

Money as a Test of Human Values in Lillian Hellman's Plays

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Abstract

Hellman raises multiple issues in her plays, yet 'money' emerges as a common motif and unifying symbol in all her plays. One may say without any exaggeration that Money is a recurring protagonist in her plays because it can affect people's loyalties and values. Money represents a wide variety of values to different characters individually. Some love it, some hate it, and some pretend indifference to it; however, none can deny its significant role in their lives. It fetches both pleasure and pain to those who possess it or long for it. In *Toys in Attic*, after the loss of his money, Julian explains:

Old saying, money is a real pure lady and when the world began she swore herself an oath never to belong to a man who didn't love her. I never loved her and she guessed it. Couldn't fool her, she got good sense. (751).

Keywords: Money, Avaricious, Rapacious Greed, Materialism, Self-righteous, Immoral, Blackmailing, Corrupt, Deviant

Introduction

"Money has never made man happy, nor will it; there is nothing in its nature to produce happiness. The more of it one has, the more one wants."

– Benjamin Franklin.

Money is the cause of all evil in Lillian Hellman's social and moral canon. It makes people self-righteous, morally blind, corrupt, deviant, avaricious, rapacious, dishonest, loveless, cruel, and even murderer, as one notices the ill-effects of wealth on the rich, the nouveau riche or the poor and desiring to be rich in all her plays. The action within the plays commonly involves a struggle between the financially rich and the economically poor. Wealth operates not only as a structural element but also as a basic test of human values. Hellman's purpose is to exhibit the corrupting influence of money; therefore, more often, the wealthy characters are portrayed negatively, sometimes even villainous as the Hubbards. However, the poor and those who are not obsessed with money always emerge as more admirable characters. Servant class characters, especially when they are Negroes, are more positively drawn, and the playwright seems to prefer them as vehicles for articulating her social and moral values.

Aim of the Study

Money serves as a basic test of human values in Lillian Hellman's plays. This paper examines the effect of money on various characters; money as both the cause and the solution to problems. Famous is the maxim: "money as the root of all evil". One may not totally agree with this maxim; nonetheless, one should not acquire money at the cost of human values. One should not be avaricious because it is one of the seven deadly sins.

Hellman was a woman of angry, ironic, rebellious and non-conformist temperament, and perhaps, this temperament is responsible for her social and moral protest in her plays. This protest in her plays can be seen in the light of financial relationships because greed for money is the basic theme of her plays, but money is also the best key to understanding the values that her plays reflect. It operates in several different directions and serves as a basic test of values. Lillian Hellman presents some likeable rich characters also like Horace and Birdie (*The Little Foxes*), but more often, wealth is used destructively by those who possess it, and her protest is against those who misuse the power of their wealth.

In the play *The Children's Hour*, for example, it is wealth that makes it possible for Mrs. Tilford to control not only her life but that of



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others as well. Her self-righteous attitude results from the money that she possesses and the enviable status that she owns in society. Her attitude prevents her from having a clear and open mind on the issue of lesbianism. Hellman proves that money gives so much power to a person that he can destroy innocent lives, and in this, society also favours him.

In the play *Days to Come*, the inherited wealth of the Rodmans is the leading cause for the final tragedy that the play dramatises. The family wealth attracts Julie to marry Andrew Rodman, although she does not love him and hence maintains adulterous relations with two men, first with Mr Ellicott and then with Leo Whalen, the labour organiser. She was compelled to marry wealth and position, and thus the sound values necessary for healthy married life were missing.

In *The Little Foxes*, greed for money becomes a factor that destroys filial affections and all family considerations. Brothers, husband, children----nobody matters.

Hellman has presented the deterioration of human emotions, values, family ties, loyalties, and moral-principles in the play. Members of the Hubbard's family were rolling in money, and yet their greed for it was endless. They do not hesitate to resort to such tactics as blackmailing, threatening, stealing, intriguing, cheating or even murdering. The Hubbards are the Southern reconstruction businessmen who became rich by exploiting the poor whites and the simple Negroes. Marriage, to the Hubbards, is like a business transaction. Regina married Horace, Oscar married Birdie, and Oscar wants Leo (his son) to marry Alexandra (Regina's daughter). All these marriages are made for monetary benefits and not for love.

Each member of the family is like an animal in a lawless jungle. The springs of human affection have entirely dried up in them. Regina hates her husband and lets him die, and Oscar persuades his son to steal. Ben and Regina are ever at each other's throats. In every respect, the Hubbards in their avarice and rapacity are like "the little foxes that spoil our vines: for our vines have tender grapes." Alexandra's escape from her mother and the reasons she gives to escape, represent the hope for a better future. Alexandra's protest against the Hubbards brings Hellman's note of social and moral protest. Hellman warns the audience that only the Alexandras among them can ensure the promise of America's better future.

The Hubbards in *Another Part of the Forest* exemplify the new South nouveaux riches. They come into money through nefarious means during the Civil War and the Reconstruction. These people embody the amorality, secularism and materialism of the modern world. Hellman has described them as "a very predatory middle-class family, on its climb to enormous riches". This family consists of Marcus, his wife Lavinia, their two sons Ben and Oscar and their daughter Regina. Marcus keeps his two sons in resentful servitude at very meagre wages. Only Regina is approved and pampered by him, and this attachment of his is given incestuous overtones.

There is more than a hint that Ben is a jealous rival of his father for Regina and his money. Under such circumstances, the average healthy family relations cannot be expected.

In both the wartime plays, *Watch on the Rhine* and *The Searching Wind*, money is a central preoccupation. In the former, the wealthy Farrellys are finally "shaken out of the magnolias" by the heroic example of Kurt Muller. Kurt looks at money not as an end in itself but merely as a tool useful for accomplishing noble purposes. In contrast, his antagonist, Count Teck de Brancovis, was willing to stoop to the most dishonourable lengths for money. That his wife married him for the prestige of a European title rather than pursuing more promising and rewarding values is a further example of the blinding influence of wealth.

The Searching Wind features the wealthy Hazens who are more concerned over their foreign investments' safety than the dangers to their country. Their wealth and position save them from direct retribution for their selfish actions, but these advantages could not shield them from their shame and guilt. Throughout the play, there is only confusion. Nobody is firm in taking a decision. Every character takes one particular stand at one point and shifts ground the very next minute. Alex Hazen is unable to make up his mind about which girl he should marry. Ultimately he marries the girl he doesn't love, which leads to confused relations. Hazen makes mistakes after mistakes; as a result, he indirectly becomes responsible for making his son, Sam lose his leg. Sam denounces his parents for doing nothing to prevent the events that led to World War II. He speaks for the young people of America who were paying for their parent's generation's mistakes. In this way, the play presents a society peopled by such persons who are not sure of themselves and who foolishly bring about trouble for themselves and others.

In *The Autumn Garden* and *Toys in the Attic*, Hellman's concern for wealth's inseparable hazards is continued. Although she takes pains to show in *The Autumn Garden* how both rich and poor alike can build their lives on illusions and how, by the time the autumn of life arrives, it is too late to hope for a new, substantially redirected life. Hellman favours the chances of the poor characters over wealthy ones in the quest for happy and satisfying lives during their waning years. Middle-class Constance and Ned, at the end of the play, are better prepared for their declining years than are their wealthier associates. The play reflects Lillian Hellman's continuing critical interest in the passing social scene and some psychological factors contributing to social evils. She lets these evils fall on social conditions, family circumstances, and day-to-day situational events. The characters, engaged in social intercourse within the play, make direct comments related to values perennially crucial to society.

In *Toys in the Attic*, Hellman gives money its most prominent role of all. In this play, Mrs Prine, like Mrs Tilford in *The Children's Hour*, is admirably generous in providing her daughter with money but fails disastrously in preparing a young girl for a happy

life within the world of reality. Though she gives her daughter all the material advantages of life, she fails to supply the maternal love and interest that her proper adjustment and development demands.

Both -- The Autumn Garden and Toys in the Attic -- deal with problems that beset middle-age, and both provide the social lesson that happiness has less to do with financial status than most people are in the habit of believing.

Conclusion

Hellman is not prejudiced against the rich; what she dislikes is, and one also notices it around oneself, the close alliance between wealth and anti-social behaviour. Her social protest is against the inordinate lust for money and power. In a few instances, it is true, like that of Nina Denery (The Autumn Garden) and Mrs Albertine Prine (Toys in the Attic) that wealth is more a matter of routine acceptance than of avid pursuit. In the case of the Hubbards (The Foxes Plays), money signifies power and corruption. However, in other situations such as those which Horace Giddens (The Little Foxes) and Kurt Muller (Watch on the Rhine) face, money presents counteracting medium to social and moral evils it commonly generates. The healthy use of money by these humanitarian characters promotes public welfare and repudiates the destructive individualism widely pervaded throughout Hellman's plays. Hellman's heroes are indifferent to the blind pursuit of wealth, and although they do not discard wealth, their preference for sound values makes them emerge as admirable heroes.

It becomes evident from the plays of Hellman that she was an anti-capitalist. She hated those who waded and wallowed in money; however, she also acknowledged the power of money in the most un-Marxian way. On the one hand, she disapproved of the capitalistic society and appealed for a social change; but on the other hand, she upheld that an individual could not escape the responsibility of his deeds and that only the system - the social setup - was not to be blamed.

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