

TRUTH: THE DOUBLE EDGED WEAPON

Based on Lillian Hellman's play *Toys in the attic*

Verdade: Faca de Dois Gumes

Baseado em *Toys in the attic*, peça de Lillian Hellman

Wahrheit: Ein Zweischneidiges Schwert

In *Toys in the attic*, von Lillian Hellman

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SUMMARY

The following article is divided into three parts: a summary of *Toys in the attic*, some considerations on the title of the above mentioned play, and an analysis of the theme «Truth» as related to the play. Its conclusion emphasizes the ambiguity of the term «Truth», pointing out the difference between «reality» and one's «aprehension of reality», between «knowledge» and «interpretation of knowledge».

RESUMO

O artigo seguinte está dividido em três partes: um resumo de *Toys in the attic*, algumas considerações sobre o título dessa peça, e uma análise do tema «Verdade» no que diz respeito à peça. A conclusão enfatiza a ambigüidade do termo «Verdade», chamando a atenção para a diferença entre «realidade» e «apreensão da realidade», entre «conhecimento» e «interpretação do conhecimento».

The action of Lillian Hellman's eighth and last play, first produced on February 25, 1960, at the Hudson Theatre in New York, takes place in New Orleans, Louisiana. Among its main characters are Anna and Carrie, two maiden sisters who live in the house that once belonged to their parents. Their younger brother, Julian, married Lily and left for Chicago one year ago. He now returns very rich, bringing many expensive gifts, including boat tickets for his sisters to go to Europe — an old dream of theirs. But they are suspicious about the origin of his money, and they would rather have him poor beside them, than rich and distant. Lily too is suspicious about the money, and about a lady that her husband has been meeting. Lily's mother, Albertine, is a very rich woman who has Henry, her colored chauffeur, as her lover. Carrie listens to a conversation between Albertine and Henry, in which Albertine tells him about both the money and the lady. Carrie tells Lily what she knows, and Lily makes a phone call to the husband of the lady Julian has been meeting. The husband sends his men after his wife and Julian, and Julian comes back home defeated, beaten, depressed, and with no money at all.

Julian is a toy for his sisters; they do not want to let him out of the attic, out of their house. They want to keep him forever, for he is a special toy for them. They have always been careful with him, always handled him, as it were, with kid

gloves, and now they do not want to see this toy played around with, and spoiled and ruined by outsiders. He leaves the attic and they become worried about his integrity. They do not want to share their esteemed toy with anybody else. They do not like the "attic", but that is the safest place they have to keep him from harm. Whenever they think of leaving, happiness seems to evade them, and they feel lost: what will happen to him when they are absent? So, they never leave. And he stays. And they keep him. And they are all toys in their attic.

Lillian Hellman has written in *Pentimento*, "The hardest lesson to learn in the theatre is to take nobody too seriously".¹ If we comprehend this sentence from the point of view of the revelations of a given character, we will understand that nobody possesses the truth entirely. We search for truth in others, forgetting that such an analysis proceeds from our point of view — which is not truth in itself, but our truth only.

In *Toys in the attic*, Lily Berniers is the one who is not taken too seriously either by her mother or by her husband's sisters. Lillian Hellman has said about her, "sadly whacky, not crazy, but fey, and disjointed, and sweet and lost".² Her description of Lily in the play is, "Lily is a frail, pretty girl of about twenty-one" (697). This presen-

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tation helps to define her as insecure and naive. Her prettiness and youth go together to reaffirm this statement. Her being "frail" suggests Lily's inclination to be vulnerable and lacking, as it were, in substance, as well as "morally weak; easily led astray or into evil",³ which is a prediction of what happens at the end of the play. Just as with Lily Mortar, her name also reveals a dichotomy: she is a lily — the symbol of purity, whiteness, beauty; but nevertheless, she involves the person that she loves most — her husband — in a ridiculous situation, when, at the end of the play, he is beaten up by the men that the husband of his former mistress sends after him; automatically, they flee, gibe and mock at him — and "flee", "gibe" and "involve someone in a ridiculous situation" is the meaning of the French word "berner",⁴ of which "Berniers" — Lily's French name — is a modification.

The problem with Lily is that she is completely lost, reluctant to act and to decide about even the minimal things in her life. The truth with Lily is that she is afraid of losing her husband. She is afraid of loneliness. "Lily is greatly in need of love and is possessed of a mystical-religious obsession for 'truth'. Having felt rejection as a child, since her mother slept during the day in order to be free of her and to make love to her Negro paramour at night, Lily finally resolved her self-doubts in her discovery of Julian's love for her".⁵

The feeling of rejection that Lily holds because she presumes that her mother has sold her to Julian helps to increase her insecurity and her need for truth and support. She tries to get this support from her husband cutting her hand and hitting herself against a table, on purpose, to call his attention, and to make him desire and love her. Goaded by her insecurity, Lily tries to captivate Julian, and suggests, "Please. Make me cured, Julian. Let's go to bed and maybe you'll be pleased with me — Maybe" (730). But indeed *she* wants to be pleased with him: nobody else gives her pleasure or satisfaction, or pays attention to her, or shows her kindness. She lacks love, and Julian is the only one who can make her content.

In her search for truth, Lily prefers to keep her wedding ring than a new diamond one that Julian has bought for her, "Please give me my ring" (706), "I want my ring. I was married in my ring" (707), "I want my ring. I was married in my ring. This is a vulgar ring" (708), "I want my married ring" (708). Julian asks her, "Superstitious?" (706), which implies a doubt about reality: being superstitious suggests that one is afraid of truth. She does not answer, and the doubt persists. She does not want or like money, either, "My money? Doesn't matter about my money. I don't want money" (699), "I'm not worried about money" (699), "I never wanted us to have money. I hate money" (719), "I said I wasn't worried about money" (699). The troubles that involve Lily make her confused by illusions, in her hope for being able to act, and

finding herself and truth. This money which she is not interested in is the same that helped her marry Julian, and it is the same that helped them live in Chicago for a year. Lily's wish is to make herself independent of material riches, to be able to pursue happiness. For her, money, diamonds and traveling are a way of concealing truth, and camouflage what is really valuable. Richness implies Julian's absence, whereas they were always together before he became rich. Her wedding ring brings her good memories of the times when Julian had no money and they were just married, "Did it rain? I don't remember. It was all days to me: Cold and hot days, fog and light, and I was on a high hill running down with the top of me, and flying with the left of me, and singing with the right of me — I was doing everything nice anybody had ever done nice" (699). Her first ring symbolizes what life has of simplicity. Although a fake, it means a real marriage, a hope in the future; it means truth for her, while her real diamond ring does not mean anything: it symbolizes a false situation, fear for a dubious future, and it gives her insecurity, "[...] what he married me for, he doesn't need anymore. Isn't that true?" (740).

In her pursuit of happiness — her motivation being Julian — Lily naively calls Mr. Warkins and inadvertently tells him where his wife is to be found with Julian; this conversation is a turning point in the play, and it reminds us of the conversation between Anna and Carrie, in which Carrie reveals one more of Lillian Hellman's doctrines, "[...] when you love, truly love, you take your chances on being hated by speaking the truth" (731). As Lorena Holmin has observed, "This line emphasizes [...] that love can be destructive. One means of destroying by love is by failure to express the truth to the beloved".⁶ And this reminds us of Albertine, in Act Three, when she warns Lily, "[...] the pure and the innocent often bring harm to themselves and those they love and, when they do, for some reason that I do not know, the injury is very great" (747). Lily's mother once more gives her some advice, "There are many ways of loving. I'm sure yours must be among them. Put white flowers in your hair, walk up your mountain path of truth with a white banner in your hand, and as you drop it on his [Julian's] head, speak of love" (727). Lily repudiates what is not truth, and says, "But I will go and tell him the truth now and —" (727). Interestingly, though, lies have helped her through Anna's attitude toward her; Anna lies to conceal Lily's unskilled attitude toward Mrs. Warkins' telephone call:

JULIAN. I heard the phone. Didn't the phone ring?

ANNA (*after a second*). No. (708)

Again Anna lies to conceal Lily's casting her new ring away, "I have it. I was looking at it" (709).

Carrie's jealousy of Lily helps to increase her suspicion of everything; she is always defensive, she is always criticizing something. When she says that she does not believe that Julian and Lily are in town, Anna says, "Maybe Lily's pregnant. They arrived and wanted to go to a doctor first so they could tell us the good news" (695). That is not exactly a lie, because the truth is unknown, but again it is a way that Anna has of protecting Lily. Julian is aware of this kind of protection that his sisters have toward him, because he explains to Albertine, "[...] and they got ready to give me all they had, and tell all the same nice lies about how the next time" (722).

In contrast with the truth — since there is no lie without a truth — Lily's insecurity and fear of losing Julian also make her lie, specially when the subject is the mysterious lady that he has been meeting, "That's the first lie I ever told you" (701): she admits having seen them in a place different from the one that she had mentioned. He is at home when Mrs. Warkins calls, but Lily tells her that he is not; she tells Julian that she said that in an impetus: she does not know why she said it, "The phone did ring. It was that lady who calls every evening. I told her you weren't here. I don't know why I said it but I did" (708-09). She admits her lie once more, "I didn't know I was going to do it" (709). Lily lies again when Julian asks her where her new ring is, after she has just thrown it away; she says, "I don't know" (709). In a conversation with Anna, Carrie accuses Lily of lying to Julian, "He doesn't know she went out last night. He doesn't know she gave her ring away — to some woman — She's told him lies. She lies to him, she tricks him" (730). Lily belongs to an environment in which she is involved in lies and tricks, which increases her sensibility. All this is woven by Lillian Hellman through the influence of one character upon another, which leads to Lillian Hellman's maturing artistry of characterization. Lillian Hellman's maturing perspicacity about her characters and her increasing strength in characterization coincide with the expansion and refinement of her characters as her career expands. Her characters' motives, their psychology, and their motivation sometimes lead them to personal failures or neurotic complication. Lily twice hurts herself on purpose, and she also tried to kill herself rolling down a hill some years before — which may have a connection with her expression of ecstasy which has already been quoted. The adjectives used by Lillian Hellman to describe Lily ("[...] sadly wacky, not crazy, but fey and disjointed, and sweet and lost"), quoted earlier in this study, help us to understand Lily's escapes into the night through dangerous alleys into "an upstairs room with a morphine addict who holds séances" (747). In her search for truth, she is positive that Madame Celeste is right, "Truth, truth is the way to life, and the one way, the only way. Open your hearts with this knife and throw them here" (717). Lily attempts to escape into religious illusions and experiences in her search for truth:

LILY (*sits down, speaks quietly*). Everybody left and there I was. The woman said, "You want me, child?" And I said, "Could I buy your knife?" "No", she said. "The knife is not for sale." But I wanted it more than I ever wanted anything and, well — (*Smiles, slyly*) — finally, we swapped something — And when it was in my hand, for the first time in my life, I just said everything, and asked. The lady said the knife of truth would dress me as in a jacket of iron flowers and though I would do battle, I would march from the battle cleansed. Then I fell asleep —

ALBERTINE. Your many religious experiences have always made me uneasy, Lily —

LILY. When I woke up I knew that I must begin my struggle up the mountain path of truth by asking you —

ALBERTINE. You telephoned at two this morning to speak with me about a journey up a mountain path of truth?

LILY. And Henry came instead, and made me get in the car, and brought me *here*. He stood in the way — But he can't. Because I must ask truth, and speak truth, and act truth, now and forever.

ALBERTINE. Do you think this is the proper climate? So hot and damp. Puts mildew on the truth. (717-18)

It is through Albertine that Lillian Hellman releases her philosophies and what Annette Johnson calls "real truths".⁷ Later on, in this same scene, in a dialogue which takes more than six pages of Act Two, Albertine warns Lily, "On your struggle up the mountain path, you will find that truth is often ugly. It burns" (719). As Meredith Ackley points out, "Lily is not plausible. One is left to wonder what purpose is served by the belaboring of idiosyncrasies, the dark implications and the needlessly detailed drawing of her very strange character. Portraying Lily as a child could be in part explained as a device to show Julian's need for someone whom he could take care of and who would depend on him as he has been taken care of and has depended on his sisters. Her character, however, remains inexplicable because no reason becomes apparent for the attention given her bizarre activities".⁸ In Cynthia Larimer's opinion, "The 'knife' of truth which she clings to so desperately is symbolic of the pain of truth, the truth which hurts Carrie and Anna, as well as Julian. But it also represents Lily's masochistic search for the truth [...]"⁹ In Meredith Ackley's point of view, "Though her infantile stammerings about truth may announce the subject of the drama, they clog the machinery of the play. She brandishes a 'knife of truth', but if she is not simple-minded, her truthfulness is mindless. Miss Hellman may intend the results of Lily's activities as a warning of the dangers of naiveté, or of abstract truth untempered by reality which can become another form of

blindness".¹⁰ This obsession of Lily's comes to be known and not only involves herself, but also disturbs those around her. Julian is probably the most bewildered, hit by the inconvenient and odd attitudes and speeches of Lily. He is surprised by what is going on within his wife's mind:

LILY. The knife of truth. Will you swear on it? Swear that you will keep me with you whatever —

JULIAN. For Christ's sake, Lily. What the hell's the matter with you? (*He drops the knife on the table*) Stop talking foolish and stop playing with knives. (736)

As the play progresses, Lily's fixed idea to know the truth and to tell only the truth grows through a situation in which she is talking to Carrie about Mrs. Warkins, "I'll swear on my knife of truth that if I have just one more year —" (741) to a climax in which she talks to Mr. Warkins on the phone and tells him where to find his wife and her husband. Her action is irrational and destructive, and illustrates her fear of losing Julian, at the same time that it shows her relief to be free of what she considers a heavy burden. She feels light, and secure because of the confidence her "knife of truth" gives her; nevertheless, because it is the first time in her life that she makes a decision, and because she is doubtful about its results, she becomes intuitively apprehensive, "I did right, just exactly. *Didn't I?* And I'll take the knife of truth and swear to keep my word —" (744). (*Italics mine.*)

In her despair, Lily had given her diamond ring as a proof of her fidelity to Madame Celeste, who sells it back to Albertine. Lily says to her mother, "That's not fair, is it? Now I must give her back the knife of truth. (*She turns as if to leave*) I'd like to keep it, but she'd never sell it" (746). Afraid that her mother wants to take her friend from her, she defends Madame Celeste in her naiveté of not knowing what Madame Celeste really is, "You want to take my friend from me —" (747), "My friend is a sweet friend. I gave her my ring because she loved me and gave me courage —" (747). On giving her truth, Madame Celeste gives her courage, and vice versa. It seems as all that Lily wished was condensed in a single word: courage — which reminds us of a vigorous sentence by Lillian Hellman, "I never want to live again to watch people turn into liars and cowards [...]"¹¹

In one of her several pieces of advice to Lily, even before her daughter talks to Mr. Warkins on

the telephone, Albertine refers to Lily's overaction, "You asked my advice and here it is: You do too much. Go and do nothing for a while. Nothing. I have seen you like this before. (*With force*) I tell you now, do nothing" (727). This is a presage of what is going to occur at the end of the play on account of Lily's attitude (which causes all the damages to Julian); it is also a forecast of Albertine's words to Lily when Julian gets home bruised and beaten up, "Go in and sit by him. Just sit by him and shut up. Can you do that? Can you have enough pity for him not to kill him with the truth? Can you love him enough to go by him, sit down — (*Very softly, with great violence*) — and be still? (*Lily nods*) Then go and do it" (750). After the truth is known, Lily is blamed by Carrie — and rejected, "Let's be glad nothing worse happened. We're together, the three of us, that's all that matters" (750), which reminds us of another one of Carrie's bitter remarks, "I read in a French book that there was nothing so abandoned as a respectable young girl" (730) — a parallel with the French book *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, by Théophile Gautier, referred to in *The children's hour*.¹²

It is surely more than a coincidence that Lillian Hellman begins her collection of eight plays with a Lily, and closes them with another Lily, both catalytic in relation to the lives of those around them, and that both are closely involved with two maiden women who live in the same house, and a man who is connected in one way or another with these two women. Then again both Lilies somehow belong to the families that they destroy. But nonetheless they are different: Lily Mortar is led on by malice and selfishness, while Lily Berniers is activated by unawareness and naiveté. The destruction in *The children's hour* is caused by Lily's inaction, while the ruin in *Toys in the attic* is caused by Lily's overaction: Lily Mortar is sure that truth is with her, that she knows all, that she can act — yet, she does not act: she disappears when needed; Lily Berniers is inactive, she is not sure of anything, she is all doubts, she seeks truth — but she reveals part of her hidden personality when she takes command of the situation. Both families are damaged physically, economically and socially by their "lilies". William Shakespeare, at the end of his "Sonnet XCIV", has already taught us that the word "lily" has a certain ambiguity; that it may be a symbol of purity, whiteness and beauty, but, because of this, its corruption is worse:

"For sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds;
Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds".

NOTES

- 1 Lillian Hellman, *Pentimento* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973), p. 196.
- 2 Richard G. Stern, «Lillian Hellman on her plays», *Contact*, 3 (1959), p. 117.
- 3 *The American heritage dictionary of the English language*. Ed. William Morris (New York: American Heritage & Houghton Mifflin, 1969), p. 521.
- 4 The French word «berner» was cross-checked in *Larousse* and *The American heritage dictionary*.

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- 5 Annette Bergman Johnson, «A study of recurrent character types in the plays of Lillian Hellman,» Diss. Univ. of Massachusetts 1970, p. 133.
 - 6 Lorena Ross Holmin, *The dramatic works of Lillian Hellman*, Diss. Uppsala 1973 (Stockholm: Rotobekman, 1973), p. 153.
 - 7 Annette Bergman Johnson, «A study of recurrent character types in the plays of Lillian Hellman,» Diss. Univ. of Massachusetts 1970, p. 262.
 - 8 Meredith Erling Ackley, «The plays of Lillian Hellman,» Diss. Univ. of Pennsylvania 1969, pp. 150-51.
 - 9 Cynthia Diane Miller Larimer, «A study of female characters in the eight plays of Lillian Hellman,» Diss. Univ. of Purdue 1970, p. 183.
 - 10 Meredith Erling Ackley, «The plays of Lillian Hellman,» Diss. Univ. of Pennsylvania 1969, p. 150.
 - 11 Lillian Hellman, *Three* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), p. 726.
 - 12 Lillian Hellman, *The children's hour* in her *The collected plays* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1972), p. 24 and p. 49.