

# Rumours, Gossip and Lies: Social Anxiety and the Evil Child in Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour*

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## Summary

Most readings of American playwright Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour* (1934) focus on the psycho-social power of adolescent-driven gossip, rumours and slander, and the frightening outcomes that can emerge when people lose their ability to reason, question, analyse and criticise the world around them. This article argues that the drama also serves as a cultural and political commentary on the social anxieties of a changing America seeking a "return to normalcy" after war in the 1910s, cultural upheaval in the 1920s, and financial collapse in the 1930s. Mary's "evil" behaviour suggests that she is caught in a net of shifting social values concerning sexuality and gender roles and uses wickedness as a strategy to order and control her chaotic world. As an orphan, an outcast, and a young woman grappling with her own developmental issues, Mary desires to gain status within Lancet, Massachusetts, by exposing and attempting to eliminate cultural anxieties about gender and sexuality, as well as changes in social mores and challenges to the family unit. Populated by narrow-minded, heterosexist and self-righteous matrons, oblivious and self-serving adults, and spoiled children who seem unscathed by the Great Depression devouring the nation, the conservative denizens of Lancet succumb to Mary's "big lie" (i.e., that her teachers are lesbians) because it allows them to label and purge the "problematic" and independent women. Thus, Lancet willingly surrenders to the hysteria created by a group of children who, led by Mary Tilford, derive vicarious pleasure and status from the fall of Karen Wright and Martha Dobie – two promising, self-sufficient, educated women who challenge its rigid definitions of womanhood.

## Opsomming

In die meeste vertolkings van die Amerikaanse dramaturg Lillian Hellman se *The Children's Hour* (1934) word klem gelê op die psigososiale mag van adolessente se skinderstories, gerugte en kwaadpraterij, sowel as die skrikwekkende gevolge van mense se onvermoë om dinge uit te redeneer, te betwyfel en te ontleed, en om hulle samelewing te kritiseer. Daar word in hierdie artikel aangevoer dat die drama kulturele en politieke kommentaar lewer op die sosiale onrus in 'n snel veranderende

Amerika onder mense wat gesmag het na normaliteit ná 'n oorlog in die 1910's, 'n kulturele omwenteling in die 1920's en 'n finansiële ineenstorting in die 1930's. Mary se "bose" optrede dui daarop dat sy worstel met veranderende sosiale waardes oor seksualiteit en genderrolle, en dat boosheid 'n strategie is waarmee sy haar chaotiese lewe probeer orden en beheer. Sy is 'n weeskind, 'n verstoteling en 'n jong vrou wat met haar eie ontwikkelingsprobleme worstel. Mary wil aansien verwerf in Lancet, Massachusetts, deur kulturele kommer oor geslag en seksualiteit asook veranderings in sedes en die verbrokkeling van gesinseenheid aan die lig te bring en te elimineer. Die konserwatiewe inwoners van Lancet bestaan uit verkramppte, heteroseksistiese en eiegeregtige middeljarige vroue, onsensitiewe en selfsugtige volwassenes, asook verwerende kinders op wie se lewe die Groot Depressie oënskynlik geen invloed het nie. Hulle glo Mary se "groot leuen" (dat haar onderwyseresse lesbies is) omdat hulle sodoende die "probleem" met die rol van die vrou, wat reeds sedert die laat negentiende eeu in die Amerikaanse samelewing voorgekom het, kan etiketteer en kan besweer. Daarom laat die inwoners van Lancet hulle meevoer deur die histerie van 'n groep kinders wat onder die aanhitsing van Mary behae daarin skep om twee vroue tot 'n val te bring. Dié twee vroue, Karen Wright en Martha Dobie, is belowende, selfonderhoudende en opgevoede vroue wat die samelewing se rigiede opvattinge oor die rol van die vrou betwis.

During the twentieth century, the "evil child" emerged as a major archetype within American literature. From the sociopathic serial killer Rhoda Penmark in William March's *The Bad Seed* (1954), to the demonic offspring in Ira Levin's *Rosemary's Baby* (1967), William Peter Blatty's *The Exorcist* (1971), and David Seltzer's *The Omen* (1976), evil children have infiltrated the American psyche through blood-chilling works of fiction as well as their film adaptations. While some of these children exhibit wicked qualities due to external influences (such as abuse, ghosts, or even Satan himself), others are "bad seeds" who have inherited "bad genes", functioning outside the boundaries of human conscience, manipulating adults through charm, and provoking fear and reluctant acquiescence in other children. Yet, as critics Eric Ziolkowski (2001) and Brian Eugenio Herrera (2010) have maintained, the evil child is more than simply a literary motif used by authors to create suspense. Ziolkowski argues that since antiquity, children have been repeatedly depicted as wicked, cruel and immoral, strikingly defying the Western image of the child as a symbol of innocence while compelling adults to engage in introspection (2001: 8). Moreover, Herrera conveys that for evil adolescents, who "are neither simply children nor actually adults", lying, manipulation, and "the circulation of fabricated stories function dramatically as ... a relatively freeing activity whereby [they can] ... engage in [unconscionable activities] as a way to intervene in the worlds around them", typically mobilising "overt social commentary about morality, hypocrisy, and societal norms" (2010: 334, 346).

When Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour* premiered on Broadway at the Maxine Elliott Theatre on November 20, 1934, critics were immediately drawn to the character of Mary Tilford, a fourteen-year-old girl who embodied the social and class privileges of inherited wealth, as well as what

Brooks Atkinson described as “pure evil”: “Mary is more than an incorrigible child; she is a pathological demon, imperious, cruel and diabolically clever ... a miniature genius of wickedness” (Atkinson 1934a: xi). Mary’s characterisation as a corrupt and immoral child or adolescent stems from the fact that “purely as a matter of malicious vanity, [she] spreads the [false] rumour that [Karen Wright and Martha Dobie], the headmistresses [of her school], have an unnatural affection for each other” (i.e., they are lesbians) (Atkinson 1934b: 23). Based on a true story which transpired in Scotland during the first decade of the nineteenth century, *The Children’s Hour* created a sensation in the theatre and literary worlds, decades prior to the aforementioned novels, because it broached subjects such as homosexuality, intentional malice, the destructive capacity of a lie, and the potential for evil in children at a time when the nation was enamoured with Shirley Temple, the quintessential “perfect” little girl. Audiences were shocked when they discovered that Hellman’s play was not a child-friendly matinee on domestic bliss as its title suggests, but rather a psychological thriller that critiques the entire American values system (Atkinson 1934a: xi). The title of the play, which is an allusion to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s poem of the same name, thus serves not only as an ironic reference to a sentimental, romantic poem about the innocence of childhood, but also to the type of society that could rear such a wicked, conniving child. Unlike the BBC radio program “The Children’s Hour”, which between the 1920s and 1960s became for its young listeners a “pause in the day’s occupation ... between school and homework” (Dolan 2003: 333), Hellman’s *The Children’s Hour* depicts a world in which children are in control – a world in which roles are inverted, where children, through manipulation and intentional deceit become adults, and adults, through their gullibility and susceptibility to the wiles of Mary Tilford and her cohorts, become children.

Most readings of *The Children’s Hour* focus on its function as a case study in “the curse of scandal mongering and the whispering campaign ... the kind of vicious lying that may easily wreck the lives of innocent people” (Mantle 1935: 33). In other words, the psycho-social power of adolescent-driven gossip, rumours and slander, and the frightening outcomes that can emerge when people lose their ability to reason, question, analyse and criticise the world around them. However, I argue that the drama also serves as a cultural and political commentary on the social anxieties of a changing America seeking a “return to normalcy” after war in the 1910s, cultural upheaval in the 1920s, and financial collapse in the 1930s.<sup>1</sup> Although Mary undeniably suffers from what would today be categorised as “sociopathic

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1. United States presidential candidate Warren G. Harding promised a “return to normalcy” (i.e., a return to life the way it was before World War I) during his 1920 election campaign. Harding was elected president in 1920, and served until his death in 1923.

disorders”, she is not simply a “bad seed”, “problem child”, or “angst-ridden adolescent” out to destroy those who attempt to control her. As this reading of *The Children’s Hour* will elucidate, Mary’s “evil” behaviour suggests that she is caught in a net of shifting social values concerning sexuality and gender roles and, much like the female protagonist Abigail in Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible* (1953) who intentionally accuses innocent “rivals” of witchcraft, uses wickedness as a strategy to order and control her chaotic world. As an orphan, an outcast (despite her privileged-class status), and a young woman grappling with her own developmental issues, Mary desires to gain status within Lancet, Massachusetts, a symbolic microcosm of small-town America, by exposing and attempting to eliminate cultural anxieties about gender and sexuality, as well as changes in social mores and challenges to the family unit. Populated by narrow-minded, heterosexist and self-righteous matrons, oblivious and self-serving adults, and spoiled children who seem unscathed by the Great Depression devouring the nation, the conservative denizens of Lancet succumb to Mary’s “big lie” (i.e., that her teachers are lesbians) because it allows them to label and purge the “problematic” and independent women. With its proclivity towards conformity, its overwhelmingly strong mob mentality, and its insatiable, gossip-obsessed and rumour-loving masses, this small town willingly surrenders to the hysteria created by a group of children who, led by Mary Tilford, derive vicarious pleasure and status from the fall of Karen Wright and Martha Dobie – two promising, self-sufficient, educated women who challenge Lancet’s rigid definitions of womanhood.

### **From Intimate Friends to Lesbian Lovers: Changing American Gender Roles and the Social Construction of Homosexuality**

*The Children’s Hour* is based on “The Great Drumsheugh Case”, an infamous Scottish trial from 1811 involving two female schoolteachers and close friends, Marianne Woods and Jane Pirie, who were accused by a pupil, Jane Cumming, of sexual relations. In November 1810, Jane’s aristocratic grandmother, Dame Helen Cumming Gordon of Edinburgh (the model for Mrs. Amelia Tilford, Mary’s patrician grandmother), who was an ardent supporter and patron of the all-girls boarding school, withdrew her granddaughters Jane Cumming and Margaret Dunbar for “‘very serious reasons’ and recommended that several other families do the same. Within a few days, the school was emptied” (Moore 1992: 513; Tuhkanen 2002: 1004). In an attempt to restore their reputations and claim monetary remuneration for the destruction of their school, in May 1811 Woods and Pirie sued Cumming Gordon for libel. The case, which was eventually presented to the House of Lords, focused on Jane Cumming’s testimony which

asserted that she had witnessed a late-night rendezvous of a sexual nature between the two teachers. Specifically, “the sixteen-year-old girl, who had shared her bed with Pirie, claimed to have been awoken on several occasions at night to find the two teachers in bed together, laying on top of each other, ‘whispering and kissing’ and moving so that they ‘shook the bed’” (Tuhkanen 2002: 1004). While the women won the libel case in 1812 by the margin of one vote (Jane Cumming broke down and began to contradict herself upon cross-examination), and were acquitted of “indecent and criminal practices” (Moore 1992: 513) and declared to be victims of malice, it became a national scandal, effectively barring Woods and Pirie from ever teaching again and reducing them to a life of poverty. (It is unclear if they ever received monetary remuneration from Dame Cumming Gordon.)

The story ultimately entered Hellman’s artistic palette through William Roughead’s *Bad Companions* (1930), which described the Woods/Pirie case and served as inspiration for the plot of *The Children’s Hour* (Martin 2001: 401). Hellman changed certain aspects in the play – in her version, she gave one of the teachers, Karen Wright, a fiancé; unlike Woods and Pirie, Karen and Martha slept in separate bedrooms, away from students; in *The Children’s Hour*, Mary eventually admits that she lied about her teachers; and unlike the original case, Hellman’s play ends with Martha’s suicide – all of which complicate the accusations of lesbianism. Jane Cumming, like Mary, was an unpopular, precocious orphan, raised by her wealthy, dowager grandmother, who probably fabricated the accusations to foster a sense of belonging. However, unlike Mary, Jane was a child of colour, born to Lady Cumming Gordon’s son George and a fifteen-year-old Indian girl. Moreover, her status as an “illegitimate” biracial child was used during the libel case to construct her as an unreliable witness who allegedly had access to sexual knowledge that a white child of her social class in the UK would not have had (Martin 2001: 403). The judges ultimately decided that she had most likely created the story, using her “prior knowledge”, for attention, and that not enough solid evidence existed to find the women guilty – even the defence attorney argued that since no “artificial object designed to resemble the male instrument of procreation” was found, no “venereal congress can be assumed” (Faderman 1983: 230-231). However, the crux of the case – that two women’s reputations were ruined due to hearsay, gossip, and rumours, without any substantial proof, corroborative evidence or reliable eyewitnesses – remained the same in Hellman’s play.

One of the reasons why Woods and Pirie were able to elude accusations of lesbianism to win their libel case – and why Karen and Martha were unable to do the same – was the major shift that occurred between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with respect to female relationships. During the Victorian era in both the United Kingdom and the United States, intimate friendships, especially within homosocial environments such as same-sex boarding schools and the domestic sphere, were the norm among middle-

and upper-class white Protestant women (Corber 2011: 52). According to historian Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, these intimate “romantic friendships” were not only appropriate and customary in nineteenth-century middle- and upper-class America but “socially acceptable and fully compatible with heterosexual marriage” and not even remotely associated with latent lesbianism (1975: 8). According to Lillian Faderman, these romantic friendships “signified a relationship that was considered noble and virtuous in every way” (1981: 16). Some particularly committed women (many of whom were intellectuals living in large American cities) even engaged in socially sanctioned long-term cohabitation arrangements known as “Boston marriages” which used the cultural legitimacy granted to female homosocial interaction to elide heterosexual marriage.

However, with the advent of the twentieth century came a shift in the way society viewed these relationships. Encouraged by medical authorities, specifically sexologists such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis, who had placed sexuality on a scale from “normal” (heterosexual) to “abnormal” (homosexual), transforming sexuality from (private) sexual acts to the core of one’s identity (one no longer performed homosexual acts; one was a homosexual), all such intimate homosocial relationships suddenly came under suspicion as being potentially “abnormal” (i.e., lesbian) (Lunbeck 1994: 4; Terry 1999: 35-39). The construction of the “abnormal” sexual being “provided a clear-cut threshold between permissible and impermissible behaviour ... helping to segregate those labelled as deviant from others, thus containing and limiting behavioural patterns” (Weeks 1981: 98). In the United States, homosexuality was now (and up until 1974) considered a pathology or “mental disorder” that could only be treated by physicians, specifically psychiatrists (Simmons 1979: 56).<sup>2</sup> This not only increased the authority of the medical profession to diagnose, treat, and define homosexuality, but also reinforced the power of social forces to intervene in the lives of “suspicious” (i.e., successful and ambitious) women who overtly challenged traditional gender roles. As Smith-Rosenberg elucidates, “by the 1920s, charges of lesbianism had become a common way to discredit women professionals, reformers, and educators” (1985: 281). Thus, it is no wonder then that the words “normal”, “abnormal”, “natural” and “unnatural” are used to describe teachers Karen and Martha, and that lurking not too far in the background is a physician and patriarchal proxy,

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2. In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) began discussing the removal of homosexuality from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM). Although in 1974 the APA Executive Board ratified its removal, the diagnosis was simply reworded in the 1980 DSM as *ego-dystonic homosexuality*. It was not until 1986 that the diagnosis was removed entirely from the DSM. For more information, see “Facts About Homosexuality and Mental Health”, last accessed May 1, 2012: [http://psychology.ucdavis.edu/rainbow/HTML/facts\\_mental\\_health.HTML](http://psychology.ucdavis.edu/rainbow/HTML/facts_mental_health.HTML)

Dr. Joseph Cardin (Karen's fiancé) who, as Mrs. Tilford's nephew, serves as an omnipresent watch guard over their relationship.

Thus, while in the late nineteenth century Karen and Martha's relationship would have been considered "normal" and perhaps, as a Boston marriage, even fashionable, by World War I such relationships were becoming suspect, deviant, and "unnatural"; by the 1930s, two women embracing could even suggest a "lesbian relationship". Homosocial environments such as all-girls schools became, almost overnight, "veritable hotbeds of lesbianism", which is one of the reasons why the adults in *The Children's Hour* probably believe Mary's fabricated accusations. Coded euphemisms used in the play such as abnormal, normal, unnatural, and natural "testified to the popularization and consolidation of these psychoanalytic categories used to demarcate lesbianism" in the American psyche (Taylor 1998: 298). Moreover, "the shift from the ambivalence toward women's passionate same-sex attachments to their categorization as perversions not only created the (pathologized) identity category of the lesbian" (Tuhkanen 2002: 1014) but also rendered the notion of the separate, homosocial women's sphere as "potentially threatening and divisive, for it directed women's sexual and economic power away from the heterosexual establishment", specifically, institutions such as marriage and motherhood (Titus 1991: 215).

As women who aspire to "positions of authority", Karen and Martha become "vulnerable to slander ... they are expected to be exemplary at the same time that they are suspected of hiding sinister perversions" (Sullivan & Hatch 1974: ix). As "New Women" who establish the Wright-Dobie School for Girls, their crime is rebelling against the social order, the patriarchy, heterosexual marriage and procreation, desiring careers instead of children, and becoming financially independent without men (Paige 1989: 68).<sup>3</sup> In the absence of a strong patriarchy (the only male in the play is

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3. The New Woman originally emerged in late-nineteenth-century America as a reaction to the Cult of True Womanhood and the rigid, socially constructed gender roles it proscribed for white Protestant women of the middle and upper classes, especially within the private microcosm of the family unit. The Cult stressed purity, piety, naivety (especially in sexual matters), a lack of female passion, domesticity (i.e., a dedication to the "female" private sphere of the home), an abhorrence of the "male" public sphere of the outside world, submission, and subservience to patriarchal figures (especially husbands, fathers and brothers). New Women represented everything that members of the Cult did not: namely, self-actualisation and liberation. They participated in the public sphere, were well educated (usually college educated, often graduating from co-ed institutions) and politically aware, many of them advocating female suffrage and other women's rights. Moreover, New Women chose whom they wanted to marry (if anyone), practised birth control, and worked after/in lieu of marriage. For more information, see Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860", *American Quarterly* 18(2) 1966: 151-174; John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman,

Joe Cardin), Mrs. Tilford, who is of “old New England stock; never married out of Boston; still thinks honor is honor and dinner’s at eight thirty” (Hellman 1979: 21), functions as an agent of the patriarchy, or a patriarchal woman.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, Martha’s Aunt Lily Mortar, who also came of age in the late nineteenth century, is a remnant of the Cult of True Womanhood, which prescribed a rigid set of gender roles, especially for middle-class women. Despite her mediocre career in the theatre, unstable personality, and fickle nature, Lily “the Duchess” attempts to train the girls at the school according to these prescribed female gender roles by stressing the ornamentals such as good manners, sewing, feminine behaviour, literature, languages, elocution and enough deceit to “trap a man” (Paige 1989: 69). As Lily informs her students, “[w]omen must learn these tricks” (Hellman 1979: 6). Neither Martha, Karen nor Joe conforms to these rigid gender roles; in fact, Joe calls his aunt, Mrs. Tilford, “sick” and proclaims that “Lily Mortar is not a harmless woman .... She’s a nasty, tiresome, spoilt old bitch” (Hellman 1979: 46-47). Yet, Martha in particular is targeted, mostly because she stands out in the small town. Overtly critical of society and not afraid to voice her opinions, she comes from a working-class background and, unlike the princesses of *Lancet*, experienced a difficult childhood. She, like Mary, was orphaned at a young age and raised by an older female relative (in Martha’s case her Aunt Lily) and resists normative definitions of middle-class womanhood throughout the play, choosing, instead, to create an alternative family model with Karen.

As *educators* accused of lesbianism, Karen and Martha represent the ultimate “outcasts whose difference threatens all social order, not just that constructed by gender ... they [challenge] spatial and hierarchical ... order, structure, and difference ... [by] turn[ing] ‘normal,’ predictable order and hierarchies upside down” (Titus 1991: 222). As women who are responsible for the mental and moral well-being of young girls, they become particularly dangerous, especially since, at the time, many Americans maintained

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*Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), pp. 265-271; Martha H. Patterson, *Beyond the Gibson Girl: Reimagining the American New Woman, 1895-1915* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2008); Nancy Woloch, *Women and the American Experience* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005), Chapter 12; Robert J. Corber, *Cold War Femme: Lesbianism, National Identity, and Hollywood Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), pp. 52-53; and Tanfer Emin Tunc, “Talking Sex: Deciphering Dialogues of American Female Sexuality in the Mosher Survey, 1892-1920”, *Journal of Women’s History* 22(1) 2010: 130-153.

4. The statement that Mrs. Tilford “never married out of Boston” could be an encoded euphemism for the fact that she never engaged in a Boston marriage.



that same-sex schools were hotbeds of homosexuality, and that lesbianism was a contagious mental disease (i.e., a product of nurture, not nature). Consequently, they could allegedly “corrupt” the adolescent girls at any moment. However, the accusation of lesbianism remains an allegation throughout *The Children’s Hour*. The fact that the unproven “crime” destroys Karen’s and Martha’s lives conveys the vulnerability of unmarried, successful women in a society that is suspicious of intelligent, independent, professional women who reject the traditional gender roles of wife and mother.

### **“There’s Something about Mary”: The Motivation behind the “Big Lie”**

Central to *The Children’s Hour* is a set of questions whose answers clearly inform the psycho-social dimensions of the play: What motivates individuals to lie? What social and psychological functions do rumours, gossip, slander and scandal fulfil? Are individuals who engage in these behaviours “evil”? Can children be “evil”? Mary Tilford seems to suffer from a range of disorders including separation anxiety (she lives at a boarding school and flees to her grandmother’s house whenever something does not go according to plan) and egocentric narcissism, both of which are cultivated by her manipulative skills as a pathological liar, cheater, blackmailer, and controller. According to psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut, narcissistic personalities are subsumed with feelings of emptiness, boredom and anxiety (all three of which are present in Mary) and therefore “expend energy on protecting the self”. Moreover, “the psychological structure of the self [comprised] two poles, one representing a person’s skills and abilities, the other representing goals and ideas. The successful cohesion of these two poles depends upon [the] integration of ... the child’s ‘grandiose self’ and the ‘idealised parent imago’” (Brown 1991: 3-4). A failure to integrate these two poles due to maternal deprivation (Mary is an orphan who is raised by a formal grandmother) leads to a narcissistic obsession with the “self as object”. For Mary, creating rumours, gossip and scandal through lying not only allows her to, at least psychologically, reunite these two poles, but also serves as an exercise in self-aggrandisement that compensates for her vulnerability, insecurity, lack of adult guidance, apparent inferiority complex, and low self-esteem. As Herrera posits, she uses lies to “remake her world and to rebel against the injustices she perceives to be befalling her” (2010: 342).

Mary, who Hellman describes as an “undistinguished-looking girl” and “sullenly dissatisfied” (1979: 7-8), uses the rumours, gossip and scandal she fabricates as a self-protection mechanism to give her attention, power, and authority as a female child in an adult world. Gossip allows her to create a network of influence over which she has ultimate control: it serves as the glue that binds her circle of friends together, and creates an artificial sense

of belonging, solidarity and social standing which she manipulates through fear and threats of punishment (Rosenbaum & Subrin 1963: 817-831). Mary thus functions as a “teen fabulist figure – an adolescent character whose spectacular fabrications about serious and typically sexual subjects instigate both the pleasure and the perils of the dramatic scenario” (Herrera 2010: 333). While the perils of the scenario are self-evident (especially for Karen and Martha, who stand to lose everything), the pleasures come in numerous forms – power for the disempowered (Mary) as well as the vicarious pleasure of scandal and gossip, which is magnified when gender roles and sexuality are at stake. As Michel Foucault observes, in the West there has been a “pleasure in the truth of pleasure; the pleasure of knowing [and producing] that truth, of discovering and exposing it, and the fascination of ... telling it”, especially when it comes to private expressions of desire (Foucault 1978: 71). Mary is cleverly able to use these strategies to create alliances with children who become the handmaidens of her machinations: she appoints her classmates as her “French maids” (an archetype which implies sexuality, especially within American culture) and even forces Rosalie Wells to pledge to be a vassal to her knight (subverting gender roles when it suits her), thus allowing her to climb to the top of the social ladder to claim power. Mary’s manipulations ultimately put to rest any possibility of the sort of homosocial “romantic friendships” once found in same-sex schools. In fact, Mary is not interested in sisterhood. As Robert Corber conveys, she essentially turns such relationships “inside out” (2011: 55); she is obsessed with power and control. Despite the fact that “she’s had more attention than any other three kids put together” (Hellman 1979: 14), it is clear to both her teachers and classmates that “there’s something the matter with [Mary]. That’s been true ever since the first day she came. She causes trouble here; she’s bad for the other girls”. As Martha foreshadows, “I don’t know what it is – it’s a feeling I’ve got that it’s wrong somewhere” (Hellman 1979: 14).

Mary is just as comfortable manipulating gullible adults, such as her grandmother Mrs. Tilford, as she is manipulating puzzle pieces, which she does in Act II of the play. Although she is at the age when she can make decisions for herself and should know the difference between right and wrong, Mary “uses Lancet’s most influential citizen [her grandmother, who also functions as a representative of the patriarchy] ... as a vehicle for her revenge” (Armato 1973: 444), often concocting her fantastic tales at random. As Mary expresses, “I’ll think of something to tell her. I can always do it better on the spur of the moment .... Grandma’s very fond of me, on account my father was her favorite son. I can manage *her* alright” (Hellman 1979: 28). Guilt-ridden about Mary’s parentless existence, Mrs. Tilford is a soft target – a dupe for her rehearsed lines and smiles, and “too crazy about Mary to see her faults very clearly – and the kid knows it” (Hellman 1979: 14). She naively believes everything Mary says, and is sympathetic to her

granddaughter who is a perpetual “victim of circumstance”: “Oh, please, Grandma, don’t send me back [to school] right away. You don’t know how they’ll punish me ... I can’t go back! I can’t! They’ll kill me! They will, Grandma! They’ll kill me!” (Hellman 1979: 33). Even though Mrs. Tilford warns “the earnest little coaxer” not to “imagine things like that ... or you’ll grow up to be a very unhappy woman” (i.e., no one will want to marry her) (Hellman 1979: 34-35), she swallows the “big lie” Mary fabricates (that Martha and Karen are lesbians) immediately and without any investigation, most likely because it “fits” their “transgressive” behaviour. She continues Mary’s work by spreading what she has heard to Evelyn’s mother, Rosalie’s mother, Joe, and the other adults in her vicinity – allegedly to “protect the children at the school” – and within a few hours destroys the women and their careers. More importantly, Mrs. Tilford allows her granddaughter to stay at home, thus actualising Mary’s vengeful personal motivation behind the big lie: to escape the power struggle at school (which her teachers are bound to win) and re-establish order (perhaps her own patriarchal order via her patrician grandmother and Cousin Joe) in the secure domain of her grandmother’s home.

While Mrs. Tilford knows that Mary is a “special” child, she is not fully aware of the fact that she is being used as a pawn in Mary’s chess game. As Martha conveys to her, “You fool! You damned, vicious .... You realize, nothing, nothing, nothing” (Hellman 1979: 48). Mrs. Tilford refuses to contemplate the depth of the accusation mainly because accusing two successful, non-conformists of lesbianism complements her world view. Moreover, Mary is a child and, presumably, a child would not lie, especially about something as “sinister” as lesbianism (the adults also assume that Mary does not even know what she is lying about). However, Mary is not naive or innocent, even about sexual matters, compelling Martha to ask “Where did you learn so much in so little time?” (Hellman 1979: 53) The audience knows: Mary has just finished reading a copy of Théophile Gautier’s *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, an erotic French novel written in 1835 and translated into English in 1890. The novel, which deals with bisexuality, lesbianism, transgenderism, and prostitution, is even passed around from girl to girl, thus reinforcing the notion that same-sex schools are hotbeds of illicitness. The “one part” all the girls want to read, coupled with the conversation Peggy Rogers and Evelyn Munn overhear in which Aunt Lily accuses Martha of having “unnatural” feelings for Karen – “You’re jealous of [Joe]”, Lily exclaims, “and it’s unnatural, just as unnatural as it can be. You don’t like their being together” (Hellman 1979: 20) – inspire the vengeful, perpetually slighted Mary to accuse her teachers of lesbianism (Tuhkanen 2002: 1009). Ironically, her “disorderly” sexual curiosity and the forbidden knowledge she gains through a taboo literary work become the power mechanisms Mary uses to order her world, suggesting that she has the potential for “sexual/gender deviance” herself. Mary pieces together this

information to amplify the latent sexual suspicions surrounding Karen and Martha and to fulfil her wish of not returning to the torturous Wright-Dobie School for Girls. Clearly, “although Mrs. Mortar bears responsibility for introducing the homophobic construction of female homosocial bonds into the community, Mary is the one who circulates it” (Corber 2011: 55-56).

Mary, who is constantly criticised by everyone from the family maid, to her friends, to her teachers, to her grandmother for being “unladylike” is also ironically the most “feminine” in her wiles, cunningly mimicking the “ladylike” man-trapping qualities she learns at school – flattery, false tears, and romantic sentimentality (she obtains a bunch of flowers from the trash) – to fool Aunt Lily when she is late for class. She practises facial expressions to use when her plotting requires drama, and even feigns a heart attack when she is punished for her lateness and lying: “I’ve got a pain. I’ve had it all morning. It hurts right here (*Pointing vaguely in the direction of her heart*) Really it does .... My heart! It’s my heart! It’s stopping or something. I can’t breathe (*She takes a long breath and falls awkwardly to the floor*)” (Hellman 1979: 12-13). Although her cousin Joe, who is called to examine Mary, is aware of her manipulative nature (as he conveys, “Our little Mary pops up in every day’s dispatches ... [her heart attack was] just a little something she thought up”) (Hellman 1979: 16, 21), he too becomes a victim of her accusations, eventually dissolving his relationship with Karen after she loses the libel suit against his aunt. Mary’s malice might also have been motivated by her jealousy of Joe’s relationship with Karen – because Joe is consuming Karen’s attention, he might steal her away from the school; or, because Karen is occupying Joe’s time, she is depriving the girl of time she could be spending with her cousin. Either way, Hellman suggests a tense, grotesque love triangle between Mary, Karen and Joe – one that is resolved in Mary’s favour with her grandmother’s destruction of the school, Karen and Joe’s engagement, and Martha, a perpetual thorn in Mary’s side.

Thus in *The Children’s Hour*, “the relationship between innocence and experience is inverted as Mary serves as the agent of corruption .... Metaphorically and psychologically, Mrs. Tilford [and the other adults] ... become ‘the children’ and Mary becomes ‘the adult’” (Rich 1999: 198). Mary is successful in controlling the adults who inhabit her world because she is able to diagnose and exploit their weaknesses without revealing her own: as Martha admits, “We still haven’t the faintest idea what goes on inside her head” (Hellman 1979: 14). Moreover, she uses the fact that there are no solid role models among the adults in her environment, that there is an absence of a tangible patriarchy (the patriarchal forces are diffuse in *The Children’s Hour* and implied through Mrs. Tilford and Joe), and that she is surrounded by a series of dysfunctional relationships to devise a plot which, coupled with the subplot of blackmail (i.e., Rosalie stole Helen Burton’s bracelet and Mary uses this to force Rosalie to corroborate her lie), ruins the

credibility of her teachers and pulls Joe and Mrs. Tilford deeper into her frightening world.

The collaborative nature of the “big lie”, the vicarious pleasure derived from sexual scandal concerning “suspicious” women, and the assumption that Mary, as a child, is innocent and unable to connive, manipulate, or lie about such a sexual topic, prevents those around her from intervening once the lie is in motion. She “behaves so cleverly and deviously that she may be understood to exist within a different fault line ... the seam that is created between our expectations of childhood innocence and her actual experience and behavior” (Rich 1999: 198). The target of her gossip, lies, and rumours becomes those who challenge her power by interfering with her efforts at self-protection, refusing to believe her lies and attempts at manipulation – namely, Karen and Martha. According to Mary, their uncompassionate attempt to discipline and provide externally imposed order to her world through rules and punishment is “unjust persecution”: “You never believe me. You believe everyone but me. It’s always like that .... Everything I do is wrong ... I’ll tell my grandmother. I’ll tell her how everybody treats me here and the way I get punished for every little thing I do. I’ll tell her, I’ll ...” (Hellman 1979: 12). As a victim, she seeks revenge for the restrictions Karen and Martha place on her attempts at gaining authority – “They can’t get away with treating me like this, and they don’t have to think they can” (Hellman 1979: 28) – and they pay the ultimate price: social and professional destruction.

Audiences often conflate Mary with evil because she encapsulates social tyranny, arbitrary injustice, sadism, violence (she physically and metaphorically twists Peggy’s arm; slaps Evelyn; bullies the other children by calling them “stupid” “dumb” “idiots” and extorting money from them; kicks furniture; and throws objects) as well as the monstrous, depraved, and cruel extents to which individuals can go to erase difference and perpetuate conformity. She also exhibits the characteristics of evil as described by psychologist Ervin Staub: destructive and intentional “extreme harm ... not commensurate with any instigation or provocation” (although she thinks her teachers deserve punishment) as well as the “repetition or persistence of greatly harmful acts” in order to cause an “enduring” effect (1999: 180). She walks the fine line between truth and fabrication with unbridled bravado, while simultaneously playing the “innocent child” card and waiting to attack violently, cold-bloodedly, and vindictively, both physically and verbally, should someone attempt to reveal her masquerade. Yet, it is her cruel and cold environment that compels Mary to display such antisocial behaviour; in other words, she is a by-product of the society in which she lives. Thus, she comes to embody the maliciousness that society is – especially when under threat – capable of exerting. It is the American society that can give birth to a spoiled villain like Mary Tilford, engage in such

character assassination, and create a witch-hunt through a calculated falsehood that Hellman ultimately targets in *The Children's Hour*.

In the 1930s, the United States was not only struggling with changing gender roles that, according to more conservative forces, needed to be disciplined, but was also grappling with the “economic disarray” of the Great Depression, which to many seemed particularly harsh after the opulence of the so-called Roaring Twenties. Women were increasingly being told to return to the private sphere so they could create employment opportunities in the public sphere for men who really “needed” them. Moreover, as Serena Anderlini-D’Onofrio conveys, “the fear of poverty instigated hypocrisy and a new moral conventionalism. The Great Depression marked the onset of a new conservative culture [in which] experiments with sexuality were punished” (1998: 173). Thus Karen and Martha are persecuted not only for transgressing gender roles economically (as self-reliant professional women), but also for challenging the traditional family unit in a very subversive manner, namely by illustrating the irrelevance of men both socially and, as it is suggested, sexually (Karen’s marriage to Joe is delayed so many times that their engagement becomes a joke). Mary and her accusations only serve to “foreground the anxieties and frustrations of a country in turmoil ... [Karen and Martha] disrupt the stability and centrality of privileged, white America” (Turner 2000: 2) and are punished for their actions by a destructive, malicious lie. Mary also represents the underlying, latent “evil” that exists in society – evil that, as Depression-era Americans discovered through events such as the kidnapping and murder of the Lindbergh baby – could be mobilised at any moment (Turner 2000: 8).

However, the “evil” that Mary “manufactures finds its antecedents within the patriarchal structure where it thrives .... The patriarchal institutions [in Lancet, Massachusetts] perpetuate this ‘evil’ ... for these systems – the courts, the marital institutions, the schools and even the churches – are the vehicles for unjust treatment of women” (Paige 1989: 67). Mary simply brings these social tensions – of homosexuality, of independent women, of alternative lifestyles – to the surface, vocalises the fears and cultural mores of the more conservative elements of the small town, and by wielding power over Lancet’s adults, is temporarily rewarded for her actions through social prominence. Central to Mary’s accusations is a class-oriented power struggle which Hellman weaves intricately throughout the dramatic arc (Adler 1999: 125; Spencer 2004: 52).<sup>5</sup> Mary and Mrs. Tilford represent inherited old wealth and are thus socially superior to the self-made Karen and Martha. One of the reasons why the accusation of lesbianism sticks to Martha is her suggested “lesbian physicality” (masculinity) and working-

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5. Hellman was a socialist sympathiser who, like her lover, mystery-writer Dashiell Hammett, testified before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) during the Red Scare of the 1950s. Thus, many of her works either explicitly or implicitly focus on the American class struggle.

class roots (Shedd 2007: 140). Moreover, it is also suggested that Karen would not have been a suitable match for Joe, even if the accusation of lesbianism had not surfaced – after all, he is a well-respected local physician with a very lucrative career ahead of him, while Karen works for a living. (It is unclear whether she works for self-fulfilment or financial reasons.) Either way, as Mrs. Tilford’s nephew, Joe could marry any one of the town’s eligible debutantes, who would gladly adhere to the gender roles of wife and mother without blemishing his career. Karen certainly does not fit this image of womanhood, and as *The Children’s Hour* implies, might cause Joe hardship in the future. Clearly, there is more than just the fear of marriage intervening between the couple. The accusation of lesbianism almost becomes an excuse for the break-up of a relationship that seems destined for failure from the beginning.

The most self-righteous “daughter of privilege” of them all, Mrs. Tilford, is blind to Mary’s vicious and vindictive tendencies, and only in the last scene of the play does she admit the “big lie” was a figment of Mary’s imagination. Her “high moral standards” spin her into a “homosexual panic” when accusations of “deviance” begin circulating throughout the town. As the protector of the virtue of the young girls in Lancet (she was one of the benefactors of the Wright-Dobie School), she unflinchingly defends the patriarchy and the traditional Puritan mores of New England white Protestant society by arrogantly and stubbornly refusing to listen to Karen’s, Martha’s and Joe’s vocal outcries. She uses her influence to destroy the teachers, and later naively believes that her money can put an end to her granddaughter’s reign of terror, which undoubtedly must have struck Depression-era audiences struggling to make ends meet as particularly cruel. In fact, the affluent characters in *The Children’s Hour* seem oblivious to the economic turmoil of the nation, making them all the more despicable. The only clear allusion to the Great Depression is vocalised by the Tilfords’ maid, Agatha, one of the few working-class characters in the play, who conveys the waste of spending “\$3.85 on a long distance phone call while families across the nation are starving” (Turner 2000: 202). However, her comments make no impact on Mary who verbally abuses Agatha by telling the “nagging” woman to “stop asking me questions ... stupid” (Hellman 1979: 31). Thus Hellman not only critiques the immorality of the wealthy capitalist classes whose money gives them the power to destroy (which is eerily reminiscent of the Buchanans in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s 1925 novel *The Great Gatsby*), but also conveys the notion that absolute power corrupts absolutely.

### **The “L-word” and the Silence of Sexuality**

“Lesbian” is the most powerful word in *The Children’s Hour*, yet it is never vocalised in the play. Its power therefore lies in suggestion and innuendo:

the mere hint of such “illicit activity” was enough to merit social and professional death in many parts of the US in the 1930s. In fact, the “L-word” was so revolting to contemporary audiences that Hellman believed including it in her dialogue would compromise the success of her play. Consequently, Martha’s lesbianism is socially constructed and Karen’s heterosexuality is socially deconstructed through a smear campaign that centres on whispering, euphemisms and the horror of possibility (Adler 1999: 123-124). Essentially, “the discourse about Martha – the lies, rumours and gossip that spread throughout the community – *produces* her lesbian identity, even though she has never engaged in lesbian activity” (Corber 2011: 56). Aunt Lily is the first character in the play to suggest their “unnatural affection”. Mary simply “spins tale after tale – some loosely based upon scenes the audience has witnessed” in order to persuade her grandmother to allow her to leave the school which has allegedly caused her so much disciplinary torture. “She finally hits a goldmine with stories of ‘unnatural acts’ between the two teachers” (Shedd 2007: 139), and elaborates on it in a dramatic and suggestive fashion which thrives on the uneasiness between Martha, Karen and Joe (yet another love triangle in the play). Mrs. Tilford tells Mary to “stop using that silly word” – unnatural – and to stop alluding to “funny noises”, but she continues to do so because she can see the fear and repulsion it evokes on her grandmother’s face. The fact that the word “lesbian” is never mentioned only heightens the tension of the scene: the content of Karen and Martha’s supposed sexual encounter, which Mary whispers into her grandmother’s ear, first slow and hesitantly and then frenzied and feverishly, is left to the reader’s imagination (Titus 1991: 221; Dolan 1993: 163-164; also see Erhart 1995). The fact that Mary has to whisper it at all implies that sexuality – whether it be hetero-, homo-, or adolescent – is, in *Lancet*, a dirty secret which cannot be spoken out loud or discussed in an open and civilised fashion. Mary knows that even her sexual awakening must be hidden and silent because, ultimately, sex is power, and women are not meant to wield power in patriarchal societies.

When Karen and Martha ask for an explanation of the accusation, Mrs. Tilford expresses that she does not want the two “lepers” in her house (Armato 1973: 445) and cannot even verbalise the charge that Mary has hurled against them: “I don’t think you should have come here ... I can’t trust myself to talk about it with you now or ever .... This thing is your own. Go away with it. I don’t understand it and I don’t want any part of it” (Hellman 1979: 48-49). This inability to speak creates a silence that is more comfortable to Mrs. Tilford and the women of her generation than the truth itself. Sexuality in the play therefore becomes an empty space that, for the remnants of the Cult of True Womanhood, is filled with misinformation or no information at all. For Amelia Tilford, ignorance is truly bliss; she would rather remain oblivious to the truth than discover something “distasteful” and potentially damaging to the social order she strives so desperately to



protect. As she conveys, “It had to be done .... Righteousness is a great thing” (Hellman 1979: 50). This explains her horror when Joe questions Mary about her allegations. Mrs. Tilford is mortified that Joe will force her to call what she has “witnessed” by name: “Stop it, Joseph! .... You are trying to make her name it, aren’t you?” (Hellman 1979: 53-54).

Mary, the “strange girl, bad girl ... who hates everybody and everything” is, after this encounter, “not a child any longer” (Hellman 1979: 51). Nevertheless, she is, like the child her age denotes, afraid of the ramifications of being discovered being a liar. She thus refuses to admit that she has invented the entire tale, even when Joe gives her the chance to confess. Like her grandmother, she does not deviate from her original accusation even when, under questioning, her “imagined acts” are exposed as a fabrication: “One night ... I looked through [Miss Wright’s] keyhole and they were kissing and saying things”, to which Karen replies, “*There’s no keyhole on my door*” (Hellman 1979: 54). After panicking and claiming that it must have been Martha’s room and not Karen’s (this is also highly unlikely since Martha shares her room with her aunt), Mary shifts the conversation away from the obvious, bumbling lie she is perpetrating by dragging Rosalie into it (i.e., Mary did not see the tryst – her friend did) (Shedd 2007: 140). Mary also attempts to veer the conversation off course by blaming her adult inquisitors for her confusion: “Everybody is yelling at me. I don’t know what I’m saying with everybody mixing me all up. I did see it! I did see it!” (Hellman 1979: 55). It is this silence over the “L-word”, and the characters’ outright refusal to see through Mary’s manipulation, that reinforce the lie and allow it to destroy the lives of all those involved.

Initially, Martha hopes that suing Mrs. Tilford for libel will force her to verbalise her accusations, bringing the truth to light: “Don’t get the idea that we’ll let you whisper this lie. You made it and you’ll come out with it. Shriek it to your town of Lancet. We’ll *make* you shriek it – and we’ll make you do it in a court room” (Hellman 1979: 50). However, Mrs. Mortar, one of their key witnesses, ignores numerous requests to appear in court due to her “moral obligation” to the theatre (Hellman 1979: 62). While we are not given any insight into the court proceedings (and if Mrs. Tilford actually “shrieked” anything sexual), we do learn that since they could not establish a case, Karen and Martha lose, which is when the ultimate ramifications of Mary’s actions surface. They become socially ostracised by the people of Lancet, who are convinced that they have had “sinful sexual knowledge of one another” (Hellman 1979: 63). In fact, the outcasts cannot even leave their home to go for a walk or to go shopping, thus reversing roles with Mary whose activity they tried to limit at the beginning of the play. As Martha remarks, “There aren’t three stores in Lancet that would sell us anything. Haven’t [you] heard about the ladies’ clubs and their meetings and their circulars and their visits and their ...” (Hellman 1979: 60). Their only contact with the townspeople is a giggly grocery boy who, like a voyeur,

creeps into their house to deliver food, hoping he might catch a glimpse of something erotic. Moving elsewhere is not a solution either since their case is national news – the latest gossip in big cities as well as in small towns. For the town of Lancet, social order has been restored. For Karen and Martha, life will never be the same. Even language has a new sexual meaning now: “Woman, child, love, lawyer – [there are] no words that we can use in safety anymore ... we have to invent a new language, as children do, without words like tomorrow” (Hellman 1979: 66, 72).

Martha begins to internalise the court decision, and wonders if she is, as she calls herself, “a freak” (Hellman 1979: 60). Perhaps others see what she cannot see – might she actually be a lesbian? Or at least what Hellman calls in her personal notes on the play an “unconscious lesbian”? (Spencer 2004: 47). Even though the allegations are the figment of a manipulative little girl’s imagination, they ironically precipitate a “confession” and the admission of feelings that even Martha is not aware she has:

I love you that way – maybe the way they said I loved you .... There’s always been something wrong ... as long as I can remember. But I never knew it until all this happened .... You’ve got to know it. I can’t keep it any longer ... 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 .... I’ve never loved a man – I never knew why before .... 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. I don’t know. It all seems to come back to *me* ... I didn’t even know.

(Hellman 1979: 71-72)

Although Martha frames her potential lesbianism as “something wrong”, her confession is probably the most truthful moment in the entire play. In all likelihood, Martha does have feelings for Karen. Whether or not they are of an erotic or sexual nature, and their consequences for both Karen and Martha, are never discussed. All possibilities, like the “L-word” itself, are stifled when Martha, out of guilt about her “dirty” feelings, commits suicide by shooting herself, signalling the culmination of Mary’s evil acts as well as the ultimate punishment for the “tragic lesbian” of the play (as Aunt Lily insensitively states after Martha’s death: “Suicide’s a sin”) (Hellman 1979: 73; Martin 2001: 402). The shadow of lesbianism that exists in the household also leads to the demise of Joe and Karen’s engagement. Although Joe seems determined to continue the relationship, he acts coldly towards Karen, and even asks her if the allegations are/were ever true. When he leaves, Karen knows he will never return and the

damage done [to their] world by so-called “good” people through self-righteous judgment, selfishness, and blindness to their own weaknesses [comes full circle]. The havoc is created, not only by Mary’s lie, but also by

adult reaction to it, even, finally, that of “good old Joe”, whose doubt topples the [final] domino. His doubt is the last in a chain of events causing Martha’s suicide.

(Lederer 1979: 31)

Mary does not even appear in Act III of the play and is never actually punished for her actions, underscoring the importance of the social reaction to the lie and the fact that those who perpetrate such atrocities often go unpunished. As Herrera conveys, “possibly as a result of her ... liminal status as neither child nor adult, the teen fabulist figure is typically exempted ... from any clear moral, social, or dramatic consequences” (2010: 346).

While Karen, Joe and even Martha will be able to, at least physically, escape Mary’s presence, Mrs. Tilford will forever be bound to the monster she, and Lancet, have created. Mary harbours sociopathic tendencies with which Mrs. Tilford will have to deal for the rest of her life. As her guardian, she will have to assume responsibility for her granddaughter’s crimes. She attempts to assuage her guilt over Martha’s suicide by offering Karen monetary compensation, but as she learns, all the money in the world cannot purchase an unsullied reputation, a “perfect” grandchild, a clear conscience, or an extinguished life. Mary is the product of a society that rushes to judgment, relishing the condemnation and ostracisation of those who are wrongfully accused, especially if they are women who are not “quite (w)right”, as Karen’s last name, Wright, suggests. Mary tenaciously clings to her lie – and Mrs. Tilford to her values, which Mary’s lie only reinforces – even when faced with the opportunity to rectify the situation. They use their power to influence the masses of Lancet and redraw the gender line that has been blurred by Karen and Martha. However, like the two female protagonists, they also presumably suffer, suggesting that Great Depression America was a period of transition, with multiple moral systems successfully and unsuccessfully competing with each other.

In the end, poetic justice is not served in *The Children’s Hour* – the “evil” are not overtly punished and the “good” are not rewarded in any obvious way. Nevertheless, Hellman’s play is far more nuanced than a battle between “good and evil”. As such, there can never be any true victors, victims, or victimisers. Each character becomes entrapped in his/her own socially constructed prison. Amelia Tilford faces an uncertain future as the cage-keeper for a monstrous child: “I could never [send her away]. Whatever she does, it must be to me and no one else ... she’s [my] very own, to live with [for] the rest of [my] life” (Hellman 1979: 77). Acting “out of pride, ... in the end [she] punishes [her]self”, and as Martha predicts, gets “more than she bargained for” (Hellman 1979: 50). Karen, though stripped of a marriage, a career, and a friend, is still as proud and pragmatic as ever, but, as the ending of the play suggests, will pay the price for her emotional coolness through a lifetime of wandering and wondering. Martha chooses death rather than confronting her feelings for Karen and coming to terms

with her sexual orientation. Like Mrs. Mortar, Joe will survive, but will always be followed by the shadow of his companions' unfortunate demise.

As Karen expresses at the height of the hysterical accusations, evil can come in numerous (in)visible guises in American society: "The wicked very young, and the wicked very old" (Hellman 1979: 51). One of the most frightening aspects of the drama is how easily the reputations of successful women can be destroyed out of jealousy, insecurity, closed-mindedness and resentment. That *The Children's Hour* has been continually revived over the past few decades – most recently in London, starring Keira Knightley and Elizabeth Moss as Karen and Martha, respectively – simply illustrates the fact that this play remains just as relevant today as it was in 1934. Society still attempts to inscribe boundaries around women, and powerful women who transgress traditional female gender roles, whether politically, socially, culturally, or sexually, are still subjected to a level of scrutiny rarely imposed upon men. The media, in particular, can *create*, *destroy*, and in some cases *recreate* reputations overnight (Karen and Martha even convey this notion when they make the comment that "we've been in the papers") – a phenomenon that high-profile American women, such as Hillary Clinton, Martha Stewart, and Ellen DeGeneres, to name just a few, have experienced. As *The Children's Hour* conveys, and the treatment of non-conformist women in America continues to illustrate, the United States still harbours a great deal of anxiety about gender and sexuality, especially towards those who seek to challenge social norms and cultural mores.

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