

MISS HELLMAN'S HUBBARD PLAYS: *The Little Foxes* AND *Another Part of the Forest*

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Lillian Hellman's plays present a close interaction between character and setting. Few characters, if any, find happiness at home. Although rooted some place, they dream of some place else -- unreal worlds and faraway lands -- their own fanciful hopes.

Four out of Miss Hellman's eight plays deal specifically with the Southern background and way of life; *The Little Foxes* and *Another Part of the Forest* are among them. They show her concern for and knowledge of her native region, its history and its people. The action comprises a series of events showing the characters' psychological needs and their often unsuccessful attempts to escape their land and background.

I wish to show that the geographical element in those plays is more than scene painting to lend local color, and that the characterizations are more than melodramatic inventions to please an audience. The plays of the Hubbard series study the exploitation of man and land and introduce the notion (further developed in her other plays) that existence is only meaningful in action.

Another Part of the Forest tells the story of the Hubbard Family: Marcus and Lavinia, and their children Ben, Oscar and Regina. They all want to escape Marcus' domination. The action begins when Regina is twenty years old and in love with John Bagtry, a member of the Southern aristocracy. She wants to elope with him to Chicago, but he only dreams of fighting a war anywhere. Oscar plans to get rid of his father by marrying a prostitute and

leaving with her for New Orleans. He needs the family money for that. Lavinia dreams of moving to Altaloosa and taking care of some poor colored children. Ben wants control of all the money and property, which he finally gets by blackmailing his father. For that he uses the revelation of his half-insane mother that Marcus was responsible for the massacre of some twenty Confederate soldiers. At the end Regina and Oscar align with their brother (though they hate him) just because he is the new power of the clan. *The Little Foxes* continues the Hubbards' story. Regina is now married to Horace Giddens, a rich banker, and Oscar to Birdie Bagtry, John's cousin. Both marriages are a consequence of the family's financial interests. The action begins when Regina and her two brothers are doing business with a Chicago tycoon. With his money they plan to build cotton mills in Lionnet, the old plantation of Birdie's youth. They still need Horace's consent to finance a part of the project. Horace, who is recovering from a heart attack in a Baltimore hospital, is brought home so that Regina can persuade him to close the deal. He refuses to. A fight for money and power ensues among the Hubbards. In a climactic scene Regina lets Horace die by not giving him his medicine. She then takes over, as they now depend on her money to strike the bargain. Her victory is only partial, however. Her daughter, Alexandra, revolts and announces that she will be leaving for good.

The Hubbard Plays follow a reverse chronological order. They criticize the South and suggest better days, finer hopes. They show a process of degeneration which begins with the collapse of the lofty but weak aristocrat and the rise through both work and fraud of a new ruling class - work decreases as degeneration increases - and which ends with a sudden inversion of values, a strong reaction against villany and a near return to the aristocratic noble feelings

and dreams of justice. The Hubbard Plays show the close relationship between man and land and also the iterative nature of history.

Another Part of the Forest is set "in the summer of 1880 in the Alabama town of Bowden."¹ The physical process of subduing the vast Southern territory has already taken place. The Civil War had reduced the remaining aristocracy to a powerless minority. In the play this group is represented by John Bagtry, his Aunt Clara and Cousin Birdie, examples of the old magnificence of the South and of a subsequent shabby manner of living. It is Birdie, herself, who relates her family misfortunes: "The truth is we can't pay or support our people, Mr. Benjamin, we can't - Well, it's just killing my Mama. And my Cousin John, he wants to go away." (p.346).

Aunt Clara, John Bagtry and Birdie are the ultimate representatives of a decadent ruling class who had lived at ease for two or three generations free from the necessity to toil and to compete. They had been, as such, easy victims to financial speculation and to the elaborate machinery of ingenious chicanery, because they required credit and security to get on in life. Elegance in manners, general intelligence and imagined superiority were qualities not strong enough to face the real difficulties of working the land and building the cotton kingdom. The aristocrats could not survive, as they could not adapt to the real necessities of the South. Birdie explains, in pathetic words, "I was such a ninny, being born when I did, and growing up in the wrong time. I'm much younger than my brothers. I mean I am younger, if they were living. But it didn't do any good." (P. 345).

There were indeed few answers to the problem of the remaining aristocrats and these answers were escapes rather than real solutions. A most common escape was through the marriage of the land owner's daughter (Birdie) to the stout planter's son

(Oscar). It is Ben who sees the chance and advises his brother Oscar: "Better you'd stayed for the lemonade and fallen in love with Lionnet's cotton - fields." (P. 344). Later on he says: "Just as good for Oscar to marry a silly girl who owns cotton, as a silly girl who doesn't even own the mattress on which she -" (p. 375).

Similarly, Regina's choice of a husband is also planned by this greedy and cunning Ben, who advises her to marry Horace Giddens: "He's in love with you. That was obvious when he was here. It's good society, that family, and rich. Solid, quiet rich." (P. 339). And at the end of the Act Three he says to Regina: "Now honey, about you. You're a scandal in this town. Papa's the only person didn't know you've been sleeping with the warrior." (P. 400), "Papa, and Horace Giddens in Mobile. How soon he'll find out about it, I don't know. Before he does, we're taking you up to see him. You'll get engaged to him by next week, or sooner, and you'll get married in the first church we bump into." (P. 400-01).

Besides this decadent ruling class, there are its servants, the former slaves, who have not gone soft, and who are now stronger than their masters. Lillian Hellman finds an organic dependence between the white masters, negro servants and the land. The servants and land are both the victims of greedy exploitation by the vulgar rich. Addie, the mammy says: "Yeah, they got mighty well off cheating niggers. Well, there are people who eat the earth and eat all the people on it like in the Bible with the locusts. And other people who stand around and watch them eat it." (P. 182).

Miss Hellman's Negroes are not cast romantically. For her they are wise human beings who can easily adapt to the needs of life, who have enough common sense to know a dream from reality. Addie replies to Horace when he promises to consider her in his

will: "Don't do that, Mr. Horace. A nigger woman in a white man's will! I'd never get it nohow." (P. 184). Roles such as these are not the ordinary roles given to servants. In the Hubbard Plays, the parts played by the two black mammies, Addie and Coralee, are the very heart of the play, no doubt two different versions of Lillian Hellman's own nurse Sophronia, whom she considers one of the strongest influences in her childhood and adolescence: "Oh, Sophronia, it's you I want back always. It's by you I still so often measure, guess, transmute, translate and act."²

The negro, with his quick, intuitive understanding of what was required of him, and the aristocrat, with his broad conceptions of gentility and honor, represent, in the dramatic world of Lillian Hellman, the remains of the Old South fast being bought up by the vulgar rich.

The new ambitious planter quickly saw the profit to be made from the good soil and climate. His cotton kingdom, with its hardships of competition and speculation, became the new frontier. Marcus is Lillian Hellman's representative of this rising class in the New South. He worked hard in the beginning, cheating whenever the chance came, to grow prosperous. Marcus was smart, callous and unscrupulous and won his enviable position through thrift, luck and fraud. When talking to Captain Bagtry about the Civil War he shows his opportunistic streak: "Why don't you choose the other side? Every man needs to win once in his life." (P. 367). Later he says to Regina: "I am not interested in Ben's motives. As long as they benefit me, he is welcome to them." (P. 369). Lavinia, his wife, accuses him of treason and bribery. She tells Ben that Marcus had got rich buying salt from the North and then selling it to the Southern troops at exceedingly high prices: "People were dying for salt and I thought it was good to bring it to them. I

didn't know he was getting eight dollars a bag for it, Benjamin, a little bag. Imagine taking money for other people's misery." (P. 383-84). She also reveals, in her half-insane speech, that even if unwittingly, Marcus had caused the massacre of twenty-seven young Southern soldiers and paid a Captain Virgil E. McMullen to write him false passes "proving he had ridden through Confederate lines the day before the massacre, and didn't leave till after it." (P. 385).

But Marcus also had the good characteristics of those who are close to the soil. As he says: "At nine years old I was carrying water for two bits a week... When I was twelve I was working out in the fields... At fourteen I was driving mules all day most of the night." (P. 376). Marcus was physically and mentally strong and, though unscrupulous, had worked hard. A product of laissez-faire economics, he believed deeply in free choice and in unlimited opportunity. He succeeded and then, as W.J. Cash, in his classic study *The Mind of the South*, describes the newly-rich in the Reconstruction, "found himself free from every necessity of toil, free from all but the grateful tasks of supervision and mastery, free to play the lord at dignified ease."³ Since he was a boy he had a strong sense of class awareness and wanted an education to make his gentility legitimate. He explains: "I took the first dollar I ever had and went to the paying library to buy a card....I taught myself Latin and French.... I learned my Greek, read my classics, taught myself - Think what I must have wanted for sons. And then think what I got. One trickster, one illiterate." (P. 376).

Thus Marcus is a mixture of good and evil. As he was a direct product of the soil he was a good man, but as he was too ambitious he was evil. In turn Ben, Oscar and Leo, without roots

in the soil, are mutants. To follow them is to see the process of degeneration. Marcus is right, if crude, in judging his sons as degenerates. It is ironic that the qualities he despises in them are the same qualities which helped bring him success. For example, Ben inherits Marcus' cunning and unscrupulousness. Ben's motto is land and money without work, credit without capital, enterprise without honesty. He cheats Birdie, Oscar, Regina, Lavinia and his father, whom he of course hates most. Ben acquires much of the evil spirit of Marcus, and Oscar, his father's hoggish instincts. Marcus' lust for Regina, latent and disguised in paternal love, surfaces in Oscar's open lust for Laurette. In Leo, the third generation, we see a man who is wild, stupid and dishonest. He beats animals for pleasure, steals money and bonds, lusts for women and has no capacity to think and solve his own problems.

This individualistic family, though filled with hate, also understands that it must stay together to succeed. Horace mentions that Ben wants him as partner "to keep control in the family" (p. 170) or as Regina says: "And in addition to your concern for me, you do not want control to go out of the family. (To Ben). That right, Ben?" (p. 147). Ben, in turn, won't marry into another family for he doesn't want to share his wealth: "What's the difference to any of us if a little more goes here, a little less goes there - it's all in the family. And it will stay in the family. I'll never marry. So my money will go to Alexandra and Leo. They may even marry some day..." (p. 150). The plot that the children should marry - pretty close to incest, since they are first cousins and raised together, is a clear manifestation of the Hubbards' greed.

Individualism in the family is bred by the survival

instinct. The Hubbards know that the best lands had been drawn into a relatively few large units. They are lucky to have one of them. Marcus is the paterfamilias. He bosses his sons: "Benjamin! Rope Oscar and bring him out here immediately. I told fifteen years ago you were damn fools to let Klansmen ride around, carrying guns --" (p. 336), "Give the money to Colonel Isham, Benjamin. Go away, Oscar" (p. 337). He bosses his wife and servants: "Coralee. I'll be right down. Lavinia, send everybody else to the dining room for breakfast" (p. 335), "Jake, take the boxes in. And put Mr. Benjamin's valise out of your hand" (p. 334). He bosses his enemies as, for example, when he wants to get rid of them: "Good day, Colonel" (p. 337), and he bosses his "friends" -- Marcus says to Penniman and Jugger: "The Mozart was carelessly performed. The carriage is waiting to take you to the station. Good night." (p. 374). And Marcus even bosses Regina whom he loves most: "Come in to supper, Regina" (p. 368). And later on: "You're lying to me about something. That hurts me. Tell me why you were talking to that man, why he called you honey --" (p. 370). Marcus' will in family matters stands as law, and it is also law in the region, since any governmental power is weak. He is strong enough to pay off Isham to placate the anger of the mob and to save Oscar from a lynching. Marcus can buy off the local people in a quiet display of self-centered power. He can also engage in a conspicuous display of consumption. The family gets whatever it wants and if, as often, the luxury will not be bought in the South, it must be imported from the North. Regina's elegant clothes all come from an idealized and far away Chicago. Good fortune freed the Hubbards from an apparent dependence on their neighbors, but brought, as a consequence, the worse problem of loneliness. Regina, the strongest character in these plays, admits that she married Horace because

she felt lonely:

*Horace. I was in love with you. But why did
you marry me?*

Regina. I was lonely when I was young.

Horace. You were lonely? (p. 188).

As earlier she had said to Marcus: "Course I don't know anything about business, Papa, but could I say something, please? I've been kind of lonely here with nobody nice having much to do with us. I'd sort of like to know people of my own age, a girl my own age, I mean." (p. 349). The irony here is that it is John, not Birdie, she is interested in, but still it is company and love she is looking for.

Regina has the best head for business. She is the most cunning, ambitious and pushy one in the family. She argues, she persuades, she trades, she bargains and forces the whole group to obey her slightest order, to satisfy her most intricate desire. She is always aware of her strength, as we can note in her answer to Oscar's remark that she is "talking very big" (p. 149): "Am I? Well, you should know me well enough to know that I wouldn't be asking for things I didn't think I could get" (p. 149). Her manner is plain, but like Marcus', her aspirations soar. She wants to be high class. When John Bagtry tells her that he likes his cousin and aunt and that "they don't go around raising their voices in anger on an early Sunday day" (p. 330) as Regina does, she promptly replies: "I don't want you to tell me about the differences in your family and mine" (p. 330).

Regina accepts what pleases her and rejects what does not. She is able to escape all kinds of material needs, but she cannot

escape herself and so resents her awareness of being counted within the often immoral, vulgar and ignorant class of the newly-rich. In her fancy dreams she overestimates the aristocrat typified by John Bagtry and yet despises her husband. She is also romantic and practical. Her practicality comes from her need as a Southerner in the Reconstruction to compete against the "damn Yankees" and prosper. Her romanticism is an intuitive faculty, a basic wish to expand her emotions, to reach for the unattainable. It comes from the Southern dream for romance.

As Ben, Oscar, Leo and Regina grow stronger in their determinations to be powerful, Marcus grows mellow in age. He feels the necessity to enjoy his acquired fortune and position, to soften his tensions - to play the aristocrat. He chooses to spend his leisure time in the company of musicians such as Penniman and Jigger. They flatter him by praising his second-rate musical compositions in order to milk him for money, to eat his food and drink his liquor. Penniman looks at the score and says: "Very interesting. Harmonically fresh, eh, Mr. Benjamin?" (p. 353), "I would say this: It is done as the Greeks might have imposed the violin upon the lute. (Hums) Right here. Close to Buxtehude - (Inspiration) Or, the Netherland Contrapuntalists. Excellent" (p. 355), "I like it very much. And if you would allow us, I would like to introduce it in Mobile during the season. Play it first at the school, say, then, possibly -" (p. 355). Marcus wants to believe them, so would not dare challenge them, or they might call his bluff. Instead, he attacks Laurette:

*Marcus. Sincee's uncle played Mozart on a
little drum. Have you ever heard of
that, Miss Bagtry?*

Birdie. Oh. Well, I haven't, but I'm sure there must be such an arrangement.

Marcus. That's very kind of you, to be so sure (p. 365).

But later on the truth comes out when Jugger, angry at Marcus' observation that he has performed his Mozart carelessly, replies: " 'Carelessly performed'. What do you know about music? Nothing, and we're just here to pretend you do" (p. 374). Marcus' claim to an aristocratic way of life is only superficially successful. He wants to believe that in acquiring riches he has somehow automatically become a gentleman, but often his coarseness shows through his fancy clothes. Underneath he feels inadequate. His manners lack subtlety, finesse and decorum and, typically *nouveau riche*, he throws his money around, for example, when he gives Isham a large sum for Taylor's medical treatment:

Isham. There is no need for so much. A hundred would be more proper.

Marcus. Good day, Colonel (p. 337).

Another member of the Hubbard family, but one different from the rest, is Lavinia, Marcus' wife. She has a double function in the play. As she is the planter's wife she is a simple, fragile woman, tired from the weight of her work and responsibility over the years. She also fits the Southern fanatic religious pattern. She feels guilty about keeping her husband's crimes quiet. Her guilt, as sometimes happens, grows into an emotional and passionate faith, which leads her close to insanity. She says to her son Benjamin: "I think, now, I should

have told the truth that night. But you don't always know to do things when they're happening. It's not easy to send your own husband into a hanging rope" (p. 382). Lavinia's god is antropomorphic, a capricious master, a personal god, who talks to her in her dreams: "I spoke with God this night, in prayer. He said I should go no matter. Strait are the gates, He said. Narrow is the way, Lavinia, He said -" (p. 382). And, "I told God about that last night, and God's message said, 'Go, Lavinia, even if you have to tell the awful truth. If there is no other way, tell the truth" (p. 382). And so she did. Lavinia listens to her god, her troubled conscience, her super-ego, through the voice of his minister. She says: "You know I got my correspondence with the Reverend. He wants me to come and I got my mission and my carfare. In his last letter, the Reverend said if I was coming I should come, or should write him and say I couldn't ever come" (p. 351).

Lavinia's simplicity, ignorance and naïveté, in the face of her hardships and sufferings, lead her into a strong feeling of guilt and a psychological need to make amends for both hers and Marcus' sins through good deeds. She had already repented and confessed, but would still have to suffer her penitence to achieve absolution. Her imagined penitence would be to go to Altaloosa for her poor colored children, to offer them money, education and love. Lavinia's psycho-religious conflict represents the feeling of guilt that the white Southerner bears when he has to face the problem of slavery and of injustice towards the black man.

I have so far analysed the relationship between the aristocratic Southerner/the negro servant/the newly-rich and the South. The outsiders in the Hubbard Plays are Horace and Alexandra. Horace becomes infected by the family hatred. He tries to take

revenge and punish Regina for her coldness and greed. She tells him: "I see you are punishing me. But I won't let you punish me" (p. 187). But Alexandra is pure, uncorrupted, and proves to be strong. She observes, judges and decides. Alexandra is the new generation. She stands for a new historical cycle. Her reaction to the family hatred is to return to the former aristocratic decorum and honor. Regina notices it and says: "You've been around Birdie so much you're getting just like her" (p. 198). Alexandra does not seem to resent it: "Funny. That's what Aund Birdie said today" (p. 198). Alexandra is close to Birdie, the aristocrat, as she is to Addie, the negro servant: "Addie said there were people who ate the earth and other people who stood around and watched them do it. And just now Uncle Ben said the same thing. Really he said the same thing. (Tensely) Well, tell him for me, Mama, I'm not going to stand around and watch you do it. I'll be fighting as hard as he'll be fighting (Rises) some place else" (p. 199). Though no heroine, Alexandra is the new hope, a symbolic revival of the Old South.

As for the real villain of the Hubbard Plays, Lillian Hellman makes him not a Southern plantation master at all, but a greedy Northerner disguised in gentility and class. Each Hubbard sees him in a different way. He enchants Birdie with his elegance and charm: "Mr. Marshall is such a polite man with his manners and very educated and cultured" (p. 136). Regina sees him as a promise of status and wealth: "And there, Birdie, goes the man who has opened the door to our future" (p. 143). Ben parallels him with money and progress: "Well, when he lifted his glass to drink, I closed my eyes and saw the bricks going into place" (p. 144). Oscar dreams of "The pleasure of seeing the bricks grow" (p. 145). But this latter-day carpetbagger is recognized by Ben

for what he is: "Money isn't all" (p. 141), says Ben, to which Mr. Marshall retorts: "Really? Well, I always thought it was a great deal" (p. 141). Later he says to the same Ben: "Well, however grand your reasons are, mine are simple: I want to make money and I believe I'll make it on you" (p. 142). It is the Hubbard family that struggles unscrupulously against its neighbors, against itself, to gain yet more, to increase its investment, but it is Mr. Marshall who brings truly predatory capitalism from Chicago. It is this evil which Miss Hellman so strongly attacks in the Hubbard Plays.

The need of geographical movement, found in all Miss Hellman's dramatic work, but more so in the Hubbard Plays, stands for the simplest as well as the most primitive form of escape. The characters long for what is far away (either in place or time or both), but their dreams are seldom if ever fulfilled. No one seems satisfied with what he has, what he means or where he is: Regina wants to escape from family and home to the impersonality of the big city, from the provinciality of Bowden to the commerciality of Chicago, and while she waits to carry out her plans she tried to bring Chicago to her by ordering her expensive clothes from there. John and Birdie, Regina's aristocratic neighbors, carry an even stronger and more uneasy sensation of inadequacy for their roles - a social dissatisfaction - since they long to escape from both the place and the time they live in. John wants to leave Bowden in search of a war, any war - in Brazil or at any place where he might demonstrate his chivalric prowess. As a nostalgic Southerner he values the notions of violence and "honor." Birdie wants to go back to the old Lionnet, where she was born - a land of plenty and "perfection" and a symbol of the static, conservative, unchanging Southern society

of her parents. Oscar, less worried about power, honor and land, but led by his sexual libido, plans to elope to New Orleans with Laurette. Leo, Oscar's son, is part of a process of social and moral degeneration. He inherits his father's acute sexual desires and no strength to sublimate them. The small town of Bowden is too provincial for him and so he "must go to Mobile for the... very elegant wordly ladies" (p. 137). Lavinia, in turn, to compensate for her omissions and sinful deeds, escapes into the half-insane and mystic world of her antropomorphic god and imposes upon herself the penitence of going "As far as Altaloosa" (p. 381) to provide for her poor colored children.

In her Mood Plays (the last series Miss Hellman wrote and also the most mature of her dramatic work) as well as her Political Plays (which chronologically precede it) Miss Hellman gradually changes her approach to the escape theme. Her characters become less worried about actually moving from place to place in search of ideality and attack their unsatisfactory reality by means of either psychological or physical violence.

But ironically she only states a formal answer to her thematic question in that grand flop written in collaboration with others, the musical *Candide* (1956). Lillian Hellman's *Candide*, like Voltaire's, tells the story of an incredibly naive young man who moves from place to place in search of perfect love, purity, wisdom, harmony and happiness. The whole action is that of escape. "I'm homesick for everywhere but here" (p. 655). *Candide*'s escape, as opposed to those escapes found in Miss Hellman's Hubbard Plays, is throughly fulfilled. The last song of the musical contains the thematic answer so laboriously sought after - that each one must face his own reality, must make his own garden grow.

NOTES

¹ Lillian Hellman, *Another Part of the Forest*, in her *The Collected Plays* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971), p. 329.

All the quotations from Miss Hellman's plays are taken from this edition. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.

² Lillian Hellman, *An Unfinished Woman* (Boston: Bantam, 1974), p. 206.

³ W.J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York: Vintage, 1941), p. 23.