

# **The Classroom as Social and Cultural Place In Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour***

**Prof. Hana Khlaif Ghena (Ph.D)**

College of Arts/Al-Mustansiriyah University

Department of Translation

## **Abstract**

This paper aims at exploring the dynamics of power in Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour* which deals with a typical educational setting. Besides being a 'site of national citizen building', and a place where the State authorities ensure the 'minimum common level of enculturation and socialization,' the educational settings, the paper argues, offer a unique insight into the social and cultural structure of society. As these settings influence society, and are themselves influenced by it, Hellman's play reveals as much about the teachers, administrators, as about the students. The play, which takes place in an all-girl private boarding school, tells a lot about American society in the 1930s. Hellman's main focus is not to give solutions to the problems and questions raised, rather, she aspires to draw attention to them and raise public awareness about the dangers of neglecting them. The paper discussion is informed by two main concepts: learning as a social interaction and social reproduction.

Key Words: Hellman, *The Children's Hour*, Learning, classroom, social interaction.

## **I. The Classroom as Space and Place:**

Learning and teaching are certainly multilayered processes. In order to succeed in them, a number of requirements have to be fulfilled. These requirements involve many parties such as teachers, students, curricula, educational environment, educational authorities and the school as space and place.

Schools- and classrooms by implication- can be defined as measurable and mappable physical spaces that typically include windows, closets, a number of chairs and tables, whiteboards, official curricula, notebooks and binders, etc., and collectively "embody a particular vision of education. It is an isolated and austere set-up." However, modern approaches to learning and education tend to view classrooms as settings where "development, beauty, play, privacy, conversation, freedom of movement [and thought]" should be cultivated and consolidated (Harouni, 2013, p.187).

Changing this traditional view of classrooms as spaces requires a more complex definition of space. The new suggested definition should consider not only the “bare physical bones of the classroom”, but also “makes room for a greater set of human experiences”(Harouni, 2013,p.188). In the definition presented by French sociologist Henri Lefebvre(1901-1991), in his groundbreaking book *The Production of Space* (1974/1991), space is defined as a social product. This implies a shift in perspective from physical spaces to the social processes of their production. The mechanisms that shape the school as such a zone, and the ways in which people take part in shaping them, must be part of any study of the school setting. Thus, space comes to represent much more than the limited sense of the word as physical environment(See Ibid). Lefebvre, in fact, “challenged traditional notions of space as an abstract arena and passive container, proposing a theory that unified physical, social, and mental conceptions of space by emphasizing its continual production and reproduction.” Space, accordingly, can no longer be viewed as static or inert background, but as an arena of struggle that shapes ideas, beliefs, principles, and values. It is, in this sense, intertwined with embodiment and lived experiences, touching every arena of social and cultural life, including, of course, religion(Gunderson, 2018).

Classrooms, in view of that, should be dealt with as places rather than spaces. In “Place”, Preucel and Meskell define ‘place’ as the outcome of the social process of valuing space; a product of the imaginary, of desire, and the primary means by which we articulate with space and transform it into a humanized landscape”(2004, p.215).

Classrooms are often seen as one of the central agents for socialization and instilling norms and values in future generations; it is, in Herrera’s words (2006: 27) a “site of national citizen building”, and a means to “ensure the minimum common level of enculturation and socialization”(in MOE, 2003, p.8f.).

One of the main means to achieve these goals is to ‘discipline’ students. Thomdile and Barnhart (1979, p.262) define ‘discipline’ as a "trained condition of order and obedience, order kept among school learners, bring to a condition of order and obedience or bring under control". It is also regarded as a "practice of imposing strict rules of behavior on other people" and "the ability to behave and work in a controlled manner" (Treffry et al, 1997, p.211). Rice, furthermore, remarks that “Discipline’ is not only a behavior which leads to better learning and a display of behavior which the society has agreed upon as appropriate, but it

is also looked upon as actions taken to prevent or handle behavior problems in the classroom as well as the control of learner behavior(1987, p.30).

To many teachers, discipline means obeying rules. They hold the view that the students will not be disciplined unless they are closely monitored and threatened by punishment. This method of reward/punishment is often used to impose the worldview of the educational system on the students, and it sometimes leads to a misunderstanding of the word 'discipline' which, for some people, means only punishment, pain, and fear. According to this view, discipline is considered as not being positive and educative (Onderi&Odera, 2012, p.710).

In contrast to this view, 'discipline', Mbithi affirms (1974), can also be viewed as a positive force. It can be used as a means of training students to think critically, to analyze the situations, to solve problems and make appropriate decisions on the action to take. It does not mean correction only, but guiding the individual to make reasonable decisions responsibly. Mbithi believes that in classroom teaching, discipline means the control of the class to achieve desirable behaviors(in Onderi& Odera, 2012, p.711). Mbithi seems, in this respect, in full agreement with Martin (1997) who maintains that, on one level, discipline in school is linked to the creation of an orderly environment that permits teaching and learning to occur, but, at another more fundamental level, it is centrally linked to issues of social cohesion, justice and equality(qtd in *Discipline in the Primary School*, 2002, p.2). Schools, in other words, are not only concerned with teaching and learning, but also with relationships and responsibilities. This means that teachers will need support in dealing with this issue in schools. As stated by Martin, "discipline in schools is a shared, collective responsibility." It is not only in the interest of those directly involved in education to support discipline in schools, but also in the interest of all members of society (Ibid.).

The success in achieving the goal of disciplining students can not be taken for granted. More often than not, some students need some corrective disciplinary measures as a result of being undisciplined or having committed an offence or going against the school rules. In such cases the educational management should apply appropriate procedures when handling discipline cases(Onderi&Odera, 2012, p.711).

The types of disciplinary measures range from giving students extra assignments, detention during break, corporeal punishment, suspension, discussion with principal, isolation of pupil, extra homework, notification

of parents, refer to another teacher, removal of privileges, and exclusion from class. (see chapter five of *Discipline in the Primary School*, 2002)

Discipline here, as an idea and system, resonates with the French philosopher Michel Foucault's (1926-1984) viewpoint of schools as 'heterotopias' and discipline as a means of producing 'docile bodies.' In "Of Other Spaces," Foucault explains that "heterotopias" are real spaces that assume a symbolic purpose. He identifies two primary types of heterotopias—heterotopias of "crisis" and of "deviation." The first consists of "privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are...in a state of crisis: adolescents, menstruating women, pregnant women, the elderly, etc.," and Foucault identifies boarding schools as such a space, a place where "the first manifestations of sexual virility were in fact supposed to take place 'elsewhere' than at home"(1986, p.24). Thus, boarding schools work outside of but to the benefit of society at large, especially in regards to the management of adolescent sexuality. Paradoxically, these spaces, feared to be 'hot-beds of vice', and "the chief theater of immature and temporary homosexual manifestations"(qtd. in Tuhkanen,2002, 1010) because of the "dangerous proximity of pupils," are the same spaces meant to foster normative citizens(Ibid.). Dyne (2017) suggests that one of the ways to address the issue of proximity resulting in homosexuality was through "the careful management of space and time within the boarding school in order to establish discipline among students".

In *Discipline and Punishment*(1977/1995), Foucault explores how 'discipline' is used to produce 'docile bodies'. 'Docile bodies' means "bodies that have been groomed for maximum productivity upon entry into a given society." For Foucault, "discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, 'docile' bodies. It increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience)"(p.138). In order to further explain this issue, he identifies a number of controlled environments, like barracks, religious institutions, or schools, that employ various means of discipline "for controlling or correcting the operations of the body" (Ibid, p.136). In other words, in addition to being a heterotopic space for adolescents in a state of "crisis"(Foucault 1986, p.24), boarding schools and their managers become an agent of the dominant society, charged with the task of molding students into "proper" citizens. If this system is to effectively produce bodies that are groomed for their intended purpose, discipline should be practiced especially in regards to policing "appropriate" sexual behavior, regimen, and a clear distribution of power(Dyne, 2017).

Learning and teaching are also informed by social and cultural norms and ideas prevalent in a society. Darling-Hammond, Austin, Lit, and Nasir strongly believe in the necessity of creating a “culturally responsive teaching ....[which] involves a genuine respect for students and belief in their potential as learners”(n.d ,p.105). Teachers should also take into consideration the importance of connecting to students’ experiences, and the impact of school culture and home culture on students’ learning. They will evaluate how to make the classroom a place where students feel comfortable, see themselves represented, and engage with curriculum materials that reflect their own interests and orientations(Ibid).

However, too many schools, not only in United States of America, but also all over the world, do a poor job of teaching students. A growing body of research illustrates the reasons which range from the policies that govern school funding, curriculum offerings, staffing, and tracking systems, to factors that depend much more on teachers’ knowledge, skills, and expectations for their students (Darling-Hammond, n.d, p.106). Spring (1997) suggests that students develop a wide range of coping mechanisms in response to institutional pressures that send them signals that they do not belong. Among the responses students may adopt are an oppositional relationship to school: “The school does not include me, therefore, I will not invest in school” (Ibid, p.107).

To tackle this problem of nonbelonging, Garcia reviewed a number of studies that documented schools with strong academic achievement. In terms of instruction, he found that many of the classrooms emphasized communication between teachers and students, family-like social settings where students interacted with each other, thematic units selected by students with their teacher, and a strong commitment to communication with parents. In these classrooms, teachers’ relationships with their students and their expectations for their success were central. Significantly, these teachers ‘adopted’ their students. They had high academic expectations for all their students and also served as advocates for them. They rejected any conclusion that their students were intellectually or academically disadvantaged (1993, pp. 82-83).

In the same vein, Munro (n.d,p.8) strongly recommends social interaction during learning which aims at assisting learners to align their personal understanding of ideas with the culturally accepted understanding. This learning process is referred to as the negotiation of meaning and is necessary in all areas of formal learning. A negotiated meaning is the shared or agreed understanding of a concept. In addition to Munro, Marzano (2003) wrote that “virtually anything you do to show interest in

students as individuals has a positive impact on their learning” and makes several suggestions, including: greeting students outside of school, such as at extracurricular events or at stores; singling out a few students each day in the lunchroom and talking to them; being aware of and commenting on important events in students’ lives, such as participation in sports, drama, or other extracurricular activities (in *Culturally Responsive Classroom*, 2008, p.6).

Many of the issues delineated above are discussed in Hellman’s *The Children’s Hour* which takes place in the Wright-Dobie school for girls. Hellman in this play is not concerned with the ‘lie’ or ‘act of betrayal’ performed by Mary, one of school students, per se; rather, her main objective is to expose some of social and cultural dynamics that influence the performance of school as an educational institution whose main task is to reproduce citizens that conform to the rules and dictates of the heteronormative dominant society. The school poor performance surely results in questioning many of the assumptions on which it is based.

## II. School as Social and Cultural Place:

“In order to teach you, I must know you”(Delpit, 1995, p. 183).  
“Oh, Grandma, don’t make me go back to that awful place”(Hellman, 1979, p.39).

Hellman’s *The Children’s Hour* opens in a typical educational setting. It is “A room in the Wright-Dobie School for girls, a converted farm-house eighteen miles from the town of Lancel”(p.5). As soon as the curtain raises, the audience realize the incongruity in the scene. Based on the stage direction, the classroom is far from being that conducive or encouraging environment one might expect in a privately-run, and owned school. The teacher, Mrs. Lily Mortar, who is Miss. Martha Dobie’s aunt, and a penniless and failed actress, is sitting on a large chair with “*her eyes closed....[and] Her clothes are too fancy for a classroom*”(1979, p.5). Six of the seven girls are sewing “*with no great amount of industry on pieces of white material.*” Rosalie Wells is sitting nervously while Evelyn Munn is trying to trim her hair. Peggy Rogers is busy reading aloud from a book: “*She is bored and she reads in a singsong, tired voice*” (p.5).

In their school, Karen and Martha’s main task is “regulate time and provide guidance, instruction, discipline, and structure for their students” as Dyne explicates(2017, p.24). The Wright-Dobie School, however, fails to do so because, Dyne continues, “rigor and discipline appear to be largely absent.” Mrs. Mortar’s attempts to act as an authority figure within this educational space are customarily aborted: she is consistently interrupted and even corrected by students. These regular interruptions constitutes a

subversion of the expected “power dynamic between teacher and student”(Ibid.).

The opening scene reveals another major aspect in the School educational system: it is traditional. It is based on learning by rote, and is designed to prepare girls for meeting the expectations of the largely patriarchal and heteronormative society. This is significant as boarding schools are usually considered “unique spaces and pedagogical systems that often function as extensions of an imperialist model that exists to reinforce hierarchical and heteronormative ideals and expectations in order to produce nationalized, gendered, and racialized citizens through the use of discipline”(Dyne, 2017, p.10). The Wright-Dobie School, Dyne remarks, represents such a mechanism, but a number of factors ultimately prevent it from succeeding as an instrument of the discipline. These factors include a “subverted distribution of power, sexual difference, and a fractured heteronormative timeline”(Ibid).

The first text referred to in *The Children's Hour* is William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*(1596-1599) from which Peggy, a student, misquotes Portia and contributes to introducing some of the central themes in the play; namely, power, justice, and mercy. The choice of Shakespeare's play shows Hellman's intelligence as it touches upon two central themes in her play. First, it reveals Hellman's strong interest in dealing with the implications of injustice and mercilessness inflicted by the Lancet community on Karen Wright and Martha Dobie, the two Principals of the school who were falsely accused of ‘unnatural’ sexual same-sex behavior. Second, It demonstrates the centrality of the issue of marriage, which is equally central in Shakespeare's play, in Hellman's female characters' lives. Without Bassanio's desire to marry Portia, there would have been neither bond nor trial. Marriage texts in the Elizabethan era often stress the ‘hierarchical’ nature of marriage, with man/husband being superior in position to woman/wife. The husband is “the King, Priest, and Prophet in his house”(see Chapter one of Bazzell, 2008, pp.7-54). Bazzell points out that although most of the ‘marriage’ texts in this era are meant to emphasize heteronormativity, Shakespeare succeeds in presenting female characters that belie the expectations of the dominant society(see Ibid).

Mrs. Lily asks Peggy to repeat Portia's quotation till she is able to keep it by heart. There is a great emphasis on her part on skills that are gender-based. ‘Sewing’ is an example. In order to be good housewives, women have to learn many tricks, and it is the school's responsibility, Mrs. Lily believes, to teach them these tricks. There is also an emphasis on ‘breeding.’ As Merriam-Webster(2018) Dictionary states, ‘Breeding’ has

four main meanings; it is the action or process of bearing or generating, ancestry, education, training in or observance of the proprieties, and the sexual propagation of plants or animals

(<http://www.merriam.webster.com>).

It is noteworthy that references abounds in the play to 'breeding' for, it is "an excellent thing" for girls to have 'good breeding', as Mrs. Lily states while reproaching Mary for missing classes: "Even if you have no interest in your work you might at least remember that you owe me a little courtesy. Courtesy is breeding. Breeding is an excellent thing"(p.8). It is very important for girls to have 'breeding' because it makes them desirable and marketable. It is what every man wants in a woman. Another reference to 'breeding' is to the gender-based role-playing. As expected, Peggy does not plan to work after completing her studies. All she wants is to be a lighthouse-keeper's wife. At the end of the play, after Martha's suicide, Mrs. Lily, the widow, is distraught at the prospect of living alone, without a 'husband' or a source of income to support her. Karen is advised to go back to Joe Cardin, her fiancée, because it will be very difficult for her without him (p.65).

"Breeding", in the reference, as Tuhkanen explains, denotes a "cultural finesse that proper education instills in young women; its absence is a sign of class inferiority" (2002, 1018). In being late for her class and picking a bunch of faded flowers from the trash can to present to Mrs. Lily, Mary exhibits a deficiency in breeding, and shows a failure on the part of the school to instill this feature in her. Had she been interested enough to attend school, Tuhkanen avers, "she might have learned through education"(Ibid).

Breeding, however, does not signify cultural grooming only. It also refers to 'biological reproduction'. Doctor Joe, who is called in to look at Mary when she feigns heart attack and is accused of lacking in proper breeding, illustrates this meaning. Cardin's deceptively simple question in relation to Mary: "What's the matter with [Mary] now?" gives us an idea about her and justifies her position as the pivotal axis around which the events of the play revolve. This is not the first time Mary fakes illness to evade punishment or gain sympathy. The second meaning of 'breeding' being a process of biological reproduction and species preservation is explicitly stated in Cardin's declaration: "I stopped at Vernie's on the way over to look at that little black bull he bought. He's a baby! There's going to be plenty of good breeding done in these hills"(16).

Hellman's ironical employment of 'breeding' with its multiple meanings perfectly fits the nature and aims of the School as an institution.



She first situates the word in Mrs. Lily's "lofty cultural ideals" and then, later in the same scene, she uses it in reference the rather more mundane activity of fertilizing farm animal. Mary and other girls must, first, learn how to be refined socially and culturally; and second, they should not forsake the old-established norms or seek to lead their lives in ways other those agreed upon by society: to be good housewives and mothers (Tuhkanen, 2002, p.1019).

Deviance from these norms takes many forms. It is translated in *The Children's Hour* in Martha's questioning of the necessity of marriage for working-class women who are financially independent. It is also expressed in the hysterical fear of the possible prevalence of uncontrolled (sexual) desires and practices especially in same-sex institutions. In order to avoid such potential violation of social norms, the Wright-Dobie School applies a number of measures to police unaccepted 'sexuality' and to underpin heteronormativity. Martha is told she needs to "get a beau" of her own because "Every woman, no matter what she says, is jealous when another woman gets a husband" (p. 21); and Karen, as the paper states previously is told to "go back to Joe".

The great emphasis on "breeding" and on delineating the qualities of "well-bred" women in the Wright-Dobie School certainly contribute to highlighting the issue of education which is gendered-based. It is obvious that the schoolgirls are being prepared for occupying specific positions within society as wives and mothers. This can be achieved through a "system of institutionalized policing of sexuality, at all levels of the...School"(Dyne, 2017, p.14). Hellman creates a system of women policing the sexuality of other women: Mrs. Lily polices the students, Karen and Martha's friendship is policed by the community at large, and Martha effectively polices herself through confession, expression of shame, and finally, suicide. Dyne suggests that this policing system points to Foucault's theory of docility and raises the question of controlled reproduction. These references "not only reveal cultural anxieties about having the "right kind" of citizens reproduce, but also *how* and *when* they do so"(emphasis in the original)(Ibid).

'Inbreeding', the opposite of 'breeding', is used when a person fails to comply to the rules set by society and its institutions. The 'eavesdropping' incident in which Peggy and Evelyn were involved, is described as a type of 'inbreeding' or bad action which the girls should not do. The same holds true of 'curiosity' which is very 'unlady.'(p.42) Rejection of marriage as a necessary and socially-sanctioned choice is another example that makes a girl deviate from the established social and

cultural norms. Inbreeding, in this sense, can be viewed as lacking of the desirable qualities a girl should have to have access to the dominant society.

As a teacher in charge of educating students, it is crystal clear that Mrs. Lily lacks efficiency and competence. She is fond of telling old stories of her 'gilded days' as an ex-actress. She also fails to give a good image to her students for while she keeps criticizing Peggy for skipping some lines in the quotation, she herself skips three lines. Moreover, she is often susceptible to flattery as it is clear when Mary Tilford, the class troublemaker, brings her flowers to ask her forgiveness for being absent from the class. Both Wright and Karen agree that the school is better off without Mrs. Lily who often complains about almost everything: the farm, the school, the boredom, the management, the dullness of class(p.19).

The atmosphere of dullness in the class abruptly changes when Karen Wright enters. As the stage direction states "*With her entrance there is an immediate change in the manner of the girls: they are fond of her and respect her*"(p.10). Karen is more interested in keeping order in the school and in disciplining girls. She believes that the school girls were very happy until Mary comes. She is determined to know why Mary is unhappy. Mary seems out of norm in the school. She often lies to her teachers and classmates: "She's a problem, that kid. Her latest trick was kidding your aunt out of a sewing lesson with these faded we threw out"(p.13). "Your Mary's a strange girl, a bad girl. There's something very awful the matter with her" according to Karen, and more often than not, both teachers do not "have the faintest idea what goes on in her mind"(p.14). She often feigns sickness, intimidates, manipulates, blackmails, and threatens to "go to her grandmother with some tale about being mistreated"(p.13). Martha is horrified at this possibility because she is almost certain that Grandma would believe Mary, and consequently "would take her away"(p.13)

Cock suggests that Mary's "abnormality" is not the reason that places her beyond knowledge. Indeed, the failure to understand the 'kid' is elsewhere taken to be the root of the problem with Amelia's relationship with her, with Karen declaring "She's too crazy about Mary to see her faults clearly – and the kid knows it" (15)(n.d, p.9). One should remember, here, that the Wright-Dobie School is a private-not public- school. This means that it financially depends on the money the girls' families are paying in return for teaching them. Mrs. Emelia Tilford, the Grandmother, is the main sponsor of the school. So taking Mary away "would give the school a swell black eye"(p.13). It will be ruined and may become bankrupt. Hence, something must be done to avoid this.

Another suggestion by Martha is to let Joe speak to Mary. Doing this, however, is tantamount to admitting that the School teachers can not do the job assigned to them; i.e., it equals an admission of their failure to 'discipline' Mary and reproduce her as a normative and proper citizen, and this could ultimately mean that the Wright-Dobie School is doing a 'poor job' in the educational field.

Martha believes that it is better to admit this because they have "tried everything [they] can think of. [Mary] had more attention than any other three kids put together"(p.14). Karen employs a more reasonable approach in dealing with Mary. She tells her: "Let's understand each other." She is serious in her attempt to 'understand' the kid on condition that the latter stops 'lying'; an act that makes everything 'wrong'. When Karen recognizes the futility of rectifying Mary's misbehavior and disobedience, she decides that she should be 'punished'. Mary, thus, is to spend the recreation periods alone for the next two weeks. She will neither participates in horse-back riding, boat races, nor in hockey. She is not to leave the school grounds for any reason(p.12).

There is another issue that troubles the managers of the School. Karen is engaged to Joe for a year, and she is about to get married. This raises the question of women's role in society: is she to leave work after marriage or continue in her career as a teacher. Martha is afraid that Karen will leave her job after marriage in spite of the latter's confirmation that she does not intend to do that, and that marriage does not run contrary to work. Martha reminds Karen of the great efforts they exerted-of "slaving and going without things to make ends meet" (p.16) in order to establish the school and gain independence.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, remaining single for women teachers during their time in the profession was highly acceptable as a cultural norm. There were, in fact, a number of public and private institutions that "refused to employ women, trying also to limit their teachers' social contacts with single men" although marriage was a private issue in the case of self-employed teachers like Wright and Dobie(Clifford in Dyne, 2017, p.13). Marriage bans for women teachers had become a popularized, mainstream myth by the time Hellman wrote *The Children's Hour*, which complicates the fact that Karen intended to continue her work after marriage. Karen's plans to continue teaching after marriage could be considered as a deviant behavior by the 1930s audience, but Karen and Martha's position as sole proprietors and instructors of the Wright-Dobie School, Dyne points out, allowed for some measure of flexibility. That is, Karen would be able to maintain her position as a

professional educator despite social norms because the school was privately owned and because the marriage would be a reification of heteronormativity. In this sense, Karen is a “representative of heteronormative authority” and contributes to endorsing it. This endorsement, however, goes against certain expectations for teachers and fails to protect Karen from rumors of same-sex relation. In *Those Good Gertrudes: A Social History of Women Teachers in America* (2014), Clifford sheds light on some of these expectations, observing that “In a ‘homosocial [not homosexual] environment, the spectrum of legitimate female-female behavior was broad,” and it was common for “generations of single women teachers” to live “with other women: perhaps a sister or widowed mother but often an unrelated single woman, frequently another teacher”(qtd. in Dyne, 2017, p.13). However, “Around the turn of the twentieth century, the term ‘homosexuality’ appeared, and Freudianism subsequently embellished earlier suspicions of ‘sex inversion’” (Clifford 164). This “popularized sexology” in mass culture led to “an abiding anxiety of close female friendships, especially in the context where male supervision is lacking,” which adds plausibility to the scandalous nature of the lie Mary tells in *The Children's Hour* (Tuhkanen, 2002, p.1012). Thus, even though boarding schools were designed for the purpose of serving the hetero-patriarchal empire, boarding schools for girls “were seen as artificial environments” where the spread of uncontrolled reading and knowledge had the potential to injure girls’ “normal growth, inflicting them with physical and mental diseases”(Ibid, p.1021).

In her article ‘Murdering the Lesbian’ Titus suggests that during Hellman's childhood and youth, in the first two decades of the twentieth century, the feminist movement was already discredited, as exemplified by the emergence of the ‘New Woman’ at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century (1991, p.215). Faderman elaborates this idea, and remarks, in her work *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers* (1992), that such a discredit was directly linked to the advancement of the suffragist and feminist movements which began to challenge mainstream, patriarchal values, especially those related to the family. Faderman further explains that whilst close female relationships were encouraged in the nineteenth century as a “means for women to find consolation and support *prior* to marriage, such ‘romantic friendships’, with the advent of sexology, became the target of mainstream (male) discourses”(qtd. in Cuenca & Seguro, 2008, 118). The feminist movement, fighting for women's suffrage, their right to higher education and access to the labor market, encouraged these female attachments. This period saw the birth of quite a few all-women

colleges which meant that middle class women, with career ambitions, did not need to consider marriage as the only option for surviving economically. Consequently, romantic friendships, and the feminist movement associated with them, were accused of making women unfit for marriage and family life(Ibid, p.117). As a result of these dramatic changes in the mindset, many women began acting in ways inappropriate to their gender, desiring to get an education, for example, or work in a challenging, lucrative profession (Faderman in ibid., p.118).

In Hellman's play, Karen and Martha's liaison actually contains all the ingredients of a romantic friendship as Cuenca & Seguro illustrates(2008, p.118). As such, it represents a threat to patriarchal, Victorian values which, despite the bohemian atmosphere of the 1920s, had never disappeared. Martha fears that Karen's engagement to Joe will put an end to her emotional and professional relationship with her friend. In their conversation about Karen's forthcoming marriage, we learn that both women went to college together, presumably to an all-female institution. Such places came to be regarded as dangerous for women; colleges “masculinized” girls making them crave for “privileges” ascribed to men and encouraging same-sex desire (Faderman in Ibid.). Martha is aware of the incompatibilities between marriage and a successful professional life. “I don't understand you”, she tells Karen. “It's been so damned hard building this thing up [the school], ... and now we're getting on our feet, you're all ready to let it go to hell” (p.16). Clearly, Martha articulates the ideology of the New Woman. The sexual element that was attached to that figure in the early twentieth century is reflected later on in the same act when Martha's aunt, Mrs. Mortar, a former actress, points out that her fondness for Karen is *unnatural*, a term used by turn-of-the-century sexologists to refer to lesbianism (Ibid.).

Besides leaving work, there is a more serious issue that lies at the heart of Martha-Karen's relationship. When Martha informs Mrs. Lily that she is no longer welcomed in the school, the latter insinuates that Martha feels upset and becomes nervous whenever Joe comes to visit his fiancée, Karen. Mrs. Lily describes Martha's alleged ‘fondness’ and ‘interest’ in Karen as “unnatural”, and further claims that Martha was like that even when she was a child, and advises her to get married as she is a mature woman now.

Mrs. Lily's insinuations gain in significance when it was used by Mary to convince her Grandmother that something ‘terrible’ was going on in the school, and that, as a result, her escape, after being punished, was justified and defensible. It is worth mentioning that it is Evelyn and Peggy,

not Mary, who had heard the conversation, but it is Mary who coerces them to tell her, and then makes her elaborate lie. Mary also bullies and threatens Rosalie of defaming her by turning her to the authorities because the latter has borrowed/stolen Helen Burton's bracelet. Mary, moreover, 'orders' Rosalie to move her belongings to the new room, and Rosalie succumbs although she protests being treated as a 'maid.' She further forces Rosalie to apologize on her hands and knees, and to swear an oath: "From now on, I, Rosalie Wells, am the vassal of Mary Tilford and will do and say whatever she tells me under the solemn oath of a knight"(p.43). Mary also coerces Peggy out of her money because she needs it to take a taxi to her Grandmother's house. This is the second time she does this. The money Peggy gets from her family is less than other girls. She spends a long time saving it. She has neither gone to movies nor bought candy like other girls. When Peggy 'hysterically' refuses to give Mary her allowance, (*Mary makes a sudden move to her, grabs her left arm, and jerks it back, hard and expertly. Peggy screams softly. Evelyn tries to take Mary's arm away. Without releasing her hold on Peggy, Mary slaps Evelyn's face. Evelyn begins to cry*)(p.30).

Martha and Karen do not know how to categorize Mary in terms of age-group. Although she is referred to as 'kid', 'child', and 'little', they always talk about her as "if she were a woman"(p.14). Pedagogically speaking, the age-group is one of the factors that define the types of materials given and the teaching methods. Mary's misconducts place her out of the age-group she is in. The language she uses does not fit a girl in her age. 'Shut up,' 'you idiot,' 'too ugly' 'sissy,' 'dumb,' 'dirty,' 'cow', 'fat', and 'stupid' are words that Mary often uses in her conversation with other girls, and 'nervously,' 'fiercely' and 'hysterically' are adverbs that are often used to describe her action. In the play, she is a 'fibber', a 'coaxer' 'naughty,' and 'liar.'

The play is based on an actual court case that took place in early nineteenth-century Edinburgh between two women running an all-girl boarding school and a local well-known and respected noblewoman. Similar to Martha and Karen, Jane Pirie and Marianne Woods, the two governesses initiated the libel case in 1810 after being accused by Miss. Jane Cumming, one of their boarding school students of having a lesbian relationship. The accusation was solely based on *misinterpretation* (emphasis mine) of 'voices' and noises' heard at night, and that on several occasion, Cumming awoke to find the two governesses in bed together, laying on top of each other, "whispering and kissing" and moving so that they "shook the bed"(in Tuhkanen, 2002,p.1004). The Court Judges were

perplexed how could a sixteen years adolescent girl have such knowledge. After much debate, the Court concludes that because Jane was born in the 'primitive, unrefined' India and spent her first eight years there, she had allegedly come in contact with 'deviant' knowledge, and might have been polluted by immoralities practiced there, and exposed to a knowledge of women being able "to kindle each other's lewd appetites". The whole case, in this sense, is being discussed and presented in terms of the West-East relationship. Because Jane lacks white skin, she lacks the civilized character that prevents her from realizing the gravity of her allegations(Tuhkanen,2002, 1006).

A careful reading of the play reveals that there are several factors that contribute to making Mary a mischief-maker. She is parentless and is kept under the custody of her Grandmother who spoils her by over trusting her. Mary recognizes this and makes the utmost use of it in the school as well as at home. One should remember, here, that 'disciplining' children/students is a shared responsibility among the families, the school-teachers and society at large. Moreover, Mary is exposed to materials that are inappropriate to her a girl/student. She secretly gets and reads *Mademoiselle de Maupin*(1835/1895), a novel by the French novelist, Theophile Gautier(1811-1872).

Gautier's novel deals with a love triangle. D'Albert and his mistress Rosette are both in love with Théodore de Sérannes whom neither of them knows is really mlle/a woman. De Maupin disguises herself as a man so that she can learn about men before trying to find herself one. Her masquerade is entirely successful as she's something of a tom-boy. The plot traces the intricacies of this romantic relationship as Rosette believes Maupin to be a man while D'Albert feels deep inside that he is courting a woman not a man. The relationship in the novel is not physical, but sensual and aesthetic, and the main message is that love and passion can be aroused and bestowed solely for their own and beauty's sake, without regard for the sex of the beloved or the expectations and conventions of society (See Burrows, 2008).

Part of the vivid and intense manner with which Mary describes what she has professedly heard and seen can be traced to this novel. This raises the question of curricula choice. *Mademoiselle de Maupin* is not officially sanctioned as a text for the students in the Wright-Dobie School, but was secretly circulated among the girls. This draws attention to what is termed 'the dangers of reading,' a highly controversial issue among the educators and "a rather risky business whose outcome and full consequences can never be known in advance"(qtd. in Tuhkanen, 2002, 1009)

Rather than attributing the cause of the defamatory accusation to ill-breeding that results from living among savage and uncultivated people as in the original source, Hellman's play, Tuhkanen(2002, 1009) suggests, implicitly ascribes the alleged source of the contaminating lesbian and deviant knowledge to the reading of Gautier's novel which, as Faderman tells us, was held accountable by many contemporary commentators for eliciting suspicions about the actual nature of close female friendships in North America (qtd in Ibid.). It is the knowledge gained through her reading that supposedly makes Mary see (lesbian) things around her (Ibid.).

Accordingly, *The Children's Hour* can also be considered a commentary on the power of literature as fostering and encouraging otherness, creating an awareness of lesbianism which might not have originally been there. Martha's assertion that "[t]here's something in you and you don't know anything about it because you don't know it's there. Suddenly a little girl gets bored and tells a lie – and there, that night, you see it for the first time, and you say it yourself"(p.72) places Mary's lie at the origin of her self-identification as a lesbian. Mary's lie in turn is based upon the reproduction of her clandestine reading of Gautier's novel. Hence, the reproduction of literary discourses on lesbianism is the very fabric of Mary's slander and, eventually, leads to Martha's self-discovery(Cuneca, 2008, 124).

While fears of sexual contagions were equally present in institutions for both sexes, Fuss (in Tuhkanen, 2002, 1012) argues that the pathways of and prevention methods for these contagions were described in gender-specific terms. For schoolboys, the best way to ensure immunity against such diseases was considered to be rigorous intellectual activity, a curriculum that would keep the pupils from mischief. When the pupils in question were girls, however, studying was thought likely to produce some dangerous excesses: "If intellectual training among schoolboys was seen to provide inoculation against a sudden outbreak of the sexual perversions, among schoolgirls it was identified as one of the prime causations of sexual degeneracy". Such logic stems from gendered assumption of adolescent susceptibility to deviancy: while boys' "inner sense of morality" (Rose, in Ibid.) must be cultivated, girls are supposed to possess it inherently. Hence, "if you are a girl it is somehow assumed that [morality] arises spontaneously from the inside; whereas what is involved for boys is obedience to an external social law they will themselves finally appropriate and represent"(in Ibid, 1013). This means that girls should read only those texts that are endorsed by the patriarchal heteronormative society in order



to mould and make them submit to the prescriptions of the dominant society. Consequently, "too much studying—too much reading—would predispose girls to contagious knowledge of deviant sexuality." (Ibid.)

Immediately after arriving at her Grandmother's house, Mary begins to tell a series of lies that horrify her Grandmother. She makes use of several tricks to stay away from school. She uses flattery and when she realizes that this will be of no avail, she claims that she can not go to school because "They'll kill [her]!.... They'll kill [her]!" (p.33), and that her Grandmother does not "love her....care what happens" to her (p.35). The most damaging and obnoxious of her lies is related to the supposed relationship between Martha and Karen. 'Homosexuality, is never mentioned by the word or named as such throughout the play, but is referred to as a 'secret,' something 'scary,' 'unnatural,' 'this thing' and 'awful business.' Mrs. Tilford is shocked at Mary's description of life at school. She decides to set things right without verifying the truth of her granddaughter's claims.

Mary's supposedly groundless lie, however, is un 'unspeakable' and a 'shared' knowledge at the same time, and it has been a turning point in the lives of all persons concerned. The play, indeed, makes clear that, hearing her granddaughter's gossip, Mrs. Tilford knows instantly what Mary is talking about, as if the knowledge was already there, merely waiting to be activated. Throughout the scene in which she is confronted by Martha and Karen, Mrs. Tilford seems to understand how contagious their condition is, especially to her. She tries to bar the two women from entering her house, as if turning away carriers of an infectious disease. "I won't have her here," she says immediately, hearing Karen's voice (p.46). Yet, she also implies that such measures come necessarily too late. When summoned to his aunt, Cardin asks her, "Are you in some trouble?" Rather than immediately demonizing Karen and Martha, she replies, "We all are in trouble. Bad trouble" (p.45). Mrs. Tilford's words suggest all Lancet people are implicates in the "trouble." (Tuhkanen, 2002, pp.1015, 1016)

The school immediately becomes a 'madhouse', an "insane asylum" that "has been let loose". All girls were taken out of it. More humiliating is that some of the parents wait outside for their daughters because they do not "want to enter a place like ours". As Martha states. (p.47) Both teachers were stigmatized and ostracized after they lost the libel suit they rose against Mrs. Tilford. Joe also changes attitude. Although he seems willing to continue the marriage plan and suggests to travel abroad with both Karen and Martha, Karen feels that their relationship was damaged beyond repair. So she finds it better for both of them to break their engagement because

both will be hounded by the case for the rest of their life. This certainly will lead to self-hate and self-loath.

Act three opens in the same room of scene 1, but "*it is dull and dark and uncared for. The windows are tightly shut, the curtains tightly drawn*"(p.58). the changes that take place in the school after Mary's slanderous accusation are quite evident. An atmosphere of death-in-life prevails. Martha and Karen are loitering and trying to waste time by talking about not-all-important things. They can neither go shopping in the town nor walking in the park fearing that people, who boycott them, might see them. The following speech by Karen succinctly describes the grave situation both teachers are in:

What are we going to do? It's all so cold and unreal and-It's like that dark hour of the night when, half awake, you struggle through the black mess you've been dreaming. Then, suddenly, you wake up and you see your own bed or your own nightgown and you know you're back in a solid world. But now it's all the nightmare; there is no solid world. Oh. Martha, *why* did it happen? *What* happened? What are we doing here like this?(p.61)

The most important outcome of this case is Martha's recognition that she 'might' love Karen:

that way-maybe the way they said I loved you...I have loved you the way they said...there's always been something wrong. Always-as long as I can remember. But I never knew it until all this happened...it's there. I don't know how, I don't know why. But I did love you, I do love you. I resented your marriage; maybe because I wanted you; maybe I wanted you all along; maybe I couldn't call it by a name; maybe it's been there ever since I first knew you.(p.71)

Martha admits that she has never had such feeling for any person except Karen and that she has "never loved a man...[She] never knew why before. Maybe it's that"(p.72). She realizes that there is a big difference between them now and that she can not stay with Karen anymore because she feels 'dirty' and 'polluted.' Her decision to commit suicide is not surprising considering the scale and impact of damage that befalls her reputation, and personal and public image. Mrs. Tilford's offer of public apology and proper compensation after finding out the truth will be of no use to her and Karen. The loss is irreparable and irretrievable.

This brings to light one of the central themes of the play: 'intolerance' especially against same-sex or homosexual relationship which is considered 'unnatural and depraved.' The society presented in the play is homophobic. The girls' families were terrified by the possibility of a lesbian relationship between the two teachers. This reflects the deep concern for the sexual identity of persons which would be severely condemned and rejected if it is not compatible with the norms of the heteronormative society.

Moreover, Hellman's strong interest in the presentation of female characters and her discussion of their problems in terms of identity, right to freedom and independence, and work is noteworthy. In her *An Unfinished Woman*(1979), Hellman elucidates these issues. She reports: "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"(p.45). Hellman's discussion takes place in a social and cultural environment where severe restrictions were imposed on women, and in the era of the Great Depression (1929-1939), which adversely overshadowed all aspects of life in America and led to enormous economic, social, and cultural changes in the social fabric of society. In the same book, Hellman talks of this era as a "sad story," and confirms that "there were so many sad stories in the early 1930"(1979, p.78).

The play contains other references to issues common in educational settings. There is the problem of students' academic performance. There is a clear difference among the school girls in this respect. It takes Lois more than a day to prepare for the Latin exam. This may explain her wish to discontinue attending the sewing and elocution class. Evelyn suffers a problem in speaking: she pronounces 's' sound as 'th'. Rosalie is getting fatter every day, and Peggy is financially overwrought.

There are also references to topical events that plagued American society in the 1930s. Agatha, Mrs. Tilford's servant, warns against spending money unwisely and talks of "families starving"(p.41) during the economic crisis. Another reference is to the 'scarlet fever' which was common in some parts of America(p.42). Joe speaks of the horrible conditions in hospitals. They are "badly equipped", underfunded, and the laboratory is dirty.

III. Concluding Remarks: This paper is an attempt to bridge a gap in the critical reception of Hellman's dramatic works in general, and *The Children's Hour* in particular. While studies on this play often focus on female homosexuality and pursuit of independence within a general context

of intolerance, pathologization, and overwhelming fears of changing well-established social and cultural norms, the paper sets out to underline some of the problems educational institutions usually confront: understaffing, teachers' inefficiency, curricula choice, the students' capabilities and conduct, and the expectations of society in regards to the schools' main responsibilities.

Although the play seems to endorse the values of the dominant heteronormative society by, for example, punishing Martha for her expression of her same-sex desires, Hellman does succeed in drawing attention to the questions of power dynamics, value of work, and intimacy in the same-sex educational settings. She also underlines the importance of her female characters' attempts to gain independence and freedom in a conservative society that suspiciously considers them.

Critical studies also elaborate on the origin of Hellman's play which is a real historical court case as section two adumbrates. The researcher, however, is of the opinion that the title cleverly resonates with Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem 'The Children's Hour' which reflects on the importance of spending more time and exerting more efforts in dealing with the children to understand and help them. The devastating results of Mary's 'lie' could have been averted had the school principals, Martha and Karen, talk directly to her family, and had Mrs. Tilford speak to them before deciding to inform other families.

As student, Mary's (mis)conduct is representative of many students all over the world who resist attempts to 'regulate' and 'discipline' them. Besides teachers, Mary is in need of specialists from other fields to tackle her tendency to bully, intimidate, and manipulate other students.

Finally, *The Children's Hour* is not a play about a 'lie' told by a girl student, rather, it can be considered a record of the cultural and social changes in regards to the position of woman in society and the impact of the Great Depression on life in America in the 1930s.

## References

- Bazzell, J. D. (2008). *The Role of Women in The Merchant of Venice: Wives and Daughters Ahead of their Time*. Arizona U.P.  
<http://hdl.handle.net/10150/193464>
- "Breeding." (2018). Merriam Webster. URL <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/breeding>
- Burrows, J. *Gautier's Mlle. de Maupin*. Electronic Text. URL <http://www.ebooksgratuits.com/>
- Cocks, N. *Uncanny Repetitions in Lillian Hellman's The Children's Hour*. URL [Centaur.reading.ac.uk/51653/1/0771R5.pdf](http://Centaur.reading.ac.uk/51653/1/0771R5.pdf)

**The Classroom as Social and Cultural Place In Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour* .....Prof. Hana Khlaif Ghena (Ph.D)**

- Cuenca, M. & Seguro, M. I. (June 2008). "Making Something Out of Nothing": Lesbianism as Liberating Fantasy in *The Children's Hour*." *ATLANTIS*. 30(1), 115-127.
- "Culturally Responsive Classroom." (October 2008). Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development. URL <https://steinhardt.nyu.edu/.../Culturally%20Responsive%20Classroom%20Mgmt%20St...>
- Delpit, Liza. (1995). *Other people's children: Cultural conflicts in the classrooms*. New York: The New Press.
- "Discipline in the Primary Schools. A Report." (2002). Irish National Teachers' Organization. URL [www.into.ie](http://www.into.ie).
- Darling-Hammond, L., Austin, K., Lit, I., & Nasir. *The Classroom Mosaic: Culture and Learning*. Stanford University School of Education. URL [https://www.learner.org/courses/learningclassroom/support/06\\_culture.pdf](https://www.learner.org/courses/learningclassroom/support/06_culture.pdf)
- Dyne, S. A. (2017). "It's so queer—in the next room": Docile/ Deviant Bodies and Spatiality in Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour*. <https://miranda.revues.org/10519>
- Foucault, M. (Spring 1986). "Of Other Spaces." (J. Miskowiec. Trans.). *Diacritics* 16(1). 22-7.
- Foucault, Michel. (1977/1995). *Discipline and Punish*. (A. Sheridan. Trans.). 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York : Vintage-Random House.
- Garcia, E. E. (1993). Language, culture, and education. *Review of Research in Education*, 19, 51-98
- Gunderson, J. (2018). "Introduction to Spatial Theory." *Theory and Methods in the Study of Religion*. URL <https://sites.utexas.edu>.
- Harouni, H. (2013). Lived in Room: Classroom as Teacher. *Berkeley Review of Education*, 4(2), 187-204, URL <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1gn704tw>.
- Lefebvre, H. (1974/1991). Trans. Donald Nicolson-Smith. *The Production of Space*. Cambridge: Basil Blackwell Ltd.
- Hellman, L. (1979). *Six plays by Lillian Hellman*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Hellman, L. (1979). *Three: An Unfinished Woman, Pentimento and Scoundrel Time*. New York: Little, Brown & Company.
- Memorandum of Education (MOE). (2003). *The National Plan for Education for All 2002/2003 – 2015/ 2016*. Cairo: Arab Republic of Egypt Ministry of Education.
- Munro, J. Social-cultural influences on learning. URL <https://students.education.unimelb.edu.au/selage/pub/readings/.../PELculturaleffects.pdf>.
- Onderi, H. L. N. Odera, F. Y. (2012). "Discipline as a Tool for Effective School Management. *Educational Research*. Vol. 3(9), 710-716.
- Preucel, R.W., & Meskell, L. (2004). "Places." In L. Meskell, & R. W. Preucel, *A Companion to Social Archaeology* (p.215). Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 215.
- Rice, J.E. (1987). *The attitude of teachers towards corporal punishment. A conceptual primer*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Englewood Cliff: Prentice- Hall.

- Thomdile, E.L. & Barnhart, C.L. (1979). *Scott, Foresman Intermediate Dictionary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. URL [files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED243490.pdf](http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED243490.pdf)
- Treffry, D; Summers, E; Hasseft, O'Neil, P. & Todd, J. (1997). *Collins New English Dictionary*. London: Harper Collins.
- Titus, M. (1991). "Murdering the Lesbian: Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour*". *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 10(2), 215-32.
- Tuhkanen, M. (December 2002). Breeding (and) Reading: Lesbian Knowledge, Eugenic Discipline, and *The Children's Hour*. URL <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/mfs/summary/v048/48.4tuhkanen.html>. DOI: 10.1353/mfs.2002.0081, 1001-1040.

## **الصف المدرسي بوصفه مكاناً اجتماعياً وثقافياً في مسرحية ساعة الاطفال للكاتبة المسرحية ليلين هلمان**

ا.د. هناء خليف غني

كلية الآداب/الجامعة المستنصرية

### **المستخلص**

ترمي هذه الورقة البحثية الى جلاء ديناميات السلطة في مسرحية ساعة الاطفال للكاتبة الامريكية ليلين هلمان التي تتحدث عن موقع توبوي نموذجي. إضافة الى كونها "موقعاً لإعداد المواطن القومي"، ومكاناً تضمن فيه السلطات الحكومية "تحقيق الحد الأدنى من عملية التثاقف والتنشئة الاجتماعية"، توفر هذه المواقع التعليمية-وهذا ما تجادل به الورقة- تبصرات فريدة في طبيعة البناء الثقافي والاجتماعي للمجتمع. ونظراً للتأثير المتبادل الذي يمارسه المجتمع والمواقع التعليمية في بعضهما بعضاً، تكشف المسرحية الكثير من الجوانب المميزة لعمل المدرسين والإداريين وكذلك الطلاب. وتلقي المسرحية، التي تقع أحداثها في مدرسة بنات داخلية، الكثير من الضوء على المجتمع الأمريكي في ثلاثينيات القرن العشرين. لم تكن هيلمن ترمي الى تقديم حلول للمشكلات والقضايا المطروحة، بل ان جل ما كانت تطمح اليه هو لفت الانتباه الى هذه المشكلات وتعميق الوعي بمخاطر اهمالها. وظف البحث مفهومين اساسيين هما التفاعل الاجتماعي وإعادة الانتاج الاجتماعية.

الكلمات المفاتيحية: هيلمن، ساعة الاطفال، التعلم، الصف، التفاعل الاجتماعي.