

Research Article

‘Destructive Power of Lies’ in Lillian Hellman’s *The Children’s Hour*

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Abstract

Lillian Hellman, one of the prominent playwrights of the Depression period in America, is remarkably a social conscious playwright. Her plays highlight the social, political, and economic injustices that prevailed in her contemporary society. Hellman’s *The Children’s Hour* is a sensational drama staged in Maxim Elliot Theatre in 1934. The play is based on an actual case trial in 1810 in Scotland where a school student wrongly accused her two teachers for their unnatural relationship. This paper depicts how the society admits, entertains, and promotes children’s lies in terms of scandals, gossips, and rumours. Mary Tilford, a school girl hates all the school authorities for mistreating her in the school. The destructive power of a lie forms the dominant theme of the play and how it ruins three lives – Martha Dobie, Karen Wright, and Dr. Joe Cardin is skilfully depicted. The play presents lies as human flaw and aptly highlights how a crafted lie of a young girl causes devastating effects on three lives.

Keywords: good and evil, lies, scandal, rumour, gossip

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Lillian Hellman, one of the prominent playwrights of the Depression period in America, is remarkably a social conscious playwright. Her plays highlight the social, political, and economic injustices that prevailed in the society. Her contemporaries like Susan Glaspell and Rachael Crothers have elaborated feministic perspectives in their literary compositions. As a playwright, Hellman is partly different from her contemporaries in reading the scenario of American society and depicting them in her plays. She has written eight plays namely, *The Children’s Hour* (1934), *Days to Come* (1936), *The Little Foxes* (1939), *Watch on the Rhine* (1941), *Another Part of the Forest* (1946), *The Autumn Garden* (1951), *The Lark* (1956), and *Toys in the Attic* (1961). She has published three memoirs: *An Unfinished Woman* (1969), *Pentimento: A Book of Portraits* (1973), and *Scoundrel Time* (1976). These memoirs deal with Hellman’s literary career, political activities, and personal relationships.

The Children's Hour is Lillian Hellman's first successful and sensational drama staged in Maxim Elliot Theatre in 1934 and it ran for 691 performances. The title of the play is an allusion. It is taken from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem titled "The Children's Hour," which delineates the theme of childhood innocence. But, in the case of Lillian Hellman, *The Children's Hour* is a revelation of childhood evil expressed through the character Mary Tilford. The play is based on an actual case trial in 1810 in Scotland where two school teachers were wrongly accused by a school student for their unnatural relationship. The objective of this paper is to reveal how Mary Tilford develops 'a bigger lie' and how the society admits, accepts and promotes children's lies in terms of gossips, rumours, and malicious attack on the two headmistresses of a Boarding School in New England. It also depicts the devastating effects of lies on three lives. In this regard, Doris V. Falk rightly observes: "*The Children's Hour* was a play about good and evil... the smear and the big lie, the power of the old and rich and rob – to despoil – others of livelihood and life" ("Signposts" 37).

The play deals with the lives of Mary Tilford, Martha Dobie, Karen Wright, Mrs. Amelia Tilford, and Dr. Joseph Cardin. Mary Tilford is a fourteen-year old girl who hates the school authorities and the strict rules imposed upon her. Karen and Martha are good friends from their childhood. During their college days, they maintain a healthy, cordial relationship. Later, they establish a boarding school for girls in Lancet, New England. Even though they are very responsible in handling their students and enriching their academic progress, Mary hates them for mistreating her in the school. Once she is punished by Karen for being late to the class. The scene clearly describes Mary's arrogance:

KAREN. Wait a minute, Mary, I've had the feeling—and I don't think that I'm wrong—that the girls here were happy; that they like Miss Dobie and me, that they liked the school. Do you think that's true?

MARY. Miss Wright, I have to get my Latin book.

KAREN. I thought it was true until you came here a year ago.

MARY. (without looking up) I'm not lying. I went out walking and I saw the flowers and they looked pretty and I didn't know it was so late.

KAREN. (impatiently) Stop it, Mary! I'm not interested in hearing that foolish story again. I know you got the flowers out of the garbage can. What I do want to know is why you feel you have to lie out of it. (TCH 11-12)

Mary is stubborn in nature and hence she sticks to her lies. She refuses to admit the fact that she is late to the class. To escape from the punishment, she falsely faints and falls. Dr. Joe Cardin, a medical practitioner, is invited to the school to treat Mary.

Mary, the destructive force, stimulates her schoolmates to attack maliciously the two headmistresses. Her lies are intentionally crafted for she wants to leave the school. She is a kind of villain as it is denoted by Doris V. Falk in his literary piece entitled *Lillian Hellman*:

In her manuscript notes for the play, Hellman compared Mary to Shakespeare's Iago, the villain in *Othello* who is traditionally considered to exemplify "motiveless malignancy."

Hellman indicates that Mary is different from Iago only in her fear of consequences... Although Mary is the initiating force of evil in the... execute her purposes. (37)

Mary persuades her friends to gossip about Martha Dobie and Karen Wright. Her friends, Peggy and Evelyn who overhear the conversation between Lilly Mortar and Martha Dobie report that Martha was discussing about her feelings for Karen. Suddenly Lilly accuses Martha and calls her feelings 'unnatural.' This conversation is misinterpreted by Mary's classmates Peggy and Evelyn, while they were engaged to reassign the classroom. Mary forces her friends to tell what they overheard. She then deliberately fabricates a lie and decides to plot a scheme to destroy the reputation of Martha and Karen. Her untruthful statements shock the audience. In this regard, Burns Mantle in *Best Plays of 1934-1935* states that "the curse of scandal mongering and whispering campaign of rumor and gossip is a kind of vicious lying that may wreck the lives of innocent persons" (33).

Mary rushes to her grandmother's house with a cunning plan accusing Karen and Martha as having an 'unnatural relationship.' Initially Mary's grandmother Mrs. Amelia Tilford dismisses her complaints about the teachers and does not encourage her lies. She is quite aware of Mary's childishness and irrational fears:

MRS. TILFORD. Stop crying. Mary

MARY. (raising her head from MRS. TILFORD'S lap) It's so nice here.

Grandma.

MRS. TILFORD. I'm glad you like being home with me, at your age you can hardly— (More seriously) What made you say such a terrible thing about Miss Wright and Miss Dobie? You know they wouldn't hurt you.

MARY. Oh! But they would. They—I— I (Breaks off, looks around as if hunting for a clue to her next word; then dramatically) I fainted today!

MRS. TILFORD. (alarmed) Fainted?

MARY. Yes. I did. My heart—I had a pain in my heart. I couldn't help having a pain in my heart, and when I fainted right in class, they called Cousin Joe and he said I didn't. He said it was maybe only that I ate my breakfast too fast and Miss Wright blamed me for it.... (TCH 34)

However, Mary's nature of weaving unreal web of incidents and accusations in her daily conversations gradually increases Mrs. Tilford's doubt on Martha and Karen. When Mary whispers and rapidly forms an accusation, the old woman is convinced and hence believes that Karen and Martha would have engaged in lesbian affair. Mary's malicious attack on Karen and Martha influences Mrs. Tilford, who makes a phone call first to Dr. Joe Cardin and then to the parents of children registered in Wright-Dobie school. She spreads Mary's poisonous charge to spoil the name and fame of the school. Richard Waternberg in his review in *The Oregonian* remarks: "one of the students, the disenchanted, bad seed Mary Tilford, spreads the rumor that Karen Wright and Martha Dobie have had 'unnatural relations,' and subsequent events leads to the closing of the school and the devastation for the two woman who ran it" (Waternberg).

After losing 'libel' suit in the court, Karen and Martha hide themselves in the vacant boarding school. They are publicly branded as "lesbians" and are vehemently rejected by the society. However, it is a false accusation made by a fourteen-year-old vindictive girl. And to Karen it is a bitter grief to accept the reality that Dr. Joe Cardin, her fiance has decided to leave the hometown and to settle in Vienna where he completed his studies, denying her genuine love for him. Later, Karen understands the fact that he too doubts her relationship with Martha as 'unnatural.'

Hellman's *The Children's Hour* is a tragedy and undoubtedly Martha and Karen are the real victims. The court case took up for ten years and two teachers felt that their life has become disrespectful; their social and economic credibility has been destroyed. They are shattered to believe themselves abnormal. Martha who really loves her friend is affected both physically and psychologically. Her chaotic mindset compels her to think that she has ruined Karen's life. Above all, they both can no longer stay together. Unable to face the reality, Martha steps to the nearest room and shoots herself. Doris V. Falk observes the severe impact of Mary's fabricated tale on Karen Wright and Martha Dobie:

The teachers become social outcasts, unable even to leave the house. The school is ruined, and distrust has even tainted Karen's engagement to Joe... that their marriage would never work and that his suspicions would never be laid to rest. ("Signposts" 35)

Mary's hatred nature towards Karen and Martha drives her to the extent of doing evil deeds to her own teachers. The problem of modern man is to define himself between good and evil that makes him an individual and helps him to create an identity for himself in the society. The characters in the play exhibit socio-psychological aspects which is the existing human nature of an individual and the whole (people). Mary and Karen have become inverted according to their natural expression of emotion. The student becomes wild while the teachers remain innocent. Hellman has structured Mary's character as intentional deceit and morally convicted to her desires.

Thus *The Children's Hour* delineates human evils in the form of gossip, lies, and scandals. Lillian Hellman in *The Children's Hour* portrays human nature: good and evil through her characters. The playwright in an interview with Hersey states that: "This is a play not really about lesbianism but about a lie" (Hersey 249). The destructive power of a lie forms the dominant theme of the play and how it ruins three lives – Martha Dobie, Karen Wright and Dr. Joe Cardin is skilfully depicted. The play highlights Mary's fabricated accusations on Karen and Martha and how it coerces Martha to commit suicide. Devoid of moral values and unaware of the devastating consequences of fabricating lies, Mary goes to the extent of ruining the lives of her own teachers. The play aptly expresses how a crafted lie of a young girl has the capability to destroy three lives.

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