

WHO OWNS THE TRUTH?*

Based on Lillian Hellman's Play The Children's Hour

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Lillian Hellman was an American playwright. She was born in New Orleans, Louisiana, in 1905, and died in Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, in 1984. Her childhood and adolescence were divided between the two wholly different environments of New York City and New Orleans. In the latter she also had the company of both her mother's and father's families, who were steeped in the traditions of that city. Because of the influence this part of the South had on her, she succeeded in reflecting in some of her plays the life and the views she observed in her youth. Because she felt equally at home in New Orleans and in the North-East, she used both these settings as the background for her plays.

The Children's Hour, her first play, was first produced on Broadway in 1934. It was greatly praised by the public and by the critics, and it launched her into the world of art.

The intention of this study is to analyse an aspect

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of the truth in the above mentioned play.

Near a small town in Massachusetts, Karen and Martha are the owners of a boarding school for girls, in a converted farmhouse. Mrs. Mortar, Martha's aunt, lives with them. Karen is engaged to Joe, a physician and cousin of Mary, one of the students at the school. Catherine, Evelyn, Helen, Lois, Peggy and Rosalie are some other students. Mary does not want to live at the school. Evelyn and Peggy overhear a conversation between Mrs. Mortar and Martha, in which Mrs. Mortar says Martha is jealous of Joe. Rosalie steals Helen's bracelet. Aware of both what had been said and the theft, Mary compels her grandmother, Mrs. Tilford, who is responsible for her, and with whom she lives when away from school, not to send her back to an environment where the two teachers share an "unnatural" relationship. To support her story, Mary makes Rosalie an eye witness of the facts, since she is indebted to Mary. Mrs. Tilford not only keeps Mary with her, but also spreads the news to Joe and to the other girls' mothers, who take them out of school. Karen and Martha lack Mrs. Mortar's testimony because she has decided to travel; they lose their libel suit, and are ostracised by society. Joe still wants to marry Karen, but she makes him see they could not live happily together under the pressure of his doubt. Talking to Karen, Martha realizes she has indeed loved Karen. Soon after this conversation and her aunt's arrival from her travel, Martha commits suicide, and Mrs. Tilford, having discovered in the meantime that Mary had lied, appears to apologize and offer any help that

the teachers might need, not knowing of Martha's tragic end.

The title of this play was taken from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem "The Children's Hour".¹ Lillian Hellman derived ironic inspiration from not only the title, but mainly the first stanza of the ten which the poem consists of. His is a sentimental view of life when it becomes merrier by the presence of children who sweeten the hard hours of work in a daytime, in a lifetime. When Karen and Martha think their time has come to enjoy years of work they have had, it is children, apart from family, who ruin all their expectations, and, instead of sweetening their lives, destroy them. Lillian Hellman found the source for this play² in an occurrence that took place in the nineteenth century in Edinburgh, Scotland, where two school teachers were charged with lesbianism by one of their students. They never succeeded in recovering their prestige, their money, or their school.

Lillian Hellman herself has written about The Children's Hour, "[...] this is really not a play about lesbianism, but about a lie. The bigger the lie the better, as always".³ But what is a lie? Is it indeed the reversal of truth, or in some way a confirmation of it: for a lie to exist, there must be a truth.

In The Children's Hour, the bustle that takes over that

small town in Massachusetts is supposedly aroused by Mary, "fourteen, neither pretty nor ugly [...] an undistinguished-looking girl" (p. 7)⁴, an adolescent spoiled by her grandmother; she is not exactly a malignant girl, as Lillian Hellman has said, "I thought of the child as neurotic, sly, but not the utterly malignant creature which playgoers see in her",⁵ but we may suppose that she is unaware of what may happen when she brings up what at the end becomes a catastrophe for both of her teachers.

It is typical of most adolescents to run away from reality. Mary wants to run away from school and from all that attaches her to any established method or routine. She is used to having what she wants, when she wants. Her grandmother's money and prestige have influenced Mary much more than they both realize. The way Mrs. Tilford deals with Mary and considers her demands is totally acquiescent. For a type of person such as Mary, such a way of considering life being ingrained in her, it is practically impossible to balance all the effects one's attitude may reach. She releases a rumor. When she realizes she can not go back, she creates her truth, and adheres to it.

Since she is an experienced lady because of both her age and knowledge of Mary's attitudes, we would hardly expect that Mrs. Tilford, "a large, dignified woman in her sixties, with a pleasant, strong face" (p. 29), would make the situation worse by ratifying Mary's words. But that is exactly what she does when she spreads the accusation among the other students' mothers, who take their children

away from the school. Mrs. Tilford acts slanderously. Mary's truth has become her truth.

What about the "plump, florid woman of forty-five with dyed reddish hair" (p. 5) — Mrs. Lily Mortar? Very surreptitiously, she infiltrates herself not only in the house where her niece Martha lives and works with Karen, but also in their professional activities, and what is worse: in their private lives. Her physical presentation helps to establish her as a healthy woman, nevertheless brusque, conceited and deceiving. Her "dyed reddish" hair suggests Mrs. Mortar's tendency to be false and not dependable, as well as a boastful woman, someone who wants to call attention to herself. Very strong on her outside, but very weak in her inside, as will be noticed in this study. Her own name shows what she is: on the surface, a lily — the symbol of purity, whiteness, beauty; but deep in her, the power to cause or bring bad luck and death: mortar (from Latin mors [stem mort-], death). She presents a contrast within herself, appearing to be one person, but actually being somebody else. What is the truth in Mrs. Mortar?

It is really Mrs. Tilford who spreads the news. It is indeed Mary who whispers the rumor. But the one who actually begins the subject is Mrs. Mortar, when she tells Martha, "I should have known by this time that the wise thing is to stay out of your way when he's in the house" (p. 17). Being afraid of being sent away, she sees no way of reacting unless by attacking her niece, who has just made her aunt realize that she has not been happy there: when she

points out that Mrs. Mortar is always complaining about the farm, about the school, about the money she gets there, about Karen, and even after she has got what she wants (Martha and Karen are giving her money to go to England, and enough to get along on), she's "still looking for something to complain about" (p. 17).

Mrs. Mortar lives on her past, when she was an actress. The past is the escape into which she retreats from the unpleasantness of life. She thinks she is an astute woman, and she believes in her power of domineering an audience, even if this audience is composed of her students, to whom she also teaches, "Women must learn these tricks" (p. 6). Her use of the word "tricks" reveals the amoral, perhaps immoral thoughts that govern her mentality. She is aware and conscious of her reputation and value as an actress — but all that is past, and in her mind only. The sentence "Pity. Ah! [...] pity makes the actress" (p. 6) shows us that she thinks she is still a theatre performer, and at the same time it shows us that being no longer an actress, she is not able to feel pity. Martha represents all those who are around Mrs. Mortar, when she says, "Don't act, Aunt Lily" (p. 17) — they are all aware of her theatricality and do not pay much attention to her. She speaks of her work as a wonderful theatre performer, but she lives in a farmhouse giving voice and elocution lessons to the girls in the school, and does not seek work for herself as an actress. Nevertheless, she criticizes Martha even after she is dead, "She would have got a job and started all over again" (p. 64). Mrs. Mortar's absence of psychological strength does not allow her to start again:

she is static and passive. She considers herself "a poor relation" (p. 16), who accepts the hospitality of her niece, but who does not forget to charge for her services, although she gets paid for them, "I, who have worked my fingers to the bone!" (p. 16), "Here I've donated my services" (p. 16); her attitudes are those of an ingénue, although she is not a naïve character in the play. She is a character within a character, clinging to the memory of a certain Sir Henry who taught her many things about the theatre, and she bases her life on his teaching and on reminiscences of him. The theatre is so much rooted in her that she confuses appearance with reality, and she is incapable of distinguishing her own thoughts and words from her attitudes. Congruence is what is lacking in her. She finds it "natural" (p. 15) that Mary should have her presence when examined by Joe; she finds it "natural that an older woman should be present" (p. 15) at such an examination — she even says, "It seems that I'm not wanted in the room during the examination" (p. 15) — and that same sentence reminds us of the necessity Karen and Martha have of her presence in the room of the trial, and then it is she, "an older woman", that "should be present", who seems not to want to be present to testify in favor of her niece and her friend. And she does not appear, although she once tells Mary, "I always like thoughtfulness" (p. 8). Indeed, the two teachers lose their case not because society censures them or because they are pursued by their rich clientele, but because Mrs. Mortar fails to appear at the trial as a witness.

When teaching Peggy, she recommends her to read Shakespeare's Portia "with some feeling, some pity [...] why can't you feel pity?" (p. 6), "try to submerge yourself in this problem. You are pleading for the life of a man" (p. 7). Now, the lives of two women are at stake, depending on her, depending on her pity, but she is absent — both in body and in responsibility, because she is on a tour, which she considers "a moral obligation" (p. 55), "a moral obligation to the theatre" (p. 55), that is a chimera, a fake, an illusion. This reminds us of one of her sentences, "Pity [...] pity makes the actress" (p. 6). Her asking Peggy whether she can not feel pity brings later an irony: she herself does not feel any pity for the two teachers — pity and mercy, as she stresses several times at the beginning of the play, when reading Portia, "'But mercy is above this sceptred sway; it is enthroned in the hearts of kings, it is an attribute to God, himself; and earthly power doth then show likest God's when mercy seasons justice. We do pray for mercy, and that same prayer doth teach —'" (pp. 5,6,7,8). In her case, what mercy, what justice? All this then is mere façade.

What is important for Mrs. Mortar is completely forgotten by herself when dealing with others. She tells Mary, "are we in the habit of taking walks when we should be at our classes?" (p. 8), "I suppose you have just as fine an excuse for being an hour late to breakfast this morning, and last week — " (p. 10), but she does not show up at the trial; she stays away not only for a morning or a week, but

for months. She is capable of seeing and feeling that "Things have changed in the theatre — drastically changed" (p. 54), and she is "very glad to see the old place again" (p. 54), but she is unable to realize how much "Things have changed" (p. 55) at school and in the girls' lives — drastically changed, too. Even the interior of the house is different, and she seems not to notice it. This point of view is corroborated by M. Ackley, when he says:

The return of Mrs. Mortar is a remainder of the beginning of the action and is used as an ironic contrast. Unchanged, she returns to a setting and to characters completely changed by what she has done or left undone. The contrast emphasizes the extent to which the lie has been successful. Each of the characters is in some way broken, except for Mrs. Mortar whose words generated the action.⁶

She understands that telling the teachers about the latest changes in the theatre "will throw a very revealing light" (p. 54) on the subject, but she can not understand the revealing light she could have brought to their lives if she had been present in court, as Martha tells her, "great part of the defense's case was based on remarks made by Lily Mortar [...] a greater part of the defense's case rested on the telling fact that Mrs. Mortar would not appear in court to deny or explain those remarks" (p. 55). Her truth does not coincide with reality, "I didn't think of it that way, Martha" (p. 55). She wants to escape

reality. "Now don't let's talk about unpleasant things anymore" (p. 55) or perhaps anything disagreeable that may come from it. She is afraid of "unpleasant notoriety" (p. 55). She is the kind of person who retracts when facing something unpleasant and then shows up offering comfort, "I'm sorry I didn't come back. But now that I am here, I'm going to stand shoulder to shoulder with you. I know what you've gone through [...] I'll be here working right along with you and we'll —" (p. 55). This passage again reminds us of her sentence, "Pity [...] pity makes the actress" (p. 6). She seems not to have known about anything that was going on, or to have understood it in a different way, or even to have believed it, and then hurries to regret it, "now that you've explained it" (p. 55) — and only now she shows that she has realized all that that has happened. Moreover, she tries to inculcate some hope in the girls, "the body and heart do recover, you know" (p. 55) — forgetting that reputation does not recover.

Mrs. Mortar is a contradiction: she wants to be accepted, but she does not welcome the idea of accepting or forgiving others, or she thinks they deserve punishment — because she does not admit having ever failed, "In my entire career I've never missed a line" (p. 8); that refers not only to the theatre, but also to the way she has regarded her entire life. Her sensibility is on the surface; deep in her, she is incapable of feeling: yet, she says to Martha, "you are so thick-skinned that you don't resent these

things —", (p. 15), and to Karen, "How can you be so feelingless?" (p. 66). She never apologizes; nevertheless, she supposes others should, "When you wish to apologize, I will be temporarily in my room" (p. 56). She goes on criticizing others, "You mean to say you're not going to do anything about that?" (p. 18), "What a nasty thing to do!" (p. 10), "Why, I'd slap her hands!" (p. 11), "God will punish you for that" (p. 55); and even after Martha is dead, she seems not to realize the extension of all the facts, and says, "Oh, how could she — " (p. 64), "Suicide's a sin" (p. 64).

Mrs. Mortar is not just ominous, but she also instigates doubts and negative feelings in those who are around her. After coming back from her tour, she sees Joe Cardin in the room and says, "I call that loyal. A lot of men wouldn't still be here. They would have felt — " (p. 56). She seems to forget all that she has done and refers to Mrs. Tilford, "That woman can't come in here. She caused all — " (p. 56), "You going to allow that woman to come in here? [...] I'll never let that woman —" (p. 66).

Lillian Hellman moves deep into her characters' psyches and then she is able to anticipate the image of truth enclosed in the play. That is the case of Lily Mortar's prediction, "Burying yourself on a farm! You'll regret it" (p. 16). For Mrs. Mortar, truth is always on her side; nevertheless, this sentence goes beyond her own predictions.

During the whole play Mrs. Mortar's tendency is to do nothing, although always boasting of doing much. But after

Martha's suicide, she shows the insecurity her static personality tries to hide, "What shall we do?" (p. 64), "We've got to do something" (p. 64), "I don't know what we can do —" (p. 64), "I don't know what — (Looks up, still crying, surprised) I'm — I'm frightened" (p. 64), "I was good to her" (p. 64), "I always tried to do everything I could" (p. 64), "What will happen to me? I haven't anything" (p. 65), "I was good to her too. I did everything I could. I — I haven't any place to go. (After a few seconds of silence) I'm afraid" (p. 65). These sentences show her moral failure and self-delusion. She seems lost both physically and psychologically. The double meaning Lillian Hellman has inserted in Mrs. Mortar's sentences, "I can't help it. How can I help it?" (p. 64) affirms once more how meaningful the irony involved is: she bases her concentration on the psychological.

Perhaps the most significant sentence occurs when, ("for no reason") (p. 9), Mrs. Mortar says during one of her classes, "'One master passion in the breast, like Aaron's serpent, swallows all the rest'" (p. 9): she does not know she is revealing herself, confessing the "truth" that is inside herself — but which she is not aware of; and she says after Martha's suicide, "I can't realize it's true" (p. 64). At the end of the play the statement, "it wasn't true" is used three times. According to M. Ackley, "the conflict is understood to be between the lie [...] and the truth, or more abstractly, between the truth and the forces that prevent its acknowledgement."⁷ The repetition of the

image of truth indicates the importance of this concept to a better understanding of the play.

There are two parallels within Mrs. Mortar's part in the play; she begins the controversy, and she begins the play; she is there at the end of Martha's life, and she is there at the end of the play. She sews the story with the intangible capacity of both her presence and absence, of her truth and not truth.

NOTES

¹Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, "The Children's Hour," in his Poems by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (London: Gresham, n.d.), pp. 224-25.

²John Phillips and Anne Hollander, "The Art of the Theater I: Lillian Hellman: An Interview," Paris Review, 33 (Winter-Spring 1965), p. 70.

³W. David Sievers, Freud on Broadway (New York: Hermitage, 1955), p. 280.

⁴Lillian Hellman, The Children's Hour in her The Collected Plays (Boston: Little, Brown, 1972), p. 7. All subsequent page references for Lillian Hellman's plays are to this edition.

⁵Sievers, pp. 279-80.

⁶Meredith Erling Ackley, "The Plays of Lillian Hellman," Diss. Univ. of Pennsylvania 1969, pp. 35-36.

⁷Meredith Erling Ackley, "The Plays of Lillian Hellman," Diss. Univ. of Pennsylvania 1969, p. 35.