

**‘A glimpse on Techniques and Art of Characterization’ in Miss Lillian Hellman’s
*The Searching Wind***

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Abstract: *The aim of this paper is to examine Hellman’s techniques and art of characterization in her play The Searching Wind. It is to discover how the dramatist has given form to the central theme in her play, how she has developed her characters and their situation. The Searching Wind is remarkable for its novel plot with its multiple-scene scheme, bringing some film techniques to bear upon its structural unity. Although Hellman never held the movie industry in high esteem, she learned its techniques well enough to use them in her most ambitious play, The Searching Wind. Hellman's characters in The Searching Wind are more vulnerable than the superhuman characters in Watch on the Rhine because of their patriotic fervor. We should also remember that in The Searching Wind Hellman has painted her characters on a historical canvas. On top of that she seeks to convey the helplessness of individuals in responsible positions when they cannot take their own stand.*

Key Words: *Hellman’s techniques, art of characterization, plot, multiple-scene scheme.*

Introduction:

Told through flashback, *The Searching Wind* is the kind of play that puts great demands on the cast. Act I moves from 1944 to 1922 and back to 1944. Act II moves from 1923 to 1938 and full circle to 1944. The first two acts, showing the onset of fascism in Rome and Berlin, are well done, though both are cluttered by the development of the novel triangle. The third flashback is notable for a delineation of the Nazi diplomat who deals with the Munich pact. *The Searching Wind*, even more than *Watch on the Rhine*, drives its strength from its immediacy. In the words of Richard Moody, "With Eisenhower's invasion of France two months away, with the Nazis still threatening we struggled to know where we went wrong in bringing the Civilized world to the edge of disaster."¹ The 1920s were a time for history to test the convictions of the 1920s, it turned out that there were none. The endless parties in *The Searching Wind* are spin-offs of Jay Gatsby's extravaganzas where it made no difference who attended. Such a lack of discrimination may have been acceptable then. But the careless men of the 1920s spilled over into the next decade when frivolous Emilies sat next to Nazis and fascist at soirees, making small talk and never challenging their political beliefs for fear of breach of etiquette.

Discussion:

However, many critics contend that the multiple scenes and numerous major characters in the play divert the audiences from Hellman's thematic intentions, thereby marring its structural unity. For instance, Richard Moody says: "the segmented structure is loose as a haystack and also reduced the firepower of the political message. It might have held on longer performances, if she had tried so hard to write two plays at once, one political, and the other personal."² Casper H. Nannee feels: "*The Searching Wind* has two centers around which the plot revolves. One is the willingness of American businessmen to do business with Hitler and Mussolini and the other is the pent-up feelings of returned soldiers towards those who brought on the war by closing their eyes to what was going on."³ *The Time* reviewer points out that *The Searching Wind* is "more like two plays-and two very unequal ones."⁴ Doris V. Falk says: "neither the theme, nor the plot structure, nor the characters ever came completely clear on the stage-and they take considerable analyzing even on the printed page."⁵ And Katherine Lederer writes: "the attempt to tell two stories at once makes the impact of the play diffuse, although the theme is clear enough."⁶ Downer contends: "Hellman was so caught up in contemporary issues that the structure of the drama is faulty."⁷ Critics feel that the structural beauty of the play is spoiled chiefly because of the simultaneous treatment of two divergent stories within the scope of a single plot as in the case of *The Children's Hour*. The critics seem to have taken a from T. S. Eliot's critical pronouncement on Shakespeare's *Hamlet* that the play is a film on which two photographs have been taken.

Plot Construction:

But a deeper understanding of the play reveals that Hellman has done an admirable job in solving the technical difficulties arising from resolving the personal problem by way of merging it into worldly problems. It is not fair to stress the parallel too strongly as some critics have actually done. For, it is to be borne in mind that the story is dramatized in terms of 'surface realism' and any attempt to find *raison d'être* would destroy the needed illusion. As Barret H. Clark explains, "the author, have established on a solid dramatic basis, the personal drama, a drama in itself complete- resists the temptation to point out that what was wrong with individuals is precisely what is wrong with the nations."⁸ Furthermore, as Sievers observes, "if there is a weakness in *The Searching Wind*, it is that the plot construction is not of the tense cat-and-mouse battle of minds that made Hellman's Hubbard plays memorable. Charmingly weak characters are more difficult to deal with dramatically than willfully sadistic ones."⁹

The Searching Wind is important for its intense realism. Like *Watch on the Rhine*, it is contemporary in its content. The play is set at crucial moments in the history of the rise of fascism in Rome in 1922, at the time of Mussolini's take-over in Italy; in Berlin, in 1923, as the first sign of Hitler's rise becomes apparent; in Paris, on the eve of Chamberlain's appeasement. Hellman herself told in an interview.

Like every other writer. I use myself and the time I live in. The nearest things to a political play was *The Searching Wind*.... I meant only to write about nice, well-born people who, with good intentions, helped to sell out a world.¹⁰

With keen awareness of the interaction of psychological and political factors, Lillian Hellman shows the isolationist foreign policy during the thirties as an inevitable expression of the personal escapism of the men who made the policy. As Barret Clark observes, "there is the heart of the problem, Miss Hellman has sought to elucidate if not to solve."¹¹

Art of characterization:

Like the plot-construction, Hellman's art of characterization in *The Searching Wind* is met with certain criticism. For instance, Richard Moody thinks that the characters "appear banal and inconsequential. Nor do the characters assume any stature. With the possible exception of Moses Taney, the portraits are little more than line drawings."¹² But, a close study of the play reveals that Hellman's characters in *The Searching Wind* are more vulnerable than the superhuman characters in *Watch on the Rhine* because of their patriotic fervor. We should also remember that in *The Searching Wind* Hellman has painted her characters on a historical canvas. On top of that she seeks to convey the helplessness of individuals in responsible positions when they cannot take their own stand. She also creates a microcosm-macrocosm relationship between the trio-Alexander Hazen, Emily Hazen and Cassie Bowman-and their times. The compromises that Alex, Emily and Cassie made in their own lives are repeated on an international scale. Alex becomes an ambassador, thereby choosing a life of appeasement. In Emily, he finds the ideal ambassador's wife-apolitical and affluent. Cassie bemoans her generation: "We are an ignorant generation." (333) Yet, she spends her summers in Europe to be near Alex whose weakness she condemns but whose company she needs. Even in 1933, as Jews are being harassed in the streets of Berlin, Cassie and Emily enjoy the security of a café where they argue about Alex.

Description of individual characters:

Within the limits of communist rationalizing, Hellman successfully depicts the individuals who are most to be blamed for the unchecked development of fascism. They are people who have outlived an epoch and cannot shake loose from passivity to act effectively either own happiness or the national good. And, apart from their politics, they most resemble the figures of Hellman's 'Chekhovian' plays-*The Autumn Garden* and *Toys in the Attic*.

Coming to individual characters, Alexander Hazen, the hero of the two ladies, Emily Hazen and Cassie Bowman, may also be said to be the hero of *The Searching Wind*. He is portrayed as a

sincere idealist. As Cassie remarks, he is an American diplomat, an attaché in Rome, who follows an isolationist during the rise of Mussolini and Hitler in order to escape from the ugly truth. His political philosophy is a carry-over from his unresolved emotional life.

Alex's life is one of compromise and rationalizing, in spite of his basic good nature and idealism. The pattern extends from his betrayal of Cassie and marrying of Emily to his career as a diplomat. In his political career, he contributes significantly to the American policy of appeasement which reached its climax at the time of the Munich Conference in 1938. Watching as he does fascism become real, bold and imperious, Alex is at once a decent and a muddled man. Though he is dismayed by what he sees, he hangs on to the hope that somehow good will come of evil. As his stake is in the status quo, he instinctively makes out a case for appeasement. Despite his now clearer view of what is happening, and despite his aroused conscience, he sends a report back to his government offering equivocal support for appeasement. He defends himself against his conscience by insisting that the individual cannot hope to deflect the course of history. It is his belief that the protest of the individual is useless that makes him so weak.

Despite the accumulating evidence of crisis, Alexander remains convinced that things are not as bad they seem. Cast as a stereotype of Woodrow Wilson, Hazen refuses to see the threat in Mussolini's rise. He tries to rationalize it. Regarding the Nazi evil and the threat of war, he is befuddled and confused. The developments in Europe are 'strange' to him and he does not know what is best for him. Thus Alex remains one of the most complex characters of Hellman. He is a figure of no real power himself. Yet, he remains the spokesman for the official blunders, delays and defections that made Munich no terminus.

The next important and interesting character in *The Searching Wind* is Cassie Bowman who is the lover of Alexander Hazen. She is intelligent and idealistic in her insistence that Alex should take a firm stand. Though John Gassner calls her "high minded,"¹³ her actions are certainly not high-minded. It is to be noted that Cassie has more life and she is more assertive than Emily and Alexander. Hers is the most forceful dialogue. In Rome, she says to Alex: "A revolution is going on out there. But by this next year it will be nothing more than dinner table conversation. Things mean so little to us, to you." (304) She says to Emily: "Do stop playing the piano. It doesn't go well with guns." (304) Cassie appears to be Hellman's spokesman. It is Cassie, who at the end of the play, explains to herself and the others what they have done with their lives: "I do not want to see another generation of people like us, who did not know what they were doing or why they did it.... We were frivolous people." (333)

Moses Taney is yet another interesting character in the play. He provides philosophical comment on the action like a chorus in Greek drama. He is a charming but disillusioned fighting liberal, retired editor of a once great newspaper. He has cynically abandoned his fighting newspaper and has withdrawn himself from political decision-making but comments bitterly on

other people's diplomatic compromises. He closely parallels the wise old man, Joshuva Farrelly, of *Watch on the Rhine*. He points out Alex's mistake by giving his view "that bad men are stupid and good men are smart." (290) But, this 'scornful old liberal,' who knows better the circumstances that led to war, himself behaves worse.

However, the most fascinating character in *The Searching Wind* is Sam Hazen, son of Alexander and Emily Hazen. He is of a younger generation and speaks for the author as Julie does in *Days to Come* and the youngsters in *Watch on the Rhine*. Hellman obviously intended Sam to show us that the sins of the fathers are visited on the children. Sam was in the army and he saw history taking shape for which he was not responsible in any way, though as an army man he was also taking part in it. He vehemently questions the stance taken by his parents and his grandfather as by-standers without making an attempt to change the course of history. He was proud of his parents until one day when his fellow army man gives a newspaper cutting which says that many of the self-proclaimed righteous people including his parents had business dealings with Germany.

Like Alexandra in *The Little Foxes*, Sam is bitter about his father, because he is an appeaser. With the full truth spread out for the first time before him, he cries shame upon the parents he loves. What is more, he demands passionately that there are no such mistakes again for any reason. Sam is the heir to the mistakes of his predecessors, that is, his parents and grandparents, who have caused him to fight in war and to lose a leg in the process. He urges his parents:

I don't want any more of my father's mistakes...I am ashamed of you both, and that's the truth.I don't want to be ashamed that way again. I don't like losing my leg.... I'm scared-but everybody's welcome o it as long a it means a little something and helps to bring us out some place. (337)

Sam knows that "history is made by the masses of people" (334) not by one or two men and he can only hope that the loss of a leg will make people less frivolous. Thus, Sam is one of Hellman's soldier-boys, who has finally found a purposeful life in the army.

Emily Hazen, the wife of Alexander Hazen, is a one-time best friend of Cassie Bowman. Emily uses her power tactics to win Alexander from Cassie and marries him. She is a woman who derives her pleasure from consorting with those very businessmen and politicians who had facilitated the rise of the forces which eventually wound her own son. Emily, throughout the play, strives to learn how Cassie feels and in what way Cassie's affair with her husband reflects all the three participants in the situation. And at one point she stresses the need for getting

things straight, but all that she says is: "We've started it; let's finish it.... It's time to find out." (333) Thus, Emily Hazen too, like Alexander Hazen, is an appeaser, but in her case, she forgives Cassie all through the play.

Hellman's political attitude:

Hellman's attitude to the contemporary political situation is quite clear. The innocent Americans in *The Searching Wind* win admiration for their simple charm and carefree attitudes. But their ignorance of evil and poverty, their lack of concern for the disturbing events between the wars and their efforts to be nice guys constitute a flawed existence. Innocence is not enough. In the context of twentieth century political developments, it is actually a liability. As N.S. Pradhan observes, "written under the shadow of war *The Searching Wind* contains the denunciation of a so-called innocence which makes the American look like a fool in the eyes of the world."¹⁴

Satires:

The Searching Wind is not only intensely realistic but also extremely satirical. The play is a scathing indictment of a generation of smug American indifference to Hitlerism. The ultimate power of the play rests with the bitter-sad indictment of the appeasers and with the documentary reminder of Munich. It satirizes the passive complacency of the generation that could sit idly by and witness the persecution of an entire group of people without active protest. The ever-seeking playwright, Hellman, is not content with spinning a little fable and tacking an appendix onto it. And so, she conceived a dramatic structure which combines a personal knot of conflicting wills with a roughly parallel knot showing how a world-wide situation is only an amplified personal drama on a large scale. Hellman herself emphasized this in an interview:

there were not only a lot of bastards who fixed things up in the last 10 or 12 years, but nice people, too,) as in their personal lives) can do bad things from the right motives. I know I don't start by telling myself to write a play about War. What War, whose War? What occurs to me first are the people.¹⁵

Dramatic Irony:

Hellman employs dramatic irony in *The Searching Wind*, but not as thoroughly as in her earlier plays. We know before the characters do that Sam must lose his leg. We know before Emily that Alex and Cassie have an affair and physical relation. But the organization of the play is such that we learn much of the information along with the characters. Strangely enough, Emily, the

detective,' who instigates the search for the truth in their lives, never explains why she wants to know it in 1944, what she has not faced in previous twenty years. We get the best explanation in Emily's words to Alex: "But there's a great deal that you don't know, and Cassie doesn't know, and I don't either. It's time to find out." (333)

Boomerang Irony:

Hellman also employs 'boomerang irony' in *The Searching Wind*. Alexander went to World War I because no one acted to prevent that war. He feels that his father's description of France did not match with he saw at first hand. Sam feels that the Italy he fought in does not fit the Italy Alexander describes. And Sam goes to war, of course, because his father's generation let it happen. Cassie, by quarrelling with Alex, loses the chance to influence him to take a definite moral stand. Emily, who influenced Alex to support appeasement because she did not want Sam to go to war, is then indirectly the cause of his being wounded. Like the dowager in *Watch on the Rhine* and the matriarch to come in *The Autumn Garden*, Moses makes ironic comments throughout the play, but he is as guilty as the rest, having abdicated a position of power and responsibility from which his viewpoint might have had some influence.

Symbolic Significance:

The Searching Wind is not without its symbolic significance. The very title of the play is symbolic. Hellman told an interviewer that she had got the title from Negro maid:

Some morning when she came she'd say
'it's a searching wind today.' She
meant one of those winds that go right
through you to your backbone. I
suppose in my title I was thinking of
the wind that's blowing through the
world.¹⁶

The author's own explanation of the title, however, makes the play more meaningful. In her memoir, *An Unfinished Woman*, Hellman says: "It takes a searching wind to find the tree you sit in who can tell what side you are on if you don't know your own mind?"¹⁷ In the memoir, this sentence is applied to upper class liberal attitudes towards racism.

Conclusion:

To conclude, *The Searching wind* is a highly provocative play of the season. Unlike Hellman's other great play-*The Children's Hour*, *The Little Foxes* and *Watch on the Rhine*-*The Searching Wind* is not predominantly taut and intense. Its span is long and its world spacious. Hellman has pitched a handful of lives into the swirling history of our age. It also delves into the psyche of the young generation which has the moral responsibility, for the sake of humanity, to put all the

splintered pieces of the West and rebuild a more humane civilization. They are not responsible for the disaster and yet they have task of redeeming the situation. *The Searching Wind* is not a formal play, though it is concerned with a profound truth. There is no true villain in the play. The only villain seems to be appeasement of people. All the major characters just let things happen stand around and watch the earth and the people on it being eaten. And, as Lederer observes, "a searching wind blows away the rationalizations of all the characters by the end of the play, as they learn the truth about themselves."¹⁸ Hellman's characters, though personally and morally responsible for their actions, are almost always portrayed within a social framework, their motives rooted in social forces. Hellman does not present stereotype women, but rather portrays them as fully defined individuals, shaped by complex political, social, and psychological forces.

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