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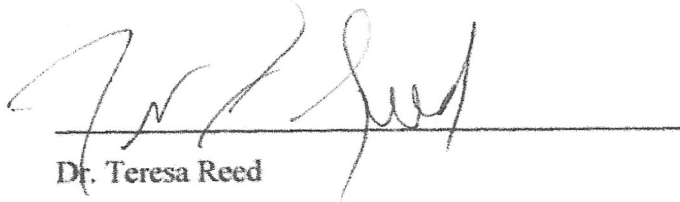

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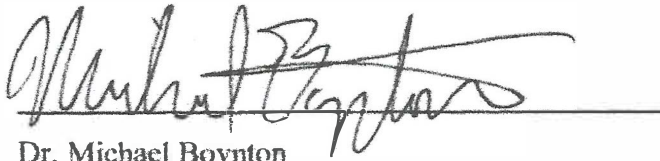

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A MORALITY PLAY OR JUST SIMPLY QUEER: LILLIAN HELLMAN'S *THE CHILDREN'S HOUR*

A Thesis Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty
of Jacksonville State University
in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts
with a Major in English

BY
REBECCA ELIZABETH WEAVER
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ABSTRACT

Queer theatre during the early 1900s in America seems to be almost non-existent when students study literature, history, and even theatre history because the records were suppressed, leaving the teaching of queer history at a disadvantage. One of the most influential queer plays in theatre history was written in 1934 by Lillian Hellman. *The Children's Hour* takes place in an all-girls school ran by Karen Wright and Martha Dobie. The two friends encounter a continuous problem by the name of Mary Tilford – one of the girls who attends the school. In an effort to convince her grandmother to withdraw her from the school, Mary tells a lie about the two teachers, accusing them of "unnatural" and "funny" acts with each other. Hellman dramatizes the consequences of said lie and shows how society reacts to two women accused of homosexuality.

By examining the works of scholarly critics on *The Children's Hour*, deeply analyzing the text itself, and theorizing on a supposed production of this play, I intend to thoroughly examine the social, political, and cultural impact that *The Children's Hour* had, has, and can have on our surrounding world. Although Hellman has said that her intent was to focus on Mary's lie rather than the queer relationship between Karen and Martha, it is my intent in this paper to argue that *The Children's Hour* actually emphasizes the lesbian relationship between the two women. In doing so, it is my intent to showcase the historical, critical, analytical, and theatrical implications of Hellman's pivotal play. Furthermore, this paper is intended to act as a critical companion to theatre artists interested in or working on a production of *The Children's Hour*.

vii., 83 pages

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Rebecca Elizabeth Weaver

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INTRODUCTION

Lillian Hellman is revered as one of the foremost playwrights during the early to mid-twentieth century. Having written plays such as *The Little Foxes* and *Watch on the Rhine*, Hellman's work is still produced and studied today, nearly one-hundred years later. In fact, her debut play, *The Children's Hour*, while "rarely revived on the professional stage… continues to be widely performed by community and college theaters in the U.S. and abroad" (Spencer 44). It is without a doubt that Hellman's play still resonates with audiences today. A play about a closeted lesbian, while not completely unheard of in queer stories today, still begs to be performed due to lack of representation in the media. People within the queer community desire that diversity in order to see themselves represented in stories just like every other white, straight, cisgendered person has seen themselves, in literature and the like, for centuries. However, there is the bit about the only admitted queer person killing herself towards the end of Hellman's play.

It is no secret that the media—literature, film, television, etc.—has a history of killing the only explicitly queer person within a story. In the late nineteenth century, the *Bury Your Gays* trope in literature originated, gaining popularity in the twentieth century and still persisting in modern media. This trope, which "features a same-gender romantic couple, [and] one of the lovers must die or otherwise be destroyed by the end of the story," directly correlates with the admission of feelings between a same-sex pairing, kissing, or one or both of the characters' death: "they often die mere moments or pages after their relationship is confirmed for the audience" (Hulan 17). One of the two main

characters in *The Children's Hour* does indeed admit homosexual feelings towards her best friend only to kill herself moments later, thus ending the play only a couple of pages after her death. So, why is this play still performed if it adheres to this *Bury Your Gays* trope? Is it because of the historical significance of the play, having been controversial to even hint towards homosexuality on a Broadway stage during this time? Or is it because the play focuses on the queer relationship between the two women, showing, albeit slightly and covertly, that the woman left alive may also be queer, providing a sliver of hope for lesbians and queer people?

The answer, although hard to pin down with any certainty, is widely debated amongst theatre artists, scholars, and critics alike. When it comes to Lillian Hellman's intention behind her famed play, many have made arguments and claims along the lines of morality, good versus evil, Freudian repetitions, and the consequences of lies and slander. However, one of the most common arguments, and probably the most well-founded, surrounds homosexuality or lesbianism. Scholars such as Mary Titus, Jenny S. Spencer, Benjamin Kahan, and Merce Cuenca and Maria Isabel Seguro have addressed the unavoidable and apparent theme of Hellman's play—lesbianism. So, when addressing *The Children's Hour* from a theatrical, or even literary, approach, it is impossible to avoid the subject of lesbianism, despite the many intentions Hellman herself has stated throughout her time writing, producing, and discussing her famed play.

As I take a deep dive into Hellman's *The Children's Hour*, I will be addressing three main points that are crucial in the study and producing of this play: the circumstances surrounding *The Children's Hour*, such as the social and political milieu of the time, background on Lillian Hellman herself, and a close look at the production

history and reception of her play; a textual analysis, which will delve into the critical scenes and events within *The Children's Hour* while examining what Hellman's true intent was throughout the many rewrites and adaptations; and a practical and theatrical examination into certain scenes that will touch, briefly, on moments that should be handled carefully by all theatre artists involved. Within each of these chapters, I will reference scholarly articles, books, and opinions on varying topics pertinent to examining Hellman's play, allowing for the presentation of criticism drawn from numerous disciplines to the treatment of this play over time, all of which are essential to the discussion of why *The Children's Hour* and its adaptations endure and are significant despite adhering to several quasi-homophobic tropes and beliefs.

Primary sources for information which will be discussed throughout this paper include Kaier Curtin's *We Can Always Call Them Bulgarians* and the 1952 acting edition of *The Children's Hour* (foreword by Harry Gilroy). Critical literary theory will also be discussed throughout and include readings from Simone de Beauvoir, Adrienne Rich, and Friedrich Nietzsche—among others. In order to gain multiple interpretations and receptions from several different audiences over the course of history, this paper will examine the 1934 production (directed by Herman Shumlin) at the Maxine Elliott theater in New York, the 1936 film *These Three* (directed by William Wyler), the 1952 production (directed by Lillian Hellman) at the Coronet Theater in New York, and the 1961 film *The Children's Hour* (directed, once again, by William Wyler).

Some influential secondary sources have helped me examine multiple different approaches to *The Children's Hour*—articles and sources specifically dealing with the theme of lesbianism in regard to Lillian Hellman's writing of *The Children's Hour* and its

long history of productions. In particular, Jenny S. Spencer's article titled "Sex, Lies, and Revisions: Historicizing Hellman's *The Children's Hour*" has heavily impacted my approach to analyzing *The Children's Hour*. She addresses not only the intention of Hellman's play, but the multiple rewrites which the playwright has undertaken from the conception of her play all the way to the 1970s. This was beneficial in identifying the progression of Hellman's intention, especially when it came to arguing whether or not her intention was the lie's consequences or the actual subject of the lie—lesbianism.

Overall, the intention behind this thesis is to delve deeply into *The Children's Hour* as a literary text but also as a theatrical production by examining the true intention of Hellman's play because it is important to know the playwright's intent in relation to the perception or textual implications when approaching a theatrical piece; however, this thesis will also act as a sounding board to discuss pivotal moments or scenes within the play that must be handled with care and possible solutions to dealing with—what would now be regarded as homophobic—difficult scenes. From a literary and dramaturgical perspective, it becomes clear that Hellman's intent behind the play has shifted over time from focusing on the act of lying, to the consequences of slander, to the theme of the lie itself: lesbianism. Considering it was published during a time when censorship of theaters and films was the law of the land and homosexuality was silenced, punished, and suppressed, it is no secret that the theme of lesbianism in *The Children's Hour* was also stifled. Nevertheless, the innuendos, subtleties, and nuances that are still present throughout Hellman's debut play lend itself to a queer interpretation that may, indeed, prove vital to acknowledging America's queer history and aiding in its progression.

CHAPTER ONE:

Social and Political Milieu

American theatre in the twentieth century, specifically the roaring twenties, was a time full of sensation, sex, lavishness, and an examination of the human condition – as all theater inevitably is to one degree or another. However, there was another side to theatre, or rather society, altogether, and it was the "most tumultuous decade the nation had ever experienced" (Houchin 73). While American theatre found its central hub in New York City to be one of expression and transformation, a larger and more conservative community turned to the past for pillars of morality and values – a past with strict, fundamental religious views, frugality, and chaste beliefs. So, while a good majority of society at the time was all about conservative values and religious focus, the rest instigated a period of mass consumerism – "spending, rather than saving, came to be identified with prosperity" (Houchin 73).

Since the beliefs of society were split during this decade, the rules and regulations for theatre and entertainment were divided as well. Theaters were full of plays portraying female autonomy, sexuality, nudity, and so much more. It was this sense of autonomy that worried the conservative division of society because it "undermined the fixed moral absolutes upon which the national ethos rested," and they "refused to entertain the possibility that standards of behavior [are] socially constructed" (Houchin 75). Behaviors that do not adhere to the accepted standard have always been regarded as anarchy and compared to a physical representation of "Satan" (Houchin 75) himself, and in this time, nothing confirmed this belief more than the sexual behaviors seen on the stage:

> Sexual activity was no longer limited to the confines of marriage or the deviant behavior of prostitutes, procurers, and their clientele. Sexual satisfaction came to be regarded as a value in itself and a critical component of personal happiness. Moreover, the burgeoning consumer economy described human relationships in terms of uncontrollable sexual impulses. (Houchin 75)

In this time of self-discovery, generational expression of freedom, sexual freedom, and everything else that the conservative community deemed devilish, sections of society that showcased these radical ideas were met with penal codes and laws that began to prohibit this kind of behavior. These obstacles were most clearly seen in theaters throughout the country.

Theatre

With plays such as Sholem Asch's *God of Vengeance*, Édouard Bourdet's *The Captive*, several plays written by Mae West, and Eugene O'Neill's *Strange Interlude*, the portrayal of sexual promiscuity and freedom, the experimentation of sexuality, and the indulgence of mental and bodily autonomy were seen in excess on the American stage, especially on Broadway. In fact, it was

> …these representations [plays that featured fully developed character who defined themselves by their sexual behaviors] that ran afoul of Section 1140-a of the New York State penal code. It read, in part, that any person who participated in any capacity in a "play, exhibition, show or entertainment which would tend to the corruption of the morals of youth or others… shall be guilty of a misdemeanor." In essence, this piece of legislation allowed prosecutors to file charges against a play if it merely exhibited the tendency to corrupt a child. Whether or not a child had actually seen the play or, for that matter, had actually been corrupted, was immaterial. (Houchin 77)

It was because of the New York State penal code that Asch's *God of Vengeance* was deemed "immoral" and newspapers and magazines were warned against even mentioning the title within their writings (Curtin 35). In Asch's play, the daughter of a brothel owner was scheduled to be married by the church, a sign of religious nobility that would gain Yekel (the brothel owner) more status. However, Rifkele (the daughter) is seen, onstage, engaging in homosexual activities (kissing, light petting) with a woman from her father's brothel. So, theater-goers and reviewers alike were not happy with this "indecent" material being shown on stage.

In fact, Mae West's production of *Sex* underwent a trial instigated by the Society for the Suppression of Vice, who was known for targeting theatrical productions that violated the New York State penal code. During the production and trial of *Sex*, West started writing another play called *The Drag*. *The Drag* follows the story of Rolly

Kingsbury, who is married to Claire, the daughter of a prominent doctor, James Richmond. After being visited by a patient—David Caldwell, who was in a previous relationship with Rolly—a series of events unfold as Rolly admits his feelings for a fellow, male coworker—Allen Grayson. In the midst of these events, Rolly throws a huge party full of men in drag who are participating in homosexual activities while onstage. It is this party that displeased a majority of the audience members and reviewers. Attacks against *The Drag* were made by the Society for the Suppression of Vice, the same society that drove into obscurity Asch's *God of Vengeance* and Bourdet's *The Captive*, which was deemed to "[reveal] to thousands of innocents the fact that the world contained such a phenomenon as homosexuality" (quoted in Curtin, 44). Clearly, these plays were making their way into a world, or rather a stage, that was not ready to witness how "millions of human beings…radically different" (Schlissel 169) would influence society around them. It was not the sexual promiscuity or the characters who persecuted others that led the conservative community to charge against these plays; it was the audacity of the theaters to allow homosexuality on stage.

As Herman Shumlin, producer and director of the 1934 debut production of Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour*, stated, "by the 1930s, people were simply sick of the whole business of stage censorship, theatre people and audiences, too. We were fed up with the threat of it" (qtd. in Curtin 154). The formerly prominent Society for the Suppression of Vice, which was still headed by John S. Sumner, had begun to lose its foothold on censorship in the theater (Curtin 154-155). Theatre artists and theatergoers were still concerned about stage censorship despite the dwindling of the society due to

the presence and threat of religious and political authorities. Drama-lovers and theatergoers alike knew

> "The Children's Hour" is an audacious masterpiece, find[ing themselves] faced by a problem. [They have] learned from the doxologies addressed to Miss Lillian Hellman's play that it deals with a situation distasteful to [them] and one that [they are] tempted to turn [their] back upon. [They are] familiar and even friendly with the seven-and-seventy deadly sins as committed in the theater, from murder to mayhem, and [they are] more than tolerant with their practitioners. But [they hesitate] when confronted by that outcast of the misdemeanors—a lady heroine whose affections are abnormally misdirected. (Hammond)

Shows that were deemed indecent, such as Mae West's *Pleasure Man* (1930) and *Frankie and Johnny* by John M. Kirkland (1930), faced legal ramifications for producing their plays. The subject of queerness in American theatre, specifically on Broadway, was thought of in several different ways: "[One] may look with pleasure upon a nauseating pansy in a Broadway musical revue, but he feels doubtful about a nice girl in a serious play whose confused tissues make her a tragic combination of male and female" (Hammond)—a direct reference to the common belief of the time that those who identified as queer were made up of both male and female qualities. However, some queer plays were still able to be produced or shown on Broadway stages, even if only for a few days, weeks, or months. In fact, thirteen such plays during the 1930s made it to Broadway's stages (Curtin 155).

One of those plays, *The Green Bay Tree* by Mordaunt Shairp, caught the eye of audiences as it only hinted at the inclusion of a gay character. Of course, nothing direct was mentioned in the dialogue or action of the play in order to adhere to the guidelines of New York's State penal code and the morals of the conservative community. However, it is strongly implied that the character of Dulcimer, keen in keeping Julian close to him, is, in some fashion, queer. Due to this speculation, Dulcimer is killed by Julian's father,

leaving Julian alone in the inheritance of Dulcimer's extravagant life. By ending the play with the queer character dead the object of Dulcimer's desire (Julian) was left to walk the world alone. This conclusion is very similar to another young playwright's debut story: Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour*.

Lillian Hellman

Lillian Hellman was born in New Orleans, Louisiana, on June 20th, 1905. Born to an adoring father, Max Hellman, and neurotic mother, Julia Newhouse Hellman, Lillian spent a lot of time with her two attentive aunts who owned a boarding school in the city which, perhaps, influenced her first play, *The Children's Hour*, about two women who own an all-girls boarding school. Splitting her adolescent life between New Orleans and New York City, due to her father's failing shoe business, Lillian experienced life in both the North and the South during the Jim Crow Era, which meant she experienced a conservative society and one that, for the times, was relatively progressive (Rollyson).

Beginning her career as an assistant to a publisher, Hellman followed her then-husband Arthur Kober to Hollywood where she became a reader at a movie studio, reading books that could possibly be turned into screenplays. After an amicable divorce from Kober in 1932, Hellman became closer to an acquaintance she met a few years earlier, Dashiell Hammett, who was a great force for Hellman's feisty nature. It was during their friendship, and eventual amorous relationship, that Hellman began to write *The Children's Hour*.

The Children's Hour

With a successful run of 691 performances from 1934-1936, Hellman's *The Children's Hour* premiered at a golden time. During this time in American theatre, audiences preferred serious, provocative dramas rather than sensationalized ones; for instance, Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal* (1928), Elmer Rice's *Street Scene* (1929), and Mordaunt Shairp's *The Green Bay Tree* were all popular plays during this time that dealt with controversial topics like Hellman's. Although the subject or theme of the play has been widely debated, there are two things that these debates seem to bounce between—the original intent found in Roughead's story (the morality of lying) or the focus of Martha's sexuality which Roughead was against as he focused on the fact that the girl's lie was untruthful:

> … *The Children's Hour* (1934), written, as she admitted, "with help from Hammett." Hammett, who began as a writer for the pulps, developed a lean, muscular style … and subjected Hellman to the same discipline that formed him … Hammett critiques a draft of *The Children's Hour*, informing Hellman that it is not good enough, and sends her back to the typewriter, which she hurls out of the window in frustration. Still, Hellman conquered Broadway with her first play, inspired by a case in William Roughead's *Bad Companions* that Hammett had suggested (a student's accusing her two female teachers of displaying inordinate affection toward each other). The case became the point of departure for *The Children's Hour* … the play proved so popular suggest[ing] that audiences who may have found lesbianism unfathomable or even "unnatural," to use Mary's word, understood that there were various forms of victimization and could empathize with the victim, regardless of her sexual orientation. (Dick)

Whether or not the focus of Hellman's play is on the lie itself or the lesbianism contained within the lie, it is clear to see that Hellman was able to get her audiences to connect and empathize with the characters "regardless of [their] sexual orientation" (Dick). This connection is important because the audience is then able to put aside any preconceptions and/or prejudices and focus on the lives of the characters and the world around them,

proposing that we, as an audience, should set aside our differences and recognize how we are all similar. Hellman is able to (nearly) normalize homosexuality – at least for a moment.

As briefly mentioned earlier, Hellman was inspired by another story which she found in a collection called *Bad Companions*. A true story written by William Roughead of a "scandalous 1810 Edinburgh libel case in which the charge of lesbianism, 'whispered' by a child to her grandmother, results in the closing of the boarding school, a court case that the women eventually win, and the two women's social and financial ruin" (Spencer 45) inspired the playwright to rewrite the historical case in her own words and versions of events. There are key differences between the actual libel case in Edinburgh and the one that Hellman writes in *The Children's Hour*. For instance, the actual court case is not shown within her play, merely discussed briefly by the characters in act three. Furthermore, the parental origins of Mary, our blackmailing student, are avoided by Hellman due to the "overtly racist implications of Roughead's text" (Spencer 46). More differences between Roughead's text include the outcome of the libel case (Hellman's characters lost while Roughead's won) and the intention behind both of the authors. Roughead acknowledged his interest in the Edinburgh case to "'reside in the fact that the charges were false'" while Hellman's interest dwells in the suggestion that "society should be condemned for its actions whether or not the accusation was true" (Spencer 46). Considering where Hellman obtained her source inspiration for writing *The Children's Hour* leads us into the intent behind her play: society is quick to condemn those deemed different than the status quo or "other," whether or not the accusation is true.

The playwright's original notes while writing this play show *The Children's Hour* to be Hellman's "most heavily revised of all her subsequent plays, with six full drafts completed before Herman Shumlin directed the first production in 1934 [see fig. 1]" (Spencer 45), and she continued to revise the script well after the first production's run of the show. The current acting edition (the only version that has been approved by the author for public performance) is based on Hellman's 1952 revision and production of the play, which was directed by the playwright herself. For the purposes of staying current with both the most recently updated edition and the version that Hellman was confident enough with to direct herself, the 1952 version, as previously stated, is the version which is being addressed here and is most commonly produced in theaters today.

Inevitably, Hellman could not see a way to adhere to the social laws (avoiding any positive representation of queer characters) and maintain the "good" reputation of Martha's character while keeping her alive (Spencer 48). Although she did worry about the social stigma attached to the subject of lesbianism, Hellman was more concerned with the structural problems of the play's end. She sought to make *The Children's Hour* "a compelling cause-effect" structure that would make the ending (Martha's suicide) both enlightening and inevitable in typically Aristotelian fashion" (Spencer 48). Therefore, the connection that Hellman focuses on is not between lesbianism and suicide but rather Mary's lie and all its negative consequences, specifically her lie about lesbianism. Subsequently, as Jenny S. Spencer states, Martha's confession is not necessarily a discovery of her sexuality but rather a questioning of it.

In 1934, Herman Shumlin produced and directed Hellman's debut play (see fig. 2, 3, 4, 5), bringing with it a whirlwind of reviews and receptions from theatergoers.

> The elation of Herman Shumlin… at the remarkable longevity of his play is tempered by the knowledge that the censors of Boston and Chicago have aped London's Lord Chamberlain in banning the play. Un[a]nimously hailed by New York reviewers as one of the most vital and interesting plays in many years, Shumlin is at a loss to understand the action of the censors cited in view of the unqualified endorsement the play has received from clergymen, reviewers, and the lay and professional public of New York. ("'The Children's Hour' Passes 500th Performance")

The 1934 production of "…one of the most widely discussed play of the generation" ("'The Children's Hour'—At English Theater"), *The Children's Hour,* and its subsequent film, which was directed by William Wyler, were treated by the director and actors as though Martha was, in fact, not queer but rather her and Karen were simply just good friends. Although the 1934 production did still include Martha's confession, the subsequent film removed all allusions or references to lesbianism. After being "denied to almost every community as a stage play… 'These Three' has forsaken its [*The Children's Hour*] lesbian theme to go on the screen a perfectly normal scandal" ("'These Three'") in the 1936 film version of the play (see fig.6, 7). Even though the first production had a successful two-year run, this is why Hellman kept making changes, and the acting version we use today has more of an emphasis on the relationship between Karen and Martha.

The Motion Picture Production Code (better known as the Hays Code) "was introduced in order to better control what people would see on-screen and who could tell those stories" (Lewis) and

> prohibited profanity, suggestive nudity, graphic or realistic violence, sexual persuasions and rape. It had rules around the use of crime, costume, dance, religion, national sentiment and morality. And according to the code – even within the limits of pure love or realistic love – certain facts have been regarded as outside the limits of safe presentation. (Lewis)

This included any sort of questioning of sexuality (male or female), sexual preference, or sexual activity. So, when Samuel Goldwyn "brought Authoress Hellman to Hollywood, gave her a typewriter, and told her to straighten [the play] out into a *normal*, *understandable* scandal" ("*These Three* from *Children's Hour*") it was to reach, not offend, the American middle class. Therefore, any reference to or inclusion of the relationship between Karen and Martha was not allowed. The movie was retitled *These Three*, and it re-envisioned both Mary's lie and the main relationship presented throughout the story. Instead of "…venomous, demoniac 14-year-old, Mary Tilford" (Harrison) telling her grandmother that she saw Karen and Martha engaged in "unnatural" activities with each other, Mary tells her that there was a love triangle between Karen, Martha, and Joe—Joe was desired by both women. In doing so, this film has completely removed Martha's confession scene, leaving no controversy about the reception or interpretation of Martha's discovery nor Karen's reaction. However, Martha's confession is, arguably, the pivotal moment of Hellman's play. Everything since her argument with Mrs. Mortar has led to this moment of realization and, consequently, her death. Therefore, removing it from the story creates an entirely new story than the original.

In 1952, *The Children's Hour* (see fig. 8), was deemed the "dramatic sensation of Broadway, both because of the new author's gift for taut, powerful storytelling and the lesbian aspects of her story… once again proved to be the most gripping play in Broadway, a sharp vivid piece of adult theatre that can still get an audience worked up and hold it fascinated" (Sheaffer). Hellman's focus shifted when she directed her own

play in 1952. She was more concerned with shifting the attention from Mary to the actual accusation of lesbianism. Hellman, in an interview with Louis Sheaffer, said

> I've altered about ten lines… made some little changes where I found the speeches kind of literary. I shortened one scene, lengthened another by a couple of speeches. I thought it over all Summer, about revising, and one day came to the conclusion that it might make it worse in some places. (Hellman)

Going into this production, Hellman, indeed, made some changes to the original 1934 script, considering the changes in the social and political milieu of the times and her intent shifting from the telling of the lie to the lie itself. In fact, she stated, "If I can accomplish what I am setting out to do in this production, the reviews will read quite differently. They will say the first act is very slow, the second act is lovely, and the third act is the play […] It's not about the liar, […] it's about the lie" (qtd. in Rollyson 336). Even in her 1952 edition of the play, Hellman admitted that her focus was not on Mary and the act of lying but rather on the lie itself – the accusation of lesbianism. Despite being rewritten and directed by Hellman herself, the reception of the 1952 production was not as well received as one might think. Louis Sheaffer, after interviewing Hellman before the production opened, said of the show:

> the weak spots are more evident today, the rather flat and literal moments, the occasional tendency to draw out a scene too long and squeeze its last drop of drama… has lost some of its tragic impact because the subject of homosexuality has become increasingly familiar in recent years. (Sheaffer)

The rising interest and familiarity of the subject of lesbianism, and homosexuality in general, paved the way for yet another adaptation of Hellman's play. Paying more attention to this increase in social and political climates, William Wyler attempted another film depicting the events of *The Children's Hour*.

The 1961 film (see fig. 9, 10) starring Audrey Hepburn (Karen) and Shirley MacLaine (Martha) was more loyal to the playwright's words in the 1952 rewrite of the

play than the 1936 film version was to the 1934 script. In fact, the 1961 film provides a more empathetic and less homophobic representation of Martha's confession to Karen (see fig. 11, 12) than in previous iterations. First and foremost, this film stays true to the script (Hellman's 1952 version) which gave audiences "…a highly dramatic film that inspects a social problem NOT for exploitation and sensationalism BUT—for once—for critical analysis and understanding" (Holland) – the text speaks for itself, despite any other intentions or interpretations. This adaptation was monumental because it marked "the first time sex deviation has been treated in a major Hollywood film. It is done with maturity, but some movie-goers may still feel that such themes have no place in the entertainment films. I [Bob Thomas] would be inclined to agree with them" (Thomas). Thomas' viewpoint mimicked the majority of society's feelings at the time. Yet, despite the objection to the play's discussion of lesbianism, Wyler's film seems to make an impact:

> …The reason for reverting back to the original play title is that all newspaper stories which have appeared since the start of filming several weeks ago have noted that the picture is based on Miss Hellman's play, indicating an overwhelming acceptance and interest in the title "The Children's Hour". ("The Children's Hour' Final Title")

Despite the film's greatness, the "beautifully acted" portrayals of Hellman's characters, and the belief that this film should be "appreciated by adults as an intelligent exercise in human emotion," the critics' and audiences' seemingly single objection to the story is the lesbianism (Thomas).

Throughout her life, Hellman insisted that her play "was not, and never was, about lesbianism" (Spencer 52). This insistence causes an issue with those who wish to present this as a play about lesbians or a look at queer history. However, the original

audiences (those in 1934) responded mostly to the lesbian content as opposed to what Hellman deemed her intent was—the morality about a lie and its consequences. Therefore, Hellman redirected her focus from Mary and her lie to the relationship between Martha and Karen which resulted in a more thorough acknowledgement of lesbian issues and history. As Spencer states, “The political climate that made *The Children’s Hour* an appropriate choice for Broadway revival in 1952 also guaranteed that audiences would have a different experience of the play than was possible in 1934” (52). In acknowledging the audiences’ perception changing from 1934 to 1952, the same can be said for an audience who would see the show today in 2022. The history of the queer community and the socio-political associations with the queer community will, inevitably, produce new meanings and interpretations gained from an analysis and theoretical future productions.

CHAPTER TWO:

Analysis of Actor's Edition (1952)

Several critics and academics have long discussed a pivotal play by Lillian Hellman: *The Children's Hour*. People have examined the social contributions, political milieu, and the history of and surrounding *The Children's Hour*, but often ignore the text itself. In fact, some argue that "textual meaning is an excess that can be safely removed from the play" (Cocks 375). However, one cannot analyze the intention, impact, or reception of the play without dissecting and discussing the text itself. While Neil Cocks proposes the idea that textual meaning can be removed from the play, he also references Jenny S. Spencer's critique, particularly her argument that "historical research into this play amply demonstrates that 'meaning' is not simply 'there' to be discovered but is something to be constructed from the materials at hand" (60). Along with her completely accurate stance that historical research can and should be applied to dramatic literature (if not all literature), Spencer is also correct in stating that meaning is not something that is inherent or discoverable—it must be interpreted based on the historical, social, and political milieu that surrounds the play. In fact, James Berlin, in his essay, "Contemporary Composition: The Major Pedagogical Theories," supports this belief that truth is "a relation to be created" (244), that is observed and then interpreted based on one's own personal experience, knowledge, desires, etc. Therefore, textual meaning should not be removed from the play, but should rather be observed and interpreted through historical, social, and cultural backgrounds in order to determine a truth: "the poet's aim must be judged… by the art of the poem itself" (qtd. in Wimsatt and

Beardsley 1233). When approaching a dramatic text, the first thing one must do is judge the text itself. Then one must work their way outward, analyzing the social, political, and economic milieu of the world of the play, followed by the playwright's information, historical background, and cultural relevance to the world during which it is being analyzed or performed. For the purposes of this thesis, one must start with "the poem itself" (qtd. in Wimsatt and Beardsley 1233)—the text.

Amongst these discussions is the popular debate on what Hellman's intent was versus how it has been repeatedly perceived. Spencer, once again, in her essay, "Sex, Lies, and Revisions: Historicizing Hellman's *The Children's Hour*," state that

> Although Hellman insisted throughout her life that her play was not, and never was, about lesbianism, she could not ignore the response of the original audiences [and the subsequent adaptations and audiences] to its lesbian content; her defensive stance on the subject was one consequence of a press that talked of little else. (52)

So, while theatre artists should not and cannot ignore Hellman's intent for the play—"how a malicious lie…can wreck lives" (Johnson)—the reception and perceived intent (lesbianism) also cannot be ignored. Later in Spencer's essay, she quotes Hellman herself saying "if I can accomplish what I am setting out to do in this production, the reviews will read quite differently. They will say the first act is very slow, the second act is lovely, and the third act is the play […]" (qtd. in Rollyson 336). Therefore, Hellman's play is sort of unbalanced. She has two acts full of exposition, but the third act is the bulk of the play—where her intent lies. Hellman herself says that her intent is "about the lie", not "about the liar [Mary]" (qtd. in Rollyson 336) nor in the act of lying, which could be the reason why Mary is not seen at all in the third act. Now, whether or not Hellman further means the consequences of the lie or the nature of the lie (lesbianism) is up to

interpretation. In arguing the playwright's intent does not align with the perceived intent garnered from the text, some moments throughout *The Children's Hour* must be examined.

The Children's Hour, an already ironic title considering the play's content, opens on a scene within the Wright-Dobie School – an all-girl school in Lancet ran by teachers, Martha Dobie and Karen Wright. All of the girls (Peggy, Evelyn, Rosalie, etc.), sans Mary Tilford, are gathered around in the midst of various tasks. Mrs. Mortar, Martha Dobie's aunt and a fellow teacher at the school, sits at the helm of the children, guiding them in a reading of William Shakespeare's play *Antony and Cleopatra*. This is a very interesting parallel presented immediately within Hellman's play. In Shakespeare's classic, Antony is having an affair with Cleopatra (much like the supposed relationship between Karen and Martha). Antony is set to marry Caesar's sister, Octavia—as Joe is set to marry Karen. However, Cleopatra finds out about the upcoming nuptials and becomes jealous; this is reminiscent of Martha's reaction towards the news of Karen's impending marriage to Joe.

In the 1934 edition of Hellman's play, the playwright has the girls reading from Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, not *Antony and Cleopatra*. In this 1934 version, Hellman has Peggy reading a monologue of Portia's, specifically her monologue pleading for mercy. In their essay, "Making Something Out of Nothing: Lesbianism as Liberating Fantasy in *The Children's Hour*," Merce Cuenca and Maria Isabel Seguro mention a great omission on Hellman's part from Portia's famous speech: "in the course of justice, none of us, /Should see salvation" (qtd. in Cuenca and Seguro 120-121). The omission of these words from the reenactment in Hellman's play should alert anyone familiar with

Shakespeare's work to the conclusion of her story. Martha does not see redemption, which is marked by her death and the play's conclusion. However, with the omission of Portia's speech and the rest of the recitation from *Merchant of Venice* and the addition of lines from *Antony and Cleopatra*, Hellman is changing the focus of her play. Instead of focusing on mercy and redemption as seen through the inclusion of *Merchant of Venice*, Hellman is moving the focus to the love story between Martha, Karen, and Joe which is similar to Shakespeare's story of Cleopatra, Octavia, and Antony.

In the midst of Peggy reading for Cleopatra during a scene in which she is speaking of her love for Antony while holding an asp, Mary Tilford sneaks in late. It is fitting that Hellman provides Mary's entrance in this moment when Peggy reads, "The stroke of death is as a lover's pinch, which hurts, and is desir'd" (9) because Mary ends up being the cause of a sort of death for Martha and Karen – death of their career, their reputation, Karen's engagement, and the women's friendship. The truth is "desir'd" by Martha but ends up hurting Karen and, ultimately, both of their lives. Lines of Cleopatra's monologue are intermittingly interrupted by the girls. However, Hellman makes it a point to have Peggy say Cleopatra's line, "He'll make demand of her, and spend that kiss which is my heaven to have" (10). This foreshadows the end of the play by aligning Antony with Joe, Karen with Octavia, and Martha with Cleopatra. The main difference between the comparison is that Martha's heaven is kissing Karen, not Joe.

In presenting material from Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, Hellman is doing something similar to the bard himself – a play within a play. For instance, in *Hamlet*, Shakespeare shows the prince of Denmark hiring a traveling troupe of actors to perform a play which he has written in order to gain insight into his uncle's guilty

conscience regarding his murder of his own brother. In *The Children's Hour*, Hellman uses the scene from *Antony and Cleopatra* to reveal something to her audience: what we need to be paying attention to as the play unfolds. This scene also sets up Mary's character quite well, possibly portraying her as the asp that kills Cleopatra or, more specifically, the truth that causes Martha's suicide. The characters stop the scene from *Antony and Cleopatra* with the line, "Peace, peace, dost thou not see my baby at my breast—" (10). Ending the play-within-the-play here implies that this line carries importance. Both Karen and Martha are seeking peace by the end of *The Children's Hour*, and maybe, like Cleopatra, Martha believes peace to be death. However, the death of Cleopatra is not shown here, leaving the conclusion of Hellman's play unconfirmed by those not familiar with the bard's original work. This also shows that perhaps Hellman had different intentions for Martha's character other than her suicide, lending an interpretation to look closely at how Hellman treats the queer, intimate moments between Karen and Martha (and maybe other characters) throughout the play.

After the reading's interruption, Mary Tilford is seen sneaking back into the room, this time clutching a handful of wildflowers as she is addressed by Mrs. Mortar. It is this moment the audience sees Mary spin one of her elaborate tales – a trait that becomes synonymous with her character. Mary states that she has brought the flowers for Mrs. Mortar and that is why she was late to the elocution hour. Once Mrs. Mortar sends Mary off to find a vase for the flowers, Karen Wright, one of the owners of the Wright-Dobie school, walks into the room. Immediately, we see how the girls interact with Karen as someone who they look up to and respect. Upon Mary's return with the flowers, Karen questions the girl as to where she acquired them. This shows the readers and audience

members that the relationship between Mary and Karen is one of distrust and frustration, especially once Karen reveals that Mary obtained the flowers "[from] the garbage can this morning" (13) rather than from the fields as the girl tells Mrs. Mortar.

In establishing Mary's character as a liar, the focus of the play becomes less about the act of lying; since it is a common occurrence, there is no importance to yet another lie. The focus becomes more about the content of the lie that is yet to come. This scene, as well as the one that follows—in which Mary pretends to faint, causing Karen to call Joe—, establishes that Mary has a history of lying; it has become a personality trait for her rather than something she does on occasion. In his essay, "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense," Friedrich Nietzsche states: "…the liar uses the valid tokens of designation—words—to make the unreal appear to be real…[and] misuses the established conventions by arbitrarily switching or even inverting the names for things" (Nietzsche 766). As the reader can see in this scene, Mary uses pretty words to persuade Mrs. Mortar of her lie. It can also be seen in the scene where Mary uses words to make her grandmother believe that Martha and Karen's relationship is not what it appears to be. Nietzsche goes on to say that "if [the liar] does this in a manner that is selfish and otherwise harmful, society will no longer trust [them] and therefore exclude [them] from its rank" (Nietzsche 766). Mary's lies have been selfish in their intent, so she is punished for those lies. Mary's punishment is, rightfully, intense considering her habit of constantly behaving in this manner. However, Mary believes, as a child does, that this punishment is unfair and harsh: "…I get punished for every little thing I do" (15). Her ultimate lie, which will be addressed shortly, is, presumably, also punished; however, the audience does not see this punishment. Hellman's focus on the lie itself as opposed to

Mary is, in a sense, a sort of exclusion – excluding her from the spotlight which is seen in the absence of Mary from act three.

This next scene between Martha and Karen is important because it is the first time we see the two women interacting with each other. Both of the women are not bustling around helping or teaching the girls, and neither seems to be preoccupied. Once the two women are onstage, everything seems to settle down, almost as though two friends or lovers are sitting down to dinner to talk about their day; it is easy and familiar as indicated by the stage directions inserted in the text: Karen sits down as

> MARTHA. (*Sits in chair R. of desk*.) And, please God, Grandma would believe her and take her away from here. (*Karen get cigarettes from desk drawer, offers one to Martha.*)
>
> KAREN. No. But we ought to do something.
>
> MARTHA. (*Takes cigarette*.) How about having a talk with Mrs. Tilford?
>
> KAREN. (*Smiling*.) You want to do it?
>
> MARTHA. (*Shakes head*.) No. (16)

The two go about gossiping and laughing before discussing what to do with Mary. Martha brings up Joe and seeing what his opinion is when it comes to dealing with Mary. It is interesting that Martha is the one to bring Joe up in this moment. Every other time Joe is brought into the conversation, she seems to be dismissive and avoidant of him – not cruelly, but rather dejectedly. The two begin discussing the need to send Mrs. Mortar on her way as to not get stuck with her there. However, the conversation turns back to Joe as Martha remarks that "he was already on his way. Isn't he always on his way over here" (17). Martha says this in a way that is usually seen in a child who does not seem to want to do what is required of them – as though it is an inconvenience.

KAREN. Well, I am going to marry him. I'm glad he wants to see me.

MARTHA. (*Slowly*.) You haven't talked about marriage… I mean, have you and Joe decided on—?

KAREN. Yes. We'll get married as soon as the term is over. We'll be out of debt by then and the school will be paying for itself. And Joe's found a house. We'll all go and look at it tomorrow.

MARTHA. So soon? Then we won't be taking our vacation together?

KAREN. Of course we will. The three of us.

MARTHA. I had taken for granted, I guess, that we were going to the lake, like we always do, just the two of us.

KAREN. Now there'll be three of us. That'll be fun, too.

MARTHA. Why haven't you told me this before?

KAREN. I'm not telling you anything we haven't talked about before.

MARTHA. You never told me that it was to be so soon. You never told me about a house or—

KAREN. We only decided the other night. (17-18)

This particular part of the scene is the first instance in which we see Martha's resistance to Karen's relationship with Joe. She seems fine enough with Joe, especially a few scenes later, but Karen seems to be mourning her friendship with Karen or maybe even the loss of a potential romantic relationship with her. If she continued to have Karen all to herself, without a man weaving his way into their lives, then maybe it would have been enough for Martha – a life with just her and Karen.

Karen begins to realize that Martha is upset at the news of her impending nuptials with Joe and tries to divert the conversation back to the school and the children. However, Martha is not ready to drop the conversation just yet.

KAREN. (*Laughs*.) It's a big day for the school. I guess we're good teachers. Rosalie has finally put an "I" in could.

MARTHA. (*Rises, crosses R. below sofa to below R. end of sofa. In a dull, bitter tone*.) You really are going to leave, aren't you?...

KAREN. (*Puts pencil down, rises. Gently*.) …You haven't listened to a word I've

> said. You are not going on alone. You talk as if you had never taken the marriage very seriously.
>
> MARTHA. I don't mean that, but it's so— (18)

Martha is painfully "aware of the incompatibilities between marriage and a successful professional life" (Cuenca and Seguro 118), articulating the, at the time, popular idea of the twentieth-century woman. This conversation between Karen and Martha is very telling of their relationship but also of Martha's feelings toward Karen. Martha feels as though she will lose the intensity of her friendship with Karen once she marries Joe. Martha seems to think that she will lose Karen altogether; perhaps she is afraid to lose the deep connection and the possibility of more than just friendship with Karen.

If Hellman's focus is on the morality of lying, as opposed to lesbianism, then why does Hellman include an obvious, insistent denial from Martha towards the couple quickly followed by the argument between Mrs. Mortar and Martha? In this argument, Martha treats Mrs. Mortar the same as Karen treats Mary earlier in act one.

> Karen and Martha decide that [Mrs. Mortar] must be relieved of her teaching duties, and literally thrown out of school. Their decision is just, for Mortar is a nuisance and an incompetent, yet they do not consider for a moment the effect such a dismissal may have on an old woman whose life has been the school. (Armato 445)

Although Armato makes a good connection to the parallel of Mary and Mrs. Mortar, the assumption that they are the same is exaggerated. Mary is a child, still learning and making her way in the world. Mrs. Mortar is a grown woman who should be more aware of her surroundings, her impact on those around her, and should respond in a more mature way than Mary does. Armato makes this connection in order to justify the outcome for Martha and Karen and emphasize that Hellman's play is about "the malice of revenge" and extending "mercy" (Armato 445-446). While the discussion of justice and

mercy is a valid, thought-provoking discussion, it ignores the larger picture. In tandem with Karen and Martha's discussion, the following argument between Martha and her aunt must be examined too. The inclusion of the fight between Mrs. Mortar and Martha, in which the women fight about how unnatural Martha's jealousy towards Joe is, shows that Hellman did want to put, at least, some focus on the subject of lesbianism. Mary could have made up any lie in order to get her grandmother to withdraw her from school or, if one believes Mary to be more nefarious than that, ruin the lives of Karen and Martha. Hellman chose to include this argument between Martha and her aunt in order to provide Mary with a specific lie regarding Martha's sexuality.

If the focus of the play surrounds the queerness of Mary's lie rather than the act of lying, then it is pertinent to discuss the content of Mrs. Mortar's argument with Martha. Their argument starts off with Mrs. Mortar playing the victim; "I say it was a deliberate snub. Isn't it natural that the child should have me with her? Isn't it natural that an older woman should be present at a physical examination?" (19). Martha's discontent with her aunt's presence and her nonstop vanity is evident in her response: "What are you talking about? Why in the name of heaven should you be with her?" (19). Mrs. Mortar then continues on her rant about how important she was when she worked in the theatre, and she dislikes being snubbed; even more so, she dislikes Martha's unwillingness to do anything about it. This conversation between the two becomes an argument about Mrs. Mortar's place in the school. Mrs. Mortar turns her anger and disdain to Martha, stating, "I told you at the beginning you shouldn't have bought a place like this. Burying yourself on a farm! Meeting no men! You'll regret it" (20). This is the first time Martha's single status has been brought up in discussion. During this time, there is this ideal or belief of a

“new woman” (Cuenca and Seguro 118) or the “myth of woman” (Beauvoir 1265).

Lillian Faderman, in her work *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers* (1992), explains

> …as the late nineteenth-century feminist movement grew in strength and its potential to overthrow the old sex roles, it was not too long before feminism itself was also equated with sexual inversion and many women of the middle class came to be suspected of anomaly, since as feminists they acted in ways inappropriate to their gender, desiring to get an education, for example, or work in a challenging, lucrative profession. (46)

So, Martha and Karen are both anomalies having established their own business (the school) without the aid of any man. However, Karen is the only one seen as being normal or escaping the lonely life of a feminist by entering a relationship with Joe. Whereas Martha has not made any romantic connection with a man, so she is struggling to subvert this idea of the “female invert” (Cuenca and Seguro 119). The idea of the invert “focused on ideas of gender rather than sexual identity” (Bauer 87). Therefore, this idea of an “invert” is connected to the association of feminists to lesbianism. Those who were considered feminists were assumed to also be lesbians. This idea of feminist and the “new woman” that dominated society during Hellman’s time is also discussed in Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*.

In chapter eleven of *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir discusses the myth of woman and the opposing idea of the “Eternal Feminine” (Beauvoir 1265). She states:

> …woman is other than man, and this alterity is directly felt in desire, the embrace, love; but the real relation is one of reciprocity; as such it gives rise to authentic drama. Through eroticism, love, friendship, and their alternatives, deception, hate, rivalry, the relation is a struggle between conscious beings each of whom wishes to be essential, it is the mutual recognition of free beings who confirm one another’s freedom, it is the vague transition from aversion to participation. (Beauvoir 1265-66)

In saying this, Beauvoir is saying that otherness is felt in heterosexual romantic relationships, but the “real relation is one of reciprocity,” such as Karen and Martha’s

relationship considering it "gives rise to authentic drama." Furthermore, Karen and Martha confirm each other's freedom which leads to this transition of aversion (Martha and Karen's vehement denial of Mary's accusation) to participation (Martha's confession and Karen's inevitable acceptance).

Once Martha really dives into the truth of the matter—her and Karen's wish for Mrs. Mortar to leave—Mrs. Mortar decides to throw a wrench into the argument, furthering tearing into Martha.

> MRS. MORTAR. (*Crosses D. R.*) Never mind. I should have known better. You always take your spite out on me.
> MARTHA. Spite? (*Crosses up R. of desk to above desk. Impatiently*.) Oh, don't let's have any more of this today. I'm tired. I've been working since six o'clock this morning.
> MRS. MORTAR. Any day that he's in the house is a bad day. (21)

Once again, we have further confirmation of Martha's feelings toward Joe. We know that Martha has a bad day every time he comes to the house which, we know from Karen and Martha's previous conversation, appears to be every day.

> MARTHA. (*Crosses to C.*) When who is in the house?
>
> MRS. MORTAR. (*Crosses up to R. of sofa*.) Don't think you're fooling me, young lady. I wasn't born yesterday. And I didn't meet you last month… I know what I know. Every time that man comes into this house, you're in a bad humor. (*Crosses L. upstage of Martha to above chair R. of desk*.) It seems like you just can't stand the idea of them being together. God knows what you'll do when they get married. You're jealous, that's what it is. (21-22)

This whole scene between Martha and Mrs. Mortar has been done without the mention of Joe's name. Not once has Mrs. Mortar mentioned the "he" to whom she is referring, and not once did Martha acknowledge who this "he" is even though both women know exactly whom they are discussing.

As the scene continues, Mrs. Mortar continues harping on Martha's disdain towards Joe, driving Martha further and further towards the climax of the argument. The "he" contained within their argument is finally mentioned out loud by name, proving that Martha knew exactly who Mrs. Mortar was talking about in her verbal attack—Joe. This is an important moment because this is where we see Martha's will begin to falter. She has put up this barrier when it comes to Joe and Karen's relationship, but Mrs. Mortar seems to be picking away at it bit by bit. Furthermore, this scene between Martha and Mrs. Mortar shows the truth of Mrs. Mortar's accusations. Margaret Speer, in her essay "A Schoolhouse of Their Own," talks about the specific words or phrases used throughout the women's discussion:

> That which occupies Martha's "unnatural" interest (aside from Karen) is the school, which she has raised with Karen in place of children. The other element of Mrs. Mortar's accusation of unnaturalness is Martha's decision to work "every night," implicitly instead of what a "healthy woman" ought to do with her nights, for the sake of some new clothes. Again, given that words meaning "sex between women" are never spoken, the facts we are offered—Martha's choice to support herself, making of childcare a paltry independence rather than engaging in its unpaid version as a mother herself—come to fill the function of the accusation; they become what makes her a lesbian. (Speer 97)

In this moment, Speer is acknowledging the actions of Martha and the fact that those actions set her apart from other women, bringing back this idea of the "new woman" or the belief that all feminists are, in essence, lesbians. This acknowledgment springboards the argument being made in this paper—that Hellman intentionally put in characteristics and vocabulary in order to influence her audience towards the subject of lesbianism.

The next exchange between the two women, before being interrupted by some nosy girls, can be regarded as the inciting incident of the play. This moment sets into motion Mary's nasty plan that eventually leads to the downfall of everyone involved.

> MRS. MORTAR. (*Crosses to Martha*.) You've always had a jealous and possessive nature. Even as a child. (*Martha turns away*.) If you had a friend, you always got mad if she liked anybody else. That's what's happening now. And it's unnatural. Just as unnatural as it can be. I say you need a man of your own, and—
>
> MARTHA. (*Turns to Mrs. Mortar*.) The sooner you get out of here, the better. You are making me sick and I won't stand for you any longer. I want you to leave. And now. I don't wish any delay about it. (22)

In this fight, Mrs. Mortar brings up the "abnormal" way that Martha has treated and/or acted around her female friends throughout her life, implying that Martha has "unnatural" feelings towards Karen. Through this argument between Martha and Mrs. Mortar, the audience sees information that is not known to anyone besides the two women, at least for now. Since the audience now knows that there is suspicion around Martha's character being queer, it allows the audience to further gain insight into the relationship between Martha and Karen shown in the previous scene when Martha becomes irritated by Karen's mention of marriage to Joe. We are seeing Martha's reactions and feelings for Karen, even though the other characters may not yet see it—providing a sense of dramatic irony which allows to audience to speculate as to what the truth is regarding Martha's feelings for Karen. It is at this moment that the two women hear a sound outside the closed door of the room. They find Peggy and Evelyn eavesdropping on their conversation, and, in true Mrs. Mortar fashion, the woman lets them know that "eavesdropping is something ladies just don't do" (22). This leads to a complication later in act one when Mary learns of what the two girls overheard.

In act two, Mary is shown arriving to her grandmother's where she tells her ultimate lie about Martha and Karen's relationship. Mrs. Tilford's reaction and the confrontation that follows provide context for the lie's consequences which are seen later in act three. The scene where Mary begins to weave her lie by appealing to words,

phrases, and context which would set off alarms for Mrs. Tilford, is crucial in further determining Hellman's intent and what the text seems to focus on throughout the play. In particular, it is the absence of the accusation being heard verbally that supports the belief that *The Children's Hour* is about lesbianism. As previously discussed in chapter one, any discussion of or relating to sexual activity or sexual preference is frowned upon in theaters during this time. Therefore, the audience does not hear the exact accusation because of this censorship within the theater, further proving that Hellman's use of buzzwords—"unnatural," "abnormal," "funny"—supports the idea that her play is focused on the subject of lesbianism, not the morality of lying.

In the beginning of act two, Mary arrives at her grandmother's house and is greeted by the maid, Agatha, who knows something terrible is afoot with Mary. Once her grandmother enters the room, Mary decides to put on an act of innocence, claiming that she was "awful homesick" (34). Mary catches her up on the day's activities, embellishing the parts that will gain her sympathy and those that make Karen and Martha look mean. Mary then goads her grandmother by dropping a hint at something that was done, but once her grandmother does not take the bait, she changes tactics and decides to tell her upfront.

> MARY. I can't tell you.
>
> MRS. TILFORD. Why?
>
> MARY. (*Sulkily*.) Because you're just going to take their part.
>
> MRS. TILFORD. (*A little annoyed*.) Very well. Now run upstairs and get ready for dinner.
>
> MARY. It was—it was all about Miss Dobie and Mrs. Mortar. They were talking awful things, and Peggy and Evelyn heard them and Miss Dobie found out, and then they made us move our rooms.
>
> MRS. TILFORD. What has that to do with you? I don't understand what you're

talking about.

MARY. They made us move our rooms. They said we couldn't be together anymore. And they have a good reason. They're afraid to have us near them, that's what it is, and they're taking it out on me. They're scared of you. (37)

Mary preys on her grandmother's desire to fit in and do what is best for Mary by saying that Karen and Martha are scared of Mrs. Tilford finding out about this so-called big secret they are keeping from everyone. Mrs. Tilford tries to dismiss it as unimportant, that Mary should not be listening in on such conversations. However, Mary digs her heels in and further fabricates her elaborate lie.

MRS. TILFORD. There's nothing wrong with people having secrets.

MARY. But they've got funny ones. Peggy and Evelyn heard Mrs. Mortar telling Miss Dobie that she was jealous of Miss Wright marrying Cousin Joe.

MRS. TILFORD. You shouldn't repeat things like that. It means nothing and—

MARY. She said it was unnatural for a girl to feel that way. (*Rises, crosses up around L. end of love seat and R. to R. of love seat*.) That's what she said, Grandma. (*Mrs. Tilford turns her head*.) I'm just telling you what she said. She said there was something funny about it, and that Miss Dobie had always been like that, even when she was a little girl and that it was unnatural.

MRS. TILFORD. Stop using that silly word, Mary. (38)

Mary's repeated use of the word "unnatural" is intentional on Hellman's part. Even without the direct knowledge of what Mary has told Mrs. Tilford, we do know that the child is using vocabulary that was heard during the fight between Mrs. Mortar and Martha—unnatural, "a term used by turn-of-the-century sexologists to refer to lesbianism" (Cuenca and Seguro 118)—and we have knowledge that Mary and the girls have access to a sexually explicit book *Mademoiselle de Maupin* by Theophile Gautier in which a woman uses her beauty to captivate a young poet and, disguised as a man, his mistress. Hellman is making the choice to have Mary stick to the word "unnatural"

because she knows that Mrs. Tilford and the audience watching will know exactly what Mary is talking about without actually saying the words. Mrs. Tilford is annoyed by Mary's exaggeration of events. It seems as though Mrs. Tilford knows that Mary is putting on a show, and she wants her to just be done with it so they can go about their evening. However, once Mary knows that she is losing her grandmother's attention, she knows that she must hurry and complete her lie.

> MARY. …I can't say it out loud.
>
> MRS. TILFORD. There couldn't possibly be anything you couldn't say out loud. Now either tell me what's worrying you, or be still.
>
> MARY. Well, a lot of things I don't understand. But it's awful, and sometimes they fight and then they make up, and Miss Dobie cries and Miss Wright gets mad, and they make up again, and there are funny noises and we get scared. (39)

Mary knows exactly what she is doing. She is playing the innocent little girl who is unaware of the things going down in the women's room. Everything that she is saying is, at least to the knowledge of the audience, fabricated.

> MRS. TILFORD. Noises? I suppose you girls have a happy time imagining a murder.
>
> MARY. And we've seen things, too. Funny things. (*Sees the impatience of Mrs. Tilford.*) I'd tell you, but I got to whisper it.
>
> MRS. TILFORD. Why must you whisper it?
>
> MARY. I don't know. I just got to. (*Leans over back of Mrs. Tilford's chair and begins whispering. At first the whisper is slow and hesitant, but it gradually works itself up to fast, excited talking. In the middle of it, Mrs. Tilford stops her*.)
>
> MRS. TILFORD. (*Trembling*.) What are you saying? (*Without answering Mary goes back to the whispering until the older woman takes her by the shoulders and turns her around to state in her face.*) I don't believe you know what you're saying, Mary! Are you telling me the truth? (*Mary whispers again briefly.*) …Have you told me the truth?
>
> MARY. I swear on the grave of my father. Please don't send me back—
>
> MRS. TILFORD. No, you won't have to go back. (39-40)

Mary exaggerates the details and completely fabricates other events in order to make her grandmother believe that Karen and Martha are in a romantic and sexual relationship. This fabrication causes Mrs. Tilford phones Joe and the mothers of the other girls at the school. Some scholars and theatre artists would argue that this is the inciting incident because it is Mary's lie and her grandmother's belief that begins the troubles for Karen and Martha. However, this lie would not have been fabricated had the earlier argument between Martha and Mrs. Mortar not taken place. Therefore, this moment is a direct result of that argument.

One of the least talked about scenes in critical studies and essays on *The Children's Hour*, surrounds the confrontation between Martha, Karen, and Joe against Mrs. Tilford; scholars tend to gloss over this part in their analysis. It is unsure why scholars tend to gloss over this scene, but maybe it is because it does not seem important – at least on the surface. Although this is just a typical scene in which Karen and Martha deny the allegations, it is also very important to take this scene into consideration especially when analyzing the placement of the scene and its implications. Act two ends on the two schoolteachers, Martha and Karen, vehemently denying the allegations set forth by Mary and, in turn, Mrs. Tilford. Also, within this scene, the audience is able to see how Joe reacts to the news, showing that he is loyal to both Karen and Martha as he refuses to accept the accusation. However, immediately following this scene, in the third act, Joe is shown conversing with Karen who tells him to leave. Karen immediately rejects Joe's loyalty out of fear of bringing him down with him – or perhaps because she is beginning to realize her truth. Furthermore, after Martha's insistent denial in act two—

her protests being the loudest—it is odd to see Martha come to admit those feelings closely following the end of that scene, directly after Karen tells Joe to leave.

One potential reason Hellman put these two scenes so close together could be to show the progression of time—Martha having time to think about Mary's lie and the consequences she has had to endure has given her time to realize her "unacknowledged desire [which] is her fatal flaw[, and] brings on the tragedy and provides the 'cause' and 'possible justice' of her death" (Titus 223). Or maybe it is simply because, like most closeted queer people today, Martha was not ready to admit to the allegations in full during the scene in act two because part of herself was saying they were not true – she did not, technically, have a sexual relationship with Karen. However, another part of her knew that she wanted to, so she had to deny the allegations to keep that part of herself hidden. To find out a deeper reason for the dramatic shift in Martha's character, one must continue to examine the text itself.

Mrs. Tilford decides to tell Joe Cardin about the so-called "unnatural" relationship between Karen and Martha. Now, it has been acknowledged that the relationship of Joe Cardin and Karen Wright has been in opposition to every other character/relationship throughout the play: "the women in the play—schoolmates, aunts, and grandmothers—together surround the one heterosexual couple… In this context, Karen's last name seems suggestive. She is Karen 'Right' surrounded by all the 'wrong' who seek to disrupt and finally succeed in destroying her 'right' relationship" (Titus 221). Evidence of this suggestion is seen in the confrontation between Mrs. Tilford and Joe:

> JOE. What did you call me here for?
>
> MRS. TILFORD. (*Turns to [Joe]*.) You must not marry Karen.

JOE. (*Shocked, grins*.) Why must I not marry Karen? (*Then very sharply, rises, putting drink on table*.) What are you talking about? Why must I not marry Karen?

MRS. TILFORD. Because there's something wrong with Karen—something horrible. (46)

At first, Joe is defiant and loyal to Karen and their relationship; he is even protective of Martha and her reputation. He demands to be told what is going on. As soon as Karen says what Mrs. Tilford has spread amongst the parents, "that Martha and [Karen] have been—been lovers" (47), Joe is taken aback by the incredulous and "sick" (47) news. Before now, Joe and Karen's relationship had not been brought into question, and nothing threatened the couple. However, this is the moment in which Joe starts questioning not only his relationship but also his reputation, his association with the two women and the school, and, eventually, his own opinions regarding the closeness of Karen and Martha. Furthermore, it can be inferred that this is the true moment we see the supposed consequences of lesbianism—the ruining of a "normal" and happy heterosexual relationship. Hellman's focus on the straight couple inadvertently shines light on the characters labeled "other" such as Martha.

In the midst of the confrontation between Martha, Karen, Joe, and Mrs. Tilford, there are some key moments that need to be addressed. For instance, Martha tells Mrs. Tilford that she is being careless with their lives, that they are "human beings" (48). Mrs. Tilford retorts saying that "[they've] been playing with a lot of children's lives; and that is why [she] stopped [them]" (48). This is reminiscent not only of the play's title, but also the not-so-modern-day concern about how queer media influences children to this day. Mrs. Tilford goes further to say that she has done "what [she] had to do. What they are may possibly be their own business. It comes a great deal more than that when children

are concerned in it" (48). This could be a reference to the belief that children should not be exposed to certain modes of thinking during this time (and still to this day).

In fact, one of the main modern-day events that comes to mind when analyzing this particular scene of Hellman's play is Florida's "Don't Say Gay" bill or Florida's HB-1557 in which primary education instructors (in grades kindergarten to grade three) are prohibited from classroom instruction on or relating to sexual orientation or gender identity. It also prohibits any instruction on sexual orientation or gender identity in any grade that is deemed "not age appropriate or developmentally appropriate for students" (Florida House of Representatives) and prohibits schools from restricting parental access to their student's education and health records. Mrs. Tilford's concern, one could argue, is not for the children but rather due to the fact that she does not "understand it and [does not] want any part of it" (49).

The climax of *The Children's Hour* does not occur until act three; in fact, it is not until thirteen pages into the act (four pages away from the end of the play) that we see the dramatic conflict reach a peak. Having been through a slander trial and dealing with the outcome of losing said trial a "couple of weeks" (61) ago, Martha and Karen find themselves in an empty, cold school by themselves. As the play moves closer to the climax, the audience is reintroduced to Mrs. Mortar. In their conversation, there is a specific part that sounds out more than the rest:

> MARTHA. (*Quietly*.) Yes, they've changed. (*To Mrs. Mortar, who backs away L*.) Listen to me tell you what you are pretending not to know: Karen Wright and Martha Dobie brought a suit for slander against a woman called Tilford—
>
> MRS. MORTAR. (*Delighted she can interrupt*.) Oh, I meant to tell you. She's outside in a car. I saw her as I got out of my taxi. She called to me. Imagine that. She's right up the road—Imagine that, calling to me— (60)

Mrs. Mortar makes a comment saying that she saw Mrs. Tilford in a car as she was getting out of her taxi; she was also seen by the grocery boy just minutes before Mrs. Mortar's entrance: "there's a car outside. Been there every time I came down the road" (58). Hellman deliberately put these inconspicuous comments into the dialogue in order to make Mrs. Tilford's entrance later in this act even more impactful. Hellman tells us that Mrs. Tilford has been sitting outside the school while Martha admits her feelings, while Karen dismisses Martha's feelings, and when Martha kills herself, implying that she could have come in at any time and tell the women that the accusations were indeed false. However, Hellman, having the ultimate power over her characters, chose to keep Mrs. Tilford outside of the school, on the brink of rectifying everything that has occurred, in order to make Martha's death more impactful.

This conversation between Martha, Karen, and Mrs. Mortar continues on, solidifying the exact impact that Mrs. Mortar's absence had on the outcome of the trial and the consequences of that loss.

> MARTHA. (*Moves to R. of chair upstage of desk.*) There's an eight o'clock train. Get on it.
>
> MRS. MORTAR. (*L. of chair upstage of desk.*) Martha!
>
> MARTHA. You've come back because you had no place else to go. There's nothing here for you. All my grown life I've been something for you to pick dry. Get out and don't come back!
>
> MRS. MORTAR. (*Sniffling a little.*) How can you talk to me like that?
>
> MARTHA. Because I hate you. I've always hated you.
>
> MRS. MORTAR. (*Gently.*) God will punish you for that.
>
> MARTHA. (*Moves D. C.*) He's been doing all right. (60-61)

The fact that Hellman has made Martha move to center stage in this moment is important. Once Martha has told Mrs. Mortar exactly what her avoidance of the trial has done to

their livelihood, Mrs. Mortar turns herself back into the victim once again: “I know what you’ve gone through” (61). On one hand, this is great supporting evidence of a popular theory that Mrs. Mortar should be considered a person labeled “other” or “deviant” in this play like Mary and Martha (Cuenca and Seguro; Titus; Cocks). On the other hand, it is just Mrs. Mortar being who she has been throughout this play: egotistical, manipulative, and, to some extent, narcissistic. Martha, who has been annoyed and frustrated with her aunt since the beginning of the play but inevitably accommodating towards her, has now had enough. She has taken the ultimate stand against her aunt who has showed time and time again that she does not care about anyone but herself. So, when Martha lands center stage for her line, “He’s been doing all right” (61), it has a dual meaning. First, the audience now knows that their focus should be on Martha; she is the person of interest, the one all of the action seems to be revolving around at the moment. Second, having her center stage while acknowledging that god is already punishing her implies that she is not only at the center of the entire play, but also that society (and their religion-based homophobia) is already punishing her for something she cannot control.

Moving forward, in order to further argue that Hellman’s intent is on the queer aspects of the play as opposed to the morality of Mary’s lie, it is important to examine Karen’s final conversation with Joe. When Joe was last seen, he was vehemently defending Karen and Martha against the accusations. However, it was also posited that he might be questioning the validity of the rumor. Although he does seem to be supportive of the women by selling his place and his practice in order to move away with Karen and Martha, Joe’s unconscious actions seem to be more telling of his true feelings to the

situation, and it is one's "acts" that are to be measured when determining one's true intent or meaning (Beauvoir 1268).

> KAREN. (*Smiles, nods, and leans over to kiss him. He puts his cigarette out, in ashtray on end table L. of sofa. She draws back.*) Why did you do that?
>
> JOE. Do what?
>
> KAREN. (*Softly*.) Draw away from me.
>
> JOE. (*Sits on sofa*.) I didn't draw away from you. What kind of talk is that? I was putting out a cigarette. (*He holds his hand out to her. She ignores it*.) (62)

In pulling back from Karen, Joe is reluctant to show her any kind of affection; "so potentially infectious that even Karen's sensible, stalwart fiancé hesitates to kiss and hold her, fearing contamination" (Titus 222). It is, however, even more interesting that the first person he touched since he entered was Martha, by holding her hands, yet he does not wish to kiss the woman he is set to marry.

Once Martha leaves to cook some food, we see the truth of how Joe has taken the events of the past several weeks:

> JOE. Please stop talking that way […] There's going to be no more talk about what could have been or should have been or who should have said what or why or when—What you've done, you've done. And that's that.
>
> KAREN. (*Turns to him*.) What I've done?
>
> JOE. (*Rises. Moves R. Impatiently*.) What's been done to you.
>
> KAREN. (*Follows him*.) You said it yesterday, too. What do you mean when you say "What you've done"? Tell me, darling. Tell me what you mean.
>
> JOE. (*Turns to Karen. Shouting*.) Nothing. Nothing. I don't mean anything. Why do you think I do? (*Moves to U. C. Then quietly*.) Karen, there are a lot of people in this world who have bad trouble. We happen to be three of those people. (*Turns to Karen*.) We could sit around the rest of our lives and live on that trouble, and we'd get to the place where we'd have nothing else because we wanted nothing else. That's fun for some people—but not for me. I wanted to be a doctor because I don't like sick people. (*Comes back to Karen, embraces her*.) I'm not going to be a sick man, and I'm not going to let you grow sick, either… We can't go on like this. Everything I

say is made to mean something else. What are you doing to me? What's the matter with you?

KAREN. (*Quietly*.) Yes, every word has a new meaning. Child, love, lawyer, judge, friend, room, woman— (*Turns away L.*) There are not many safe words anymore. That we can't move away from. A new place, a new room, won't fix that for us. Sick, high-tragic people. That's what we'll be. (64-65)

Joe tells Karen that he believes "everything [he says] is made to mean something else" (65), which is confirmed by Karen when she replies, "Yes, every word has a new meaning…There are not many safe words anymore." This particular exchange is interesting because it posits this idea that the words which have been used throughout the play—unnatural, abnormal, or even words such as friend—are being presented with new meanings: queer, lesbian, lover; "words will have meanings beyond themselves" (Cocks 371). During this conversation between Karen and Joe, we see that Joe regards this rumor, this lesbianism, as a sickness or a trouble—a common belief during this time was that lesbians were "essentially sick individuals" (qtd. in Cuenca and Seguro 121). In fact, it could "be argued that Hellman's play was a natural choice for American theaters during the [1930s, 1940s, and] 1950s since the text reproduces all the homophobic fantasies on lesbians which mainstream audiences accepted as a matter of course at the time" (Cuenca and Seguro 123).

Karen gives Joe the opportunity to address his concern, insisting that he tell her how he has truly felt throughout this whole debacle even though he denies having anything to say or ask.

KAREN. Yes, you do. We've both known for a long time. Say it now, Joe. Ask it now.

JOE. I have nothing to ask. Nothing. (*Then, very quickly, turns to her*.) All right. It is—? Was it ever—?

KAREN. (*Quickly puts her hand over his mouth, stopping him*.) No. Martha and I

have never touched each other. That's all right, darling. I'm not mad. I am glad you asked me.

JOE. My God, what's happened to me? (*Embraces her.*) I'm sorry, darling. I'm sorry. I didn't want to hurt you—I didn't ever believe— (*Crosses to C.*)

KAREN. No, of course you didn't really. But after a while, you weren't sure. Maybe there was just a little truth—that's the way these things go. That's the way they are meant to go. You've been a good, loyal friend. (65)

Karen stops Joe from completing his questions, which makes one wonder why she even asked him to ask it in the first place. Perhaps she stopped him because she too was afraid for him to ask – maybe because they both noticed some of the behaviors and/or actions between Martha and Karen could imply some truth in the rumors. It is Joe's wavering conviction that the rumor was false that causes Karen to tell him to "go now, darling" (66). At this point, Joe has had his life and future shattered, and now Karen has also had a part of her future destroyed. This is one part of the answer to the major dramatic question presented in Hellman's play – Karen is, in some sense, not surviving the consequences of the rumor. A part of her, the part where Joe is a major part of her life and future, has been taken away. It can be argued that Karen made the decision to tell Joe to leave either because her intentions are altruistic – not wanting to cause Joe any further harm or submit him to a life of banishment from society—or because she is starting to realize her true feelings towards Martha and wants Joe out of the way in order to pursue her. When Karen states, "that's the way these things go. That's the way they are meant to go" (65), she implies that she too might have feelings for Martha and needs Joe out of the way in order to live her life with Martha.

Once Joe makes his departure, the climax of Hellman's play is ready to shine. Separated by Joe's wavering loyalty and his inevitable departure, the gumption seen in both Martha and Karen during the final scene of act two is now gone with the quick

development of Martha's discovery. Karen tells her that Joe has left, and Martha responds: "I don't understand what you've done" (67). This particular phrase is interesting because it implies that Karen has had a choice in the matters at hand. Granted, she did have a choice in kicking Joe out and breaking things off with him, but she did not, consciously, have a direct hand in the rumor that Mary Tilford started. In fact, it could be argued that all of the events have been done towards her. She is the first of the duo that we are introduced to, she is the one who punishes Mary Tilford, and she is the one who loses both her fiancé and soon, her best friend. It seems as though Karen Wright is the true victim in all of this seeing as how she has "been the object of everyone's desire throughout [the play]" (Titus 224). She has been desired by Joe and their heterosexual relationship, Mary in her sought-after revenge, Mrs. Tilford when begging for Karen's forgiveness and continued involvement in her life, and, ultimately, Martha in her supposedly unrequited love. However, Karen admits that there might be "just a little truth" (65) to the rumor that could imply Karen had feelings for Martha as well which she was not ready to directly admit. So, shooing Joe out of her life might have been a way for Karen to live her life with Martha and not worry about hurting or being concerned with anyone else.

As the focus of the play is further investigated, it is becoming clearer that *The Children's Hour* is, indeed, about the content of Mary's lie. This argument is sustained when Hellman shows Martha admitting her feelings to Karen. The two women have already suffered tremendous consequences – loss of the school, loss of her fiancé (Karen), loss of income, loss of social status, etc. Although it could be argued that Hellman is trying to show the power, or rather the intense consequences, of lying by

showing how the lie makes Martha question her own truth leading to her death, this is a very homophobic—at least from a twenty-first century mindset—approach. In examining Martha's confession, one must also look at the way Karen reacts to that confession: she distances herself and reacts "horrified" (69), yet another homophobic detail or reaction.

Martha, after hearing about Joe's departure, sticks to her guns about the untruthful rumor. Karen states that "it isn't a new sin they tell us we've done. Other people aren't destroyed by it" (68). However, Hellman has Martha address the difference between stories within society at the time and the specific case of Martha and Karen.

> MARTHA. They are the people who believe in it, who want it, who've chosen it for themselves. That must be very different. We aren't like that. We don't love each other. We don't love each other. We've been close to each other, of course. I've loved you like a friend, the way thousands of women feel about other women.
>
> KAREN. (*Turns her back to stove*.) I'm cold.
>
> MARTHA. You were a dear friend who was loved, that's all. Certainly there's nothing wrong with that. It's perfectly natural that I should be fond of you. Why, we've known each other since we were seventeen and I always thought— (68)

Martha continues to deny the rumor so passionately, in fact, that it seems as though she is trying to convince herself rather than anyone else. In the midst of her defense, Martha seems to being to falter, trailing off before Karen asks why she is saying all of this.

The next several lines between the two women constitute the climax of the play. In these lines, Martha admits her feelings towards Karen, and we are able to see both women's reactions to those feelings, bringing the play to its peak. The first line of the climax is very important; Hellman even italicizes the line within the text, showing its impact.

> MARTHA. (*Kneels down next to Karen*.) *I have loved you the way they said*.

> KAREN. (*Idly*.) Martha, we're both so tired. Please don't—
>
> MARTHA. There's always been something wrong. Always—as long as I can remember. But I never knew it until all this happened.
>
> KAREN. (*For the first time looks up, horrified, turns to Martha*.) Stop that crazy talk—
>
> MARTHA. You're afraid if hearing it; I'm more afraid than you.
>
> KAREN. (*Turns away, hands over her ears*.) I won't listen to you.
>
> MARTHA. You've got to know it. I can't keep it to myself any longer. I've got to tell you that I'm guilty.
>
> KAREN. (*Deliberately*.) You are guilty of nothing.
>
> MARTHA. I've been telling myself that since the night we heard the child say it. I lie in bed night after night praying that it isn't true. But I know about it now. It's there. I don't know how. I don't know why. But I did love you. I do love you. I resented your marriage; maybe because I wanted you; maybe I wanted you all these years; I couldn't call it by a name but maybe it's been there ever since I first knew you— (69)

This is a pivotal moment in the play. Martha, having denied it her whole life, realizes that she is queer. Even though Karen refuses to agree with her, rejects Martha's admission, and will not let Martha believe that it is true, she knows that "To tell the truth, her situation makes woman very liable to such a view. Her physiological nature is very complex; she herself submits to it as to some rigmarole from outside; her body does not seem to her to be a clear expression of herself; within it she feels herself a stranger" (Beauvoir 1268). Throughout her life, and this play, Martha has submitted to heteronormative notions because that is what she has been told to do "from [the] outside." In doing so, however, she "feels herself a stranger" because her true expression does not adhere to heteronormative guidelines.

Martha's retreat "into sameness—assimilation for those who can manage it—is the most passive and debilitating of responses to political repression, economic insecurity, and a renewed open season on difference" (Rich 1591). This is why Martha's

assimilation into a heteronormative society has caused such a debilitating consequence (suicide) once she has discovered and admitted her truth. Her "retreat into sameness" was so complete that she did not even recognize its existence until a little girl decided to tell a lie with an "ounce of truth" (Hellman 69). It is the possibility of truth that Martha has confessed that absolutely scares Karen because if the rumor is slightly true, then maybe it is also true on her behalf.

At first, Martha seems okay with this realization that she is queer, saying that "there's something in you and you don't do anything about it because you don't know it's there. Suddenly a little girl gets bored and tells a lie—and there, that night, you see it for the first time, and you say it yourself…" (69). This line, as Mary Titus suggests, "…corresponds to that of other women early in this century, if not to Hellman's own experience" (221). At first, it even seems as though Martha is happy that Mary lied to her grandmother because if she hadn't then Martha would not have discovered her truth. Martha goes as far as to say that Mary "found the lie with the ounce of truth" (69). However, as she continues coming to this realization and noticing how Karen is taking the news, she begins to have doubts in herself again, saying that she feels "so God-damned sick and dirty" (69). This is the moment that the audience begins to realize Martha's fate, especially when she states "I don't want tomorrow. It's a bad word" (69). She feels as though tomorrow is a promise which she is not entitled to. Immediately after her resignation, Martha retreats to her room, and we hear a shot. The shot does not make Karen jolt or scream or move in any way for several moments until she is seen springing from her chair and sprinting offstage.

Some critics and scholars might go as far to say that Hellman's play, no matter how you look at it, eliminates the queer character which adheres to the all-too-familiar trope of "murdering the lesbian" (Titus 215). However, Robert Tindol and Zhang Xin postulate that "…the demise of Martha is not the end of lesbianism in the story" (329). As previously (and briefly) mentioned, there are other characters designated as other within Hellman's play—Mary, Mrs. Mortar, and Mrs. Tilford. However, this designation is on the same basis that Martha is said to be a lesbian: independence, fondness of female company, and the further possession of both male and female qualities. Therefore, "lesbianism has not been eradicated in actuality in the play's universe, but merely in the normalization of the comfortable tale that women should have traditional heterosexual relations with men" (Tindol and Xin 329). Along with Martha's death, Hellman has also destroyed the single heterosexual couple within the play. She has removed any strictly romantic relationships, leaving the women—Mrs. Tilford, Mrs. Mortar, and Karen—to examine their lives. As previously discussed, Mrs. Mortar and Mrs. Tilford are considered "other" within the world of this play because they lived independent lives free from men. Karen is now a part of the "other" because she is without Joe. However, in separating her from Joe and grouping her in with the "other," Hellman is providing the audience with the possibility that Karen may now be queer as well.

Coming to a close, the text shows Mrs. Tilford coming to the school seeking absolution from Karen and Martha for the wrongs she has incurred upon them. Hellman is providing the characters with a sense of closure, but not salvation. Mrs. Tilford has discovered Mary's accusation to be false – Martha and Karen never had "sinful sexual knowledge" (61) of each other. Mrs. Tilford begs Karen for forgiveness, saying that the

suit will be paid in full and that the judge will publicly apologize for everything that has happened. Karen, having lost her best friend moments after Martha's admission of feelings, seems cold. However, I would argue that she is not cold or detached but rather in a state of mourning for her friend, the life she had plan, her fiancé, and her career. In fact, I would say that her final monologue has real depth to it and solidifies how she feels about the rumor started by Mary Tilford, refusing to add in the comfort of Mrs. Tilford's guilty conscience.

> KAREN. Martha is dead. (*Mrs. Tilford gasps, shakes head, very slowly, sits L. end of sofa, covers face. Karen watches her.*) So last night you found out you had done wrong to us. And now you have to right that wrong or you can't rest your head again. Well, don't rest it. I won't be your confessor. Take your conscience some place else, get somebody else to help you be a "good" woman again. (*Smiles*.) You told us that night you had to do what you did. Now you have to do this. A public apology and money paid and you can sleep and eat again. You and all those who always know how right they are. What's somebody else's life to you? A way to show your own righteousness. And if you happen to be wrong, (*Shrugs*.) then you can always put it right some other day. (*Quietly*.) I have a dead friend. Get out of here and be noble on the street. (72)

In this moment, instead of correcting Mrs. Tilford by telling her that the rumor had an ounce of truth, Karen lets Mrs. Tilford beg for forgiveness. However, she does not absolve Mrs. Tilford of her guilt. Hellman has Karen looking out the window for the remaining page of the play, not looking at Mrs. Tilford or Mrs. Mortar. This is very poignant because Karen is turning her back to the elderly women, their beliefs, their excuses, their crimes, and she is looking toward the openness, the possibility of a new future that she must embark on alone.

After an in-depth textual analysis of Hellman's play, *The Children's Hour*, it is clear to see that the major dramatic question identified at the beginning of the play has been answered. Martha has not survived Mary's lie, and while Karen has physically

survived, she does not come out unscathed. Karen has lost everything and everyone important to her and is left completely alone. Although her feelings towards Martha were a bit ambiguous for a brief moment while talking to Joe about the validity of the rumor, it is clear to see that, even if she did not have romantic feelings towards Martha, Karen knew Martha was a vital part of her life.

By the end of the play, there is a glimmer of hope for Karen when we see her looking out the window to what is in front of her rather than continuing to look at what has happened to her. This moment shows that a queer future can be seen by the end of the play. In not telling Mrs. Tilford that Mary's lie was true on Martha's part, Karen is not only keeping Martha's confession to herself and honoring her dead friend's reputation and memory, but she is also refusing to let Mrs. Tilford feel the slightest validation in her attack on the two women. This is important because she could have easily told Mrs. Tilford about Martha's feelings, but then Karen would have to face the fact that maybe she, too, had the same feelings. Karen faces great loss and grief in this final scene, having lost everyone dear to her in a matter of a couple of hours—at most. By portraying this loss, one could argue that Hellman is showing the tragic consequences of a vicious lie—with the emphasis on the treatment of those accused of lesbianism or homosexual activities/feelings in general. However, in starting over by herself, maybe Karen is given the power to take hold of her life, her narrative, and start over again by being truthful with herself.

In conclusion, Hellman's play is not about the lie that Mary Tilford tells her grandmother, rather it is about the queerness of the lie that garners the most attention from the reader and the audience. Yes, the lie instigates the conflict. However, the lie

would not have a foot to stand on without the argument between Mrs. Mortar and Martha in which Mortar implies that Martha is queer. Therefore, it is clear that the inciting incident is that very same argument between Martha and Mrs. Mortar because it provides the subject (social morality of queerness) of both the lie and, consequently, the play itself.

As Beauvoir states, those who are oppressed (i.e. women) know how to exist in a world designed to oppress them. Karen, having been brought up the same as Martha, in a society that encourages this heteronormative thinking, has donned "an artificial expression on her face" and has learned to "turn toward [men] a changeless smile, or an enigmatic impassivity" which is very telling of Karen's relationship with Joe (Beauvoir 1270). Furthermore, Karen's "real sentiments, [her] actual behavior," are "carefully hidden" as she is "cautious… play-acting" in order to conform to society's expectations – a state in which she finds herself stuck until she starts questioning it in her conversation with Joe and again during Martha's confession (Beauvoir 1270).

If approached with the belief that, "…the human being is not anything. [They are] to be measured by [their] acts" (Beauvoir 1268), Hellman's play can then be analyzed in such a way that looks at the acts of the characters rather than their words. Therefore, Martha's actions—as outlined in her argument with Mrs. Mortar, relationship with Karen, behavior towards Joe and Mrs. Tilford, and her confession—confirm that Hellman's intent throughout the play has been on Martha's sexuality and the reception of that sexuality as opposed to the morality of Mary's lie—"If lesbianism is women making a life together, then she did see it; we all saw it" (Speer 100).

As addressed towards the beginning of this chapter, Hellman's intent is "about the lie" (qtd. in Rollyson 336) rather than the liar. Therefore, the question then focuses on

whether or not Hellman focuses on the consequences of the lie or the content of the lie itself. It appears that Hellman intended to focus on the morality of the lie and its consequences; however, it is clear through this textual analysis that the perceived intent given through the text itself focuses on the content of the lie—lesbianism. As Cuenca and Seguro state, "the play... points at the faultlines in mainstream ideology" (120). So, when working on *The Children's Hour* in a modern context, it is pertinent that one stays aware of and focused on Hellman's intent - the lie itself - and that her intent can be brought to the forefront while both acknowledging the past and encouraging the growth and progress of society and culture as theatre should strive to do.

CHAPTER THREE:

A Practical Approach to The Children's Hour

When discussing and analyzing dramatic literature, there are a couple of things (among many) that dramaturgs keep in mind at all times: what is the play trying to say or what does it deal with and how does the cultural/historical milieu of the world at the time of its original publication/production relate to the current sociopolitical times of our world. Whenever one works on an established play, dramaturg or not, these things must be taken into consideration in order to gauge how the meaning, execution, and perception have changed over time. As Jenny S. Spencer so eloquently said in her essay, "Sex, Lies, and Revisions: Historicizing Hellman's *The Children's Hour*":

> A number of things happen when we … look at the history of the play's creation, productions, adaptations, and critical reception over three decades. We discover, first, that neither Hellman nor her audiences were ever entirely happy with this play; second, that an 'original' or 'authorized' version of *The Children's Hour* is difficult to pin down; and third, that Hellman's own unacknowledged relationship to both the play's source and its themes must complicate any assessment of her work (44-45).

Without taking these elements into consideration, the production will not be executed to its greatest potential, and the text's intention will be lost. Therefore, in looking at the structure of the play, the different approaches to the play, and the obstacles in mounting a production of Hellman's *The Children's Hour*, it is easier to discern how to go about generating a production that effectively handles these issues and allows both the textual intent and the director's concept to shine through to theatre artists and audiences alike.

After analyzing both the progression of Hellman's intent and the objective supported by the text, it is pertinent to also address the reader's response or rather the

audience's response; after all, "it is the reader who brings the text to life, who gives it meaning" (Lynn 24). Of course, this does not mean that the audiences' reactions are the end-all-be-all for what the play means because everyone's reactions are bound to be different when taking into consideration one's personal or subjective experiences. However, when analyzing theatre, it is important to understand that the audience may interpret the play differently than the author, director, actors, etc. expects the audience to receive it. Nevertheless, it is clear that "No one… not even the author, can be the ideal, ultimate reader, saying everything that should be said about a work, once and for all" (Lynn 25).

Like every production of a play, there are many things to take into consideration when mounting a production. Playwright's intent, textual meaning, the social/political milieu of the world of the play, etc. should be taken into account when developing a concept. One could decide to mount a traditional production, one that stays true to the playwright's intent no matter what without trying to reimagine or redirect the play for a modern audience—such as modernism, realism, naturalism. However, one could also decide to conceptualize a production by taking an influential idea or motif found within in the play and conceptualizing the design, acting, and/or staging to fit one's own preference—different conceptual ideas can include postmodernism, surrealism, expressionism, theatre of the absurd, epic theatre, minimalism, etc.

If a theater is aiming to adhere to Hellman's intention—meaning that the play is about the morality of the lie and its consequences—then it might be best to mount a more traditional production of Hellman's *The Children's Hour*. The set design would be as it is described in the text (per the stage directions, props list, and stage layout—if provided in

the edition being used). Therefore, there would be little to no deviation from the playwright's original text. The audience would see the play as close to the original production as possible in order to keep the world of the play accurate to the time in which it was written. For example, the schoolhouse would include as many details and props as possible with a realistic furnishing on the set, complete with decorations, signs of aging, places to hold multiple props, etc. Furthermore, each time the setting changed, the set would completely change as well in order to provide the most realistic scenery as possible.

However, if the aim of the production is to be loyal to the text and the meaning supported by the text, then it might be best to adapt the play or conceptualize it. The design, acting, and/or staging would differ, slightly, from the playwright's intention in order to provide a new meaning for the audience that adheres to the director's concept, the current world in which the play is being produced, or another perceived meaning shown within the text, such as the one detailed in chapter two. For instance, if one were to produce *The Children's Hour* with a minimalist or deconstructed concept in mind, one would focus on the text rather than the intense design or construction of hyper realistic elements. The set design would be simplistic, providing elements that serve a specific function with lighting that provides clean, open spaces. Instead of a detailed or exhaustive design for the schoolhouse in *The Children's Hour*, one could simply put out some chairs and a chalkboard or perhaps the outline of a schoolhouse. While providing context for the scenes within the play, the set does not distract from the dialogue and action happening on the stage. The use of color can also be as minimal as possible if mounting a minimalist production. Considering the subject of lesbianism, one could opt

to have a completely colorless production with the exception of the colors of the lesbian flag (red, orange, pink, white) thus providing a direct focus on the lesbianism or queerness of the play as seen through the acting and the dialogue.

Well-Made Play versus Problem Play

Several critics and scholars have dubbed Hellman's *The Children's Hour* as a well-made play; in fact, Hellman herself has stated that she intended this particular play of hers to be written with the elements of a well-made play in mind, "complex and highly artificial plotting, a build-up of suspense, a climactic scene in which all problems are resolved, and a happy ending" ("Well-made play"). Furthermore, Hellman is, indeed, regarded as a prominent example of playwrights who draw on the elements of a well-made play ("Well-made play"). In his book *The Rise and Fall of the Well-Made Play*, John Russell Taylor discusses the elements which must be considered in a well-made play—"clear, neat, balanced overall construction, and the appearance at least of verisimilitude [true to life]" (Taylor 15). Based on these elements, supported by Sir Arthur Pinero and rather limited according to Eugene Scribe (who was interested in the art of making connections), Hellman's play is not, strictly, a well-made play. If a well-made play requires a "clear, neat, balanced overall construction" (Taylor 15), then *The Children's Hour* is anything but well-made. The inciting incident is not present until mid-way through act one or is not seen until the end of the first scene in act two, depending on one's interpretation or analysis. Furthermore, the climax of the play is not reached until halfway through act three and is quickly followed by the denouement which only lasts for two pages. However, Hellman does a superb job of building tension and has the events of the play be causal throughout. Nevertheless, Hellman's intent, rather one believes it to be the morality of Mary's lie, the act of lying, or the content of the lie, is one of a moral or social nature.

With its didactic or moral nature (the addressing of controversial social issues such as feminism, lesbianism) and its invitation to stimulate thought and discussion, *The Children's Hour* aligns more with a problem play, or a "type of drama that developed in the [nineteenth] century to deal with controversial social issues in a realistic manner, to expose social ills, and to stimulate thought and discussion on the part of the audience" ("Problem Play"), than it does with the aspects of a well-made play. Having found its beginnings in the work of the French dramatists Alexandre Dumas and Émile Augier, the problem play found more fame in the works of Henrik Ibsen (*A Doll's House*, *An Enemy of the People*, *Ghosts*), a Norwegian playwright whose works were not only brilliant in terms of the writing but also served a purpose by discussing topical subjects in the society and culture of the time. However, the problem play was brought to its height by the Irish playwright, George Bernard Shaw (*Androcles and the Lion*, *Candida*, *Pygmalion*) who concentrated the theme of his plays on social evils in order to point out society's complicity in its own evils – very reminiscent of what Hellman has done here with her play *The Children's Hour*.

Scenes to Focus on

One of the most difficult scenes in Hellman's play is Martha's confession to Karen about her realization that she has loved her "the way they said" (68). In order to avoid a production of this play coming off as homophobic, pathetic, or pitiable, the treatment of this scene must have the utmost focus and intention behind both the acting and the directing. Emphasis from the director must be made in the portrayal of Karen during this scene. For instance, the text says that Karen is "horrified" (69) once she realizes what Martha is confessing. However, if one wishes to avoid this homophobic response, then the intention or active verb within this beat must be chosen carefully, with the intent not to be horrified but rather concerned, worried, shocked, or whatever the director wishes to portray in this moment. Furthermore, the intention behind Martha's character must also be dealt with carefully. Martha is admitting a scary—for those within an oppressive society—truth to her best friend. She is scared to lose Karen, to admit to herself that she is what society hates. So, Martha's operative words within this scene must also be chosen carefully, perhaps in collaboration with the director in order to convey what it is the production necessitates. Regardless, in the original run of *The Children's Hour*, Hellman's intention was for Martha's story to be tragic but not pathetic. In fact, she struggled to create a play in which she adhered to the guidelines of social law which was to "protect the helpless members of society against the invert" (Ellis 219). In other words, how does she write a queer play without anything directly or overtly queer being referenced or discussed in any manner other than contempt or persecution? Hellman writes in her notes,

> (The idea of an unrealized yearning, a sublimation that would never have appeared if let alone, is in one way unsound. However, I think its right and

> recognizable and should be used.) The confession the last straw: the difference between having been injured unjustly—some comfort in that—and being injured with some possible justice. Could the kid have been right. Could she, because of her own and different abnormality, have seen what they couldn't see themselves, have sensed it and unconsciously known about it. Suicide is part of that and not separate. If it's separate it will be phony melodrama, instead of cause and result. (Triesch 103-104)

Going off of what Hellman says in her notes, I would agree that Martha's suicide is the result of her confession but not simply because she is queer; rather, I would argue that the shame and guilt of denying it for so long only to come to this realization because a little girl (Mary) told a lie that happened to be her truth which inexorably caused Karen heartache and devastation (the closing of the school and the loss of Joe) is the cause of Martha's death.

The 1961 film, directed by William Wyler, provides a more empathetic and less homophobic representation of Martha's confession to Karen than in previous iterations. First and foremost, this film stays true to the script (Hellman's 1952 version) which allows a more authentic telling of the story. In this scene, Martha is, of course, hysterical. After Karen and she discuss the fact that this "isn't a new sin they tell us we've done" (68), Martha repeats the phrase "We don't love each other" (68). This repetition of Martha's shows that she is questioning whether or not Mary's lie has some truth to it, and she is trying to convince herself that she does not love Karen. However, it is not until her next little speech that she finally comes to the realization: "You were a dear friend who was loved, that's all. Certainly there's nothing wrong with that. It's perfectly natural that I should be fond of you. Why, we've known each other since we were seventeen and I always thought—" (68). It is the cutting off of that last line that tells the audience Martha realizes what her true feelings mean. In this moment, Martha is trying to make sense of

her thoughts and feelings. In her next line, MacLaine shouts the words “Listen to me” (68). In shouting these words, MacLaine takes away from the seriousness of Martha’s realization and paints her as hysterical and, quite frankly, melodramatic. If those words were said more calmly and sharply, then Karen is more likely to listen and take what Martha is saying seriously.

Overall, the scene is which Martha makes her confession should be handled carefully and with a clear intent. Hepburn, contrary to Hellman’s stage directions in the script, treats Martha in this moment as nothing more or less than her friend. She is not “horrified” (69) nor disgusted by what Martha is telling her. On the contrary, she seems to want to comfort her friend, affirm her discovery, and let her know that she is not guilty or dirty or sick in any way. Treating this confession of Martha’s in this way leans towards a more accepting, intimate, and positive interpretation as opposed to the rather homophobic response given in the script. Such a decision, however, depends on the director’s concept and their desired reception of this scene. Towards the end of the scene, Martha looks back at Karen saying, “Good night, darling” (70) which, in itself, shows the audience the intimacy between the two friends. However, in the film (1961), Martha’s line has been changed to “Goodbye, darling” (*The Children’s Hour*) which keeps the intimacy of the relationship but is too revealing as to what Martha is about to do (commit suicide). The addition of this line takes away from the impact of Martha’s death for Karen considering she must now have some sort of inkling that Martha intends to end her life. Saying “goodbye” rather than “goodnight” definitely has more finality to it. Therefore, Karen would not seem as shocked as she should be when hearing the gunshot.

To portray this scene in any other way would be a disservice not only to the play but to the queer community who has seen the death of a queer character in media far too often.

Another moment in the 1961 film version of Hellman's play that requires discussion is the method of Martha's death. In the script—both the 1934 and 1952 versions—, Martha dies by a self-inflicted gunshot. However, in the film, Martha not only hangs herself, but she also commits suicide after hearing Mrs. Tilford's apology. Hearing Mrs. Tilford's apology demeans Martha's death, omitting the original cause for Martha to commit suicide: Mary's lie. Mary's lie ended up being true which is why Martha kills herself – out of guilt for the trouble and heartache she has caused Karen. If Martha dies after Mrs. Tilford apologizes, then she has killed herself because she cannot live in a world where she is known as a lesbian. Therefore, if Mrs. Tilford apologizes after Martha has made her confession, then her death is not a direct cause of Mary's lie but rather Mrs. Tilford's apology. Furthermore, in the film, Martha kills herself by hanging rather than a gun. This provides a less impactful shock for both the audience and for Karen. Karen is reeling after hearing her friend's confession, trying to decide where to go from here. So, the immediately loudness and shock of the gunshot does not interrupt her thoughts. Although we see Karen trying to break down the door to Martha's room, the suddenness of Martha's death is lost, replaced instead with a drawn out, melodramatic scene in which Karen finds her friend dead. However, the intense scene of Karen (Hepburn) breaking down the door does provide an interpretation more appealing to those concerned with the theme of lesbianism. In fact, film scholar Joanna Rapf states, "the innuendo in Karen's reactions [is] that she too may have loved Martha 'in the way they said' although she is not strong enough yet to admit it. Certainly, feelings she has for

Martha are stronger than the ones she has for Joe" (Rapf 50). Nevertheless, for the purposes of producing this play on the stage, it would be more impactful to have the sound of the gunshot for the benefit of Karen and the audience.

In the aftermath of Martha's death, the audience sees yet another confession. Mrs. Tilford tells Karen that she has found Mary's accusation to be false. This is a moment that the director, along with the actors and, possibly, the dramaturg need to collaborate and decide how this scene needs to be handled. We see that Mrs. Tilford is begging for forgiveness; however, Karen's response to her plea for mercy is the meat—or moment of impact—of act three:

> KAREN. […] So last night you found out you had done wrong to us. And now you have to right that wrong or you can't rest your head again. Well, don't rest it. I won't be your confessor. Take your conscience some place else, get somebody else to help you be a "good" woman again. (*Smiles*.) You told us that night you had to do what you did. Now you have to do this. A public apology and money paid and you can sleep and eat again. You and all those who always know how right they are. What's somebody else's life to you? A way to show your own righteousness. And if you happen to be wrong, (*Shrugs*.) then you can always put it right some other day. (*Quietly*.) I have a dead friend. Get out of here and be noble on the street. (72)

This speech of Karen's must be done in a way that is not only candid but intentional and poignant. Perhaps having the actress portraying Karen focus, once again, on her operative words, making sure that this monologue is sharp, concise, and directed in a way that adheres to the production's intent. Karen is making a reference to a traditionally catholic practice of a confessional: "I won't be your confessor" (72). Knowledge of this act and its proceedings would aid in the delivery of the line, but Hellman is also aware of this connection which means that she wants her readers and audience to know that she is addressing the overall religious sect of society that condemns homosexuals and deviants

who supposedly stray from the path of god. Hellman also posits the idea of a "'good' woman" (72) within this monologue. Once again, she is making a connection between what society deems good behavior and the consequences of not abiding by those set standards. Karen's monologue starts off spiteful, talking about how she abhors the way society condemns those deemed "other." However, she slips into a sort of condescension when telling Mrs. Tilford, "You told us that night… and if you happen to be wrong (*Shrugs*)…" (72). Then, when ending her speech, Karen turns hateful, a quiet sort of malice when she tells Mrs. Tilford to "get out of here and be noble on the street" (72). Karen has lost her school and her fiancé yet kept moving forward. As long as she had Martha, they could make it work and "find a place to go" (68). However, she has now lost Martha; she has nothing and no one else to lose. In this moment, she feels truly alone in the world, and it is because of Mrs. Tilford and her granddaughter, Mary. The accusatory tone and cruelty within Karen's words must find its way into the deliverance of this speech.

Towards the end of the scene, we see Mrs. Mortar and Mrs. Tilford standing in the room while Karen looks out the window—no acknowledgement of the two women other than short, defiant sentences. The way that Wyler's 1961 film handles this moment is very impactful as well. He has a quiet scene—after Martha is found dead—in which everyone is attending the hillside funeral of the deceased teacher. Karen is shown defiantly and confidently walking away from everyone, including the stares of Mrs. Tilford, Mrs. Mortar, and Joe as though heading towards "an independent future built on the acceptance of Martha's love" (Spencer 59). I believe that this same effect can be accomplished in a stage production by focusing on Karen's distance between the other

two women sooner. Rather than having Karen move to the window on the line, “you’ll be alright?” (73), she should move to the window (or away from the women with her back turned) after her speech to Mrs. Tilford regarding righteousness. In doing this, the defiant nature that Karen has developed will be more evident and will provide a better, more hopeful outcome for Karen than that of isolation and sorrow as directed in the script.

In mounting a stage production of Lillian Hellman’s *The Children’s Hour*, there is a lot to take into consideration. The reception of this play during its original debut in 1934 is and will be wildly different to the reception it would garner today. Although progressive for its time, the subject matter of *The Children’s Hour*, if handled carelessly or egregiously, can be misinterpreted and gain backlash from the current socio-political climate and audiences of today’s theatre world. Therefore, when producing this play, it is important to take into consideration structure of the play, the different approaches to the play, and the obstacles in mounting a production of Hellman’s *The Children’s Hour*, and the impact that such a monumental and historical play could have on a society that is trying to make progress by encouraging representation, equity, and diversity. As theatre artists, we should be able to look back on history and feel proud of how much we have accomplished, and we should feel emboldened to push forward. As Mark Blasius and Shane Phelan quote Radclyffe Hall (*The Well of Loneliness*) in their work *We Are Everywhere: A Historical Sourcebook of Gay and Lesbian Politics*, “What I will never forgive is your daring to try and make me ashamed of my love. I’m not ashamed of it; there’s no shame in me” (218).

CONCLUSION

Even though Lillian Hellman's play *The Children's Hour* has not been undertaken by professional theaters such as those in Broadway or West End for several years (not since 2011), it is clear why it has withstood the test of time in both community and collegiate theaters: *The Children's Hour* presents a historical look at lesbianism and provides a vital interpretation of the treatment of queer people while inviting its audiences to question what a queer future might look like or how to avoid repeating the past. Although it has homophobic undertones when produced and studied today, Hellman's debut play was pivotal and influential for the queer community during her time. It allowed the subject of homosexuality to be discussed on Broadway and invited its audiences to empathize with queer individuals—something a lot of plays during the time did not dare to do in fear of being censored, sued, or arrested.

After examining multiple versions and adaptations of *The Children's Hour* and discussing a variety of scholarly sources in order to create a broad range of analyses and opinions, it is clear to see that this play can produce a variety of interpretations, intentions, and concepts worthy of a stage production. Throughout my analysis, I have considered *The Children's Hour* in its entirety by looking at the original script (1934), its first film adaptation directed by William Wyler (*These Three*, 1936), its second appearance on Broadway (1952, directed by Lillian Hellman), and its second film adaptation directed, again, by William Wyler (*The Children's Hour*, 1961). Furthermore, an in-depth textual analysis, supported by or in opposition to scholarly articles, and a theatrical approach to problem areas within Hellman's play provide both a literary and

practical approach to analyzing and staging *The Children's Hour* today in the twenty-first century.

Historical, social, and political context has proved to be essential in analyzing and devising any theatrical production or study on dramatic literature, especially in the case of Hellman's *The Children's Hour*. Analyzing a play from the conservative and censored times of the 1930s, 50s, and 60s has proven to be a difficult undertaking when approached in the less homophobic times of the twenty-first century. Nevertheless, it provides a greater understanding of queer history and how far we have come in the past ninety years—and how far we have yet to come. The beliefs of Hellman's time are extremely farfetched from the beliefs still held by some communities now, especially when discussing the queer and BIPOC communities or even the dialogue surrounding gender and equal rights for all. Although censorship laws are no longer in effect, or not as strict as they were, minority groups (such as those previously mentioned) still face oppression. So, the topic of lesbianism (or queerness in general), gender equality, and morality as addressed in *The Children's Hour* are still in effect and relevant today.

One idea briefly addressed in the third chapter of this thesis is forever in flux: audience reception. One could speculate or infer what the potential response of a present-day production of *The Children's Hour* could be. However, it is nearly impossible to garner the exact reaction this play would receive because of its text, tone, and implications concerning Martha's confession and her subsequent suicide. Modern audiences would be able to pick up on the expertly written subtleties throughout the play, noticing the relationship between Karen and Martha might be more than even they

realize. However, the way Martha's coming out is handled is rather outdated and punitive which makes it hard to interpret in any way other than what it is: murdering the lesbian.

The treatment of *The Children's Hour* as it is discussed within this thesis is not the end-all-be-all for how this play can be analyzed or produced. It is merely a suggestion and an additional viewpoint into the world created by Lillian Hellman. Interpretations and perspectives on this, and every, play is constantly oscillating and will therefore provide a mixture of themes, concepts, and scholarly works that aim to showcase the brilliance of *The Children's Hour* as it continues to be a prominent fixture in theatre history and a needed example of what the future of theatre could be. Ultimately, "spending time with this play offers hope that a contemporary production could be envisioned to reflect something new, and important, about the sense and sensibility of audiences today" (Spencer 61). Through the analysis of Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour* discussed here, there is no question that theatre is an ever-evolving discipline that aims to show the world as it was, as it is, and as it can be.

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APPENDIX A

Fig. 1. Image of Katherine Emmet who portrayed Mrs. Tilford in both the 1934 and 1952 productions of Hellman's *The Children's Hour*, "The Premiere," *The Brooklyn Citizen* 1934, https://www.newspapers.com/image/543804569/?terms=The%20Children%27s%20Hour&match=1.

Fig. 2. Image of a scene in Hellman's *The Children's Hour* (from left to right, Robert Keith, Anne Revere, Florence McGee, Katherine Emery, and Katherine Emmet), "The Children's Hour" *The New York Public Library Digital Collections*. 1934. https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e3-ec04-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99.

Fig. 3. Karen Wright (Katherine Emery) comforts Martha Dobie (Anne Revere) as Martha confesses that she has loved Karen, "Anne Revere and Katherine Emery in *The Children's Hour*," *The New York Public Library Digital Collections*, 1934, https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e4-6644-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99.

Fig. 4. Anne Revere as Martha Dobie in *The Children's Hour*, "Anne Revere in The Children's Hour," *The New York Public Library Digital Collections*, 1934, https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e4-6645-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99.

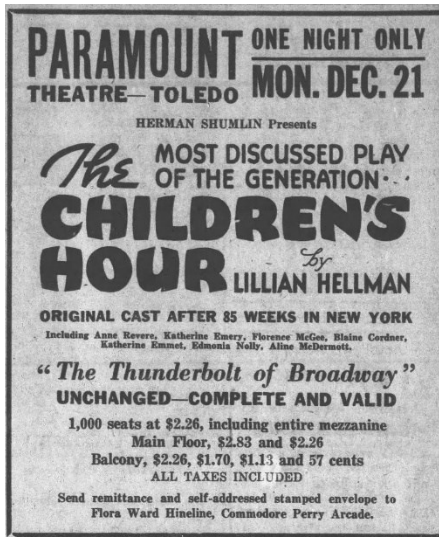


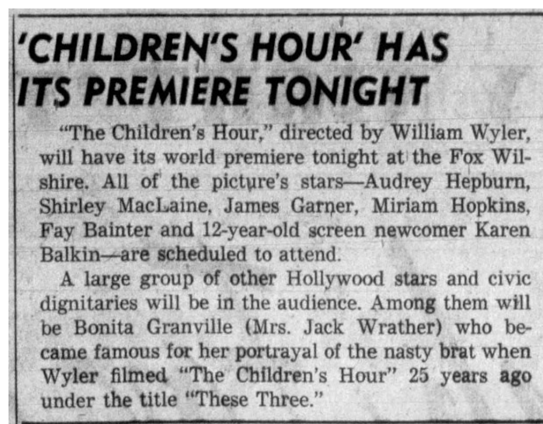
Fig. 5. An advertisement for Herman Shumlin's 1934 production of Hellman's *The Children's Hour*, "'The Children's Hour' With Original Cast," *Woodville News*, 1936, https://www.newspapers.com/image/753807000/?terms=The%20Children%27s%20Hour&match=1.

Fig. 6. Poster for the 1936 film version of Hellman's *The Children's Hour*, "'These Three' Improvement on Stage Play," *Oakland Tribune*, 1936, https://www.newspapers.com/image/142984896/?terms=The%20Children%27s%20Hour&match=1.

Fig. 7. Film Poster for William Wyler's *These Three* based on Hellman's *The Children's Hour*, "'These Three'," *The Nebraska State Journal*, 1936, https://www.newspapers.com/image/314205531/?terms=The%20Children%27s%20Hour&match=1.

Fig. 8. Playbill for Hellman's 1952 production of her play *The Children's Hour*, "*The Children's Hour* at Coronet Theatre," *Playbill Vault*, 1952, http://www.playbillvault.com/Show/Detail/Cover/4765/7674/The-Childrens-Hour.

Fig. 9. Poster for William Wyler's 1961 film adaptation of *The Children's Hour*, "'Children's Hour' Bold and Frank and Different," *Valley Times*, 1961, https://www.newspapers.com/image/580316955/?terms=The%20Children%27s%20Hour&match=1.



'CHILDREN'S HOUR' HAS ITS PREMIERE TONIGHT

"The Children's Hour," directed by William Wyler, will have its world premiere tonight at the Fox Wilshire. All of the picture's stars—Audrey Hepburn, Shirley MacLaine, James Garner, Miriam Hopkins, Fay Bainter and 12-year-old screen newcomer Karen Balkin—are scheduled to attend.

A large group of other Hollywood stars and civic dignitaries will be in the audience. Among them will be Bonita Granville (Mrs. Jack Wrather) who became famous for her portrayal of the nasty brat when Wyler filmed "The Children's Hour" 25 years ago under the title "These Three."

Fig. 10. An advertisement for Wyler's 1961 adaptation of *The Children's Hour*, "'Children's Hour' Has its Premiere Tonight," *Los Angeles Mirror*, 1961, https://www.newspapers.com/image/694372021/?terms=The%20Children%27s%20Hour&match=1.

Fig. 11. Karen Wright (Audrey Hepburn) and Martha Dobie (Shirley MacLaine) in Wyler's 1961 film adaptation of *The Children's Hour* from Matthew Hayes, "*The Children's Hour* (Web Exclusive)," *Cineaste*, 2014, https://www.cineaste.com/winter2014/the-childrens-hour-web-exclusive.

Fig. 12. Karen (Audrey Hepburn) comforts Martha (Shirley MacLaine) in Wyler's 1961 film adaptation of *The Children's Hour* from Tyler Coates, "Was It Good For The Gays: 'The Children's Hour'," 23 Oct. 2014, https://decider.com/2014/10/23/was-it-good-for-the-gays-the-childrens-hour/.

VITA

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