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Prolific Playwrights: Clifford Odets and Lillian Hellman Expose the Thirties

Samantha L. Paradis

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PROLIFIC PLAYWRIGHTS: CLIFFORD ODETS AND LILLIAN HELLMAN

EXPOSE THE THIRTIES

by

Samantha L. Paradis

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors
(History/Theatre)

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Abstract

Clifford Odets and Lillian Hellman were two of the most influential playwrights of the 1930s, which was a decade of economic instability and political unrest in the United States. Odets began his career in 1935 with his workers' theatre smash hit *Waiting for Lefty*. Hellman's career took off with the premiere of her drama *The Children's Hour*. Both playwrights generated controversy with their plays through the emphasis of Popular Front values. They were influenced by the political, social, and economic conditions in the 1930s. An in-depth analysis of their plays reveals how the interrelationship between playwright and society is best understood through an examination of the role of male and female characters and the role of class in their plays. With a look at two plays each by both Odets and Hellman, the playwrights' works offer insight into the changes in society as well as the development of the decade's cultural history.

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Introduction

An artist's use of language is the most sensitive index to cultural history, since a man can articulate only what he is, and what he has been made by the society of which he is a willing or an unwilling part. —F.O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance*

In 1941, F.O. Matthiessen's quote offered a valid definition for cultural history.

As an historian and literary critic himself, he had a grasp on the development of cultural history, especially that of the 1930s and 1940s. He watched as the politics and economics of the time influenced artists throughout the United States and how, in turn the work of those artists spoke to the issues of the day. To better understand the influence of society on artists and of artists on society, one must take an in-depth look at a particular artist and his or her work.

The 1930s was a decade of economic instability and political unrest in the United States. Because of the global depression, millions of workers throughout the United States found themselves unemployed while the social, political, and economic status quo were challenged. The government was where the public looked for a solution. Although most found comfort in the leadership of President Franklin Roosevelt, others looked elsewhere, and found comfort in the Communist Party. This instability within the United States was expressed continuously through the arts of the 1930s, and theatre was one of the most prominent venues.

Clifford Odets was, as acknowledged today, the playwright of the 1930s. His political theatre took off in 1935 with the premier of his one act play *Waiting for Lefty*.¹ Lillian Hellman, another well-known playwright of the 1930s, began her career in 1934 with the premier of her first play *The Children's Hour*. Arguably not as political in her first play as Odets, Hellman created just as much controversy.² The influence of the political, social, and economic conditions of the 1930s on Clifford Odets and Lillian Hellman can be determined through an in-depth analysis of their plays. One way to understand the interrelationship between playwright and society is to examine the role of male and female characters and the role of class in their plays. Arguably, in Clifford Odets' plays class trumped all other major themes, whereas in Lillian Hellman's plays gender and gender roles trumped all other major themes. However, these major themes can both be understood through the Popular Front, which is also determined to be the common link between the two playwrights.

The span from Odets' *Waiting for Lefty* completed in 1935 and *Rocket to the Moon* completed in 1938 and Hellman's *The Children's Hour* completed in 1934 and *Watch on the Rhine* completed in 1941 allows for the comparison of not only the playwrights, but also a comparison of their own work. With the span of time between the plays, the playwrights' works offer insight into the changes in society as well as the development of the decade's cultural history. Therefore, the study below begins with background information on the economic, social, and political developments of the 1930s and with brief biographies of Odets and Hellman. Overviews of each of the plays follow

¹Lori Seward and David Barbour, "Waiting for Lefty," *The Drama Review* 28, no. 4 (1984).

² Alice Griffin and Geraldine Thorsten, *Understanding Lillian Hellman*, (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1999), 27.

the short biographical sections. Two analytical sections then will examine the role of male and female characters as well as class within each of the plays.

A conclusion will tie both Odets and Hellman to the cultural history of the 1930s and Matthiessen's observation above.

Background

It is impossible to study the 1930s without discussing the Great Depression. In 1930, a year after the stock market crash of 1929, seven million workers were unemployed and by 1931, twelve million were unemployed. Industries could not maintain their production rates, consumers did not have the savings to purchase basic necessities, banks failed, and farmers lost their land. The United States was not the only country that suffered; the depression was a global crisis. Almost all the major industrial nations, aside from the Soviet Union, were affected by the depression. Since the United States was the leading capitalist country of the early twentieth century, it was hit hard when the depression became global because there was a drop in foreign trade and investments. Furthermore, the depression interfered with the repayment of foreign debt owed by European nations that accumulated in World War I; this further weakened the United States.³

³ Gerald D. Nash, *The Crucial Era The Great Depression and World War II 1929-1945*, (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press INC, 1992), 14; Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 217-249.

The deflated economy was not the only result of the Great Depression. The loss of work created social tribulations for Americans as the basic family structure collapsed. Social status dropped for millions of families, and many men were no longer the breadwinners of their families. In fact, many women went into the workforce to provide for their family. Because they were paid less, women were more likely to find a job. Both the working class and middle class faced social challenges during the depression. Clifford Odets acknowledged the struggles of both classes in his plays.⁴

Although the depression disrupted the social norms for many Americans, it also opened up opportunities. After Franklin Roosevelt was elected as president in 1932 and began his first term in March 1933, he initiated what is now called the First New Deal. Under this legislation, the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) was established. The NIRA provided assistance to the industrial sector of the United States, but most importantly for this analysis, Section 7a assured workers the right to organize and to engage in collective bargaining. With this guarantee laborers began to organize into national unions across the United States. Strikes erupted as workers demanded jobs and better pay; entire communities rallied around workers, creating a close-knit working-class culture throughout the country. As workers united for a common cause, they broke many of the ethnic, gender, and racial restrictions that loomed over the working class in the previous decade.⁵

⁴ Nash, *Crucial Era*, 14-22.

⁵ Nash, *Crucial Era* 33-37; Cohen, *Making a New Deal* 277-278.

Even though much of the working class was united, prejudices remained throughout the United States. Anti-Japanese and anti-Chinese sentiments dated back to the late nineteenth century; however, due to the depression, a wave of xenophobia traversed through Americans. American workers feared new immigrant workers because they provided cheaper labor and were preferred over the American workers. Immigration restrictions targeted the Japanese, Chinese, Catholics, and Jews in an attempt to establish 100% Americanism. In 1931, when Japan invaded Manchuria and violated the open door policy, U.S. officials, who advocated the open door, deemed Japan a distinct enemy. As a result, Asian Americans were the victims of an intensified racism. The success of Jewish families along with the continued xenophobia, supported by the reestablishment of the Ku Klux Klan and other nativist groups in the United States, shaped the prejudice of anti-Semitism, which contributed to passage of the Immigration Act in 1924. However, race, heritage, and religion were not the only sources of prejudices. Homophobia established a strong presence in the United States as well. With gender dysphoria, “the strong feeling that one’s assigned gender as a man or a woman does not agree with one’s sense of self,”⁶ and assumed gender dysphoria, which is when others conclude someone is homosexual based on their behavior or appearance, many individuals accused others of being homosexuals. Lillian Hellman, a victim of assumed gender dysphoria, addressed this issue in her writing.

⁶ Esther Newton, “The Mythic Mannish Lesbian: Radclyffe Hall and the New Woman” in *Hidden from History Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, ed. Martin Bauml Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey, Jr. (New York: NAL Books, 1989), 292.

The political atmosphere of the 1930s was unsettled. Many Americans turned their backs on President Herbert Hoover once the depression began because he believed that the government should play a minimal role in the recovery of the country. While Franklin Roosevelt also initially believed in a limited role for the government, he attempted to provide short-term relief to the American people. Many Americans supported Roosevelt and his administration. This included the working class and ethnic and racial minorities, who previously had not supported the Democrats. However, for some, Roosevelt's temporary solutions were not enough. Some Americans desired systemic and permanent solutions to the issues the country faced; as a result, many of them found solutions within the Popular Front and communism.

The Popular Front developed out of the organization of workers and the labor militancy of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) and is described by cultural historian Michael Denning as a “radical social-democratic movement forged around anti-fascism, anti-lynching, and the industrial unionism of the CIO.”⁷ This broad social democratic movement created a common ground for those Americans, including Clifford Odets and Lillian Hellman, who opposed the rise of fascism, lynching, and who demanded solutions to the struggles of the left wing of the New Deal. Followers of the Popular Front challenged the societal norms of United States. They supported a change in the role of women, the rights of minority groups, and even a choice in sexual orientation.

⁷ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*, (New York: Verso, 1997), xviii.

Because followers of the Popular Front were usually liberal socialists and leftists, its critics often associated these activists with the Communist Party. The Communist Party had its own movement in the 1930s, but some Party members were part of the Popular Front as well. Overall, as Denning argues, the Popular Front was a dynamic movement with diverse members. Those who were part of the Popular Front considered themselves generic communists, with a lowercase “c,” to a certain degree. In fact, the rank and file of the Popular Front were fellow travelers, often understood as individuals attracted to the ideas of Communism, but not formal Party members.

The core of the Popular Front consisted of non-communists, socialists, and independent leftists who worked with Communists and liberals to create a culture rather than a political party.⁸

Michael Denning’s book *Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* is the center of the historiographical debate surrounding the topic of this study. Because he sets the foundation of 1930s cultural history in the Popular Front movement, his work is crucial to understanding the idea that Clifford Odets and Lillian Hellman were products of their time. They addressed the major societal issues that followers of the Popular Front consistently challenged throughout the 1930s. In his work, Denning argues that “the narrative of the ‘fellow traveler’ is misleading and does not capture the full significance of the cultural front.”⁹ The cultural front did not depend on individuals choosing to become followers of the Communist Party; it was more than that.

⁸ Denning, *Cultural Front*, 3-10.

⁹ Denning, *Cultural Front*, xvii.

The cultural front developed out of the Popular Front ideology and its encounter with mass entertainment and education.¹⁰

One of the characteristics of the cultural front was a shift from Victorianism to modernism. According to Michael Denning:

Modernism marked a transformation of gender relations: part of the generation revolt against the 'Victorian' was refusal of the patriarch. . . modernism came to be the expression of the dreams, discontents, and cultural contradictions of the disaffected young people of the predominantly Anglo bourgeoisie as they came to grips with the changes in the corporate economy and the changes in proper sexuality and gender roles, with the new imperialism, with the 'foreign hordes' of immigrant workers.¹¹

The idea of this shift provides an interesting context in which to contrast the roles of women both in society and in the cultural works, such as plays of the decade. Although women were more or less stuck in traditional roles, the depression necessitated that they step out of the household and into the workforce when men were unemployed. Also, with the influence of the Communist Party, other leftist politics, and the spread of labor and community organizing, women made their way into leadership roles outside of the home. Independence was a key factor in the shift from Victorianism to modernism; however, it was a slow change and only some women participated. Exploring the gender roles in the plays of both Odets and Hellman help reveal the beginning and the inconsistencies of this shift.

The cultural front became the base for workers' theatre, one of the most prevalent cultural movements of the 1930s and arguably in the history of the United States.

¹⁰ Denning, *Cultural Front*, xvi-xviii.

¹¹ Denning, *Cultural Front*, 28.

Historian Collette A. Hyman defines workers' theatre as a "nationwide effort, organized at the local level, to use working people's leisure hours as a terrain for political education."¹² Workers' theatre produced labor plays that taught specific lessons that dealt with unions and the buildup of the labor movement. These plays featured empowered working-class characters, which provided inspiration to the working-class audiences. Workers' theatre united workers and their supporters.¹³

Workers' theatres appeared all over the country with the largest concentration in New York. There were traveling groups that were part of the theatre movement as well, but none of it would have been possible without the support and recognition of labor publications. Although the New York magazine *New Masses* had a clear connection to the Communist Party, it became the major communication line for workers' theatre. There was a section in each issue dedicated to the latest theatre productions. Later publications, such as *New Theatre*, were created specifically for workers' theatre. These publications not only reviewed productions, but also publicized the attempts to censor workers' theatre. Local officials often tried to stop performances through obscenity laws, but the numerous supporters of workers' theatre established successful campaigns that lifted the bans. In the end, the censorship gave workers' theatre more publicity and made it appear more respectable to its audiences.¹⁴

¹² Collette A. Hyman, *Staging Strikes: Workers' Theatre and the American Labor Movement*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 2.

¹³ Hyman, *Staging Strikes*, 2-5.

¹⁴ Hyman, *Staging Strikes*, 30-60; Daniel Friedman, "A Brief Description of the Workers' Theatre Movement of the Thirties," in Bruce A. McConachie and Daniel Friedman, *Theatre for Working-Class Audiences in the United States 1830-1980*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), 111-117.

Production groups, such as New York's New Theatre League, which was an organization that promoted theatre that exposed labor issues, funded workers' theatre. The New Theatre League and similar organizations educated audiences through social theatre, and workers' theatre became a part of social theatre. Since workers' theatre was a locally organized effort to use the leisure time of workers for political education, very little money was actually needed to produce performances. Workers' Theatre rarely included spectacle. It was simplistic theatre with a distinct aim to educate and inform. Therefore, workers' theatre productions went up even when an organization could not fund it.¹⁵

As for the plays, they usually were very simple. They were designed to be performed on the streets and in union halls, and therefore, mostly took place outside or in the homes of the worker characters. These settings made it easier for productions to be mounted with the limited resources of workers' theatre groups. Also, the settings created an atmosphere to which all workers could relate and added a personal touch, which encouraged a community-based activism.¹⁶

Male characters were almost always the "worker." Female characters were often the supporter: the wife, sister, mother, or lover. The female character was used to portray the effects of the economic and political conditions on the family. Labor plays also used characters of different races and ethnicities to show the alliance that was needed among all workers. Because the audience could easily relate to these characters, workers' theatre generated a new interaction in the theatre. There was now a distinct connection between

¹⁵ Hyman, *Staging Strikes*, 1-3.

¹⁶ Hyman, *Staging Strikes*, 62-64.

the actors and the audience, which opened the fourth wall for audience participation. It was not uncommon for audience members to cheer on the worker characters, boo the boss/executive characters, and provide other kinds of commentary throughout the play. Such was certainly the case for Clifford Odets' one act *Waiting for Lefty*.¹⁷

Clifford Odets

Clifford Odets' play *Waiting for Lefty* is a prime example of workers' theatre and how it exposed the political and economic conditions of the 1930s. However, before analyzing *Lefty*, it is crucial to understand Odets' life. Clifford Odets was born 18 July 1906 in Philadelphia. He was the oldest and only son, he had two younger sisters, of Louis and Pearl Geisinger Odets, who were both Jewish immigrants. The Odets family lived with Pearl's sister and brother in-law while in Philadelphia. In 1912 they moved to New York, where Louis worked as a feeder in a printing shop that he later came to own.¹⁸

Odets did not have a stable home life. Throughout his sporadic journaling, he repeatedly described himself as feeling "homeless." Although they struggled in the beginning, eventually the Odets were able to live a middle-class life. Even when the Odets family found economic stability Clifford did not. His only desire was to be an artist. He enjoyed writing poetry and stories, and later strived to be an actor, but his father did not approve. Louis had hoped Clifford would follow in his footsteps and work in the

¹⁷ Hyman, *Staging Strikes*, 65-69; McConachie and Friedman, *Working-Class Audiences*, 14-16.

¹⁸ Edward Murry, *Clifford Odets: The Thirties and After*, (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1968), 5-7.

printing industry. Clifford did not want to let his father down and tried on numerous occasions to work under him.

Odets was fond of his mother, but because she struggled with her own relationship problems with Louis and a plaguing case of tuberculosis she was often distanced from her family.¹⁹

In his late teens and early twenties, Odets worked at various summer camps as the arts director. When he was not at the camps he searched for acting jobs in New York. He found several small roles and understudy positions, but nothing permanent. It was not until the early 1930s, when Odets met Harold Clurman, that he found his way into the newly established Group Theatre. The Group Theatre was part of the workers' theatre movement. It was founded by Harold Clurman²⁰, Cheryl Crawford²¹, and Lee Strasberg²² with the idea of a theatre that would mount American plays that exposed the conditions of the 1930s. At first, Odets was cast in small roles, but throughout his short acting career at the Group he was inspired to write his own plays. By 1935 he had completed his first one act play, *Waiting for Lefty*, and his first full-length play, *Awake and Sing!* Both plays were produced by the Group, but *Lefty* came first. Odets wrote *Lefty* as part of a

¹⁹ Murry, *Odets*, 7-8.

²⁰ Harold Clurman was a well known director, stage manager, and theatre critic of American theatre. He was the leader of the Group Theatre. For more information see Educational Broadcasting Corporation citation in Bibliography.

²¹ Cheryl Crawford was a director, but is known as one of the most influential female producers in American theatre. For more information see Kathleen Enres citation in Bibliography.

²² Lee Strasberg was an American director and famous actor. He is known for the development of method acting in the United States. For more information see Cindy Adams, *Lee Strasberg: the Imperfect Genius of the Actors Studio*, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980).

revolutionary play competition through the *New Theatre* magazine. *Lefty* won the competition, and was put into production at the Group.²³



Photograph 1: Portrait of Clifford Odets taken 7 September 1937. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Carl Van Vechten Collection, LC-USZ62-54231].

The first performance of *Waiting for Lefty* was exactly what workers' theatre desired. Harold Clurman, in his book, captured the atmosphere of the premier:

The first scene of *Lefty* had not played two minutes when a shock of delighted joyous fervor seemed to sweep the audience toward the stage. The actors no longer performed; they were being carried along as if by an

²³ Gabriel Miller, *Clifford Odets*, (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1989), 164-169.

exultancy of communication such as I had never witnessed in the theatre before. Audience and actors had become one.²⁴

He later called *Lefty* “the birth cry of the thirties.” Stanley Burnshaw of *New Masses* described a similar reaction from the audience. In his review he stated, “on the first performance of Clifford Odets’ *Waiting for Lefty* the audience cheered, whistled and screamed with applause.”²⁵ At the end of the show the cast gave twenty-eight curtain calls. The audience was enthralled.²⁶ From the start Odets’ one act was a hit.

In March 1935 *Lefty* finally made it to Broadway. Performed with another Odets one act play titled *Till the Day I Die*, *Lefty* still struck a chord with its audience. Brooks Atkinson of the *New York Times* gave the play a strong review. He stated:

During the winter it seemed like one of the best working-class dramas that have been written. On second sight, it is, and it is also one of the most dynamic dramas of the year in any department of our theatre. For Mr. Odets strikes hard. . . “Waiting for Lefty” is still a play so full of excitement that it keeps playgoing on the alert. In both the writing and the playing it is centrifugal; the characters are right off the city pavements; the emotions are tender and raw, and some of them are bitter. This column dislikes the egregious office of giving advice, but it does not hesitate to recommend “Waiting for Lefty.” People who want to understand the times through which they are living can scarcely afford to ignore it.²⁷

Of course, *Lefty* did create some hostility. In fact, a performance was stopped in Boston. According to the *New York Times* four members of the cast were arrested after the premier at the Dudley Street Opera House. They were arrested for “using profanity in a public assemblage.” All four were released on bail, but the one act was banished in

²⁴ Harold Clurman, *The Fervent Years: The Group Theatre and the 30s*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), 138-139.

²⁵ Stanley Burnshaw, "The Theatre: Waiting for Lefty," *New Masses*, January 29, 1935.

²⁶ Seward and Barbour, "Lefty," 39.

²⁷ Brooks Atkinson, “The Play: ‘Waiting for Lefty’ and ‘Till the Day I Die,’ a Double Bill by Clifford Odets,” *New York Times*, March 1935, 24.

Boston.²⁸ This banishment may have prevented the play from being performed, but it did not stop the spread of the play's message. By banishing the play the Boston police piqued the curiosity of those who had yet to see the performance.

Most analyses of Odets' plays by historians, biographers, or theatre authors have tended to examine only the symbolism found in his plays. There is a lot of discussion about his use of fruit and Biblical references, as well as connection of his personal life to his work. All are valid analyses; however, there remain other useful ways to explore Odets' work. The following analysis uses the script and the basic elements of a play, the setting, characters, subject, conflict, climax and resolution, to highlight how depression-era American society influenced Odets.²⁹

The setting of *Lefty*, not specifically outlined in the script, must be New York because the action of the play was based on the 1934 New York Taxi Strike. The same assumption goes for when the play takes place: it is probably 1934 or close to it. Because Odets omitted a set description from the script and intended for the play to be performed in union halls, it probably takes place, like many workers' theatre shows, outside on the street or in a hall. The atmosphere of the play, which is an important part of the setting of any play, is the 1930s: economic depression and political instability. The characters have been struggling with the depression and they are organizing a strike for better pay and a voice in the union, which adds tension to the already unsettled atmosphere. Some of the vignettes, there are seven total, may take place outside of New York. It is not clear in the

²⁸ "Boston Police Halt Play for Profanity: Arrest Four Members of Cast of 'Waiting for Lefty' in Premier Theatre," *New York Times*, April 1935, 37.

²⁹ Clifford Odets, *Six Plays*, (New York: Random House, 1939), ix-x, 1-31.

script, but what is known is that the locations vary from the home of Joe and Edna, a laboratory, the family home of Irv and Florrie, and a hospital. Each of these locations creates a slightly different atmosphere, but all generate tension for the workers.

Because of the play's structure, the characters of *Lefty* are not complex. There is a combination of individual and stock characters.³⁰ In the crowd scenes the characters are generalized, but during their vignettes they become more complex. The stock characters of the play are Harry Fatt, the union leader, and the Gunman, who is Fatt's "backup." The individual characters stand out as each vignette is performed. First are Joe and Edna. Joe is one of the senior taxi drivers and Edna is his wife. They struggle to make ends meet and support their children. They are followed by Fayette, an industrialist, and Miller, a lab assistant who leaves his job when he is asked to spy on another employee. Next, Irv another cab driver, Florrie, Irv's sister, and Sid, Florrie's fiancé are introduced. Irv and Florrie struggle to make ends meet while caring for their ill mother. Then Clayton, a labor spy and strike breaker, interrupts the flow of the vignettes when he attempts to stop the strike. Once Clayton is revealed as an impostor the vignettes continue with Dr. Barns and Dr. Benjamin, who is fired for being Jewish even though he is one of the best doctors in the hospital. Finally, the play ends with the introduction of Agate. Another taxi driver, he rallies all of the other drivers together and starts the strike when they are informed that Lefty, the strike leader they are all waiting for, has been killed.

³⁰ Stock characters are stereotypical characters. They can vary, but they are always based on social, literary, cultural, or trait specifications. This can be seen with Odets' character Fatt. Not only is he physically fat, but he is the "bad guy," which often requires a certain evil or crusty look. Individual characters, on the other hand, may have certain stock behaviors, but their character does not revolve around it. They have more depth.

Because Odets does not present complex characters and uses the basic structure of workers' theatre characters, it is nearly impossible to provide in-depth descriptions of the characters. Odets reveals only what he needs to advance the themes of the play. He uses his characters to send a simplistic political message to the audience, and therefore he does not need to provide complex characters. Joseph Wood Krutch of *The Nation* gave a similar overview of the characters in *Lefty*. In his review of the play he stated, "The villains are mere caricatures and even the very human heroes occasionally freeze into stained-glass attitudes."³¹ Odets' focus lies more within the social issues, rather than the psychological issues of the time; thus, he only needs to develop characters that present the relationships involved with those issues. He only needs the basic tension between the union leaders and the workers for this play to be successful. This is what is often referred to as agitprop, or agitational propaganda. A form of drama popularized in the 1920s, agitprop sought to manipulate the audience, in order to generate a particular response. The plots of agitprop drama were from historical and social events. The characters were stock types, which included the boss, the worker, the imperialist, and the fascist. Political views were always present and were clear-cut. One of the major agitprop playwrights of the 1920s was Bertolt Brecht who wrote *The Threepenny Opera*.³² Agitprop drama excluded many formal conventions of theatre such as the separation of the actors and the audience, and that is exactly what Odets did in *Waiting for Lefty*.³³

³¹ Joseph Wood Krutch, "Drama: Mr. Odets Speaks His Mind," *The Nation*, April 10, 1935, 427-428.

³² *The Threepenny Opera* was musical that confronted the capitalist world. Based on an 18th century English opera titled *The Beggar's Opera* by John Gay, the musical added a Marxist point of view while satirizing traditional opera and operetta.

³³ Miller, *Clifford Odets*, 166-168.

Briefly stated, the subject of the play is the working-class and a strike. The subject directly relates to the conflict, which is between the union leaders, Fatt and Clayton, and the workers, which includes Joe, Miller, Sid, Agate, A Man, Dr. Benjamin, Voices from the audience, and the audience itself. Odets turns the audience into characters; they become the crowd gathered at the meeting. The central conflict between these two groups is the workers demanding more from the American Federation of Labor-type union leaders. The workers specifically demand higher wages, which was part of the conflict of the actual 1934 Taxi Strike. The workers threaten to strike and the union leaders just keep giving excuses as to what they are doing to help. The union leaders are doing all they can to prevent the strike, which leads to the climax of the play when Agate jumps in and becomes the leader of the workers. At first his presence is undesired by the workers, but when they hear what he has to say they unite under his leadership. Agate unites the workers with his demand for direct action. He tells the workers they need to strike now and not wait for Lefty. By the end, after the announcement of Lefty's death, the resolution comes with all the workers shouting "STRIKE" repeatedly.³⁴ This resolution, although not definite, alludes to the formation of the official strike of the taxi drivers in the play.

³⁴ Odets, *Six Plays*, 31.



Photograph 2: Photograph from the 1935 Broadway production of *Waiting for Lefty* at the Longacre Theatre. Clifford Odets (third from the left) performed with the cast from the Group Theatre. Theatre West, "Waiting for Lefty." Last modified September 03, 2010. Accessed April 1, 2012. <http://www.theatrewest.org/lefty.html>.

After *Waiting for Lefty*, Odets broke away from his agitprop writing and wrote longer dramas. Workers' theatre and the struggle of the working class still influenced his writing; however, it was not as direct. He found a new focus with the Jewish middle class. In 1938 Odets' *Rocket to the Moon* premiered with a cast and crew from the Group Theatre at the Belasco Theatre in New York.³⁵ *Rocket to the Moon* was Odets' first attempt at a love story, as well as the incorporation of the psychological dimensions of his characters. Unlike *Lefty*; it was not a smash, and received only mixed reviews. Some critics found his characters to be realistic and complimented his dialogue. However,

³⁵ Odets, *Six Plays*, 326.

others believed the first act was better than the second two.³⁶ The review in *New Masses* exemplified this point: “[Odets’] new play, for all its fumbling conclusions, becomes superb theatre. *Rocket to the Moon* poses the authentic dilemma of our times. But its hauntingly beautiful dialogue, its magnificent creation of characters, its almost painful sincerity cannot quite veil its fundamental weakness.”³⁷

Rocket to the Moon takes place in the Bronx, New York, over the course of a summer in the late thirties. The only location for the play is the stifling waiting room of a dentist’s office. In the room is a receptionist’s desk, chairs for waiting patients, a plant in the window, a water cooler, and a fan. The lighting is dim to keep the office cool. As the depression lingers on, the play contains signs that the characters still struggle financially. There are no patients visiting the dentist. One dentist cannot afford to pay the rent for his part of the office, and yet he also has to find a way to care for his son. A developing love triangle also signals that the economy remains tough. When a household is financially unstable it creates more stress and could be the reason why one spouse may look for an escape.³⁸

The characters in *Rocket* are much more complex than the characters in *Lefty*. Odets gives them much more depth, making them psychologically complex. They are “real” characters rather than stock characters. Ben Stark, a dentist, is the main character. Stark is struggling to keep patients coming into his office. He wants to move his practice

³⁶ "News and Gossip of the Broadway Area," *New York Times*, August 28, 1938, X1; Joseph Wood Krutch, "Drama: Rocket to the Moon," *The Nation*, December 3, 1938, 600-601; Brooks Atkinson. "The Play: Group Theatre Begins Another Season With Clifford Odets's 'Rocket to the Moon'," *New York Times*, November 25, 1938, 18.

³⁷ Ruth McKenney. "Sights and Sounds: The New Odets Play." *New Masses*, December 6, 1938, 28-29.

³⁸ Odets, *Six Plays*, 326-418.

uptown to a better neighborhood and he wants to specialize his work. But his wife, Belle Stark, refuses to allow him to move. Belle, who is depressed due to the loss of her child, handles the finances in the Stark household. She refuses to allow Stark to move his practice because it requires the financial help of her father, Mr. Prince, whom she rejects because of the way he treated her mother. She wants nothing to do with him, even though he continuously tries to push his way into both her and her husband's lives. Mr. Prince is financially well-off and is a regular visitor to Stark's office. They become less friendly with each other when Stark's new, young receptionist, Cleo Singer, attracts both their interests romantically. Both Stark and Mr. Prince fall for Cleo who leads them on until she is forced to decide. She loves Stark, but knows he does not have the will to leave his wife and therefore she leaves both of them by the end of the play.

The character Frenchy provides slight comical relief in the play. He is another employee that works in the building that Stark's office is in. He pops in and out of Stark's office throughout the play with witty comments and insight into Stark's love affair. Not a main character, Frenchy helps reveal Stark's inner conflict. Another minor character is Phil Cooper, the dentist who shares the office space with Stark. Cooper is a struggling single father. He cannot make his office rent payments, about which Belle continuously nags Stark. Cooper always appears to be worked up and nervous when he enters the scene. He knows he is not doing well, but he states that he is doing the best he can to make a living for himself. The final character is Willy Wax. Willy Wax is a famous dance director. A minor character, Wax grabs the attention of Cleo when he comes in for a dental appointment. Cleo, who dreams of becoming a dancer, ends up on a date with Wax and discovers he is not the man she thought he was.

He has no desire to make Cleo a dancer; he only wants to sleep with her. Once she learns this, he is out of the picture. Both Wax and Cleo use each other to try to get what they want.³⁹

The subject of *Rocket* is complex. There are underlying themes that deal with the depression and financial issues, manifested in the strain between Belle and Stark and the struggles of Cooper. Belle and Stark are under tension because they both want different things. Stark wants to be successful and make the kind of money he should be making as a dentist, while Belle refuses to make any changes. She would rather suffer and struggle with finances than look to her father for help. Cooper is behind on his rent and promises to make it up when he can find the money, but there is little hope for him. With very few patients coming into the office, Cooper admits he cannot pay any of his bills. Luckily for him, Stark allows him to stay in the office with the promise that he will pay when he has the money.

Rocket also deals with love, romance, and relationships, but more broadly stated it is summed up well in the question of, ““Why aren’t simple, decent people—dentists, and dentists’ wives, doctors, salesmen—why aren’t they happy in America of 1938?””⁴⁰ It is the strain of the depression that makes these characters unhappy and therefore destroys their relationships. Belle and Stark are introduced in the middle of an argument. Cleo lies to pretend she is well-off and happy with her single life. Cooper has no wife and has been left to be a single father. Mr. Prince, who is stable financially, tries to buy the love of others, but he fails. However, this only leads to more questions, which is why many

³⁹ Odets, *Six Plays*, 326-418.

⁴⁰ McKenney, "The New Odets Play," 28-29.

critics did not like the end of Odets' play. It has an unhappy ending, but also provides no answers. The play concludes as Belle leaves Stark to go to a house on the beach, Cooper finally pays one of his rent payments, Stark tells off Wax, Cleo turns down Mr. Prince, and Stark confesses his love for Cleo but makes no promises to leave his wife. The lights go out as Cleo begs Stark to love her and not leave her alone.

Lillian Hellman

Although Odets began his career with workers' theatre, he worked his way out of it. By the time he wrote *Rocket to the Moon* he was writing plays that were made for the Broadway stage. Broadway of the 1930s was aesthetically showy. With lots of lights and signs for theatres, movie houses, and advertisements, it thrilled foreigners. Upper class Americans, however, found it to be cheap and tasteless.⁴¹ When the depression hit Broadway was affected. The number of productions dropped steadily from 1929 to 1941. Actors and other theatre employees were out of work and the audience size diminished. Nevertheless, the thirties was a creative era for Broadway. According to Brooks Atkinson of the *New York Times* "it was one of Broadway's most stimulating times."⁴² There was very little money, but the quality of the theatre produced on Broadway increased dramatically. Theatres on Broadway attempted to make money in the mid thirties when they showcased local, social protest dramas. This included workers' theatre productions. The theatres of Broadway hoped the target audience of social protest dramas would pay to see their shows on the Broadway stage. A time of change for Broadway, the 1930s brought a new audience to the forefront. The working class, including immigrants, found

⁴¹ Brooks Atkinson, *Broadway*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1970), 175.

⁴² Brooks Atkinson, *Broadway*, 286.

their place as audience members on Broadway. Because of the depression, ticket prices were dropped to help the theatre maintain its business and pull in new crowds. Theatre became accessible to new and different audiences, which resulted in a more democratized theatre. The Federal Theatre, which was the government's temporary solution to the thousands of unemployed theatre workers, also had a role on Broadway, but was not limited to it. The Federal Theatre covered all theatres, even those in Harlem. From 1936 to 1939 the Federal Theatre supplemented Broadway.⁴³ Over the course of the depression Broadway housed shows by Eugene O'Neil, Thornton Wilder, John Steinbeck, Clifford Odets, and Lillian Hellman. In fact, Hellman was one of the major playwrights of Broadway beginning in 1935 with her play *The Children's Hour*.

Lillian Hellman was born 20 June 1905 in New Orleans. She was the only child of Max and Julia Newhouse Hellman. Both her mother's and father's families had emigrated from Germany in the 1840s and they were both of Jewish heritage. Hellman's father owned his own shoe business, but when that failed he became a traveling salesman. This forced Hellman to spend half a year living in New Orleans and the other half living in New York. She attended New York University, but left her junior year to work for the Horace Liveright publishing company.⁴⁴

⁴³ Brooks Atkinson, *Broadway*, 286-301.

⁴⁴ Griffin and Thorsten, *Understanding Hellman*, 1-5.



Photograph 3: Portrait of Lillian Hellman. *New York Times* photograph by Sam Falk.

At age twenty Hellman married Arthur Kober, a theatre press agent. She left her job in publishing and decided to write. She traveled with Kober and wrote short stories. Eventually she ended up in Hollywood where she unhappily worked as a press agent, play reader, manuscript reader, and theatre publicist. While in Hollywood she met Dashiell Hammett, a former Pinkerton detective and detective story writer, who became her lover of thirty years after her divorce in 1934. Hammett suggested the idea for *The Children's Hour* from a legal case that had occurred in Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1806.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Griffin and Thorsten, *Understanding Hellman*, 1-5.

The Children's Hour opened on Broadway 20 November 1934. From the start, Hellman's play created controversy. Even though Hellman proclaimed that it was a play about a lie and not lesbianism, it still received an immense amount of criticism. It was banned in Boston, Chicago, and London.⁴⁶ Joseph Krutch of *The Nation* thought the first two acts were brilliant works of tragedy, but he condemned the third act.

So much for the first two acts, which end a tense scene where the juvenile villain dramatically extricates herself from cross-questioning in an inquisition which is about to expose her, and once more wins her perverse success. Up to that point the play has not been pleasant but it has been powerful and increasingly gripping. There then follows a third act so strained, so improbable, and so thoroughly boring that the effect is almost completely destroyed, and one is left to wonder that anything so inept was ever allowed to reach production.⁴⁷

Brooks Atkinson applauded *Children's Hour* in his review in the *New York Times*. He did not criticize the third act as did Krutch. However, Atkinson did mention the validity of the play. He acknowledged the numerous critics that called the play unrealistic because they “doubt[ed] that mature people would accept the gossip of a child about esoteric matters.”⁴⁸ Although Atkinson acknowledged other criticisms, he rebutted them because he believed there was no way to predict what people would do in special circumstances such as those presented in *The Children's Hour*.⁴⁹ *New Masses*, on the other hand, was less than impressed with *Children's Hour*. The publication did not even give the play a review. The only trace of the play in *New Masses* is a few entries in a section titled “Current Theatre,” which had brief statements that described current plays. In the

⁴⁶ Deborah Martinson, *Lillian Hellman: A Life with Foxes and Scoundrels* (New York: Counterpoint, 2005), 103.

⁴⁷ Joseph Krutch, “Drama: The Heart of a Child,” *The Nation*, December 1934, 356-357.

⁴⁸ Brooks Atkinson, “‘Children's Hour’: Circumstantial Tragedy Set in a Girls' Boarding School –The Disputed Ending to a Swiftly Written Play,” *New York Times*, December 1934.

⁴⁹ Atkinson, “‘Children's Hour.’”

descriptions of *Children's Hour* there were statements such as this, "The play, however, is morbid enough to attract a vast audience and has sufficient surface qualities to impress those who are prone to mistake an unhappy ending for a play of great worth."⁵⁰

Most of the criticism of Hellman's play came from conflict over the subject of the play. Many found the third act unnecessary or in need of rewriting. Several critics believed that Mary Tilden was the main character and disliked Hellman's omission of Mary in the third act. Today most scholars analyze the play in a similar fashion, arguing that the play deals with lying, gossip, and good and evil. Even though all are themes within the play, the subject, as argued here, is lesbianism. If the play is not about lesbianism, then the third act, as many critics have mentioned, does not make sense.

The setting of *The Children's Hour* is mid-1930s in a rural school building, which is actually an old farm house, in a town called Lancet. Never having heard of a town called Lancet before, the location of Lancet must be assumed. Toward the end of the play there is mention of New York City, therefore the assumption would be that the play takes place in New York State, or at least in that region of the United States. The atmosphere of the play should be the economic depression and political instability of the 1930s; however, these conditions are not incorporated in the play. The school is a finishing school for girls. Therefore, the characters are mostly from the upper class who did not suffer from economic hardships as severely as the working class.⁵¹

⁵⁰ "Current Theatre," *New Masses*, December 4, 1934, 29.

⁵¹ Lillian Hellman, *The Children's Hour*, (New York: Dramatists Play Service, INC. 1934).

Because Hellman's play is a tragedy the characters are original. There is no need to consider stock characters for this analysis. Hellman's characters are very complex. Karen Wright and Martha Dobie are the proprietors of the finishing school. They have been friends since college, which indicates they are both educated. Furthermore, they are probably well educated because they are running a successful school. Karen is engaged, she has been for three years, to Dr. Joe Cardin, while Martha, on the other hand, has not had a significant other for years. Joe, a successful doctor, is not only Karen's fiancé; he is the cousin of the trouble maker Mary Tilford and the nephew of the school's patroness, Mrs. Tilford. Joe is a very supportive man, but in the end he cannot handle the accusations made against Karen and Martha. Mary Tilford is the guilty school girl. She starts the lie about Karen and Martha by telling it to her grandmother Mrs. Tilford. Mrs. Tilford, as previously mentioned, is the patroness of the school. She is an older woman who has established her status through her deceased husband. She is a sucker for gossip, which is seen when she believes Mary without any detailed questioning. Mary starts the lie, but it is Mrs. Tilford who spreads it to all the other mothers who have daughters at the school. Rosalie Wells is one of the other school girls. She is blackmailed into the accusation by Mary. Mrs. Mortar, the final character, is Martha's aunt. A failed actress, Mrs. Mortar has no place to go and therefore ends up helping out at the school. Karen and Martha do not want her there any longer and it is when Martha confronts Mrs. Mortar and asks her to leave that trouble begins. In the midst of her anger Mrs. Mortar accuses Martha of being jealous of Joe and his relationship with Karen. She claims that Martha has always been jealous of her friends and their relationships with others.

The subject of *Children's Hour* is lesbianism. Everyone, even Joe, believes or at least has suspicions that Karen and Martha are lovers and it is the accusations that ruin both the school and the personal lives of Karen and Martha. A taboo topic, lesbianism, or the idea of it, drives the action of the play. Lying does play a role, but the lying becomes more of an issue because it involves an accusation of lesbianism. The play's other major subject is the upper class. Hellman's characters do not have to deal with economic issues that the middle and lower class characters of Odets' plays do, but they do have to face the social challenges of maintaining their status within the upper class. This is seen through the characters of Mrs. Tilford and even the school girls. Rosalie and Mary both fight to maintain a presence amongst their peers and adults.

The conflict of the play centers around Mary Tilford. She lies to her grandmother about seeing Martha and Karen kissing. Her grandmother is then quick to spread the word, which results in all the girls leaving the school. The climax of the play occurs when Martha confesses her feelings for Karen as being more than just the love of a friend; she commits suicide after Karen's rejection. The resolution of the play transpires with Martha's suicide. Karen shuts down until the very end when she shows some promise of recovering after Mrs. Tilford has come to apologize. Mrs. Tilford tries to clear her conscience, but Karen refuses to accept her apology. Karen realizes how pitiful Mrs. Tilford was for believing Mary over both Martha and herself. Mrs. Tilford explains that she will never forgive herself, but offers to help Karen in any way she can. By the end Karen just asks Mrs. Tilford to leave with a promise that she will be all right and she will ask for help when she needs it.

The Children's Hour was only the beginning for Hellman. She continued to write plays both successfully and unsuccessfully throughout the 1930s. In 1941 she completed one of her most political plays, *Watch on the Rhine*. On 1 April 1941 *Watch on the Rhine* premiered at the Martin Beck Theatre. An instant hit, Brooks Atkinson of the *New York Times* claimed *Rhine* to be, "incomparably her best work."⁵² Conversely, Hellman did not win over the critic of *New Masses*. Upset with Hellman's narrow perspective of anti-Nazism, Alvah Bessie claimed, "it is no longer possible to be anti-Nazi, and nothing more. It is necessary today to define 'anti-fascism' ... [and] this Miss Hellman fails to do...there is no elaboration in the play of the nature and structure of international fascism."⁵³ Of course mixed reviews were nothing new to Hellman. *New Masses* did not prevent *Rhine* from achieving popularity. It became one of the major anti-fascist plays to be performed during World War II.

Watch on the Rhine takes place in the spring of 1940 in the Farrelly country house twenty miles outside of Washington D.C. The atmosphere is the beginning of United States involvement in World War II. The depression is over or, at least, ending as industrial production picks up with the onset of war in Europe and a new era is beginning.

⁵² Brooks Atkinson, "Hellman's 'Watch on the Rhine'." *New York Times*, April 13, 1941.

⁵³ Alvah Bessie, Sights and Sounds: "'Watch on the Rhine'." *New Masses*, April 15, 1941, 26-28.

Hellman clearly sets the atmosphere and tone of the play using an anti-fascist main character—Kurt Muller—to drive the action. He and his family heroically fight against fascism and win the support of their upper class relatives in the United States to the cause.⁵⁴

The characters of *Rhine* are some of Hellman's most likeable characters. The play begins with the introduction of the Farrelly household servants, Anise and Joseph. Anise is an older French woman and Joseph is a middle-aged black man. Both maintain the household and serve as reminders to the audience that this is an upper class household. Fanny Farrelly is the widowed mistress of the household. She runs the home with her middle-aged son, David. When the play opens the Farrelly's have two house guests, Count Teck De Brancovis and his wife Countess Marthe De Brancovis. Teck is a Rumanian fascist who is involved with the German embassy.

Twenty years earlier Sara Farrelly, Fanny's daughter, married a German engineer, Kurt Muller. After her wedding she left her home in the United States and did not return until the present. Sara, Kurt, and their three children arrive at the Farrelly household. The Muller family has spent the past seven years moving around Europe and, as a result, the children are fluent in several languages. Kurt is an anti-fascist and is involved with the German underground movement fighting fascism. The Mullers arrive in Washington D.C. looking for some relief; yet, it is not long before they are confronted in the Farrelly household. When Teck discovers who Kurt really is he tries to blackmail him for money, but in the end Kurt murders Teck and takes off to Germany to rescue a fellow anti-fascist

⁵⁴ Lillian Hellman, *Four Plays*, (New York: Random House, 1942), 249-330.

leader. By the end of the play, both David and Fanny have joined Kurt's cause by helping him dispose of Teck's body and sending him off to Germany. They come to see the importance of Kurt's anti-fascist work.⁵⁵

Watch on the Rhine's subject is clearly anti-fascism. Hellman wrote this play with political intentions. The story behind the Muller family is driven by the fight against fascism. Sara and Kurt have given up their opportunity for a "normal" life for Kurt's cause. They even involve their innocent children. The climax of the play only comes when Kurt confronts and murders Teck. There is no other reason for having such a scene, except to send an anti-fascist message. Then, with the conclusion of Kurt's departure to Germany, Hellman leaves her audience with hope that fascism will be defeated.⁵⁶



Photograph 4: Photograph from the 1941 Broadway production of *Watch on the Rhine*, which premiered at the Martin Beck Theatre.

⁵⁵ Hellman, *Four Plays*, 249-330.

⁵⁶Hellman, *Four Plays*, 249-330.

Role of Male and Female Characters

The role of male and female characters in a play can allude to the political, economic, and social conditions of the society in which the playwright lives. Clifford Odets and Lillian Hellman both used societal influences to develop the characters within their plays. As the conditions in the United States changed over time, so did the roles of their characters. Odets began his career with *Waiting for Lefty*. A workers' theatre, agitprop play, *Lefty* has different roles for male and female characters than *Rocket to the Moon*. In *Lefty*, Odets included few female characters with speaking roles. The most prominent female introduced is Edna, the wife of Joe, one of the cab drivers. Edna is an attractive woman of thirty, according to Odets' script. She and Joe have two children, and they are financially struggling. Edna is the workers' theatre stock female character. She is a supportive housewife who encourages her husband to do what is right. She pushes him to go on strike:

You got two blondie kids sleeping in the next room. They need food and clothes. I'm not mentioning anything else—But we're stalled like flivver in the snow. For five years I laid awake at night listening to my heart pound. For God's sake, do something, Joe, get wise. Maybe get your buddies together, maybe go on strike for better money...get those hack boys together! Sweep out those racketeers like a pile of dirt! Stand up like men and fight for the crying kids and wives. Goddamnit! I'm tired of slavery and sleepless nights.⁵⁷

Even though Edna is a strong female character with inspiring monologues, she remains the housewife, relying on Joe to support her and their children.⁵⁸ Because female characters have smaller roles in *Waiting for Lefty*, it is clear that Odets followed the

⁵⁷ Odets, *Six Plays*, 9,12-13.

⁵⁸ Odets, *Six Plays*, 7-13.

standards of workers' theatre when he structured his play. All the male characters are dominant and they assume the role of the patriarch; they provide or attempt to provide for their families. Even when female characters performed paid labor, they were never seen as the "worker" because outside of the factory they were still mothers, sisters, wives, and lovers, which was more important in the working class culture of the thirties.⁵⁹ Therefore, as historian Collette A. Hyman rightly notes, the role of "the 'worker' remained a gendered figure."⁶⁰

Although some women had freed themselves of the roles of the Victorian era through the sexual liberation of the 1920s flapper, most remained trapped by a domestic identity once the depression hit. The working-class ideology of community activism, established by both the CIO and the Communist Party, allowed women to join unions, unemployed councils, and fight for workers' rights. However, women struggled in their fight for women's rights. Historian Sara M. Evans precisely described the difficulty women faced:

In the absence of a movement specifically devoted to women's rights and a feminist critique of gender roles, radical women and labor organizers found it difficult to manage multiple roles and assert the importance of women's needs; thus, the striking achievements of women within the New Deal were rapidly erased from memory. And so, although some women were powerful in the thirties, women as a group were not empowered.⁶¹

Individual women gained power and authority throughout the thirties. With a shift in politics many women became involved with the Democratic Party and even the Communist Party. President Franklin Roosevelt appointed Molly Dewson to head the

⁵⁹ Hyman, *Staging Strikes*, 63-64.

⁶⁰ Hyman, *Staging Strikes*, 63.

⁶¹ Sara M. Evans, *Born For Liberty*, (New York: Free Press Paperbacks, 1997), 200, 217-218.

Women's Division of the Democratic National Committee and Frances Perkins became the first woman cabinet member as the Secretary of Labor, but as Evans acknowledges, women lacked the time to fight specifically for their rights.⁶²

Nonetheless, Odets changed the roles of his characters in his later plays. In *Rocket to the Moon*, Odets presents a different kind of housewife, Belle, who is Ben Stark's wife. Belle breaks the traditional workers' theatre stock female character. She not only runs the Stark household, but also her husband's business. She controls and tracks all of the finances that go along with the dentist's office. Belle has a voice in the business. In fact, she decides that Stark will remain in his office in the Bronx, instead of moving uptown as Belle's upper class father wants and has offered to help finance. She even handles the business transactions on her own:

COOPER: My boy fell on his skates yesterday and broke his arm.

BELLE: I'm sorry to hear that.

COOPER: And that's the only break I've had in years! Yes, I went through the whole war and nothing happened to me. They could have left me there—

BELLE: You . . . owe us a few months' rent here.

COOPER: You have my sympathies.⁶³

It is clear that Belle has no problem standing up to men; this is a depiction of a new found strength for women fighting "the patriarch." She interrupts Cooper to remind him that he owes her and Stark money. But how different is Belle from Edna? Belle is still a housewife. She is not employed and she does not seem to have any desire for employment. She does stand up for herself and make decisions for her husband, but so does Edna. It is Edna who tells her husband to go on strike because he is the one on the

⁶² Evans, *Born for Liberty*, 205-208.

⁶³ Odets, *Six Plays*, 337-338.

fence. She knows what he needs to do in order to provide for his family. Are these two women much different? No, they are not. A slight shift is seen in the freedom and amount of involvement they have in their husbands' lives. Belle enters her husband's workplace on a regular basis, whereas Edna remains in the home. Belle is free to come and go as she pleases, whereas Edna is restricted by the home and role of the housewife. This slight shift marked the beginning of change in women's liberation that developed as the decade progressed.

Contradictory, Stark, in *Rocket*, is a very timid man. Belle takes control because she is more dominant than he. Cooper stands up to Belle, but is not a strong, dominating man. He is too concerned with his financial problems to waste his time with Belle.⁶⁴ Therefore, the role of Odets' male characters did not change like the role of his female characters. Overall the men remained the breadwinners who are influenced by their wives.

Lillian Hellman was several steps ahead of Odets when it came to the role of female characters. In *The Children's Hour* Hellman presents an interesting view on the role of women. Almost all the characters are female, which is unusual for a play of the thirties. Female characters were typically the supporting roles; the male characters had the leading roles, which was closer to Odets' writing style. More importantly, Hellman depicts two leading women who have financially supported themselves enough to start their own school. This is the beginning of the transformation Denning defines as the move from Victorianism to modernism. These women, although still stuck in the

⁶⁴ Odets, *Six Plays*, 326-418.

traditional role as “the teachers” have challenged society; they have their own school with the help of a patroness. The play revolves around a women’s world. It is independent women who are in control in this play; in fact, there is only one male character. This idea of independent women is a theme throughout Hellman’s work. She may have pushed the envelope with her female characters. Women, as a group, had not gained the independence portrayed through Hellman’s characters. There were individual women who achieved an independent status on their own, as previously mentioned, which may have been where Hellman found her inspiration for these strong female roles.

The conditions of the depression left many men distraught. Without work and no resources to find work, many men turned to alcohol, some left home without a word, and in some cases committed suicide. It pained many men to know they could no longer support their families and so they found an escape. When a husband was out of work or simply deserted his family it was up to the women to step up. Therefore, there was a shift in women’s independence. Women left the home to find a job and support their family. They became not only the mother, but breadwinner, sometimes without a choice in the matter.⁶⁵ Although Hellman’s *Children’s Hour* may not directly deal with the issues of the depression, Hellman may have been inspired by this shift in women’s responsibility and independence. Being an independent woman herself may have also contributed to Hellman’s characters. Often, in various interviews and notes Hellman mentioned how she always put some of herself into her characters.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Evans, *Born for Liberty*, 198-199,

⁶⁶ Jackson R. Bryer, *Conversations with Lillian Hellman*, (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1986).

Moreover, Hellman also challenged traditional gender roles and “proper” sexuality in her play as well as her real life. She presented a story about women who are part of a changing society, but also about lesbianism, which challenged proper sexuality. Hellman wrote *The Children’s Hour* at a time when women began to break into professional lines of work. Hellman was one of these women. She was one of only a few female playwrights. Because of this transition these women faced criticism of their work as well as their personal lives. Sexologist Carroll Smith-Rosenberg believes that “by the 1920s, charges of lesbianism had become a common way to discredit women professionals, reformers, and educators.”⁶⁷ Hellman herself faced accusations of lesbianism throughout her professional career. She married and divorced once and then proceeded to have a thirty year affair with Dashiell Hammet. Because she never married again, and never started a traditional family she was accused of being a lesbian. One of her memoirs, *Julia*, suggests that Hellman may have had a relationship with a woman, but there is not direct evidence and Hellman herself never admitted to it.

Children’s Hour is most likely Hellman’s reaction to the social pressures professional women faced beginning in the 1920s. Through the character of Martha, Hellman sought to not only acknowledge the social opinion of lesbianism, but also condemn it. Martha’s suicide is a result of the never-ending social criticism that she and Karen face.

KAREN: You are guilty of nothing.

⁶⁷ Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 281.

MARTHA: I've been telling myself that since the night we heard the child say it. I lie in bed night after night praying that it isn't true. But I know about it now. 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 these years; I couldn't call it by a name, but it's been there ever since I first knew you –⁶⁸

Hellman's message is clear. She did not approve of the lesbianism taboo, and therefore, found herself ahead of her time. Critics disapproved of Hellman's use of lesbianism.

When the play was up for the Pulitzer Prize in 1935, *New Masses* confronted Hellman's use of the lesbianism taboo: "they [the Pulitzer Prize judges] were confronted with *Children's Hour*, with its inverted sex theme or with what was far worse: fine plays on social subject."⁶⁹ Pulitzer Prize committee member Professor William Lyon Phelps refused to attend a performance because of the play's content. When the play was first produced Broadway's leading actresses refused the roles of Karen and Martha. Many actresses feared the play would be shut down by the police, which would have ruined their careers.⁷⁰ However, Hellman persevered and as a result her work is a reflection on the beginning of a change in social opinion. Modernism settled in with both the role of women and gender roles. Therefore, Odets may have begun to acknowledge the transformation of Victorianism to modernism and the role of women in society with his 1938 play *Rocket to the Moon*, but Hellman had already accomplished it in 1935.⁷¹

Even when Hellman had a political agenda she still managed to have a leading woman in her play. In *Watch on the Rhine*, Hellman developed the character Fanny

⁶⁸ Hellman, *Children's Hour*, 66.

⁶⁹ Robert Forsythe, "The Pulitzer Prizes," *New Masses*, 15 (1935): 29.

⁷⁰ Harry Gilroy, "The Bigger the Lie: Drama Dealing with the Big Lie," *New York Times*, December 1952.

⁷¹ Mary Titus, "Murdering the Lesbian: Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour*," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 10, no. 2 (1991): 215-229.

Farrelly. A widowed mother of two adult children, Fanny runs her country home. She has the ultimate say in the household. The servants work for her, not her son David. She even has enough independence and control to make her own political decisions at the time of the World War II political strife. In the end she chooses to financially support Kurt in his fight against fascism.

SARA: See? I come from good stock. (KURT looks at DAVID. Then he begins to smile. Nods to DAVID. Turns, smiles at FANNY.)

FANNY: Do you like me?

KURT: I like, Madame, very much.

FANNY: Would you be able to cash that check? [the check given to Teck to stop him from blackmailing Kurt]

KURT: (laughs) Oh, no.

FANNY: Then take the cash. I, too, would like to contribute to your work.⁷²

Between the disintegration of family life, massive unemployment, and the rise of fascism, women of the 1930s confronted numerous political issues. The shift to modernism allowed for women to find their own political identities. Whether they chose to join, or encourage their husbands to join, the CIO and fight union leaders or financially support the fight against fascism, women individually found political identities that did not necessarily line up with those of their husbands. Fanny is an example of one of those women. She chooses her own political agenda. Although the action of the play places Kurt at the center of attention, Fanny remains as the driving force behind the resolution. Therefore, she may not appear to be as strong of a female character as the women in *Children's Hour*, but she still has a known presence as a woman throughout the play.

⁷² Hellman, *Four Plays*, 326.

The Role of Class

Often the subject of his plays, class played a major role in Clifford Odets' work. *Waiting for Lefty* is an obvious example. As a piece of workers' theatre and agitprop there is a strong class distinction carried throughout the play. With sympathetic workers who each reveal their story, and an unsympathetic union leader and strike breaker, Odets presents his material well. The central conflict in the play is between the workers and the union leader. The workers demand more and by the end of the play go on strike. Based on the 1934 New York Taxi Strike, Odets' play fits well within the context of the thirties. The years 1934 to 1935 consisted of numerous general strikes across the United States. Textile workers along the Eastern seaboard, the dock workers in San Francisco, and the taxi drivers in New York participated in some of the largest strikes. By 3 April 1934 the taxi strike was "unique in American labor history: it [was], to date, the biggest in the industry and [possessed] connotation of great importance to all American workingmen. Forty thousand cabmen abandoned their wheels for the sake of an independent union, and against the strait-jacket of a company union."⁷³ Leftists, including the writers of *New Masses*, thought that the taxi strike symbolized the universal rebellion of the American labor force, which gave Odets good reason to use it in his play.⁷⁴ Odets even created the character Lefty as a representation of the taxi strike leader Samuel Orner. In Odets' play, Lefty dies before he can make it to the meeting. During the taxi strike Orner was attacked on his way to a strike meeting. He did not die, but Odets used that incident as part of his

⁷³ Joseph North, "Taxi Strike," *New Masses*, April 3, 1934, 9.

⁷⁴ North, "Taxi Strike," 9.

inspiration.⁷⁵ *Lefty*, like all workers' theatre, affirmed, "the experiences and values of [its] audiences . . . [and] transformed the ordinariness of working people's everyday lives and struggles into tangible possibility of successful collective action."⁷⁶ By using the experiences of his audiences Odets snatched their attention from the first line of the play. It is not a mistake that Clurman named *Lefty* "the birth cry of the thirties." However, Brooks Atkinson put it best in his review, "the characters are right off the city pavements; the emotions are tender and raw, and some of them are bitter. . . People who want to understand the times through which they are living can scarcely afford to ignore it."⁷⁷ Thus the working-class struggles of the 1930s clearly influenced Clifford Odets' *Waiting for Lefty*. His play directly commented on the tough economics of the depression and the leftist movement in working-class politics. His play's message to the audience was recognized as "Workers of the World Unite!" by *The Nation's* reviewer.⁷⁸

Even when Odets did not write about the working class, his plays still conveyed a strong class distinction. *Rocket to the Moon* is about the lower middle class. Because Stark is a dentist and Belle has a father who is well off, it can be assumed they are from the middle class. However, Stark makes it clear at the beginning of the play that he and Belle are struggling, and therefore are a part of the lower middle class: "I was a pioneer with Gladstone in orthodontia, once. Now I'm a dentist, good for sixty dollars a week, while men with half my brains and talents are making their twenty and thirty thousand a

⁷⁵ "Samuel Orner Dies; Inspired 'Lefty' Play." *New York Times*, September 4, 1973.

⁷⁶ Hyman, *Staging Strikes*, 80.

⁷⁷ Atkinson, "The Play: 'Waiting for Lefty' and 'Till the Day I Die,' a Double Bill by Clifford Odets," *New York Times*, March 1935, 24.

⁷⁸ Krutch, "Mr. Odets Speaks His Mind," 427.

year!”⁷⁹ Clearly if Stark were making the kind of money he should be, he and Belle would not have so many problems. Odets uses the Starks’ relationship to portray the middle class struggle with the depression. He not only lets it affect the couple financially, but romantically as well. Money, or the lack of it, becomes a source of tension and drives Stark away from Belle.

For Hellman, class was identified in her plays, but was not as crucial as it was for Odets. In *The Children’s Hour* identifying the class status of the characters helps the audience to understand the story better, but it does not have as much of an impact on the action of the play. Karen and Martha run a finishing school, which alludes to the upper class family-background of all the school girls because their families can afford to send them away to this boarding school. There are different values presented within the idea of the upper class. Money, for one, is crucial because it creates the status of these families. Also, the values of manners and propriety come into play for the girls. They not only receive an academic education at the school, but also instruction in class etiquette. The only major issue that class distinction affects in *The Children’s Hour* is that Karen and Martha run their school with the financial and social support of their patroness, Mrs. Tilford. When they lose her support over Mary’s accusation, their whole school falls apart. An audience of a 1930s performance of *Children’s Hour* did not identify with class distinction as they did with Odets’ *Waiting for Lefty*.

An audience went to see the Hellman’s play because they wanted to watch a drama. Remember, a 1930s Broadway audience was composed of the lower class.

⁷⁹ Odets, *Six Plays*, 330.

Workers, but mostly foreigners attended Broadway plays consistently throughout the depression, which is why an audience of *Children's Hour* did not find the sense of class consciousness they found with *Waiting for Lefty*. Generally, audiences and critics ignored Hellman's message. They became wrapped up in the ideas of gossip and lying, rather than lesbianism. When Joseph Wood Krutch of *The Nation* stated that the third act of the play should not have existed and Brooks Atkinson called the play unrealistic due to the idea of gossip, the taboo of lesbianism was encouraged. Krutch and Atkinson ignored the taboo topic. They wrote it off, which consequently strengthened Hellman's criticism of society. They disregarded the topic in their reviews and therefore proved to be just as apprehensive about lesbianism as the rest of society.

By 1941 the politics in the United States changed. Hellman's political play, from 1941, differed completely from Odets' political play of 1935. For Odets class consciousness, especially within the working class, was the root to political and social issues. By the time Hellman successfully wrote a political play, there were other issues, like anti-fascism, that became more important than working-class activism. Although the labor organizing campaigns continued well into the early forties, the momentum of World War II in Europe and the United States' indirect involvement through agreements such as the Lend-Lease Act of 1941 helped to shift political concerns in the country. Class plays a minor role in Hellman's *Watch on the Rhine*. The Farrelly family is of the upper class, but aside from the country home setting, the servants, and the financially stable household, there are no other major class distinctions. Kurt is blackmailed for money by Teck, but even so it is Kurt's political views of anti-fascism that create the conflict. Once again, Hellman acknowledged class in her play, but did not use it

thematically. Instead, Hellman used *Watch on Rhine* to frame herself within left-liberal politics. Her anti-fascist message places Hellman directly into Denning's definition of the popular and cultural front. With Kurt as the anti-fascist fighting hero, Hellman reflects the change in the political sphere that came about with the rise of the Popular Front. Consequently, Hellman's message also explains the ambivalent critiques of *New Masses*. Specifically an anti-Nazi play, from the perspective of *New Masses*, *Rhine* does not, "define 'anti-fascism' . . . delimit its meaning [or] rescue the phrase from the warmongers and the fascists themselves."⁸⁰ *New Masses* was tied to the Communist Party, which in turn was tied in to the Soviet Union. Those associated with the Party and the publication believed there was not a clear message in Hellman's play and at the time the play was produced the Soviet Union had entered the Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact, which resulted in an ambiguous position on anti-fascism. The non-aggression pact deceived the Soviet Union. It prevented the Soviet Union from interfering with the Nazi invasion of Poland and protected Germany when Britain first attempted a second front, but did not protect the Soviet Union from Germany's invasion. Therefore, the Comintern's definition of anti-fascism changed and a neutral response to Nazism resulted. This left *Watch on the Rhine* strictly as an anti-Nazi play in the eyes of the Communist Party, without a clear Communist Party message. Hellman, a fellow traveler, was not tied to the Party. She was part of the communism Denning defines as the Popular Front ideology. Conclusively, the political shift of the 1930s is evident in Hellman's play. The change over time becomes evident with the comparison of each playwright's take on a political play, from Odets and the working class to Hellman and the anti-fascist movement.

⁸⁰ Bessie, "Watch on the Rhine," 27.

Conclusion

Playwrights Lillian Hellman and Clifford Odets each had their own agenda, but their early plays were rooted in the social, political, and economic issues of the 1930s. Odets rallied the working class through his workers' theatre one act play *Waiting for Lefty*. He exposed the social, political, and economic strife of the working class during the depression through the various vignettes. He depicted the collective bargaining promised to the working class with section 7a of the NIRA through his adaptation of the 1934 Taxi Strike. The conditions of the depression still lingered in Odets' later play, *Rocket to the Moon*. Although the characters in *Rocket* were of the lower middle class, they were still affected by the depression. Odets revealed their struggle through a love story. However, *Rocket* provided more than just insight into the economic issues of the lower middle class. Odets created a strong female character, Belle. A dominant woman, Belle runs her husband's business. She is directly involved with the finances and has deserted the traditional role of the housewife. Belle marked a change in the status of women in the 1930s. The depression facilitated that women step outside of the household, but women also found leadership opportunities within labor unions, the Democratic Party, and the Communist Party. Encompassed under Denning's cultural front, the shift in women's status is understood as a transition from Victorianism to modernism. Odets only scraped the surface of this transition, Hellman, on the other hand, exposed it.

In her play *The Children's Hour*, Lillian Hellman defined the shift between Victorianism and modernism through the role of her female characters and the taboo topic of lesbianism. Hellman presented two independent women, as both Karen and

Martha support themselves with their school for girls. Hellman's play defied gender roles as well. Karen and Martha are accused of having a lesbian relationship, but Hellman pushed her agenda further with Martha's confession and subsequent suicide. Lesbianism became a "real life" issue through Martha. Hellman exposed the social taboo, and although some reviewers rejected the third act, which is where lesbianism comes to the forefront, Hellman managed to draw attention to it.

Hellman, like Odets, also portrayed other aspects of the cultural front in her plays. In her anti-fascist play, *Watch on the Rhine*, she explored the Popular Front ideology's international focus. The heroic Muller family arrives at the beginning of the play and by the end they convince their isolationist American relatives to join the fight against fascism. Hellman's message is clear and concise, and she knew her audience would be receptive. In 1941 the United States began to shift its political orientation from domestic to foreign affairs. Although they still remained, domestic issues were placed on the back burner as the war in Europe intensified and in December 1941, after the attack of Pearl Harbor, the United States officially entered the war.

Even though Odets and Hellman addressed different issues in their plays, they both used the role of male and female characters and the role of class to expose what they found to be the fundamental concerns of society. Overall, in *The Children's Hour* and *Watch on the Rhine*, Hellman surpassed Odets on the topic of gender roles. Her female characters were more independent, as seen with Karen and Martha. She also ignored traditional values with the lesbian accusation, as well as her widowed and single female characters. Only one of her female characters is married, Sarah, and even she is an independent woman.

She supports her husband, but is closer to an equal partner in their marriage because each time Kurt leaves she is left in charge. Odets' female characters do not compare to Hellman's, but he examined class issues more effectively.

In *Lefty* and *Rocket*, Odets used class to isolate the conflict of the play. The working class drives the action of the play. The cab drivers each tell their story through the vignettes and in the end they come to the collective decision to strike. The lower middle class characters in *Rocket* are the victims of the lingering depression. The lack of income for the Stark family puts a strain on the relationship, which is what drives Stark away from Belle. Class, although addressed in Hellman's plays, does not affect the action as it does in Odets' plays.

Odets and Hellman each wrote with an agenda. They exposed the fundamental economic, social, and political issues of the 1930s through their plays. They both satisfied the broad agenda of the Popular Front. One of Michael Denning's main arguments is that the Popular Front encompassed the values of anti-fascism, pro-labor sentiments, pro-civil liberties and civil rights activism. All were part and parcel of this one movement, and therefore, a link is made between the opposing agendas of Hellman and Odets. Odets addressed the pro-labor sentiments, the idea of pro-civil liberties, and civil rights activism through his class consciousness plays. Hellman tackled anti-fascism, the idea pro-civil liberties, and civil rights activism through independent female characters and her challenge of "proper" gender roles within the taboo of lesbianism. Therefore, Hellman's and Odets' plays not only satisfied their personal agendas, but also contributed to the development of a dynamic era in cultural history. They captured the atmosphere of the 1930s with their work and turned it into major productions. They were two of the most

successful playwrights of the thirties. Their plays thrived on Broadway even when they did not receive outstanding critical reviews. Hellman and Odets captured their audiences with the topics of their plays. They used their own experiences as well as general, societal perspectives to create their work, and as a result they successfully contributed to Matthiessen's index to cultural history.

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