

Mercy vs. Justice: A Reading beyond Good and Evil in Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour*

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ABSTRACT

The Children's Hour published in 1934 is Lillian Hellman's first play and the most controversial one. The controversy lies mainly in the lesbian theme in the early years of its publication when such a theme was not comfortably received by the social public. Besides the sensitive nature of the lesbian issue related to the plot, the common interpretation of the play as a pseudo-melodrama wherein the female protagonists Karen and Martha are victimized by the three villain characters, namely Mrs. Tilford, Lily Mortar, and Mary, is usually beyond suspicion. The lie told by the twelve-year-old child Mary eventually leads to the break-up of Karen's marriage and the death of Martha. Hence, Mary is considered as "tyrannical" or even "evil." However, Philip Armato's essay "'Good and Evil' in Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour*" published in 1989 changes the basic idea about the "good guys and the bad guys" in the play and causes another type of controversy over the nature of the characters. Armato argues that Karen and Martha, despite being good-natured teachers, have treated Mary and Lily Mortar respectively in rather mean and cruel way which incurs revenge and the final unintentional tragedy. In other words, the "good guys" are not purely virtuous and "the bad guys" are not purely evil. Moreover, the victims are victimizers at first and the victimizers are victims to begin with. The reinterpretation of the classic story opens another dimension of the theme and meaning of the play, which I would call the pursuit of justice and the lack of mercy. These are the hidden reasons behind the meanness of the good teachers and upright Mrs. Tilford and also the direct causes of their tragedy. This paper, therefore, tends to explore the opposition of mercy and justice beyond that of good and evil as the ultimate essence of Karen's psychological development and the downfall of Mrs. Tilford.

KEYWORDS

Lillian Hellman; *The Children's Hour*; justice and mercy; good and evil; American drama.

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"But mercy is above this sceptred sway; it is enthroned in the hearts of kings, it is an attribute to God himself; and earthly power doth then show likest God's when mercy seasons justice."

--Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*

The Children's Hour, published in 1934, is Lillian Hellman's first play and perhaps her most controversial. The controversy lies mainly in the introduction of a lesbian theme when such a theme was not comfortably received by the public. According to Katherine Lederer, "Because of its 'taboo' homo-erotic subject matter, well-known actresses were afraid to touch it. [...]" So the play was actually performed with a cast of relatively unknown actors and was initially banned in Boston, Chicago, and London. Two years later, when the play was adapted into a film, Hellman even changed the title to *These Three* and altered the theme to a heterosexual love triangle (Galens). However, the play became a Broadway sensation when it first opened in November, 1934, and again when it was revived in 1952. In 1962, when another screen adaptation was released, the theme of lesbianism was recovered and the work was widely received without any of the earlier moral outrage. The play now is considered one of Hellman's best works.

The play is based on an early nineteenth-century Scottish libel lawsuit recounted by William Roughead and entitled "Closed Doors, or The Great Drumsheugh Case", recorded in his collection *Bad Companions* (1931).¹ In the case, two teachers who run an all-girl boarding school initiate a libel case against a local and respected noblewoman whose granddaughter, a sixteen-year-old girl, accuses them of lesbianism. The noblewoman then uses her influence on other parents and makes them withdraw their children from the school. Because of the background of the girl, who was born in India of an Indian mother and lived her first eight years in her native country with her unmarried mother's family, the judges suspect she has been exposed to deviant sexual knowledge since the allegation is a crime so infamous and unheard of in the country (Tuhkanen 1006). The case ends up an out-of-court settlement, because the teachers lack the money to continue the libel case (Titus 217). Hellman changed the original character from a teenage girl of mixed heritage to a twelve-year-old English girl whose knowledge of eroticism comes from reading of some forbidden books instead of, as implied in the actual case, her parentage and upbringing. Thus the theme

¹ For the details of the Scottish lawsuit and the relevant alterations regarding the issue of lesbianism in Hellman's play, see Mikko Tuhkanen, "Breeding (and) Reading: Lesbian Knowledge, Eugenic Discipline, and *The Children's Hour*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 48.4 (Winter 2002): 1001-40.

of lesbianism is switched from the interdependence of sexual deviance and racial impurity² to the destructiveness of the lie that the child fabricates and the abuse of power on the part of an authority figure.

Over the years, critics have continued to discuss some of the important issues raised in the play, and their opinions have become more discursive as time goes by. Take the interpretation of Martha's suicide for example, Mary Titus focuses on the theme of lesbianism and criticizes Hellman for her conservative attitude in conforming to the contemporary sexual ideology. However, another critic Janet V. Haedicke, insists on Hellman's feminist perspective through her representation of female oppression in the play. Besides the topic of lesbianism, in the early years of its publication and performance, the play was commonly interpreted as a pseudo-melodrama wherein the female protagonists, Karen and Martha, are victimized by the three villainous characters, namely Mrs. Tilford, Lily Mortar, and Mary. Writing on the occasion of the revival of the play in 1953, Eric Bentley finds numerous flaws in the drama and criticizes Hellman for being "less concerned to see life than to manipulate it" and that the villain is a "*diabolus ex machine*" -- smuggled in at the outset without psychological explanation. The play belongs to "the publicist's drama" or "the drama of indignation" while the author's animus is against some certain "enemy" -- in this case, a social force dominated by the three antagonists Mrs. Mortar, Mrs. Tilford, and Mary. The lie told by the twelve-year-old child eventually leads to the break-up of Karen's marriage and the death of Martha. Despite being shocked at the element of lesbianism and the unusual wickedness in a child,³ the audience and the reader are still convinced by the interpretation that the two innocent teachers are victimized by the "tyrannical child." Hence, Mary is judged to be "sheer evil" (Bentley), a "monster" (Clark), or "the embodiment of pure evil" (Adler), or even "the summation of falsity, depravity, and cruelty" (Isaacs).⁴ The play is about how innocent people are victimized by the malicious, although the victims are not exonerated or rewarded and their adversaries are not punished, as in a typical melodrama. The play, although seen as "well-made" or "melodramatic," actually denies the audience the usual satisfaction of poetic justice (Estrin 5).

² Actually, Tuhkanen does a very detailed analysis on the link between half-breeds and sexual degenerates that was based on the intertwined disciplines of sexology and racial sciences in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and suggests that representations of sexual perversions recall and play upon those of racial hybridities in Hellman's text. Mary is referred to by Cardin as being "strong as a mule," an inter-species animal, and depicted by the author as having a "mixed, half grown mind." Martha too is described as "half one thing, half another." The half-ness and in-betweenness of Mary and Martha link them to the historical representations of "half-breeds," and hence imply sexual degeneracy.

³ As Eric Bentley points out, the play is an inversion of a traditional melodrama, in which the plot would concern a small child victimized by a tyrannical teacher, instead of two innocent teachers whose lives are ruined due to the actions of a tyrannical child.

⁴ Clark, "Lillian Hellman," *College English* 6 (Dec. 1944): 128; Jacob H. Adler, *Lillian Hellman* (Austin, 1969): 2; Edith Isaacs, "Lillian Hellman, Playwright on the March," *Theatre Arts* 23 (Jan. 1944): 9. The references above are quoted from Philip M. Armato's essay "Good and Evil" in Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour*, *Educational Theatre Journal* 25 (Dec. 1973): 443-47, reprinted in Mark W. Estrin, ed., *Critical Essays on Lillian Hellman* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1989): 73-78.

As a matter of fact, the reason why Mary is considered cruel and evil is mainly due to the tragic consequences of her lie. In other words, it is the outcome that decides the extent of Mary's evil reputation, not the other way around. Actually, in the introduction to a collection of her plays in 1942, Hellman connected her childhood-self to Mary by recalling the time when she, like Mary in the play, read the prohibited book *Mademoiselle de Maupin* and faked a heart attack. The characterization of Mary also resembles the playwright when she makes up stories and forces the girls to speak the lines she provides. The play reminds the author, as Hellman states, of the world of "the half-remembered, the half-observed, the half-understood" (Titus 218-19). This information suggests that the playwright had no intention to depict Mary as evil, despite the negative view of the character in the general reception of the critics and the audience. Indeed, the playwright even defended Mary in public. After the play was revived in 1952, Hellman wrote in an article in the *Sunday New York Times* that "When I read that story I thought of the child as neurotic, sly, but not the utterly malignant creature which playgoers see in her. I never see characters as monstrously as the audience do. [...]" (Bryer 25).⁵ Furthermore, in a 1965 interview, Hellman defended her play against its interpretation as a melodrama by saying that it was about goodness and badness instead of good people and bad people (Bryer 57).⁶ Hellman had no intention to portray a dramatic conflict just between innocent victims and malevolent foes. There are good and bad things done by people who may not intend to cause such outcomes. The three "villains" in the play convey three different kinds of badness -- Mary embodies wickedness and stubbornness, Mrs. Mortar is characterized by carelessness and cowardice, and Mrs. Tilford shows indiscretion and gullibility. People are compelled to do certain things under certain circumstances according to their impulses or principles without necessarily being concerned about the unexpected effects on other people. However, despite the playwright's protestations, the dramatic structure of the Ibsenite well-made play and the elements of secrecy, blackmail, and death still evoke in the readers a melodramatic image in which blameless individuals are victimized by the evil actions of malignant personalities.

Philip Armato's 1973 essay "'Good and Evil' in Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour*" changes the basic idea about the "good guys and the bad guys" in the play and arouses another type of controversy over the nature of the characters. Armato argues that Karen and Martha, despite being good-natured teachers, have treated Mary and Lily Mortar in rather mean and cruel ways which inspire revenge that unintentionally lead to the final tragic

⁵ The statement is quoted from Harry Gilroy, "The Bigger the Lie," *New York Times* 14 Dec. 1952, sec. 2, 3, 4; reprinted in Jackson R. Bryer, ed., *Conversations with Lillian Hellman* (Jackson: UP of Mississippi): 24-26.

⁶ The interview was conducted by John Phillips and Anne Hollander, "The Art of the Theater: Lillian Hellman -- An Interview," *Paris Review* 33 (Winter-Spring 1965): 64-95; reprinted in Jackson R. Bryer, ed., *Conversations with Lillian Hellman* (Jackson: UP of Mississippi): 53-72.

outcome. In other words, the two teachers are not purely virtuous, and their attackers are not purely evil. The victims are first victimizers, and vice versa. Moreover, the dichotomy is not between the main characters that are divided into two groups, as good and bad or victims and victimizers, but between the sense of justice and the sense of mercy. This reinterpretation of the classic story opens up another dimension of the themes and meanings in the play. The cause of the tragedy is not the evil done to good people, but the flaws in humanity, which I would call the over-insistent pursuit of justice and the lack of mercy. These are the hidden reasons behind the behavior of the good teachers and upright Mrs. Tilford, and also the direct causes of the crucial turn of events in their lives. Finally, it is the intolerant and unforgiving attitude toward others and herself that drives Martha to death.

In the first half of the play, Karen punishes Mary harshly, Martha gets rid of her aunt Mrs. Mortar by speaking cruel words, and Mrs. Tilford spreads the news that causes the withdrawal of all the children from Wright-Dobie School. These three characters emphasize the principle of justice and think they are doing the right thing without taking into consideration the feelings of other people. As a result, Mary tells the lie to take her revenge on the two teachers, Karen and Martha file the libel suit to fight with Mrs. Tilford, and Mrs. Mortar rejects the chance to give a positive testimony in court. They put strict justice first and see no need for forgiveness or tolerance, and thus Karen and Martha, who lose the libel suit, become the main victims in the inevitable tragedy. At the end of the play, after Karen's name is cleared and Martha commits suicide, Mrs. Tilford, the victimizer, suffers because her conscience will torture her with the fact that she wronged two innocent young women and ruined their lives. Mrs. Tilford joins Karen and Martha in the group of people who victimize others at first and end up becoming victims mainly because of their insistence upon the pursuit of justice without mercy. Consequently, I will analyze the element of "justice" as the cause of the tragedy and the element of "mercy" as a possible means of redemption for the characters in the play. The three characters of Karen, Martha, and Mrs. Tilford will be the focus in the first part of this work to reveal the real origin of the tragedy, and then the revenge taken by Mary and others will be discussed to show the results of the grave and tragic situation. In the end, only after Martha's death and Mrs. Tilford's repentance, does Karen finally realize the meaning of mercy when she forgives Mrs. Tilford and faces the rest of her life with a new attitude. This paper, therefore, will explore the opposition of mercy and justice, beyond that of good and evil, as the ultimate fracture in Karen's psychological development and the downfall of Mrs. Tilford.

The theme of mercy versus justice is spelled out at the beginning of the play, when we have the scene in the classroom where Mrs. Mortar is instructing the girls by having them recite some lines from *The Merchant of Venice*. The students obviously do not enjoy the

recitation, as Evelyn is maliciously trimming the hair of Rosalie, who sits in front of her, and Lois and Catherine are studying Latin secretly for the afternoon exam. Even Peggy, the girl who is reciting does not concentrate on what she is reading as she is described as “being bored” and raises her voice intentionally to give warning signals to Evelyn. The teacher Mrs. Mortar does not enjoy the class any more than the students do as she is described as listening with eyes closed in her “over-fancy clothes” and with “obviously touched-up hair” (5). Although the recitation is conveyed in such an offhand way, the main themes, that is, the concepts of mercy and justice, are revealed here. From page six to page eight, the word “mercy” is mentioned six times and the word “pity” twice. Furthermore, Peggy is interrupted again and again by Mrs. Mortar and other students when she comes to the line “but mercy is above [...].” The meaning of the line receives little attention while the recitation is repeated again and again. Mrs. Mortar is dissatisfied with Peggy’s unemotional voice, and demands that she repeat the line with a feeling of pity.

MRS. MORTAR (sadly, reproachfully): Peggy, can’t you imagine
yourself as Portia? Can’t you read the lines with some feeling,
some pity? (Dreamily) Pity. Ah! As Sir Henry said to me many’s
time, pity makes the actress. Now, why can’t *you* feel pity?
[.....]

MRS. MORTAR: Now, Peggy, if you would only try to submerge yourself
in this problem. You are pleading for the life of a man. (7)

Then she continues the lines where Peggy has been interrupted and speaks out the major message of the play that “earthly power doth then show likest God’s when mercy seasons justice” (7). However, Mrs. Mortar, an actress herself, who can recite well with emotion, ironically demonstrates the opposite as the story goes along and contributes to the destructive power which ruins the lives of two young women. The feeling of pity exists only in her acting skills, and not in her real life.

The recitation is of great significance but it is not noticed at first. The movie adaptation in 1962 even cuts the scene, and hence alters the dialectic structure of justice and mercy drawn on the plot in *The Merchant of Venice*. If we analyze the quotation from Shakespeare’s play, we may discover the lesson meant to be conveyed through the tragedy. People seek consolation and relief in nothing but mercy, which is above human sovereign power and near Godly favor. But to our dismay, human weakness often gets the upper hand over wisdom. Hellman skips the beginning of Portia’s lines, “The quality of mercy is not strained. It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven” (Shakespeare 111). Even Mrs. Mortar, like everybody else, knows that mercy is indispensable when it comes to a person’s life, but it never occurs to her that she needs to show mercy to her niece, who she thinks treats her

cruelly, and as a result she does not go to court for the libel case. This is critical to the result of the case, which leads to Cardin's distrust of Karen, the break-up of their engagement, Martha's confession, and her eventual suicide. While Mrs. Mortar continues her recitation, Peggy points out that she skipped three lines from Portia's speech, which are as follows: "therefore, Jew, though justice be thy plea, consider this, that in the course of justice, none of us should see salvation" (Shakespeare 112). The meaning of the three lines skillfully skipped by the author and unintentionally overlooked by Mrs. Mortar concerns the main cause of the tragedy for Shylock in Shakespeare's play, and for Karen, Martha, and Mrs. Tilford in Hellman's play, in their insistence on the pursuit of justice at the expense of mercy.

Karen Wright, whose last name implies the principle of righteousness,⁷ makes her entry right after the recitation scene. The description of her in the stage direction indicates that she is an "attractive" and "pleasant" woman "without sacrifice of warmth or dignity"(9). The girl students adore and respect her as she expresses her tolerance for Evelyn's mischievous behavior and her concern for Helen's loss of her bracelet. Even so, such a loving person has already shown her impatience and intolerance for two characters, namely, Mary and Mrs. Mortar. When she appears, she smiles at the girls but gives Mrs. Mortar "an annoyed look" (10). As to Mortar's complaint about Peggy's unfeeling recitation of Portia's lines from Shakespeare's play, Karen defends Peggy by admitting that she herself does not appreciate Portia either; at least, not now (10). The fact that she takes sides with Peggy shows her incomprehension and neglect of the complicated situation of human relationships and the hidden reality of human psychology. She is too naïve and stubborn to appreciate Portia's plea for mercy at this point in the play. This foreshadows the coming storm which consists of the accusation of lesbianism, the libel case, and the eventual, tragedy, just as Shylock's destiny reverses from being an oppressor to one oppressed. Only when Karen and other characters learn the significance of what it means to be merciful and forgiving, can they really become mature enough to face the harsh reality of life and the weakness of human nature.

Karen's unwillingness to show mercy is most noticeably revealed in her insistence upon the strict punishment for Mary's misbehavior. Obviously, Mary is a serial liar; she cannot become adjusted to the orderly life and tight schedule in the boarding school, and thus invents some appealing excuses to cover her behavior. In the opening scene, she is late for Mrs. Mortar's class because she stayed up late reading a banned book the previous night.

⁷ Mary Titus argues that Karen's last name "Wright" implies that she is the only "right" person with regard to sexual orientation. According to Hellman's notes when writing the play, the three "abnormal" characters Mrs. Mortar, Mary Tilford, and Martha Dobie, are connected by their qualities of "incompleteness, ambiguity, and marginality." There is an entirely female society full of "jealousy and manipulation." Suggestions of lesbian desire are diffused throughout the text, touching everyone except Karen. The adding of the character Cardin serves to clarify Karen's "right" sexual orientation. Also, the surname "Wright" suggests "write" or "playwright" which makes Karen "a counterpart to Hellman, the playwright who sought to confirm her heterosexuality publicly: to 'write' herself as 'right.'" See Titus, 219 and 226.

To avoid being punished, she presents some flowers taken from the garbage can to Mrs. Mortar, who is very grateful, as she is shown, as a former actress, to still indulge herself in the vanity of receiving applause and bouquets. Furthermore, when Karen exposes Mary's lie and corrects her behavior, she is stubborn enough that she angrily insists her lies are the truth. Here, we know that Mary is always late for the scheduled activities and always lies about her reason to avoid being blamed. She never repents and never admits her misbehavior, even when she is confronted with the truth. It is clear that Mary is poor at adjusting to school life, as Karen has observed, and she also holds a grudge against Karen, who catches her and tries to correct her behavior. She feels hurt and exclaims:

MARY: [...] You never believe me. You believe everybody but me. It's always like that. Everything I say you fuss at me about. Everything I do is wrong. (12)

To Karen and the audience, the accusation is ridiculous, as a serial liar complains about being disbelieved and keeps lying without a bit of repentance. As a teacher, Karen thinks that it's her duty to teach her a lesson by punishing her and being strict about her recurring mistakes. As Armato points out, however, the punishment is too harsh for a little girl and for such a minor mistake, not to mention that the effect of the punishment is negative. Mary never does repent or correct her behavior. Karen's open revelation of her lies and the harsh punishment only reinforce Mary's sense of being a victim, because the punishment is aimed to deprive her of the things she loves, such as her favored roommate and the boat-races on Saturday, which was promised to her beforehand. Hence, Mary is like an animal struggling against the malicious actions that she feels are being imposed on her. As usual, she lies again to deal with her difficult situation, and her lies get bigger and nastier as her situation becomes more difficult.

Nevertheless, when she pretends to faint and have a heart attack, she is being childish, rather than, as some critics argue, malicious. As a smart child, she could predict that the school will have Dr. Cardin come in to check on her, and her act will be discovered. Her pretension is an attempt to gain sympathy rather than a deliberate tactic to deceive. When she is disbelieved and exposed again and again, she complains to Karen:

MARY: [...] If anybody else was sick they'd be put to bed and petted. You're always mean to me. I get blamed and punished for everything [...] all the time for everything. (24)

She then cries violently. Although her behavior is wrong and her complaint is unfounded, her agony is real. Actually, she is really asking for comfort and confirmation when she resorts to her socially unacceptable behavior. She seems to have problems expressing the true feelings on her mind, and is always inclined to say the opposite in order to escape any responsibility.

When Karen appoints Rosalie as her new roommate, she exclaims, “Rosalie hates me” (23), although the real situation is that she hates Rosalie. When she feels deprived because she is punished by Karen, she grumbles that “She hated me” (28), but again the truth is that it is Mary that hates Karen. In Mary’s mind, neither Karen nor her friends like Peggy understand what she really means; they only deny and try to correct her. Psychologically, she has a thirst for recognition, but in reality she cannot adapt to the school environment. Therefore, she keeps on misbehaving and gets upset when she is caught. When she is driven to desperation time and again, she finally concocts the scheme to accuse her teachers of lesbianism to escape from punishment -- she has to convince herself and others that it is not her fault. She also wants to take revenge upon her teachers so as to save herself in front of her only savior, her grandmother. Since she feels that whatever she says will be ignored and disbelieved, making up an even bigger and nastier lies to attract the attention is only natural for her. Ironically, bigger lies are sometimes more willingly accepted (Gilroy 24), and the effect of the lie that starts as a drop of black water on a piece of white gauze becomes a stain that gets bigger and bigger until it is out of hand and cannot be washed out. It eventually ruins everybody’s life.

In discussions about the villains and victimizers in the tragedy, commentators tend to focus on Mary, who initiates the lie; Mrs. Mortar, whose complaints against the two young women and her absence in court contribute to the credibility of the accusation; and Mrs. Tilford, who endorses the accusation by spreading the news, which convinces parents to withdraw all the girls from school. Looking back on the tragic events, one agrees that Mary is still the first to blame, since she pieces bits of information from here and there together and tells an ugly lie which directly leads to the rest of the tragedy. For audiences it is perhaps the most shocking thing that such an apparently evil act is undertaken by a little girl, who is usually assumed to be innocent or helpless in literary tradition. In fact, Hellman never intends Mary to be an essentially evil character; noting, “It’s the results of her lie that make her so dreadful” (Bryer 25). While attention is usually focused on Mary, the individuals who help the lie take shape and create an environment in which it can be so easily propagated and believed are less often considered. Indeed, the key factor that can turn Karen from a victimizer to a victim is precisely her insistence on justice and her lack of mercy towards those who have done wrong. She does not pay attention to Mary’s psychological need to be recognized and appreciated in public, thinking that it is right to expose the lie and punish the delinquent child. Karen does not realize that her role is not primarily that of a judge who pursues righteousness and justice, but rather a teacher who educates, guides, and ideally inspires the students to strive for a brighter future. Obviously, Karen’s teaching and correction do not achieve this goal with regard to Mary.

As a matter of fact, it does occur to Karen and Martha that they should try something to improve the situation, such as talking to Mrs. Tilford about Mary or asking Joe Cardin, Mrs. Tilford's nephew, to talk to her on their behalf. However, they do not do it in time, and thus lose the opportunity to clarify Mary's behavior and habit of lying to Mrs. Tilford. In Karen's discussion with Martha about Mary, she already senses something is wrong with the girl and possibly with the way they treat her.

KAREN: She's a strange girl.

MARTHA: That's putting it mildly.

KAREN: It's funny. We always talk about the child as if she were a grown woman.

MARTHA: It's not so funny. There's something the matter with the kid.

That's been true ever since the first day she came. She causes trouble here; she's bad for the other girls. I don't know what it is -- it's a feeling I've got that it's wrong somewhere -- (14)

Karen's statement spells out exactly the problem which lies at the heart of the situation. Mary seems too sophisticated and calculating to be taken as an innocent child. People cannot help but over-react to her misbehavior, which in turns sets off the chain of events leading to the final tragedy in the play. The two teachers focus on her anti-social attitude instead of the motivation behind it. Mary is obviously unable to adjust to the disciplined life in the boarding school, but the teachers only notice the results of the poor adjustment, while ignoring the causes. When Martha tells Cardin that they do not know what to do with Mary, Cardin just takes it lightly and answers: "Aren't you taking this too seriously?" (22) If Karen and Martha were more aware of the fact that Mary is a spoiled and clever child who needs to be treated with more patience and tolerance concerning her faults, the girl might not have been pushed into taking revenge against them as if they were her enemies whom she must fight against with worst ammunition she can muster. Unfortunately, the insistence on the "right thing" to do without giving some leeway to Mary, who has committed the wrong doing, eventually incurs the most damaging loss for Karen and Martha, who only mean to educate and correct a misbehaving child.

Among the victimizers, Mary is the one who rebels out of natural human instinct. As a spoiled child who possesses the indulgent love of an authority figure like Mrs. Tilford, it is reasonable for her to utilize all the resources she can get to relieve the tensions caused by her difficult situation in school. Therefore, when Mary feels that she is mistreated, she seeks help from Mrs. Tilford against her "enemies," in this case, Karen and Martha. In order to achieve her goal, Mary has to persuade her grandmother by every means at her disposal, including crying, exaggerating, and even lying. Mary does not deliberately conceive a lie in order to take revenge on her teachers, as Armato argues (75), but rather her purpose on the one hand

is to try to avoid the blame from her grandmother because she ran away from school, and on the other, to avoid the possibly more severe punishment if she is sent back to school. In other words, the accusation against her teachers, despite its ugly nature, is more of an act of self-defense than a direct attack on them. The whole statement of the lie is a gradual development following Mrs. Tilford's reaction to the situation instead of a calculated assault.

At first, Mrs. Tilford is on the side of the school and decides to send Mary back because it is "a very bad thing to do" (33), that is, running away from school without permission and "frighten[ing] people by pretending to be sick" (34). She thinks that Mary is "imagining" (34) she is being punished continually. During their argument, as Mary cannot persuade her grandmother about her innocence and her severe condition, she becomes more anxious and even panicky. She cannot go back to school because she is afraid that she is going to be punished again for running away, not to mention the other harsh punishments already in effect, such as being excluded from the recreation periods and being grounded for the weekend, and having to share a room with Rosalie, whom she dislikes. Mrs. Tilford's insistence on such disciplinary measures, which she thinks are the right thing to do, ironically traps Mary in a predicament in which she is stubborn and desperate enough to tell a bold lie in order to escape. These are the circumstances under which Mary invents the terrible story about Karen and Martha by twisting Mrs. Mortar's words she heard from Peggy and Evelyn. Although she uses the exact words that were heard, Mary picks out only fragments and connects them improperly to make it appear that Mrs. Mortar was dismissed and punished because the two students discovered a scandalous secret. When Mrs. Tilford begins to pay attention to what Mary has said and shows that she is wavering between belief and disbelief, Mary becomes more imaginative until she convinces Mrs. Tilford not to send her back to school for the rest of the term (39). Although Mrs. Tilford hesitates before she decides to believe what Mary tells her, she still chooses to treat Mary's words as those of an adult. It does not occur to her that a smart, spoiled child like Mary will do anything to get her way. Again Mary is treated more like a grown-up than she actually is, and thus the lie of a little girl becomes powerfully destructive with the assistance of an authority figure in the adult world.

Mary does tell a horrible lie about her teachers, which leads to an irretrievable disaster, but this does not prove that Mary is evil by nature. On the contrary, Mary is just a stubborn child who tries to escape discipline by lying and manipulating other children like Rosalie.⁸

⁸ Rosalie, being a weak person, is easily taken advantage of and manipulated by a tougher character. In the opening scene of the play, Evelyn enjoys herself by trimming Rosalie's hair in class while Rosalie sits nervously with her head bent back at an awkward angle in front of her. At the end of the first act, Mary treats Peggy and Evelyn violently in order to get the money for her fare to go back home. There is obviously a pecking order among the girls, with Mary at the top and Rosalie at the bottom of it. This may explain why Rosalie has the habit of stealing little things from people around her in order to make up for her otherwise subservient position. Unfortunately, her stealing of Helen's bracelet becomes the cause for her to suffer from Mary's domination, and she is then forced to become her accomplice. Thus, the hierarchy between teachers and students is actually reproduced in miniature among the society of students.

The problem lies in the supposition that Mary can be dealt with the same way as a sensible adult; hence the adults concerned lack any merciful understanding of Mary's mental agony. When Mary complains that she is always "blamed and punished for everything" (24), she is not citing an objective fact, but telling the truth about her feelings. When she does not get sympathy and support from people around her, she exaggerates and elaborates on her own miserable condition in order to get approval from Mrs. Tilford. Karen and Martha wonder what to do with a child like Mary, but they do not consider that the best course of action is to be more patient regarding her misbehavior and express more tolerance for her stubborn attitude. Having some compassion for what a person feels and acts in certain situations can release the tension in personal relationships, and handling a child with various skills is especially crucial in conducting the child down the right path of socialization. In short, if only Karen, Martha, and Mrs. Tilford could have a little mercy for how Mary feels as a child, despite her misbehavior and rebellious attitude, the tragedy could have been avoided.

Besides Karen changing from a victimizer to a victim and Mary from a victim to a victimizer, another reversal of fortune is between Martha and her aunt Mrs. Mortar. Mrs. Mortar is presented as an inappropriate teacher who still indulges in the daydreams of former life as an actress and the public acclaim she enjoyed onstage. She is insensible, foolish, and easily deceived by the flattery and sweet talk of her students. Thus it is shown that, in some ways, old people can be as foolish as children. Although Mrs. Mortar behaves poorly as a teacher, she is, like Mary, still eager for attention and even demands adulation. She stays at the Wright-Dobie school simply because she has no better place to go. Nevertheless, she still considers herself important, being an older woman and a former famous actress. Karen gives Mrs. Mortar an "annoyed look" when she appears in the classroom, takes sides with Peggy against her complaint, and even calls her "the other pet nuisance" when talking to Martha. Being Mrs. Mortar's niece, Martha's attitude is even more disrespectful, as she confronts her directly with relentless, sarcastic remarks. Karen and Martha are respected and good-natured teachers, but they refuse to show more patience and tolerance toward Mrs. Mortar. They think they are being generous by just taking her into the school, but Mrs. Mortar feels neglected and ill-treated. She tries to ask for more understanding from her niece, only to get an unfriendly response.

MRS. MORTAR: Karen is consistently rude to me, and you know it.

MARTHA: I know that she is very polite to you, and -- what's more important -- very patient.

MRS. MORTAR: Patient with me? I, who have worked my fingers to the bone!

MARTHA: Don't tell that to yourself too often, Aunt Lilly; you'll come to believe it. (17-18)

There seems to be some evidence of competition in the air. Mary Titus argues that there is potentially triangular lesbian relationship among the three, while Mrs. Mortar is fighting for more favor from Martha out of jealousy over the close relationship between her niece and Karen.⁹ Mrs. Mortar's fighting is in vain, however, whether due to lesbian affection or just a childlike demand for recognition, as both Karen and Martha want to get rid of her as soon as possible. Martha is quite cruel in doing this, because she knows that Mrs. Mortar is only pretending about London and actually has no place to go.

MRS. MORTAR: You're trying to get rid of me.

MARTHA: That's it. We don't want you around when we dig up the buried treasure.

MRS. MORTAR: So? You're turning me out? At my age! Nice, grateful girl you are.

MARTHA: Oh, my God, how can anybody deal with you? [...]

MRS. MORTAR: (with dignity) Please do not raise your voice.

MARTHA: You ought to be glad I don't do worse. (18-19)

After the long and heated confrontation, Mrs. Mortar no doubt feels oppressed and insulted. It's only natural for her to seize any chance to get even with her oppressor, just like Shylock, who insists on the payment of a pound of flesh instead of triple the money he lent. Mrs. Mortar, being in the weaker position, especially economically, has no way to avenge herself other than fighting back verbally, bringing up the issue that hurts Martha the most--Karen's upcoming marriage. She exclaims: "The wise thing is to stay out of your way when *he's* in the house," and "Any day that he's in the house is a bad day," or complains: "You always take your spite out on me" (19). She wants to show that she is older and wiser, and knows Martha's mind well as she has known her since she was a child.

MRS. MORTAR: I know what I know. Every time that man comes into this house, you have a fit. 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 of him, that's what it is.

[.....]

MRS. MORTAR: You're fonder of Karen, and I know that. And it's unnatural, just as unnatural as it can be. You don't like their being together. You were always like that even as a child. If you had a little girl friend, you always got mad when she liked anybody else.

⁹ Mary Titus argues that besides Martha's affection for Karen, Mrs. Mortar feels in competition with Karen for the attention of Martha, her niece. Mary also fights against Karen and Martha for Mrs. Tiford's favor. Thus, according to Hellman's personal notes, Mrs. Mortar, Mary, and Martha are all somewhat being "abnormal." See Titus, 219-20.

Well, you'd better get a beau of your own now -- a woman of your age.
(19-20)

It seems that Mrs. Mortar foresees the unusual relationship between Karen and Martha, in accordance with Martha's later confession. In fact, Mrs. Mortar is actually incapable of understanding human behavior; therefore she is not a generous person who could tolerate any "abnormal" condition once she is aware of its presence. Since she is also senile and self-centered, she is more concerned about protecting herself than denouncing Karen. Actually Mrs. Mortar is only venting her anger by hurting Martha because she has been hurt in the first place. Her words are more like the vindictive exchanges in a family argument than solid accusations. In this case, the worst thing she can think of to attack is Martha's preference for a female friend instead of boyfriend. Being "unnatural" here only means acting improperly or strangely because Martha is too dependent and immature to lead her own life. She is still acting like a little girl who is jealous of anyone who takes away her friend. In fact, it is quite "natural" for a little girl to be jealous if her best friend starts to befriend another person, and it is thus not unusual for Martha to feel upset and abandoned when Karen, the one she has been so attached to over the years, finally decides to get married, especially when she herself has neither a sweetheart nor other social life. Mrs. Mortar's comments are intended to ridicule Martha or laugh at her in the same way that the latter does to her. Martha understands perfectly, so she explains to Mrs. Tilford that her aunt is a stupid woman who only wants to annoy her (53). As a matter of fact, by making Joe Cardin the target of Martha's resentment, Mrs. Mortar escapes from being the real nuisance for Martha. Just like Mary's reaction when being scolded and punished, Mrs. Mortar's remarks are a form of self-defense.

Mrs. Mortar's angry words are used between family out of impulsive feelings at the moment, not meant for other people to hear or understand. Unfortunately, her words are overheard and taken up by the students, especially by Mary, who eventually pieces together the fragmentary information and adds some imagination of her own, being inspired by her reading of the forbidden erotic book the previous night, to suit her purpose of persuading her grandma. The worst part is that Mary's lie and Mrs. Mortar's venting words eventually prove true after Martha's desperate confession, and hence set in motion the tragedy in the play. Thus it is seen that, Mrs. Mortar, albeit unknowingly, is the source of the information that the accusation of lesbianism is based on. Consequently, she could have testified in defense of Martha and Karen in court when they filed the libel suit. But due to both her ignorance of the seriousness of the matter and her neglect of other people's interest, she does not attempt to clarify the matter. When she finally comes back to the school from her tour after the two young women have lost their case, she seems jovial and unconcerned, as if nothing had ever happened, and answers Martha's questions just lightly.

MRS. MORTAR: Why, Martha, I didn't refuse to come back at all.

That's the wrong way to look at it. I was on a tour; that's a moral obligation, you know. (62)

[.....]

MRS. MORTAR: . . . It couldn't have done any good for all of us to get mixed up in that unpleasant notoriety -- (Sees MARTHA's face hastily) But now that you've explained it, why, I do see it your way, and I'm sorry I didn't come back. But now that I am here, I'm going to stand shoulder to shoulder with you. I know what you've gone through, but the body and heart *do* recover, you know [...] (63)

Mrs. Mortar's excuse is simply that she does not feel like going to court for anything or anybody. She is indifferent toward the difficult situation of the two young women, and has no real concern for their loss of the libel suit and their fate because they did not care about her feelings when they threw her out of the school in the first place. 'Martha cannot forgive Mrs. Mortar and Mrs. Mortar has no intention of making amends for her own negligence; they just fall into another dispute. Martha's reluctance to show mercy is the cause of Mrs. Mortar's angry words and then indifference. Her intolerance with Mrs. Mortar's fault drives the older woman away again and eventually leads to the final tragic outcome.

The third person who turns from a victimizer to a victim is Mrs. Tilford, Mary's grandmother and Cardin's aunt. Mrs. Tilford is referred to by Cardin as typical "old New England stock" who still thinks "honor is honor and dinner's at eight thirty" (21). She is an old-fashioned, stubborn woman who is serious about what should and should not be done. When she appears in the second act, she is described as a large and dignified person in her sixties, and she helps Karen and Martha when they first start the school. This makes her an authoritative and respected figure to people around her, and perhaps a representative of justice itself. Being a conservative and powerful figure in town, it is natural that she feels hurt and offended once she is persuaded by Mary's lie, since the relationship between Karen and Martha is a taboo one which she thinks will jeopardize the education of her granddaughter and other children. Considering her high position in town, she cannot keep silent. She decides that she needs to take some steps to protect herself and all the children. Therefore, she advises Cardin to break up with Karen and then makes phone calls to advise other parents to withdraw their children from the school. Since the relationship between Karen and Martha is in her opinion inappropriate, it is wrong for Cardin and Karen to be engaged, and wrong for the students to continue studying at Wright-Dobie school. In her mind she is taking the proper course of action based on what she has been told, and thus, when asked the reason behind such moves she gives her answer without reservation: "It had to be done" (50).

Hence Mrs. Tilford acts in the name of justice with little consideration about what the consequences will be and what trouble it will cause the two young women:

MARTHA: [...] you're not playing with paper dolls. We're human beings, see?
It's our lives you're fooling with. *Our* lives [...].

MRS. TIFORD: [...] You've been playing with a lot of children's lives, and that's why I stopped you. (more calmly) I know how serious this is for you, how serious it is for all of us. (48)

In order to uphold the flag of righteousness against what she sees as immorality, lives can be treated like "paper dolls," as Martha phrases it. Here, the suspicion, fear, and attack on lesbianism incurs the spirit of witch-hunting, and results in the demonisation and exclusion of the supposed sexual deviants. Once Mrs. Tilford believes what Mary tells her, she does not want to talk to Karen and Martha and is reluctant to hear what they say regarding the matter. Nevertheless, the confrontation in the second act is unavoidable. Mrs. Tilford, considering herself on the side of justice and righteousness, exclaims that she would not have the two women in her house. Her sense of disgust and contempt is openly expressed, as if the two teachers have an unsightly and contagious disease. Eventually Mrs. Tilford, by abusing the power she has in the community, destroys the marriage, career, and even lives of these two young women. The insistence upon justice, therefore, places Mrs. Tilford in the role of Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*, who retaliates first for the crimes against him and finally ends up pleading for forgiveness as the wheel of fortune reverses. The punishment that she suffers is also comparable to Shylock's loss of his property and daughter, since both lose what is most precious to them: Shylock his property and Mrs. Tilford her clear conscience and peace of mind.

When Karen's and Martha's career is ruined, they feel the same sense of being deprived and victimized as Mary and Mrs. Mortar do. Their reaction is similar too, when they fight back and take revenge just as Mary and Mrs. Mortar have done. They need to get even with their oppressor, Mrs. Tilford, by causing the same kind of humiliation and pain to her.

MARTHA: There must be something we can do to you, and whatever it is,
we'll find it.

MRS. TILFORD. That will be very unwise. (49)

[.....]

MARTHA: What is there to do to you? What can we do to you? There
must be something -- something that makes you feel the way we do
tonight. You don't want any part of this, you said. But you'll get a
part. More than you bargained for. [. . .] (50)

The purpose of Martha and Karen's libel suit is to destroy the reputation of the respected and authoritative Mrs. Tilford and clear their own reputation as well. Mrs. Tilford speaks the truth when warning "That will be very unwise" since experience tells her that the revenge will eventually bring rebound and cause trouble to themselves (50). Still, the two young women ignore her advice, and thus the libel suit they choose as their weapon to fight back publicizes the scandal and ruins their lives. Again, taking action in the name of justice untempered by mercy proves to be self-destructive. Karen and Martha become more ostracized from society after they fail in their libel suit because their reputation is destroyed, not only in the town of Lancet, but also all over the country. Their pursuit of justice and righteousness only leads them to the path of doom. Therefore, as Bigsby points out, the play is not only about "the power of the society to enforce its moral norms, a warning against the witch-hunt," which is carried out by the self-righteous and authoritative Mrs. Tilford, "it is more concerned with the destructive effects of insisting on one's innocence at all costs" (276). Karen, Martha, and Mrs. Tilford, being nice and respectable people, are blinded by an egotism which may disguise itself "in the form of a self-righteous idealism" (277). They always insist on correcting the wrong doings of others in the name of propriety, irrespective of the wider truth or humanity. Ultimately, such high standards leave no leeway for others as well as for themselves.

These three characters, Karen, Martha, and Mrs. Tilford, are all in positions of high status, with money and/or authority at the beginning of the play. Karen and Martha are teachers whose instruction and punishment are supposedly to be followed and obeyed by students like Mary. They are also the employers of Mrs. Mortar, holding the power to dismiss her and deny the source of her income. They possess the power to control at least some aspects of Mary and Ms. Mortar's lives and thus have a socially sanctioned ability to oppress them. Mrs. Tilford, being the sponsor to the establishment of the school and Mary's guardian, holds a certain power over Karen and Martha, and easily adopts the role of dispensing justice on them. However, when the characters in the play feel victimized, whether the punishment is justifiable or not, it is only natural for them to seek revenge and undo "the wrongs" imposed on them. This complicated series of actions and reactions set in motion all build to the final tragedy in the play, when blind justice without mercy causes troubles that none of the character would have willingly invoked.

In the last act, Karen and Martha are rejected by everyone in town and forced to live in a secluded house which is empty of former students. This is a severe punishment comparable to the banishment of Oedipus, even though Oedipus's misfortune is destined by God and his punishment is self-inflicted. What is the cause of Karen's and Martha's painful situation? What is the so called evil that brings forth the tragic result? Mary's lie and

Mrs. Mortar's gossip are the first and foremost elements to be named. Nevertheless, the false accusation would have no impact if Mrs. Tilford did not believe the story, spread it around town, and even use her influence to urge parents to remove their daughters from the school. The invention of the lie and the spreading of it are equally responsible for the tragedy that overtakes the women. For Karen and Martha, raising the libel suit might not be wise, but it is their only choice to survive and return to the life they used to have. However, the loss of the libel suit owing to the absence of Mrs. Mortar means that all the efforts to regain their reputation are in vain.

Karen and Martha's failure to defend themselves not only results in the shut-down of the school, but also the complete destruction of their lives. Most critics agree upon the moral verdict that the three villains, namely Mary, Mrs. Mortar, and Mrs. Tilford are the prime culprits, while Armato traces the root causes to Karen and Martha's actions. The ultimate reason, however, for such an extreme outcome is the malice and cruelty in people's attitude toward lesbianism. Karen's and Martha's downfall is caused directly by social intolerance toward their supposed sexual deviation". If the accusation was anything other than this sexual taboo, the women may have suffered somewhat, but their lives would not have been entirely destroyed. The extreme reactions of the time to lesbianism make it impossible for things to continue as they were, and the publicity of the libel case means that they cannot even move out of town to start new lives. The charge of sexual impropriety thus causes a crisis in the relationship between Cardin and Karen. There is no way whatsoever for Cardin to find out whether the charge is true or not, and there is no way for Karen to be sure whether she has Cardin's trust or not. Finally, Cardin loses confidence in Karen's innocence when the two women failed the libel suit, and the break-up of their engagement is unavoidable. Consequently, the final chance for the women to prove the accusation is a lie, for Cardin to marry Karen and thus validate her heterosexuality to the public, is lost.

Furthermore, after the loss of the libel suit, Karen's and Martha's lives are especially isolated and unbearable because they think they are wronged by a false charge. They are repelled by the society and they cannot join a homosexual subculture, composed of people who, while rejected and despised by others, at least have each other for support.

KAREN: Isn't there anywhere to go?

MARTHA: No. There'll never be any place for us to go. We're bad people.

We'll sit. We'll be sitting the rest of our lives wondering what's happened to us. [...]

KAREN: [...] But this isn't a new sin they tell us we've done. Other people aren't destroyed by it.

MARTHA: They are the people who believe in it, who want it, who've chosen it. We aren't like that. We don't love each other. (70)

At first the situation does not seem to be utterly lost, as the two women still have each other. However, soon their friendship begins to strain from the pressures of the case. Owing to her sense of guilt for the break-up of Karen's engagement and a sense of self-doubt and confusion, Martha begins to explore the hidden corners of her psyche and confesses that the "ridiculous charge" might possibly be true.

MARTHA: I love you that way -- maybe the way they said I loved you.

I don't know....

[.....]

MATHA: There's always been something wrong. Always -- as long as I can remember. But I never knew it until all this happened.

[.....]

MARTHA: ... 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 along; maybe I couldn't call it by a name; maybe it's been there ever since I first know you -- (71)

Martha's confession alters the origin of the tragedy and the cause of their misfortune, from Mary's malicious lie and Mrs. Mortar's careless reference to Martha's "unnatural desire" to Martha's real sexual orientation. Although her confession is full of confusion and ambiguity, events and emotions push her to investigate herself and thus confirm the existence of something that previously she had never acknowledged.

MARTHA: [...] It's funny; it's all mixed up. There's something in you, and you don't know it and you don't do anything about it. Suddenly a child gets bored and lies -- and there you are, seeing it for the first time. (72)

The whole play thus changes from a melodrama to a moral play of self-exploration.¹⁰

¹⁰ Martha's self-exploration, however, has something to do with Hellman's reflection of her ambiguous relationship with a woman according to the "Julia" portion of *Pentimento*, a mix of memoir and fantasy. Hellman connects the two by frequent references to *The Children's Hour* in "Julia." She speculates about her attachment to Julia, her love for her "too strong and too complicated to be defined as only the sexual yearnings of one girl for another." See Titus, 225. Her memories of intimate companionship with Julia and her forceful refutation against the accusation of a lesbian relationship are parallels to what happens to the two teachers in *The Children's Hour*. Even without physical contact, it does not necessarily mean there is not a love relationship. After so many years, the relationship becomes "an aimless guessing game." See Bigsby, 276. This is why Martha's confession is full of uncertainty and confusion. The subject of lesbianism thus becomes even more complicated because, according to Titus, it is both Hellman's public statement to defend herself against her contemporary social concept of sexual deviance through the tragic death of Martha, and her private struggle to understand her own personal desires through Martha's confession of her lesbian orientation. The play is Hellman's contradictory response to the changing sexual norms of her time by simultaneously confirming and condemning the public opinion about homosexuality. Doris Falk also agrees with the above, noting that "Hellman's complicated, half-understood feelings must have given her some insight into Martha Dobie." See Falk, 43. Ironically, it is Mary and Martha, the two characters who have some negative aspects in the eyes of the critics and the audience, that are the ones most closely based on the playwright's own experiences and sentiments.

Many critics consider the turn of the plot in this act as a weakness and inconsistency in development.¹¹ According to Bigsby, the play's third act turns the play "from a sub-Ibsen account of integrity assailed by private and public self-interest into a drama about the repression of truth on a number of levels." It is a "disturbing betrayal" rather than a simple melodrama (275). Martha's tragedy is not caused by the malicious lie or the false accusation, as indicated in the first two acts, but by a shocking, unexpected self-discovery -- as Oedipus faces in the *Greed* tragedy. Titus argues that, "Martha's unacknowledged desire is her fatal flaw; it brings on the tragedy and provides the 'cause' and 'possible justice' of her death" (223). Thus Martha's emotional break-down is not caused by the lie but by the truth that has been repressed within her heart, and her suicide seems a form of punishment for her own deceptions and discoveries, rather than a tragedy imposed from outside. With this perspective, Titus considers the play as a conservative text that reinforces the usual assumptions about a "normal and proper" relationship between men and women, and denies homosexuality as a valid alternative.

Although the turn of the plot and the final resolution reflect Hellman's relative conformity to contemporary sexual ideology in the thirties, they do not weaken the story but rather provide some psychological depth to the characters, making both Karen and Martha's coming of age more complex and profound. After the confession, Martha is filled with the feelings of guilt with regard to Karen and condemnation with regard to herself. She feels guilty for Karen's loss of her marriage, career, and social reputation. Moreover, and even harder to bear, she considers herself "dirty" and thus separated by huge divide from her old friend (72). The most enjoyable and precious times in her life were the years she spent with Karen, ever since they were in college. That is why when she first learns that Karen has set a day to marry Joe Cardin, she laments that she is going to miss the time when the two of them would take vacations together: "I had been looking forward to some place by the lake -- just you and me -- the way we used to at college" (15). Even when they are rejected by society, looking back at the times they had shared is still enjoyable for her.

MARTHA: [...] Remember how much we used to eat at college?

[.....]

MARTHA: I'll make some potatoes with onions, the way you used to like them. (59)

¹¹ Although there is some foreshadowing when Martha seems upset and tries to discourage Karen's marriage, the first part of the story, in Eric Bentley's opinion, is about the two heterosexual teachers victimized by a false accusation. The audience is asked to feel indignation at the wrongness of the accusation, only to "feel cheated" when it turns out that one of the teachers is lesbian and the accusation is true after all. Moreover, Bernard F. Dukore also considers Martha's confession of her homosexuality, being a shift of subject, as a major weakness of the play. William Wright thinks that Hellman is trying to have it both ways: a play about two heterosexual women wrongly accused of lesbianism, and the altogether different story of a lesbian persecuted by a cruel and unjust society. See Wright, 90.

Now the private world of the two close friends has fallen apart. Not only has the present and the future been ruined, but their past together has also been polluted and is now considered as disgraceful, all because of Martha. Martha thus becomes the destructive element to everything that is concerned her including Karen and their life together. Although she commits suicide just before Mrs. Tilford discovers that Mary had been lying, her death does not directly result from the false accusation or Mrs. Tilford's abuse of power, but from people's hatred of lesbianism.¹² It is impossible to keep the friendship with Karen and go on to live after what has happened. Indeed, to Martha's amazement, the malicious lie in fact reveals what is repressed in her heart. She thus concludes by exclaiming that "I've ruined your life. I've ruined my own. I didn't even know" (72).

Mary Titus argues that Martha's death is predestined because "the murdering of the lesbian" is intended as the author's personal statement to testify her own heterosexuality against the suspicions of sexual deviancy caused by her outspoken attitudes and achievements in her career in the context of the conservative social background of the thirties.¹³ It is the intolerant social attitudes toward lesbianism that defeat and destroy Martha, and hence brings tragedy to those around her. The play thus becomes an illustration of a naturalistic moral vision, as Berkowitz states, that human life is defined as the struggle between the individual and the larger social forces in the environment, and the social forces are always stronger. Seen from this perspective, many plays of the 1930s seem to admit defeat for humanity before the drama even begins (55). Understanding the larger social forces that lie behind the tragedy, an angry reaction or revenge against the ostensible victimizers becomes pointless. The insistence on justice only invokes a vicious circle that will lead inevitably to loss.

Martha's death thus recalls Portia's line from *The Merchant of Venice* that appears at the beginning of the play. The sense of justice is often not sufficient to bring salvation or closure when dealing with complicated human situations, and godly favor is always required to assuage human suffering. When Mrs. Mortar complains about Peggy's unfeeling voice in the recitation, Karen does not care about the meaning of Portia's plea for mercy (10). Being

¹²Her suicide under such circumstances is inevitable, even if Mary's lie is revealed and their name is cleared. It makes the tragedy absolutely irreparable and grievous. As a result, the 1962 film version of the play changes the order of Martha's suicide and the visit of Mrs. Tilford, because there is simply no way to get rid of Martha's sense of guilt and self-condemnation. For further analysis of the reasons behind Martha's self-destruction, see also Georgoudaki's analysis of the comparison between Karen and Martha.

¹³According to Titus, there was a cultural revision of women's sexual ideology in the early twentieth century. The so called "New Woman" of the late nineteenth century, who rejected marriage for a career and political action and often rooted her emotional life in female worlds, such as women's colleges, started to meet more open cultural opposition. Women who pursued independence and an aggressive social career thus often came under the suspicion of sexual deviance. In order to enter and survive in the male-dominated theatrical world, Hellman herself strived to sustain a public image of heterosexuality and conform to the conventional idea that different sexual orientations, such as lesbianism, should be viewed as socially disruptive. Therefore, Martha, who confesses her lesbian inclination, has to die to restore the social order. However, Janet V. Haedicke argues that the theme of female oppression in the play provides evidence of the feminist perspective, despite Hellman's undeniably ambivalence about feminism.

similar to Shylock, who insists that justice be done to Antonio for his prejudices against the Jews, Karen insists upon correction and punishment in dealing with Mary, who often misbehaves. Martha rejects Mrs. Mortar owing to her lack of compassion for such a foolish, vain, and helpless person. Mrs. Tilford recklessly trusts the words of a girl and makes a harsh moral judgment of the two women in the name of justice. Although they do not actually commit any crime, they are preoccupied with self-righteousness and hence invite a backlash. Their merciless way of dealing with others gives rise to Mary's lie, Mrs. Mortar's gossip, and the libel suit, and the merciless attitude of the society toward lesbianism eventually brings all the characters to the worst possible conclusion.

Not until Martha's death does Karen finally learn the lesson contained in the opening quote from Shakespeare, and thus learn more about the ways of the world and understand the true meaning of mercy. Therefore, when Mrs. Mortar tells her that she is still young despite all the events, she answers, "Not any more" (74). She does not panic or cry over Martha's death. She only accepts all that has happened with a calm and understanding attitude without looking into the root cause of things or pursuing justice further. She becomes more mature, with a new perspective on the meaning of life. This is why when Mrs. Tilford pleads for mercy and forgiveness, Karen is willing to consent and even accept her help only to make the older woman feel better, even though it is right after Martha's suicide. Karen thus decides not to get revenge by making Mrs. Tilford suffer for the damage she has caused, for Martha's death has clearly demonstrated the dangers of pushing justice too far. As for the problem of Mary, Karen understands that it is something that will haunt Mrs. Tilford for the rest of her life. Therefore, she says to Mrs. Tilford, "It's over for me now, but it will never end for you. She's [Mary's] harmed us both, but she's harmed you more, I guess" (77). Karen's mind is finally more enlightened and tender, as the weather outside gets warmer. She realizes that only through forgiveness, can she really put a stop to the tragedy and start a new life. It is thus the sense of heavenly mercy against the rule of human justice that the ending of the play truly intends to convey.

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