

SAM'S PILGRIMAGE TO TRUTH.  
BASED ON LILLIAN HELLMAN'S PLAY THE SEARCHING WIND.\*

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The Searching Wind, Miss Hellman's fifth play, was first produced on April 12, 1944, at the Fulton Theatre in New York City.

The intention of this study is to analyse an aspect of the truth in the above mentioned play, whose plot runs as follows: in 1939, in Washington, D. C., during World War II, Alex, Emily, their son Sam and Mr. Taney (Emily's father) have Cassie, an old friend of the family, as a dinner guest. The play includes three flash-backs: the first is to 1922, in the Grand Hotel in Rome, the day Mussolini marches with his men into the city. The sound of distant guns is heard. Alex is a second secretary at the American Embassy, and Mr. Taney is the powerful owner of a famous and important newspaper in the United States, who has political contacts in Europe. Mr. Taney, Emily, and Cassie are leaving Rome for the United States, but Emily decides to stay, when she knows that Cassie is also interested in Alex, and has been meeting him. The girls are both twenty-two years old, and have been friends since childhood. The second flash-back is to 1923, at a restaurant in Berlin; the noise of a crowd running and shouting is heard outside, during a pogrom. Alex is waiting for Emily. They are married and Emily is expecting Sam.

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They now live in Berlin. Cassie appears and begins to revive their past. She is in Europe for a vacation, but she knows where to find them. Emily arrives. Alex has to leave the restaurant. The two girls talk together, the one provoking the other, and decide not to see each other again. The third flash-back is to 1938, in the Hotel Meurice in Paris, shortly before the beginning of World War II. People are already leaving Paris. Alex is an American ambassador; he and Emily are visiting their children, who live in Paris. Mr. Taney is now retired, and accompanies them. Alex is very busy with war affairs, and he has to send a report to the United States. Emily knows that Alex has been seeing Cassie every summer, but she has not seen Cassie since 1923; she invites Cassie to come to the hotel, but decides not to meet her. Cassie and Alex meet and recommence their old love affair. In 1944, Alex is an ex-ambassador. Mr. Taney's newspaper, which has been leased out, is in a state of decline. Sam is a corporal who has been wounded and decorated for bravery in the war in Italy. Emily has not seen Cassie for about twenty-one years. She knows that Cassie is in town, and invites her for dinner. They talk about the war, world policy, and themselves. Emily reveals that she has known all along about Cassie and Alex. After Cassie leaves, Sam divulges that he has been called to the hospital the following day, to have his wounded leg amputated.

The relationship between the plot and the title of the play is a puzzle to the reader; but Lillian Hellman herself clarifies that connection when, in a passage in one of her autobiographical books, An Unfinished Woman, she partly describes her daily life with a black servant called Helen who worked for her for many years, "The first months had been veiled and edgy: her severe face, her oppressive silences made

me think she was angry, and my nature, alternating from vagueness to rigid demands, made her unhappy, she told me years later. (She did not say it that way: she said 'It takes a searching wind to find the tree you sit in.')

<sup>1</sup> It is from that phrase that Lillian Hellman took the title for this play. Helen Ormsbee quotes Lillian Hellman, "She meant one of those winds that go right through to your backbone. I suppose in my title I was thinking of the wind that's blowing through the world."<sup>2</sup> Not only through the world, or through the United States during World War II, but also through Sam's life: the adversity that haunts Sam urges him to look for truth, which will lead him to turn his back on his previous life and the false values of his family.

In The Searching Wind, Sam reflects the hope that the younger generations deposit on the more experienced – on those whom they trust and respect. Nevertheless, the world is always the same: older generations giving way to younger generations, that give way to younger generations ... promises, doubts, sorrows, and the unfulfilled confidence anxiously awaited.

In Lillian Hellman's latest book, Maybe, there is a sentence specially significant for this play, "[...]" occasionally they got into the dreams, the marvelous dreams of 'true' human connection, or dope or God."<sup>3</sup> What happens to this family and those around them (Cassie in particular), tells us of their human connection – but it has not always been a true or trustful connection, although an old one: their dreams and hopes last twenty-two years in the play; moreover, the relationship of Cassie with this family stems from her childhood. Emily comments, "They all seem like figures in a dream. And a dream I don't understand. None of it" (p. 303)<sup>4</sup>. The "dream" and this "human connection" not

only refer to their long acquaintance, but also to the countries and peoples involved in the several wars, revolutions, riots and pogroms that they have witnessed in Europe, which are all related to both Emily and her husband, because they belong to outstanding families whose members have been important figures in the government and in the decisions taken by their country.

Lillian Hellman describes Sam as "Corporal Samuel Hazen, a pleasant-looking young man of twenty" (p. 271). He has physically a small part in the play, since he appears a little at the beginning and even less at the end of the play. But he is the importance of the play. While his parents and Cassie discuss a love affair, and while his grandfather shows his preoccupation with world policy, he suffers from three different sources: he is the son who bears his parents' faults, the grandson who tolerates his grandfather's dreams, and the man who endures his doubts and sickness alone. Nevertheless, he has not been able to be himself. He is actually young, but he has gone through more ripening experiences than the others: he has been in World War II, fighting; the ones around him have been in several wars, but working, or witnessing, or watching - and even wasting money. The play revolves around Emily, Alex, and Cassie, but Sam's misery is the real "fait accompli".

In The Autumn Garden, Sophie is a French girl who has suffered in World War II, but who wants to go back to Europe, where she belongs - and that presents an analogy with Sam's situation. He says, "I belong here. I never liked that school in France or the one in Switzerland. I didn't like being there" (p. 322). Yet, both express the same: Sophie says, "No, I will not judge" (p. 535), and Sam says, "Oh, I'm

nobody to judge" (p. 272); moreover, both have been dominated by their families — and they suffer, "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" (p. 513), says Sophie to her aunt. And Sam tells his father, "You know, I never felt at home anyplace until I got in the army. I never came across my kind of people until I met Leck and Davis. I guess I never could have belonged to your world nor to Grandpa's, either — I still don't know where I do belong. I guess that's what's been worrying me" (p. 322). Sam can not foresee his future. The United States can not envision the end of war. Sam's name is very meaningful: through it, the author very cleverly makes an allusion to Uncle Sam. This play was written in 1944, during World War II, and Sam represents the young generation of the United States which has been drafted to wars without knowing why, or without understanding it. In An Unfinished Woman, Lillian Hellman says, "But it took us four or five years to realize that we, our own people, my hairdresser's husband, and the son of my friend's friend, and a former student of my own at Harvard, and a garage mechanic who should never have been trusted with a penknife, had all been drafted to murder for reasons neither they nor we understood."<sup>5</sup> Sam is the younger generation who has to follow what has been prepared by those who make the rules. As Mr. Taney says, "Ah, well, our time likes its old men to run the world. In our world we won't let the young run our affairs —" (p. 279), "We think of young men as fit only for battle and for death" (p. 279). Both the young generations of the United States (Sam) and Europe (Sophie) want to lead their own lives, each without foreign interference. But even if he does not understand, or if he does not agree, Sam has to obey — because he is

involved, "There was a lot I didn't understand tonight, and a lot that isn't any of my business" (p. 321). Anyway, he has to fight, and he is badly injured. Sam does not perceive the significance of his father's and grandfather's real position, conduct or influence in the preceding years, and he does not agree with the consequence of his mother's vanity and worldliness. He looks for his own truth. He wants to understand. He wants to know, "I'd like to learn how to put things together, see them when they come —" (p. 296); I don't know what is happening, but I have a feeling it's got to do with me, too" (p. 298).

Sam's anguish is accidentally released when, talking with his grandfather, he says, "Children of famous fathers and famous grandfathers learn to walk late" (p. 272) — and that, literally, is not the truth about him: paradoxically, he has to lose a leg in order to learn to walk alone. The loss of his leg is going to emancipate Sam from the false world his parents have been living in. He has to be crippled physically to be released spiritually.

At the beginning, through the French butler Ponette, the author gives us a veiled indication of Sam's destiny, when Ponette pushes a tray, and a glass falls but does not break, "In my country to drop and not to break is thought to be ill-luckness" (p. 274). Along the play, several suggestions arise about Sam's illness through his own speech, "It's not simple to me" (p. 272), "I'll have plenty of time to read it. I think they'll discharge me soon" (p. 273), "I'm tired of bed" (p. 275), "I'm not going to be a diplomat, but that won't be my reason" (p. 276), "Two years ago, Grandpa, I'd have yawned or laughed at that. I won't do either now" (p. 279), "Anyway, it's kind of an important night for me because — well, just because" (p. 298), "I don't know what I'll do

with myself after two years of the army" (p. 273). When his father asks him, "The doctor told you not to walk much. Why are you doing it?" (p. 321), he answers, "It feels good" (p. 321). It is good because it is the last time. Neither his father, nor his mother, nor his grandfather is able to perceive Sam's involuntary hints; he comments, "I was thinking that you often know more about people in books than — than I've known about any of you, I guess" (p. 296). Of course he changes his vocables from "than you've known about me", exactly to the opposite: he shows both respect and diplomacy. He does not admire the diplomatic career; nevertheless, his distortion of sentences happens to be a diplomatic one, and that shows how much he is involved by the environment of his family. Two other important traces of his diplomatic behavior occur during the play: although he suffers, he is in a good humor; and he hides that his leg has to be amputated. All these repressed feelings, plus his doubts, plus his perception of his parents' problems make Sam express himself frankly at the end of the play. He has not said much. But he has heard a lot. What Emily says to Mr. Taney referring to her discernment about her parents, might be said by Sam, "Children don't miss things like that" (p. 295). Sam has been away for two years, and most of his life has been spent away from home: after being educated in Europe, he goes to war in Italy; but in just one evening he learns more than he has ever learned, and he begins to comprehend and solve doubts, however in a very painful way, especially for one who is already suffering physically.

Most of Sam's distress comes from the confrontation between his and his father's experience of Europe: "Mr. Hazen has just returned from a tour of Africa and Southern Italy" (p. 272), says the newspaper; and Emily tells Cassie,

"Then Alex went to Italy as an observer — Sam and Alex were there at the same time, but they didn't see each other — and then Sam came back wounded and Alex got back last month" (p. 279). By and by Sam begins to question about his father's presence in Europe, "Did you tour around that part of Italy, Father? They call the place Bloody Basin now because it's a sort of basin between two hills and so many guys got killed there that we called it Bloody Basin" (p. 323). Sam questions his grandfather, "What did I see of Italy? The people in a little town, a river, some hills, a hospital. Father is an important man, he saw important people. I —" (p. 272). He does not know that his father was in Rome in 1922, "I didn't know you had been in Italy when Fascism first started. There you were on such a big day and I think so because I was there and saw what it did —" (p. 296). He feels depressed because he begins to piece together his thoughts. The following passage between parents and son show how difficult it is for them to realize their responsibility:

ALEX. You mean that if people like me had seen it straight, maybe you wouldn't have had to be there twenty-two years later.

EMILY (softly). But most people don't see things straight on the day they happen. It takes years to understand —

SAM. If that were true then everybody would understand everything too late.

ALEX. There are men who see their own time as clearly as if it were history. But they're very rare, Sam. (p. 296)

Alex tries to understand Sam because he was once in a similar situation, when his father was also a diplomat:

SAM. There were some things I didn't understand. We didn't see Italy the same way -

ALEX. Then it must be that I saw it wrong. (Smiles) Funny. I remember my father telling me about France. I kept wanting to say, for God's sake, I fought there: you can't know about it the way I do. (p. 276)

In their recollections, the flash-back of 1938 presents Alex and Emily in a conversation about a report that he has to send to the United States:

ALEX. I've always tried to push aside what I am, or where your money is, or how we live, and see what's best for my country. I've tried to do that. (Sharply) I'm going to keep on trying.

EMILY (slowly). Can you push aside your son?

ALEX. What's Sam got to do with this?

EMILY. If there is a war, he'll soon be old enough to fight in it. (Tensely) I don't want my son to die. I don't want you to have anything to do with his dying. I don't like Nazis any better than you do. But I don't want a war. I love Sam, and I want him to be happy, in a peaceful world.

ALEX (very sharply). I love Sam too. But I'll report what I think is the truth. And it will have nothing to do with my desire to keep Sam alive. I fought in a war and I wouldn't have wanted my father - (Desperately) What are we saying to each other?

We've never had fights, we've never talked to each other this way. (pp. 315-16)

In the above conversation the author reaffirms Alex's will to fulfill his obligation in relation to his country, as he has said to a German envoy, "I am an oldfashioned man. After all these years in Europe, my roots are still deep in America" (p. 311), in a sentence that reminds us of Sam's feelings; two other aspects of the above dialogue show us the same confrontation between his and Sam's experience with fighting in war and having a diplomat as father, and his straightness and perseverance in telling the truth, as he himself affirms again, "One minute I say to myself, what difference does it make what you write back? It'll be one of many reports coming in this week. But that's not true because I've got to do my best, even if it isn't important to anybody but me -" (p. 312), "the truth is I don't know what's best" (p. 312). (*Italics mine*). There is again an analogy between truth and importance in his speech and in Mr. Taney's speech: "Sorry, sorry, Sam. At my age you forget what's important and - [...] - and remember what isn't" (p. 272) - and what is important then is the truth of Sam's friend's death. These statements remind us of two of Lillian Hellman's considerations, "The truth was more important [...]"<sup>6</sup>, and "[...] the daily stuff that is the real truth, the importance."<sup>7</sup>

This importance is the one for which Sam is struggling. But to spare his parents from suffering with him, he lies, "I didn't go to the hospital. Sears was mistaken" (p. 276), and he reaffirms, "He was mistaken, Father" (p. 276). Lillian Hellman deliberately contrasts truth and lie; but Sam's lie does not indicate that he is trying to escape or that he is

a coward – on the contrary: the motive of his lying helps to create a more realistic and effective character: it shows Sam's emotional stability and wisdom.

There is a parallel between Alex and Sam: both have doubts, both love their country, both love truth. Alex tells his secretary, "I can't put the pieces together, or maybe I don't want to. I don't know. I can't believe in villainy. I can't. I always want to laugh when somebody else believes in it" (p. 307). This speech might well have been delivered by Sam, because he seems a replica of his father. However, he begins to realize that he is involved in an environment of hypocrisy, which means exactly the opposite of the truth that he has been looking for. Sam is surrounded by fake: diplomats and newspapermen frequently have to twist attitudes and facts to please those whom they work for, or the public, or "the unknown forces". Nevertheless, both belong to special societies in which they are respected and considered. And they are powerful. Curiously, Mr. Taney adverts Sam about these professions, and tells him not to follow any, "If you turn out to be a diplomat, I'll cut you out of my will" (p. 276), and, "Go sit in the library and read. You smile, but that would be a serious thing to do and you're going to be a serious man. If I'm wrong and you're not serious, I'll give you the newspaper and you can spend the rest of your life acting important and misinforming folks. That would break my heart, Sam" (p. 273).

Most of Sam's life has not been spent with his family. They do not know about him – but he does not know about them, either. When he says, "There was a lot I didn't understand tonight, and a lot that isn't any of my business" (p.321), he means that he is not interested in his parents' love triangle affair (moreover, they have just unburdened themselves

of their "secrets" — as well as his grandfather, "[...] two hours of your mother at dinner were long enough. Emily, you're old enough for me to tell you that I didn't like your mother" (p. 295), "I felt sorry when she died, but I said, to myself, of course, 'Really, my dear, you didn't have to go that far to accomodate me. You could have moved across the street'. It's a bad thing not to love the woman you live with. It tells on a man" (p. 295) — which is a prelude of Mrs. Ellis speech in The Autumn Garden, "Happiest year of my life was when my husband died. Every month was springtime and every day I seemed to be tipsy, as if my blood had turned a lovely vin rosé" (p. 467), "Do you know I almost divorced your grandfather, Frederick? During the racing season in 1901" (p. 467); listening to his grandfather's sarcastic, humorous, and ironic commentary towards someone so close helps Sam in his psychological development and discernment of facts throughout the course of the play). After the news of Sam's imminent operation has slipped out, he is moved to action: there are three decisive "mysteries" for the causes which originated his sacrifice in war which he has to solve so that he may find the tree he needs to sit in.

The responsibility of Sam's grandfather lies in the fact that, in 1922, with the advent of Fascism in Italy, he does not act; instead, he decides to lease his newspaper and make "it an excuse to just sit back and watch" (p. 322). Sam wants to know why the newspaper is no longer his, and why he has leased it, and how that could have contributed to war. As Mr. Taney himself confesses, "I decided to retire and let the world go to hell without my help" (p. 280), his lemma becomes (although through Sam's interpretation of his grandfather's words), "nothing anybody can do makes any difference, so why do it?" (p. 322). But if "the masses of

people" (p. 321) who do not act, had done something, the war might have not come, and Sam would not have gone to war and been wounded. An appropriate commentary is in An Unfinished Woman, "Liberal pigs. Pigs. They will kill all the rest of us with their nothing-to-be-done-about-it stuff. They will save themselves when the time comes, the dirty pigs".<sup>8</sup>

The responsibility of Sam's father lies in the fact that, in 1938, just before World War II, on the eve of the Pact of Munich, he does not give the necessary importance to the report that he sends to his government, "And I am an unimportant man sending back an unimportant report" (p. 310), "One minute I say to myself, what difference does it make what you write back? It'll be one of many reports coming in this week" (p. 312). Sam needs to know whether in that report his father recommended appeasement. In his conversation with Sam, Alex says, "There are men who see their own time as clearly as if it were history. But they're very rare, Sam" (p. 296), "You mean that if people like me had seen it straight, maybe you wouldn't have had to be there twenty-two years later" (p. 296). This burden comes not only from World War II, but from all his life as a diplomat. He tries to excuse himself from responsibility. He tells his secretary, "There's something crazy about sitting here and thinking that what I say makes any difference. What do I know? What does anybody know?" (p. 317), and he tells Sam, "Sometimes I was wrong because I didn't know any better. And sometimes I was wrong because I had reasons I didn't know about. But -" (p. 324). Again, if "the masses of people" who do not know, or who do not care, or who do not understand had given more importance to truth, the course of war might have been different, and so might Sam's life.

Sam's mother is worried about the social aspect of

diplomacy and of her private life. Two of the three flashbacks refer to Emily in fancy dinner parties in which she meets what Alex calls, "The Renaults and Melchior de Polignac and the fashionable society trash who run with them" (p. 314). An instance of her personality is noticed when, during a conversation in which the subject is important, she tells her son, "Stop frowning, Sam. It's bad for the young" (p. 295). Sam's interest remains on the newspaper clipping that one of his comrades in Italy gives him. This clipping, written by a woman columnist, tells of his mother at a worldly dinner party in the United States, circled by international and charming people, in what the columnist calls "a brilliant gathering" (p. 323), while Sam and his friends are battling in war. At home, Sam expresses his thoughts frankly, "I don't think I ever in my life was really ashamed before. After all the fine talk I'd done about my family - God in Heaven, it did something to me - (Stops abruptly.)" (p. 323). That clipping becomes the detonating fuse for Sam, and he reveals the anger that has been hidden by his sullen quietness. After more than six months, he still has that clipping in his pocket. In war, Sam met Leck, who became his friend. He tells of his admiration for Leck, "[...] all of us pretended we knew more than we did. But not Leck. He never pretended to anything because he really knew a lot" (p. 323). Leck is the absence of pretense, the truth that inspires Sam to face his family. Sam gives details of that conversation in Italy, when Leck tells him about the kind of people whom that clipping focuses, and comments, "My God, Sam, [...] if you come from that you better get away from it fast, because they made the shit we're sitting in" (p. 324).

Sam's final speech is the final speech in the play. In it, Sam shows his strength and denounces his family, wielding a final blow:

Well, for a couple of days I thought about what Leck said and I was going to tell him something. But that afternoon we went down to Bloody Basin and he got blown to pieces and I got wounded. How do you say you like your country? I like this place. (With great passion) and I don't want any more fancy fooling around with it. I don't want any more of Father's mistakes, for any reason, good or bad, or yours, Mother, because I think they do it harm. I was ashamed of that clipping. But I didn't really know why. I found out tonight. I am ashamed of both of you, and that's the truth. I don't want to be ashamed that way again. I don't like losing my leg, I don't like losing it at all. I'm scared - but everybody's welcome to it as long as it means a little something and helps to bring us out someplace. All right. I've said enough. Let's have a drink..  
(p. 324)

Leck is blown to pieces, and so is truth. Sam now tries to pick up the pieces and make them a unity.

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Lillian Hellman, An Unfinished Woman (Little, Brown, 1969; rpt. New York: Bantam), p. 203.

<sup>2</sup> Helen Ormsbee, "Miss Hellman All But Dares Her Next Play to Succeed!" New York Herald Tribune, 9 April 1944, sec. IV, pp. 1-2.

<sup>3</sup> Lillian Hellman, Maybe (Boston: Little, Brown, 1980), p. 90.

<sup>4</sup> Lillian 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.

<sup>5</sup> Hellman, An Unfinished Woman, pp. 55-56.

<sup>6</sup> Hellman, Pentimento, p. 259.

<sup>7</sup> Hellman, Pentimento, p. 107.

<sup>8</sup> Hellman, An Unfinished Woman, p. 78.