

# THE ESCAPE THEME IN MISS HELLMAN'S PLAYS

O Tema FUGA nas Peças de Lillian Hellman

Das Fluchtmotiv in den Stücken von Lillian Hellman

Júnia de Castro Magalhães ALVES\*

## SUMMARY

This article establishes a parallel among Miss Hellman's eight original plays, focusing on one of her most recurrent themes: her characters' psychological needs and their often vain attempts to flee from their land, their history and themselves.

## RESUMO

Este artigo estabelece um paralelo entre as oito peças da teatróloga americana Lillian Hellman, focalizando um de seus temas recorrentes: os anseios e frustrações de seus personagens, na tentativa vã de fugir de sua terra, de seu passado e de si mesmos.

The well known 20th century American writer Lillian Hellman published, among other works, eight single-handed plays. Four of them *The little foxes* (1939), *Another part of the forest* (1946), *The autumn garden* (1951) and *Toys in the attic* (1960) interpret the American Southern way of life: the remaining four, *The children's hour* (1934), *Days to come* (1936), *Watch on the Rhine* (1941) and *The scarching wind* (1944) focus on the North.

Although Miss Hellman's characters and setting vary from play to play, they both present recurrent traits meant to convey a recurrent theme: a longing for escaping.

The action also comprises a series of events showing the characters' psychological needs and their often unsuccessful attempts to leave their land and background in search for new hopes. There are three main forms of escape. Two are unreal: a) to run away from either place or time or both; b) to attack through physical violence or emotional aggression. The third form is real; it is to return to the objective world left behind.

To facilitate the development of this thesis, I have classified the plays into four different groups:

### 1. THE HUBBARD PLAYS

*The little foxes* and *Another part of the forest* tell the story of the greedy Hubbard family and deal specifically with the Southern background and way of life.

### 2. THE MOOD PLAYS

*The autumn garden* and *Toys in the attic* differ from the Hubbard sequence in that they stress mood. In their own ways they show the social phenomena of their time more through characters than through plot and action.

### 3. THE SOCIAL PLAYS

*The children's hour* and *Days to come* treat very definite social issues. Here Miss Hellman's particular fight is to rebel against the social system where human relationships become objects for sale.

### 4. THE POLITICAL PLAYS

*Watch on the Rhine* and *The scarching wind* were both molded from Miss Hellman's radical opposition to the totalitarism of Mussoline and Hitler.

The plays of the Hubbard series study the exploitation of man and land and introduce the notion (further developed in the Mood Plays through the plant-man metaphor, the cold-heat images and the influence of weather and season on living beings) that existence is only meaningful in action. The Social and the Political Plays also develop these same themes. The former emphasize the opposition

\* Faculdade de Letras  
UFMG

between good and evil within a capitalistic society, the latter oppose what is presented as pernicious American innocence and inaction to European maturity and action. This analysis leads to the conclusion that although each character assimilates the social pressures and prohibitions of his or her environment as well as physical facts like cold and heat, light and darkness, time and space, and interacts with both by resisting or avoiding their hostile or unfavorable aspects, he or she also reacts against them. Those two mechanisms constitute two different forms of escape. Miss Hellman is part of a tradition of American playwrights and novelists such as O'Neill, Williams, Miller, Albee, Hemingway, Faulkner, Steinbeck, Bellow, Updike and others who have approached the escape theme. Harry Hope's saloon benchers, Amanda and Laura Wingfield, Willy Loman, Martha and George, Santiago and Tommy Wilhelm escape from their hostile environment through illusions. Eben and Abbie, Yank, Biff and Joe Christmas resist it. Simon and Peter Cabot, Tom Wingfield, Pepe Torres and Rabbit Angstrom actually run away from it. Miss Hellman presents these three forms of escape in her plays. Her characters are intensely dissatisfied with their situation, with people around them, with the place they live in. They either recoil within their fantasy or become unhealthily aggressive. They act out their dramas somewhere, always wishing to be somewhere else.

The geographical escape, found in all Miss Hellman's dramatic work, but more so in the social series and in the Hubbard Plays, is probably the simplest as well as the most primitive of them. The characters long for what is far away (either in place or time or both), but their dreams are seldom if ever fulfilled. In *The children's hour* Martha looks "forward to some place by the lake"<sup>1</sup> (14), Mrs. Mortar wants to "go back to the stage" (17), Cardin dreams of escaping from scandal by going to Vienna (56), Karen wants "to go to sleep" (61), to "take the train in the morning" (61) and go "Somewhere; any place" (62). They finally understand there is nowhere to go and they must face reality. Martha is not strong enough to accept that and consequently escapes through the ultimate act of violence — by committing suicide. Martha's death wish parallels Karen's need for sleeping. In *Days to come* Ellicott wants to escape from tension by "going down to White Sulphur when things are cleared up" (82), and Julie wants to escape from the boredom and comfort of her wealthy household into the hard life of the strikers (105-09). In the Hubbard Plays — *The little foxes* and *Another part of the forest* — we find the greatest number of geographical escapes. 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 tries to bring Chicago to her by ordering her expensive clothes from there:

Ben. What you doing having men on the porch, you in your wrapper?

Regina (gaily). Isn't it a pretty wrapper? Came from Chicago.

Ben (pointing to boxes). And so did these on the mail train. They got your name on'em. Belong to you?

Regina (giggling). Writing can't lie. Specially writing in ink (334).

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 Southern gentleman he values the notions of violence and "honor". He comments: "I was only good once — in a war. Some men shouldn't ever come home from a war. You know something? It's the only time I was happy" (332). 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. She says to the Hubbards: "I should like to have Lionnet back. I know you own it now, but I'd like to see it fixed up again, the way Mama and Papa had it" (145), "Oh, I do think we could be happier there. Papa used to say that NOBODY had ever lost their temper at Lionnet, and NOBODY ever would. Papa would never let anybody be nasty-spoken or mean. No, sir. He just didn't like it" (146-47). Oscar, less worried about power, money, honor and land, but led by his sexual libido, plans to elope to New Orleans with Laurette:

Oscar. Laurette, I'm going to ask Papa for a loan. Then we'll go on down to New Orleans. Would you, Laurette — (361).

Laurette. You've asked me the same question for the last year, twenty times. But you never yet asked your Papa for the loan (361).

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" (137). Lavinia, in turn, to compensate for her omissions and sinful deeds, escapes into the half-insane and mystic world of her anthropomorphic god and imposes upon herself the penitence of going "As far as Altaloosa" (381) to provide for her poor colored children. Lavinia's counterpart in the Mood Plays is Lily, Julian's child-wife. She also finds support for her insecurity in mysticism, while Carrie and Anna, her sisters-in-law, dream of going to Europe. In the Mood Plays (the last series Miss Hellman wrote and also the most mature of her dramatic work) as well as in her Political Plays (which chrono-

logically 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. It is true that these acts of violence appear in all her plays. In *The children's hour* Martha commits suicide, while Mary, in a fit of rage, kicks the table, throws cushions at the doors, twists Peggy's arms and slaps Evelyn's face. In *Days to come* the psychological atmosphere is tense. The action develops through a war of nerves and culminates with the use of guns, the killing of Mossie and the murder of Firth's child. In the Hubbard Plays Marcus is responsible for the massacre of twenty-seven Union troop boys, Oscar beats his wife, and Regina murders her husband. There are Nazi raids in *The searching wind*, a murder in *Watch on the Rhine*, and a spanking in *Toys in the attic*. Miss Hellman recalls that Dashiell Hammett "frequently objected to her use of violence"<sup>2</sup> on stage. He meant that such physical violence leads to melodrama. Psychological violence, in turn, is a more subtle form of escape, a peculiar quality of her more intellectually sophisticated characters. It appears in her first work, *The children's hour*, and becomes more and more elaborate until it achieves a high level of craftsmanship in her last series, the Mood Plays.

Violence and escape are sometimes repetitive, but may also acquire different aspects in different situations and contexts. In *The children's hour* Mary actually runs away from school, but her ultimate form of escape shows up in dissimulation, lies, blackmail, and slander. In *Days to come* Julie tries to leave home in an attempt to escape from the stagnant state of her family affairs, but the more conflicting type of self-defense takes the form of infidelity, hatred, and competition. In the Hubbard Plays these same motifs reappear. The relationship between brother and sister, husband and wife, father and son, master and servant is marked by either greed, exploitation or revenge. The characters put on masks of friendliness, self-certainty, and self-reliance, but they attack in fear of being unmasked. Regina's unrealized dream of moving to Chicago becomes a minor form of escape as compared to her unwholesome quest for comfort, money, and power. And in *The searching wind* Moscs Taney and Alexander Hazen escape reality by avoiding both their personal and political responsibilities. A few characters are able to give up their fantasies and face the objective world. Carrie and Anna Berniers discover their mutual hatred, the real reason for the postponement of their trip to Europe, and Carrie's incestuous love for Julian. Constance and Crossman understand that they will have to suffer loneliness for the rest of their lives. Sophie and Kurt go back to Europe to meet war and death. Alexandra and Sam react against their family's inaction, irresponsibility, selfishness and greed. Nick and Nina, Rose and Griggs, Carrie and Anna, Alex and Emily, Andrew and Julie accept

their fate: that they must live together "for all the days to come" (128). Karen is able to confront seclusion and Mrs. Tilford takes upon herself the consequences of her false judgement.

All the characters, situations and places discussed hitherto belong to Miss Hellman's single-handed plays, but ironically she only offers a formal answer to her escape theme in that grand flop written in collaboration with others, the musical *Candide* (1956). Her *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" (655). *Candide's* escape, as opposed to those escapes found in Miss Hellman's plays, is thoroughly fulfilled. The last song of the musical contains the thematic answer so laboriously sought after in the plays — that each one must face his own reality, must make his own garden grow:

Candide (with force). No. We will not think noble because we are not noble. We will not live in beautiful harmony because there is no such thing in this world, nor should there be. We promise only to do our best and live out our lives. Dear God, that's all we can promise in truth. Marry me, Cunegonde. (He sings.)

You've been a fool and so have I,  
But come and be my wife,  
And let us try before we die  
To make some sense of life.  
We're neither pure nor wise nor good;  
We'll do the best we know;

We'll build our house, and chop our wood,  
And make our garden grow.  
And make our garden grow.

Cunegonde (sings).

I thought the world was sugar-cake,  
For so our master said;  
But now I'll teach my hands to bake  
Our loaf of daily bread.

Candide and Cunegonde (sing).

We're neither pure nor wise nor good;  
We'll do the best we know;  
We'll build our house, and chop our wood,  
And make our garden grow.  
And make our garden grow.

(Cast begins slow entry.)

Pangloss, Maximillian, Old Lady, Cunegonde,  
Candide and Governor (sing).

Let dreamers dream what worlds they  
please;  
Those Edens can't be found.  
The sweetest flowers, the fairest trees  
Are grown in solid ground.

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Entire Company (sings).

Curtain

We're neither pure nor wise nor good;  
We'll do the best we know;  
We'll build our house, and chop our wood,  
And make our garden grow.  
And make our garden grow (678-79).

With *Candide* Miss Hellman had finally and formally concluded that neither subjective running away nor any kind of violent aggression brings satisfaction, and that happiness will only be found in accepting the objective world.

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### NOTES

- 1 Lillian Hellman, *The children's hour*, in *The collected plays* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971), p. 14. All the quotations from Miss Hellman's plays are taken from this edition. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.
- 2 John Phillips and Anne Hollander, «The art of the theatre: Lillian Hellman; an interview,» *Paris Review*, 33 (Winter/Spring, 1965), p. 125.