

American Literature & Culture
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Lillian Hellman (Lecture 24)

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Good morning friends. So we talked about the rise and growth of American drama and we referred to several great dramatists of America, the nineteenth century, twentieth century American playwrights. We also talked, we talked mainly about Robert Anderson, Tea and Sympathy, we talked about Maxwell Anderson, we talked about the musicals, we talked about the method acting and the method schools of stage, Stanislavskian method, we talked about Harold Clurman and Cheryl Crawford and Lee Strasberg. We talked about the Triumvirate also, Arthur Miller, Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams and the concerns and the experiments and the technical devices that these dramatists reflected in their plays.

Lillian Hellman, a dramatist we are going to focus on for the next couple of hours is a important, not just because she is one of the earliest woman American writers but also kind of, playwrights rather, not just writer but one of the earliest woman playwrights on American stage but also for the concerns and the kind of life she led, which was quite radical for its time. So Lilian Florence Hellman who lived between 1905 and 1984, she was born on June twentieth, in New Orleans in 1905.

When people spoke of the American Theater, they generally spoke of O'Neill and Odets and the people who were writing during that time. Hellman is also one of the most prominent writers or dramatists of this age, the only woman playwright of her generation at a time when O'Neill and Odets and Robert Anderson were making waves. She was the only child of Julia Newhouse Hellman and Max Hellman who was a shoe salesman by profession. She spent her childhood in New York City and New Orleans.

She was born Jewish in New Orleans which was a port city and a hub of active financing and trading center. She grew up among a diverse bulk of immigrant population. The city developed a reputation of cosmopolitanism and liberalism especially in a decade noted for Southern White Terror to African-American people. The city's diversity produced a rich culture like the parading of brass bands, a tradition of ministerial prayers and the birth of Jazz which became the symbol of cultural synthesis.

Lilian was surrounded by the Reformed Jews group of people, called the Reformed Jews whose stand on the Jewish identity was quite different from the eastern European immigrants in the Northern cities. Many Jews rejected the notion. Jews constituted the nation of their own and instead held that their national identity to be located in the place they lived. It was thus a way for Jews to become Americans.

Lilian thus neither was a Jew in the Yiddish speaking um upwardly mobile immigrants' sense of the world nor a member of a closed knit southern Jewish community. So she occupied a complicated position in both communities. in the bifurcated world of twentieth century, Jews that played enormous stress on the meaning of Jewish identity molding it in response to historical and personal circumstances.

In the years she lived, basically we are talking about her early period in the 1930s, the Jewish identity seemed more a matter of culture and style than of religious practice. She was in this sense an American Jew whose identity was woven into the canvas of political debate. Hellman's moralist outlook thus stems from this conflicted identity, sense of conflicted identity. Her life and works championed the cause of social justice and racial equality.

After 2 years at New York University from 1922 to 1924 and a brief stint at Columbia University, she took up a position as manuscript reader for Horace Liveright Incorporated which was a New York publisher. From 1927 to 30, she worked as a theatrical play reader in New York and in between 1930 to 31, a scenario reader for MGM in Hollywood. Her job in Hollywood suited her ambition. Regular meetings with writers and intellectuals during that time helped in scaling up her career. She attended endless parties and gatherings which was a prerequisite for her job.

She melted into the smart creative and culturally ambitious circles that now surrounded her and found an exciting new world of literary and theatrical arts. In 1925, she married Arthur Kober; Arthur Kober, a theatrical press agent and writer whose connections in literary and theatrical world proved useful to her. He published, helped her publish few of her earlier short stories. Kober and Hellman lived in Paris and Germany for several months and Hellman later made extensive visits to Spain and the Soviet Union.

Her observations of the political situations of Europe contributed to the dislike of fascism and anti-Semitism explicitly in her later political works. After 5 years of their marriage, she divorced Kober and started living with the pulp fiction, detective fiction writer Dashiell Hammett. It proved to be one of the most enduring relationships of her life. Both Hammett and Hellman found a home in Communism, they were staunch Communists.

For Hellman, the catalyst was the war in Spain. However Stalin's increasingly ruthless methods and thousands of arrests and murders, as a result of his growing paranoia left large number of liberal socialists and communists of the 1930s including Hellman indecisive of their position. They started doubting their communist tendencies. But their relationship to the left wing activities of 30s was as members of entertainment community rather than as intellectuals.

After the premier of her first successful play, *The Children's Hour* in 1934 she went back to Hollywood and collaborated with many productions. The Screen Writer's Guild SWG was formed as a response to the producer's act which gave the producer complete control over the production, distribution and total ownership of the writer's work imposing not only a kind of

ensorship on the writer but also denied the credits they deserved for their work. So Hellman joined the Guild in 1935 and gave voice to the concerns of the screen writers.

She examined or she remained the member and supporter of the guild and however she did not assume a leadership position. Members of SWG were mostly communists and many of them were already blacklisted. In 1938, HUAC, the House Un-American Activities Committee was formed to resolve the issues and it called upon members of many friend groups to testify they were communist party members or not. As late as 1952 Hellman faced HUAC trials. Though she denied any alliance or membership with the Communist party she did not hesitate from hiding her support for the Soviet Union.

In 1960 after Hammett's death she turned from writing plays to teaching. She shot back to fame in the 1970s through the publication of her autobiography and memoirs. However with the publication of *Three and Maybe*, a controversy broke out when Hellman was called a liar by Mary McCarthy which became a source to most of the negative biographies written about Hellman. She was also accused of having fictionalized parts of her memoir and *Unfinished Woman* by Martha Gellhorn. Psychoanalyst Muriel Gardiner who wrote *Code Name Mary* in 1983 asserted that Hellman appropriated her past as the basis of her Julia recollections in *Pentimento*. So all these are allegations and charges and they were never settled and on June thirtieth, 1984, Hellman died before her libel suit against McCarthy went to court.

Some of the awards that were given to, that Lilian Hellman won remain Academy Award nomination for the adaptation of *The Little Foxes*, her own play which was adapted into a film, and her original screenplay *The North Star*. She also won the New York Drama Critic Circle Award in 1941 and 60 twice, and a gold medal from Academy of Arts and Letters in 1964 for distinguished achievement in the theater. She was elected to the Theater Hall of Fame in 1973. Her major works, now she has been writing since the 20s. In 1930 and in early 1934, she published two stories in the *American Spectator*.

They were like, New Yorkerish stories, they were humorous, and all her plays were redeemed from commercialism by their strong moral commitment. This is important. Through her plays, Hellman constantly makes the point that it is immoral to remain passive when evil is being done. This moral message is organically part of her artistic structure and

characterization. Her works consistently demonstrate responsibility, courage and social integration.

Now in *The Children's Hour* that we are going to do, you will find it, this was published in, performed in 1934, published after that. It was her first major play and major success directed by Hermun Shumlin. The story revolves around two women Martha and Karen who run a girls' boarding school for, they earn a living by running a boarding school for girls and they are accused of unnatural relationship quote unquote by one of their pupil Mary Tilford. The outraged society withdraws their children and forces them to shut down the school. The play closes with Martha's suicide.

So Hellman explores the theme of lesbianism which was sort of a taboo for those times. she also anticipates Mccarthian madness of the time and thus shows the government's attitude towards people who showed communist tendencies through the metaphor of the Fringe group, Martha's lesbian feelings towards Karen and the outraged society. So using that as a metaphor, she talks about what society, the damage a society can inflict on individuals. The play highlights Hellman's political consciousness and concern for the working class, the under-privileged of society, the people, those sorts of people who have to work hard to make a living.

Children's Hour is read alongside Arthur Miller's *Crucible* and Tennessee William's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* are the themes. The play was also made into highly successful films in 1930s and 1960s and because of the production code and censorship, the story was adapted into a heterosexual love triangle and the director William Wyler changed the controversial name and the movie was released as *3 Lives*. In 1961, Wyler remade the movie without changing its major theme of lesbianism and its title, this version starred Shirley MacLaine, James Garner and Audrey Hepburn.

Her next play, *Days to Come*, it came out in 1935 and deals with the theme of relations between labor and capital in the form of a strike in one industry town. In 1937 she wrote the screenplay for the film. It was called *Dead End*. *The Little Foxes* is one of her most enduring plays. It's a drama about the Hubbards of Alabama who displayed the greed and driving

egotism Hellman saw in her mother's family. So it's partially autobiographical. Hellman actually knew such kinds of people.

So Ben and Oscar Hubbard and their sister Regina Giddens form a partnership with another industrialist to set up a profitable cotton factory in their town which is impossible without Regina's husband Horace's permission. The play shows Regina and her brothers' mastery to get control over Horace's money in which Regina wins by deliberately provoking her husband into a fatal heart attack. The play is very well constructed, advancing every speech into action. Hellman's moral attack at the character is theatrically highly effective.

And also worth noting is the selfishness of the Hubbards which is explained and explored by Hellman in *Another Part of the Forest* which is 1927 work. She went back 20 years to show Ben, Oscar and Regina as young people. It is a sort of a prequel to *The little Foxes*. Her other play, next play *Watch on the Rhine* is a 1941 play where she turned to the political situations in order to awaken Americans to the growing menace of fascism. The play is set in 1940 just before the country entered The Second World War. The title is taken from the German marching song suggesting that Nazism must be watched and fought, not only in Europe but also in the US.

The play deals with the anti-fascist struggle in an upper class American home. It focused or focuses on the innocence of the Americans and the inability to comprehend the growing power of fascism and Anti-Semitism of the 30s especially in Europe. *The Autumn Garden*, her 1951 work emphasizes character over plot. It is set in a shabby southern resort hotel where 10 people who lack purpose or joy or love, they all meet. General Griggs who wants divorce from his wife with whom he is bored is a portrait of a decent intelligent man with a woman who cannot really attain his growth and then there is artist Nick Denery.

He is the man whose wife despises him due to his irresponsibility and who is too shallow a man and too selfish to display any kind of emotional commitment and Hellman powerfully develops the theme of people, Ok, stifled by various constraints. Hellman's next important play is *Toys in the Attic* which is, which presents middle aged people who come to recognize the bleakness of their life but find that they cannot have any control, any change. They don't have any, they cannot change, the rut their lives has settled in.

Instead of presenting straightforward relationship of love or domination, she examines ambivalent ones of mutual dependency. Hellman gives her characters more room to develop by relaxing her tight plotting. Then we have to talk about her memoirs and *Unfinished Woman* is a vivid autobiography that runs from her childhood to the death of Dashiell Hammett in 1961.

She analyses her rebellions and conflicts and ambivalent attitude towards money and of course her relationship with Dashiell Hammett and it won, the book won her the, her autobiography won her the National Book Award in 1969. The second volume of her memoir is *Pentimento*, a 1973 book. It's a reconsideration of certain themes in her life which were not developed in her previous one. It consists mostly of portraits, the most memorable one of her girlhood friend Julia and all this ran into controversy as I just told you. Then *Scoundrel Time* is 1976 work where she describes her experience of political persecution during the McCarthy trials, during HUAC trials. So these 3 memoirs were republished together as *Three*, the title was *Three* in 1979.

So coming to her legacy, what was her legacy? So a film was based on the relationship between Hellman and Hammett and it was produced by the Arts and Entertainment Network. The movie was called *Dash and Lily* and then many institutions including Yale University and Columbia University awarded her honorary degrees. In 2010, the committee for recognizing the women in theater, rather ironically established its Lily awards in honor of Lilian Hellman. The playwright who never wanted to be placed in the company of women playwrights, she always wanted to compete with men but then a play was instituted to encourage women playwrights. Hellman's feud or war with Mary McCarthy formed the basis for Nora Ephron's 2002 play called *Imaginary Friends*. So Lilian Hellman, a woman who made a place for herself in a worked which was largely dominated by men. Here are the references

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Reference

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Please take a look and thank you very much