



PICTURING LESBIANISM AS A TABOO TOPIC IN MODERNISM

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Abstract: This paper deals with the response of the modernist audience to lesbianism. The modernist audience reacted more toward the homosexual content instead of the tragedy of lies in the play, *The Children's hour* by Lillian Hellman (1934). This represents the well-established custom of dramatic plays, where lesbians are forced to commit suicide in the climax. *The Children's Hour* focused more on lying than lesbians. Though the play has always been discussed one of the earliest American plays containing lesbian content. As because Lesbianism in modernism aims to explore periodization-related disciplinary distinctions and cultural structures. In the play, the concept of homosexuality is initiated by lying and manipulating, which also creates the receptive conditions that brought lesbianism into a more serious light. This play has a strong homosexuality component, but it overpowers the theme lies in the play because homosexuality and homosexuals were considered as the tabooest concepts in modernism.

Keywords: Lesbianism, Modernism, Homosexuality, Periodization, Manipulating.

Introduction:

Lillian Hellman's *The Children's hour* (1934) is one of the most realistic plays of Modernism. As this play is no longer contemporary but it has valuable content, and it is still important to our current society. At the time of Modernism, Lesbianism was considered as taboo; this was forbidden in most literary works. The play creates a tense atmosphere that suggests there is some uncertain element in the process of breaking a taboo.

“Hellman said that *The Children’s Hour* was a play about good and evil. The terms did not apply to the theme of homosexuality but to that of destructive scandal-mongering – the smear and the big lie. And, simultaneously, to the power of the old and rich to rob -- to despoil – others of livelihood and life” (Falk 37)

Thus, undoubtedly it was a major risk for Lillian Hellman to write on that subject. She penned the script for *The Children’s Hour* in 1934, but it ultimately paid off. Her debut play, *The Children’s hour*, which became one of her most well-known works, was her first success. A few miles away from Lancet, in a girl's boarding school, is where the play is set.

Long-time friends Karen Wright and Martha Dobie, who run this school, had their lives completely turned upside down when Mary Tilford, a fourteen-year-old rebellious and troublemaker, accused them of being in a lesbian relationship. The false narrative by Mary Tilford is supported by her grandmother, who decides to close the school after knowing about her granddaughter’s story about those teachers.

MARY. (hastily) I saw things, too. One night there was so much noise I thought somebody was sick or something and I looked through the keyhole and they were kissing and saying things and then I got scared because it was a different sort of and I— (Hellman, *The Children’s Hour* 54).

In a contradictory way, this makes Martha realize her emotions toward her friend Karen. The two teachers’ lives were shattered; they encountered social discrimination and lost everything they had. When Martha kills herself just before the entire plot is exposed as a fabrication, the play ends with a tragic conclusion.

The play has nothing to do with Lesbianism, of course: it’s just one of the side issues. It’s just the charge of the girl, that’s all...

Lillian Hellman

The script for *The Children's Hour* by Hellman addresses the problems created by lies and manipulation. Even though this play uses the concept of lesbianism to intensify the tragic circumstances, The play has nothing that suggests homosexuality as a reality. Hellman once described *The Children's Hour* as “not really a play about lesbianism, but about a lie. The bigger the lie, the better, as always.”

No words used in the play that suggest sex or the particular word “lesbian” are ever mentioned during the conversation; rather, Mary tells to her grandmother that something "unnatural" is happening between the two teachers, as it was thought that same-sex relationships were immoral and unnatural:

“MRS. MORTAR. You’re fonder of Karen, and I know that. And it’s unnatural, just as unnatural as it can be” (Hellman, *The Children’s Hour* 20).

The Children’s Hour is inspired by the court case known as *The Great Drumsheugh Case* in the 19th century, it was the reason that Lillian Hellman decided the lie in play is about homosexuality. In this case, a girls' school was administrated by the two ladies who were accused of being lesbians and were

involved in the Great Drumsheugh Case. Although Hellman used more information from the Drumsheugh case, she also done a few important adjustments that weren't related to The Great Drumsheugh Case. A same-sex relationship was not practical during that time.

Knowing that being out in the open might jeopardize their occupations and public acceptance, most homosexuals choose to remain “unopened.” Many homosexuals experience intense moral humiliation and self-hate due to their reputation as perverts and disintegrate. In the play, society is depicted as an enemy because it punishes the innocent. In the play, Martha committed suicide because her body is added to the pile of other queer characters, and she could not bear to face the reality. Martha still got feelings for her friend Karen, but more than her feelings she wanted to fit properly into the public. Because she had feelings for Karen, she was led to believe by society that she was polluted.

MARTHA. ‘Oh my god, what’s wrong with me, I’m so polluted, I’ve ruined you and I’ve ruined my own... Oh, I feel so damn sick and dirty I can’t stand it anymore!’

— (Hellman, *The Children’s Hour* 118).

Lesbianism wasn’t staged in *The Children’s Hour* since it is merely the subject of Mary’s lie. Even though Martha expresses guilt there hasn’t been any action that would suggest whether there is any truth to the lie. If the happenings inside this story are contrasted with contemporary happenings, The lie appears to have more of an impact on people today than it did on those who saw the play's original performance in 1934. The real source of conflict in this story is a lie. The fabricated lies are ultimately what connects the story and move the plot. Two innocent women are punished by a self-righteous society for falling for a devious child's lie. Due to the taboo element of the lesbian theme, audiences were significantly more affected by it. Although Mary's claim about the two teachers being lesbians is proven to be false, on the period of that original play, lesbianism appeared to represent the taboo topic, that the audience was interested in.

Hellman attempts to offer a powerful criticism of the culture of her day while fighting for more freedom for women. In this story, Hellman aims to portray how certain people have faced injustice and oppression in American culture because of their gender or even their gender preference. How two respectable women's lives might be ruined from the deceit of a little girl during the time period when it really was extremely difficult for women to succeed and be independent. Success from that kind of controversial plot also resulted in prohibition in a few cities. A social and personal conflict brought through an unacceptable kind of exhibiting sexuality during that time was bravely presented to the audience through the author. Because of the homosexual content in the play, well-known New York critiques in 1934 and 1952 reportedly failed to notice the consequences of the falsehood itself in the play. During the 1930s, lesbianism was deemed a developing threat to society. Authors and individuals reject and criticize homosexuality since it really is considered as taboo. The play openly addressed homosexuality, where, at the time it was still forbidden in New York during that time. The girls in the story are expelled from their school after hearing a rumour that their teachers Karen and Martha is lesbian, and they committed to an illicit relationship. The concept of a “romantic friendship” came under scrutiny

by outsiders as because of the rise in boarding schools that occurred in Europe and also in the northern United States during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Although parents and teachers were frequently unaware of which the intensity of few connections, friendships were not discouraged. Within a boarding school, the proximity among students and staffs who are female enhances the believability in the deceit in the story. Although, During the modernism, lesbianism represents a threat towards the dominant hierarchical, patriarchal principles in society. As a result, it has been rejected and viewed as risky and a risk to tradition. These critics became so focused towards the issue of lesbianism in the play that they overlooked the real definition of Mary's lie and its catastrophic results. Before the 1961 release of the film, *The Children's Hour* was banned in Chicago until 1953, and in Boston and London. No one from the officials who outlawed the play had ever seen it; instead, they relied on media reports.

Screen Adaptation:

In 1935 Samuel Goldwyn purchased the rights of the film *The Children's Hour*. However, due to the production code's rigid enforcement in Hollywood, it seemed that Goldwyn's purchase would have been fruitless, so the film's release would be impossible if it was made from this script. The film adaptation entirely obscured the original issue, and implicit criticism on the second adaptation, which appeared to remain loyal over the original, sparked conflicting interpretations among commentators. It really is hoped that C. H.'s analysis on two of the mistresses' unfolding history on film would offer a valuable viewpoint over the continuing both the women plot. Hellman made significant alterations to her 1936 screenplay going beyond simply removing the homo sexual elements, which William Wyler directed, in order to adapt the story to the cinema. The film's original name has been renamed forcefully and the replacement on the initial lesbian rumours with allegations on the illicit relationship between Martha and Karen's fiancé Joe were the pair of most horrible of these changes.

The film version was drastically altered by Hellman. She was apparently content with changing the script into a love triangle despite being forced to abandon her original concept of homosexuality and maintaining the play's main message of evil was unaffected even through the changes. In 1936, Hellman almost didn't get credit for *These Three* films. Even though the 1936 version made no explicit references to lesbianism and even purposefully created a straight love triangle in contrast to a homosexual one, it appeared during its production that everyone involved in *These Three* was aware of the subject matter over the original play and could not help but suggest lesbianism.

Code after censor/stick-in-the-mud Will Hays - regulated the content of motion pictures, placing limitations on, among other things, representations of homosexuality. Filmmakers were still capable to escape the Code, but gay characters were hidden in innuendo, demanding some decoding. Gestures that supported homosexual lifestyles were rejected by audiences.

Audrey Hepburn and Shirley MacLaine were casted to play the two teachers' role, also their destinies were turned upside down when a troublemaker student wrongly accuses them of having sinful, lesbian relationship of each other. Hollywood is usually a decade or three behind the society, despite its self-proclaimed image as being progressive. The studies on The Children's Hour's transitions from stage to screen and back in the 1930s towards the current are included into the historical facts to demonstrate the play's true significance to today's public. The script has timeless element that surpass its original time period.

Conclusion:

To conclude, Lillian Hellman contributes to understanding the challenging circumstances that writers and intellectuals endured in the 1930s. Her plays accurately depicted the happenings in the culture. Through Lillian Hellman's plays, biographies, and other literary creations, readers can gain a deeper understanding of these tensions and problems. Thus, it is possible to observe McCarthy's society's mistreatment of several intellectuals, writers, performers, and others who were different or simply thought in a varies way. Here, a sexist and homophobic culture is explored since ladies were undervalued and lesbianism was prohibited. through time, and people now live within a society that is significantly accepting of other viewpoints. It is most likely a reflection of the difficult struggles of individuals like Hellman who battled against taboos, political myths, and societal norms to win independence.

Focus of my article is about how this play's effect on spectators during the 1930s fell short on the playwright's expectations. The homosexual content received more attention by the audience than the tragedy of the manipulation and lies did. The increasingly accepting attitudes toward lesbianism in today's social media may have an effect over The Children's Hour is perceived through a broad but predominantly conservative audience. That kind of a group of people might view the story in an alternative way than the New York audiences in 1934 did. While homosexuality might still be kind of a contentious problem in our society today, Undoubtedly, it has become less taboo than it was back in 1934. It's discovered which the script has a timeless aspect that goes beyond its initial historical period. A modern audience may be impacted by this play. This article ends with such a dilemma good against evil, in which good loses and evil also isn't destroyed due to premodern society by treating lesbianism as taboo.

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