



**VNiVERSiDAD
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CAMPUS DE EXCELENCIA INTERNACIONAL



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GRADO EN ESTUDIOS INGLESES

Trabajo de Fin de Grado

**Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour*:
A Critical Voice of the Thirties**

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Abstract

The aim of this degree dissertation is to raise the reader's awareness about the social upheaval that existed throughout the thirties and how difficult it was to feel free in that period. The problems that writers of that time experienced because of their different political ideas led them to write about this in their works. I will focus on the outstanding case of Lillian Hellman who expressed in most of her works real experiences and events that happened throughout her life. I have particularly centred my research in *An Unfinished Woman*, *Pentimento* and *Scoundrel Time*, her biographical narratives but paid special attention to her first masterpiece *The Children's Hour*. The work finalizes with a conclusion that shows how much the author's concerns were to come true conflicts in her real life.

Key words: Feminism, Communism, Spanish Civil War, Lesbianism, Oppression, Fascism, Nazism, McCarthy, Thirties.

Resumen

El objetivo de este Trabajo Fin de Grado es concienciar al lector sobre la crisis social que existía a lo largo de los años treinta y lo difícil que era sentirse libre en ese período. Los problemas que los escritores de esta época experimentaban debido a sus diferentes ideas políticas les llevaron a escribir sobre ello en sus obras. Yo me centraré en el espectacular ejemplo de Lillian Hellman que expresó en muchas sus obras experiencias y eventos reales que ocurrieron a lo largo de su vida. He centrado mi investigación en *An Unfinished Woman*, *Pentimento* y *Scoundrel Time*, sus narraciones biográficas pero he prestado especial atención también a su primera obra maestra *The Children's Hour*. El trabajo finaliza con una conclusión que muestra cómo muchas preocupaciones de la autora le acarrearón verdaderos conflictos en su vida real.

Palabras clave: Feminismo, Comunismo, Guerra Civil Española, Lesbianismo, Opresión, Fascismo, Nazismo, McCarthy, Años Treinta.

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Introduction

Lillian Hellman was an American 20th Century dramatist known for her political commitment to leftist causes. She was one of the most famous female playwrights and screenwriters of her time. The representation of female characters as the centre of her works is an important characteristic which makes Hellman's texts original. She is a woman who deals with contemporary political and social issues. In her works we can see how various female characters struggle for freedom, equality and independence. In most of her works, the reader can come across genuine situations of women in a society that undervalues them. She showed great determination and courage when criticising the society of that period. She had open-minded ideals and defended Communism and the Spanish Republic during the civil war; and this caused her serious and numerous setbacks. She was an untameable woman whom many criticized and others praised but who caused commotion in the Thirties.

In this dissertation I am going to reflect on all these premises that were so moving in Lillian Hellman's life, from her birth to her death, on how she perceives the agonizing situation of the Thirties, specifically the Spanish Civil War which was a key issue in her life, and how she expresses all that in works such as *Pentimento* or *Scoundrel Time*, but especially in her play *The Children's Hour*, her first great success.

Hellman gets into trouble with the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) because of her political declarations and her defence of Communism, as well as the criticism that she makes to an oppressive society. She was accused by Senator McCarthy and put her name in the black list together with other authors and screenwriters who were also indicted. I will envision this problem through her work *Scoundrel Time*, where she discusses it. Finally, I will focus on *The Children's Hour* and will centre on the true objectives of the play, its critical stances on society and its shocking standpoint.

1. An Emblematic Admonition of the Thirties.

1.1.Lillian Hellman and the Thirties

Lillian Hellman was born in New Orleans, into a Jewish family. She lived part of her life in a boarding home run by her aunts in New Orleans and the other part in New York. She studied at Columbia University and spent two years at New York University. This instability caused her frequent absences to class and she ended up abandoning her studies. She adored reading and she used to evade reality by going outside to read under a tree for instance. She began writing her own plays in 1930 and travelled around Europe. She maintained a challenging but strenuous relationship with the writer Dashiell Hammett for thirty-three years. Hellman was a woman of character and determination who lived in a time of political, economic and social changes, and all this is reflected in her plays; a period in which being a woman and writing professionally was not that common. I am talking about the Thirties.

The Great Depression brings economic drawbacks and social upheaval; it began in the United States but it affected to almost every country in the world. Many people lost their jobs and suffered financial collapse; those who once lived a time of lavishness, prosperous business and good jobs saw themselves suddenly facing economic ruin and social disgrace.

As Lillian Hellman points out:

And because the Depression has now set in, the rich, available young men partners were no longer to be found. Gradually the firm began to disappear, its assets and contracts taken over by a man who had been the head of the shipping room. It was, of course, a sad story, but there were so many sad stories in the early 1930's... (Hellman, *An Unfinished Woman* 57-58)

There were also serious divergences of class and race, and this provoked personal conflicts. Hellman felt respect and even admiration for black people because she acknowledged that her maternal family had become rich at the expense of the enslavement of black people. This is also shown in her biographies when she talks about Helen or the woman who brought her up,

Sophronia: “It was she who taught me to have feelings for the black poor, and when she was sure I did, she grew sharp and said it wasn’t enough to cry about black people, what about the miseries of poor whites” (Hellman, *Scoundrel Time* 611). Also there were differences of gender, and women were not taken seriously, this is something against which Hellman also wanted to fight for: “By the time I grew up the fight for the emancipation of women, their rights under the law, in the office, in bed, was stale stuff. My generation didn’t think much about the place or the problems of women,” (Hellman, *An Unfinished Woman* 45). Not every woman was ready to struggle against it since they were born in an ultra-conservative society and they were told to get used to living under male domination and they adapted to this situation without fighting or complaining, they simply assumed this as another rule; some of them even thought that this issue could not be solved because there was no need for improvement. However, Hellman was unwilling to change her ideals to adapt them to the time she lived in. Thus she wrote to the HUAC: “I cannot and will not cut my conscience to fit this year’s fashions...” (Hellman, *Scoundrel Time* 659).

Hellman was a non-conformist woman who changed jobs frequently when she was young. She always thought that she was in the wrong place at the wrong time, even after becoming a successful playwright: “But now, many years and many plays later, I know as little as I knew then about the conflict that would keep me hard at work in a world that is not my world, although it has been my life” (Hellman, *An Unfinished Woman* 85). Many of her friends were married to men they did not love, they just wedded for money or to get social reputation: “Of five girls I knew best, three married for money and said so, and we were not to know that two of them, in their forties, would crack up under deprivation or boredom” (Hellman, *An Unfinished Woman* 46). She belonged to a different generation of women who wanted to change social conventions and fight for freedom.

Hellman's life was intense and eccentric, she was involved in many social and political conflicts, and she showed support for the anti-Franco forces in the Spanish Civil War and took part in the anti-Nazi resistance in Austria and Germany. All this caused her serious setbacks and misfortunes but she always managed to overcome difficulties, and she was brave enough to write about it. She never surrendered.

The most remarkable of these conflicts was the Spanish Civil War. She travelled to Spain in 1937 and experienced the awful feelings when trapped in an air attack: "The planes had been around all afternoon and the mess was new and looked hot. The filthy indignity of destruction, I thought, is the real immorality" (Hellman, *An Unfinished Woman* 99). She met people who were bombed, their homes burned out, their entire communities destroyed; a dreadful experience: "Four or five days later, I tried to find Maria's. But almost every house in the three or four blocks where it should have been bombed away." (Hellman, *An Unfinished Woman* 110). She visited pavilions full of wounded, she had to put up with shocking images that would mark her life. Many writers, journalists and intellectuals had come to Spain to write about the conflict and generate awareness in their countries of what was happening here so that all kind of assistance was sent to fight against Fascism and oppression. Hellman describes the situation as follows:

...he made me and my visit too important, one man, with a huge scar on his face, rose to say that they were sure that now many other intellectuals would come to Spain and go home and write the truth and Mr. Roosevelt would then send the guns and planes to a people who were fighting for freedom. [...] an older man got up and said didn't my people have sense enough to know that it was here that Fascism would live or die, no charity was needed, just enough to let them kill it here, save American lives later on, and would I please tell that to Roosevelt? (Hellman, *An Unfinished Woman* 100).

She wanted to give voice to the agents of the conflict because she believed that theatre, literature and cinema should reflect reality, condemn injustice and help change society or at least produce a certain kind of responsiveness about what was happening. Therefore, she

promised to participate in the production of a documentary entitled *The Spanish Earth*¹, though she finally could not get involved because she got seriously ill: “She did take part, however, in the organization of a party at Frederic March’s house, where people were invited to watch the documentary and to give money for the purchase of ambulances for Spain” (Celada et als., 177).

1.2.The Thirties on Hellman’s works

1.2.1. *Pentimento*

Lillian Hellman published her autobiography in 1973. It is a book of sketches divided into seven chapters. But the most celebrated one is “Julia”, a name for an anti-Nazi activist, an old friend and classmate of Lillian Hellman, who goes through a very tense and dramatic situation in Vienna under the Nazi occupation. Julia among others belonged to a small group which fought against Nazi ideals and they tried to save some intellectuals, former editors, Jews, Socialists and Communists who were in prison due to Nazi repression. Julia asked Hellman for a favour in order to help these people who were unfairly suffering just because of their way of thinking or their origins and “... she helped to smuggle money into Germany for an anti- Nazi group” (Celada et als., 177).

Hellman denounces what Fascism and Nazism meant for most people in the Thirties, she deplores the lack of action and compromise, the very fact that only few people in America were aware of the tragic consequences that an eventual victory of Hitler could bring about to the whole world. She also deplores the internal division and the lukewarm attitude of most activists:

¹ I think it should be mentioned here that L. Hellman refers to this play in some of her early writings as *Land of Spain*, but later on the name adopted by everybody was the final title of the film *The Spanish Earth*.

I know that Hitler has shaken many of us into radicalism, or something we called radicalism, and that our raw, new convictions would, in time, bring schisms and ugly fights. But in the early Thirties I don't believe the people I knew had done much more than sign protests, listen to the shocking stories of the few German émigrés... (Hellman, *Pentimento* 422)

Julia's fight against Nazi activities had its obvious consequences; she was attacked by Nazis and ended up in hospital in terrible conditions; she lost a leg, but she did not give up and continued fighting until she was finally crushed down. She was a courageous woman with noble ideas who believed that a socialist revolution was necessary all over the world.

Throughout the story we can envision Hellman's insinuations that she could be in love with Julia: "In those years, and the years after Julia's death, I have had plenty of time to think about the love I had for her, too strong and too complicated to be defined as only the sexual yearnings of one girl for another" (*Pentimento* 414). It is something that leads us to the story of *The Children's Hour*, where the main character finally recognised that she is really in love with her friend Karen at the end of the story. Thus, it is likely that Hellman saw herself reflected on the character of Martha.

The story of Julia is a sad story because the protagonist ends up dying for an idea, a noble cause she deeply believed in. I think that the author, in this part of her autobiography, wants to show us what it meant to fight against Fascism and Nazism at that time and how difficult life was for those who dare to oppose them. All those people who thought differently, Socialists, Communists and Jews were oppressed, imprisoned and even killed, as it happened to Julia.

1.2.2. *Scoundrel Time*

Lillian Hellman wrote this autobiographical piece in 1976. It is a book of memoirs with special attention to the McCarthy period, in which a great anti-Communist hysteria was unleashed in the USA. Senator McCarthy managed to create an atmosphere of oppression and submission which affected mainly intellectuals and artists:

I had, up to the late 1940's, believed that the educated, the intellectual, lived by what they claimed to believe: freedom of thought and speech, the right of each man to his own convictions, a more than implied promise, therefore, of aid to those who might be persecuted. But only a very few raised a finger when McCarthy and the boys appeared (Hellman, *Scoundrel Time* 606).

At this time, many writers, intellectuals and journalists compromised with McCarthy's propositions but various others such as Arthur Miller, Lillian Hellman and her partner Dashiell Hammett (to name but a few), found it unbearable and adopted a radical stance fighting against it with firm arguments and rock-solid vindications. Most of them were either members or sympathisers of the Communist Party but a lot of them were only people who belonged to the film industry or the cultural world. Dashiell Hammett was one of them and according to Hellman: "...many people were turning toward radical political solutions, and he was one of them, with me trailing behind, worried often about what didn't worry him, inhibited by what he ignored" (Hellman, *Scoundrel Time* 609). He will end up in jail in 1951 "... for refusing to give the names of the contributors to the bail bond fund of the Civil Rights Congress, of which he was one of the trustees" (Hellman, *Scoundrel Time* 614). There was no freedom of expression and any sign of hostility was severely penalized. But they never surrendered and kept fighting and writing in order to show everyone what was happening. Lillian Hellman was amongst these audacious intellectuals. She was also called to testify before the HUAC (House Un-American Activities Committee) but she refused to give names or any information which could impute others: "I will testify about myself, answer all your

questions about my own life, but I will not tell you about anybody else, stranger or friend” (Hellman, *Scoundrel Time* 620).

There were other intellectuals and screenwriters caught up in the same case, Communists whose lives were ruined and who were also called to testify before the HUAC, and they were coached on how and what to testify and even told lies to gain the favour of those in power: “Martin Berkeley for example, who said that I had been at a Communist meeting in his house. I was never at his house and didn’t believe I ever met him” (*Scoundrel Time* 647). Another Communist and celebrated playwright who was called to testify before the HUAC was Clifford Odets; as we can see in *Scoundrel Time*, he and Hellman began writing plays at the same time. He ended up identifying many of his old friends as Communists.

2. Lillian Hellman’s *The Children’s Hour*

2.1. The story of *The Children’s Hour*

The Children’s Hour was her first success and became one of her most famous plays. It takes place in a girls’ boarding school located a few miles from Lancet. This school is run by two old friends, Karen Wright and Martha Dobie, whose lives take a dramatic turn when Mary Tilford, a fourteen-year-old pupil, who’s both disobedient and a liar, accuses them of having a lesbian relationship:

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

Mary’s grandmother finances the school; when she becomes aware of the story told by her granddaughter, the school closes down. Paradoxically, this helps Martha realise that she is

actually in love with her friend Karen. The teacher's lives were destroyed; they suffered social discrimination and they lost everything. The story has a tragic ending when, unable to bear the truth, Martha commits suicide just before the whole plot was revealed as a lie.

The play was first staged on Broadway in 1934 and it raised such a commotion that was soon converted into a film. But such a story was unthinkable for a movie in the Thirties, so they had to rewrite it, changing some parts: the lesbian relationship was transformed into a love triangle between two women and one man. *The Children's Hour* talks about this class of love that could not be told and could not even be thought of in that period.

The main theme of the play deals with intolerance, specifically against homosexual relationships that were considered immoral and unnatural: "MRS. MORTAR. You're fonder of Karen, and I know that. And it's unnatural, just as unnatural as it can be" (Hellman, *The Children's Hour* 20). Lesbianism is not well considered by the community, so we are talking about a homophobic society. Karen and Martha are beleaguered characters because society does not accept them and this is the important issue that I am going to deal with in the next pages.

2.2.The critical side of the play.

All along the 20th Century, there is a deep concern for sexual identity in plays and films. Homosexuality is seen as a taboo and is rejected and condemned by authors and characters alike. In *The Children's Hour*, girls are taken out of the school when a rumour is spread about their teachers being lesbians and having a forbidden relationship.

In this play we can see one of the most common characteristics employed by Hellman in her plays; all her protagonists are female characters. This play is based on a real case, it is a real trial against two teachers accused of lesbianism in Scotland during the 19th Century. The central action of the scene comes down again to the dilemma of womanhood, reflecting what

happens in a social and political environment in which there are severe limitations for women. This play deals also with the personal conflicts that come up in an oppressive society in which citizens were constantly monitored by McCarthy and his followers, this uncomfortable atmosphere denied freedom for women and the fact of being of a different sexual orientation was not allowed and as a consequence punished; then some people felt repressed since they could not fully live their lives. In summary, these are many of the major themes which Hellman talks about in her plays.

Knowing this, we realize that Hellman tries to make a strong criticism of the society of her time, defending, in turn, a greater freedom for women. Hellman wants to show us, in this play, how American society oppressed and discriminated some people because of their gender or even their sexual orientation. How the lie of an innocent child could ruin the life of two respectable women who had achieved success and independence, something very difficult in that time. Such a scandalous plot brought about success but also the prohibition in some places like London, Boston and Chicago. The author had the courage to present to the audience a social and personal conflict caused by an unacceptable form of sexuality at the time.

Conclusion

To conclude, Lillian Hellman helps us realise the strenuous situation under which, writers and intellectuals lived during the Thirties. This has been possible thanks to her plays which have made us aware about what happened in that society. Thus, we know that some conflicts like Fascism or the Franco regime, the Spanish Civil War and Nazism had repercussions in far-off parts of the world. But we can understand these conflicts and issues more closely thanks to Lillian Hellman and her biographies and plays. Thus, we have been able to witness the oppression of McCarthy's society over many intellectuals, writers and

actors and over people who were different or simply thought differently. Women were underestimated and homosexuality was banned; so we are talking about a sexist and homophobic society. But we know that all this has been fortunately alleviated over the years and now we live in a much more open-minded society. This is probably due to the hard struggles of people like Hellman who fought against taboos, political fallacies and social conventions to conquer our freedom.

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