman, the daughter of Constance’s late brother Sam and a French woman he married

before the World War II, who is engaged to Frederick. Other than these two the rest of the inmates are in the autumn of their lives.

Unlike in her earlier plays, there are no real bad characters or heroic characters. They are not like the Hubbards of *The Little Foxes*, who are “out to eat the earth and eat all the people in it” (*TLF* 205) nor are they like Kurt Mueller in *The Watch on the Rhine*, “a man who..will fight to make a good world...” (*TWR* 299). These are people like Griggs of *The Autumn Garden* who have “..frittered yourself away..” (*TAG* 490) their time, waiting and watching without acting responsibly. Only Sophie seems to be aware of her condition as she tells Constance, “I have not been happy, and I cannot continue here. I cannot be what you have wished me to be, and I do not want the world you want for me, it is too late” (*TAG* 456).

The Autumn Garden presents the universal day dream theme. They believe that their setback and stagnancy is incidental and would be ultimately resolved. They hope their present frustration would be eliminated and they would experience serenity and joy. With their delusional attitude preventing them from living in the present, Hellman highlights their inability to recognize the absolute truth of their present condition. Their self-delusion leaves them drained bereft of energy and mental stability, still they persist in their day-dreams. She just leaves them in their condition without imposing any restrictions on them. As Mary Lynn Broe in her essay “Bohemia Bumps into Calvin: The Deception of Passivity in Lillian Hellman” states:

We realize that Autumn Garden issues a stern warning reminiscent of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s early stories; life is a set in a committed direction and tended energetically before mid-life, or its returns will never be reaped. (*CLEH* 87)

The prevailing mood of the play is Chekhovian as Chekhov did not believe in plots, but in representing the images of life in a poetical manner. In *The Autumn Garden*, the symbolism inherent in the title adds a poetic dimension to the scope of the play. For Marvin Felheim:

“...The Autumn Garden is the only kind which makes for modern tragedy. It is not merely psychological (as in Tennessee Williams) nor sociological (as in Arthur Miller), but it is artistic (poetic) and moral – all in the Chekhovian sense. And so Miss Hellman’s movement in this direction is a movement toward seriousness...That Miss Hellman should have moved from well-made play in the direction of Chekhov is not surprising, for a sensitive individual, this was a logical development.” (*CLEH* 53)

Toys in the Attic is Hellman's last successful and original play. It is the most complex, morbid and Freudian. It focuses on the individual psychologies of the characters whose failure to understand themselves in the origin of their pain. Regarded by many critics as the Hellman's finest work, *Toys in the Attic* achieves the magnitude and human revelation that has always been the mark of serious drama. It reflects the influence of Tennessee William's psychosexual terrain.

Toys in the Attic is about two things – the effect of money on people's lives and illusions, and the destructive springs which run under the surface of love relationships. As in *The Autumn Garden*, Hellman has moved to a consideration of more private, intimate concerns, human emotions and motifs than materialism, secularity and amorality. She has advanced from human greed to human need which is far more universalized theme than that found in her earlier works. If Hellman has dramatized the effects of wealth on the strong, in the Hubbard plays, she portrays its impact on the weak – a wastrel brother and his doting sisters in *The Toys in the Attic*.

Loosely based on her father Max Hellman and her aunts Hannah and Jenny, it is a mordant tale of their love if it was to be portrayed in a destructive manner. The sisters Anna and Carrie love their brother Julian very much in a possessive manner that they wouldn't like him to have a life for himself with his child-bride Lily. In their all-consuming love, they destroy his life and in turn lead a doomed existence. Critics draw a parallel between this play and Chekhov's *The Three Sisters*. Jacob H. Adler points out the similarities in "The Chekhovian Hellman":

The broad outlines of the connection are clear enough. In both plays we find unhappy sisters and a brother who is a failure. In both plays, the family is of genteel origin and the sisters live in the family home, which they all own in common. In both plays, the brother marries, against the wishes of his sisters, a silly woman who increases the family's stock of unhappiness. In both the plays, the sisters want, or think they want, to go somewhere else (Moscow; 'Europe'), and finally discover they never will. In both plays, money is blamed for a good deal...In both plays, an act of violence near the close...returns the situation to a state of, more or less, equilibrium. (CLEH 43)

Toys in the Attic is about the individual psychologies of characters who fail to understand that they are responsible for their own pain and destruction. Unlike in her earlier plays, for the first time, Hellman seems to be sympathizing with her deranged characters. They are desperate beings caught in their passion which lead to their doom. The critic, C.W.E. Bigsby in his *Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama 1900 – 1940* says:

In *Toys in the Attic* the South becomes less a place than an image. It becomes an apt expression for unrealized hopes and misdirected passions. ..Hellman's gothic figures bear the marks of an experience of loss and failure. They cling together united by situation and a need which they dare not articulate. And these alliances generate the potential for pain and consolation alike. The play displays a linguistic and dramatic reticence which she had seldom achieved before... (295)

The play also portrays the plight of women in the fifties, where women were expected to find fulfillment in their lives by being selfless and through the happiness of their family. Although the idea appears to be noble, women had to pay dearly for achieving this. Not all would find their fulfillment in other's happiness without considering about themselves. Some like Carrie, would extract her debt in blood for losing her identity in relationship. The critic, Alan S. Downer, in *Recent American Drama* praises Hellman for her tragic portrayal as an artist-moralist. While commenting on the tragedy of Julian he remarks:

It is not that, like the hero of *Death of a Salesman*, he had dreamed the wrong dreams, that his values had been corrupted by a materialistic society...His life is shattered by a force unknown to the artist- sociologist or the artist-psychologist, by a force known only to the artist-moralist, the force of evil. Miss Hellman presents it directly and uncompromisingly, it is embodied in the younger sister, no capitalist dragon, no Satan lusting for revenge, no more incestuous than Ferdinand of *The Duchess of Malfi*. She is what evil must always be, the other side of good, tragic because she cannot know of her enslavement, because she can never have the opportunity to escape. She is the most memorable figure of a memorable work. (42)

The moral vision and artistry of Hellman the playwright has matured over the period of time. As Marvin Felheim sums it up in his essay "The Autumn Garden: Mechanics and Dialectics":

Miss Hellman's plays have always been dramatically powerful, and she has always displayed the virtues of vivid characterization, credible motivation, and an unusually clear and convincing dialogue style; but her work was always too limited in theme and attitude for general or permanent value. In the Autumn Garden she displayed something of the qualities she had lacked, but the play misses her characteristic force. In *Toys in the Attic*, with bows to Chekhov and the great fabulists, she has written her first play to combine all her earlier virtues, with compassion, truth, detachment, and tremendous dramatic power. (CLEH 49)

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