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‘Fascism, Confrontation and Appeasement in Three Flashbacks’ in Miss Lillian Hellman’s *The Searching Wind*

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Abstract:

The Searching Wind shows rich Americans hopping all over Europe from the year 1922-1944, like Hemingway-type intellectuals in exile. Hellman is really attacking a way of life practiced by a minority who made their values-or lack of them-the keynote of their age. The play audits the conduct of an irresolute career diplomat, his retired liberal father-in-law, and his bored wife who broke bread with Fascist- minded bigwigs. Hellman reviews the rise of Fascism and the triumph of appeasement in three flashbacks. These three flashback scenes take place in 1922, 1923 and 1938 respectively. The flashback scenes also represent three personal crises in the lives of the three major characters- Alexander Hazen, a career diplomat, his wealthy wife, Emily Hazen and the ‘other woman,’ Cassie Bowman. Hellman presents the past as a series of double crisis confrontation.

1. Introduction

Set in Washington, D.C., in the spring of 1944, *The Searching Wind* deals with the family of an American diplomat, Alexander Hazen, an attaché at Rome, during the rise of Mussolini and Hitler. A 'liberal,' Alexander Hazen turns out to be one who cannot believe in villainy, and who in the name of caution, and keeping an open mind, made compromises with evil-with Fascism, at the cost of lives of future generation. Three scenes take place in the present- 1944-the year in which the action begins and ends. And Hellman reviews the rise of Fascism and the triumph of appeasement in three flashbacks. These three flashback scenes take place in 1922, 1923 and 1938 respectively. The flashback scenes also represent three personal crises in the lives of the three major characters- Alexander Hazen, a career diplomat, his wealthy wife, Emily Hazen and the ‘other woman,’ Cassie Bowman. At each political crises, Alex appeases the fascists, and his wife appeases her rival- her ex-best friend, Cassie. Alex tries to appease both the women. Outside the trio, as commentators on the action, are the old man, Moses Taney, Emily’s father, and the young man, Sam Hazen, Emily and Alexander Hazen's son.

The framework of present time opens and closes with the conflict between Emily and Cassie. Hellman creates both curiosity and befuddlement in her audience by having Emily invite Cassie to hers and Alex's home in Washington- nobody knows why. Then through the subsequent flashbacks into the past, until in the final scene, at the house, a few hours after scene one, we learn Emily's purpose. Hellman shows the past as a series of double crisis confrontations.

In the 1922 scene, Moses Taney, his daughter, Emily, and her best friend, Cassie, along with Taney’s maid, Sophronia are visiting Rome, where Alex Hazen is a young diplomat in the American embassy. Mussolini is marching on Rome and Cassie is marching on Alex, whom Emily expects to marry. Mussolini takes over. Alex agrees with his boss, the American ambassador, that open opposition to the Fascists would be intervention in Italian internal affairs. His failure to take a strong political stand precipitates a quarrel with Cassie. This is not known to Emily that Alex and Cassie are lovers and have thought of marriage. Now Cassie decides to return to her teaching job in America for a year to think it over. Emily's response to Cassie and her challenge is that of passive resistance-to stay in Rome where Alex is. It works, and Cassie catches him.

The second political scene is in Berlin in 1923. It is the time of the first organized anti-Semitic riots. Emily is married to Alex and Cassie has made it a habit to follow them and meet Alex, when she is on vacation in Europe. The scene takes place in a Berlin restaurant where Alex is waiting for Emily and unknowingly being watched by Cassie at another table. The noises of riot and threats against Jews are heard outside the restaurant. Emily comes in shocked by the spectacle she has just witnessed of German ex-soldiers beating up old Jews. Alex’s response to the crisis is to calm down the people in the restaurant and to blame the riot on the negligence of the police. He refuses to face the complicity of the police in the anti-Semitism. On the other hand, Emily sees Cassie and is polite. Cassie takes the offensive and accuses Emily of having stolen Alex from her. Emily claims not guilty-Cassie and Alex had already quarreled. Emily offers friendship, reconciliation and appeasement.

The third double confrontation takes place in Paris in 1938 when the Munich agreement- the arch example of appeasement of Hitler by Britain and France-is about to take place. Alex must send his recommendation to the United States Government. Again, he refuses

to believe in evil and corruption, even when a Nazi attempts to pressurize him into trying to keep France and Britain out of war with Germany. He holds out hope that Hitler may keep his promise not to annex more territory after the Sudetenland, and supports Chamberlain's efforts to keep 'peace in our time.'

Emily also wants peace any price, now in politics as well as love. She does not want to send her son to war. She and Alex quarrel-the make peace-about her hob-nabbing with pro-Nazi European socialites, including the banker with whom she has deposited some of her money.

But Cassie, at Emily's invitation, has been to see Alex. Before Emily arrives, they have arranged a rendezvous. Alex has decided that he loves Emily but is 'in love with' Cassie. When Emily comes, she tells Alex that as she entered, she saw Cassie in the lobby but was afraid to confront her. And thus, she leaves Alex in the hands of the enemy, as Chamberlain-and Alex-left Europe.

In the last scene, which takes up the 1944 action again, Hellman brings all the confrontations together-the women, the war, the generations. It turns out that Emily had invited Cassie to the house in act one in order to have it out with once and for all to accuse her directly of husband - stealing. Now Cassie breaks down and tells Emily that the accusation is true. She had been out to get Alex away from Emily and to punish Emily for marrying him. Alex agrees to let Cassie go without a struggle, and he relaxes with his wife.

The major confrontation, however, is between Sam Hazen and his elders. This too, has been having fire since the opening scene. We learned there that Sam had been wounded. Now we find that he must lose his leg. In spite of his grandfather's efforts to educate him, Sam is not an intellectual-he trusts action and sincere human relations, not words. He had felt at home in the army with fighting men, and especially with his friend, Leck, who was killed in the same battle in which Sam was wounded. His war experiences have made him ashamed of his family of 'bystanders' and now he tells them why.

Sam is ashamed of his grandfather, the great liberal, who now just sits back and watches. He is also ashamed of his father who went along with Munich, and of his mother with her rich, pro-Nazi friends. Then, with an almost apologetic patriotism, Sam accuses his parents of damaging the country which he loves. He harshly tells them: I don't want any more of Father's mistake, for any reason, good or bad, or yours, Mother, because I think they do [the country] harm... I am ashamed of both of you, and that's the truth."ⁱⁱ

The play ends with Samuel denouncing his parents and their generation for bringing on the war by closing their eyes to what was happening and for feeling ashamed of expressing their love of country at a time when such an expression was necessary. In this sense, the play is reminiscent of *Days to Come*, making the point clear that the world is the sum total of each person's personal actions.

The *Searching Wind* is notable for its novel plot with its multiple-scene scheme, bringing some film techniques to bear upon its structural unity. Although Hellman never held the movie industry in high esteem, she learned its techniques well enough to use them in her most ambitious play, *The Searching Wind*. Told through flashback, *The Searching Wind* is the kind of play that puts great demands on the cast. Act I moves from 1944 to 1922 and back to 1944. Act II moves from 1923 to 1938 and full circle to 1944. The first two acts, showing the onset of fascism in Rome and Berlin, are well done, though both are cluttered by the development of the novel triangle. The third flashback is notable for a delineation of the Nazi diplomat who deals with the Munich pact.

However, many critics contend that the multiple scenes and numerous major characters in the play divert the audiences from Hellman's thematic intentions, thereby marring its structural unity. For instance, Richard Moody says: "the segmented structure is loose as a haystack and also reduced the firepower of the political message. It might have held on longer performances, if she had tried so hard to write two plays at once, one political, the other personal."ⁱⁱⁱ Casper H. Nannee feels: "The *Searching Wind* has two centers around which the plot revolves. One is the willingness of American businessmen to do business with Hitler and Mussolini and the other is the pent-up feelings of returned soldiers towards those who brought on the war by closing their eyes to what was going on."ⁱⁱⁱⁱ The *Time* reviewer points out that *The Searching Wind* is "more like two plays-and two very unequal ones."^{iv} Doris V. Falk says: "neither the theme, nor the plot structure, nor the characters ever came completely clear on the stage-and they take considerable analyzing even on the printed page."^v And Katherine Lederer writes: "the attempt to tell two stories at once makes the impact of the play diffuse, although the theme is clear enough."^{vi} Downer contends: "Hellman was so caught up in contemporary issues that the structure of the drama is faulty."^{vii}

Critics feel that the structural beauty of the play is spoiled chiefly because of the simultaneous treatment of two divergent stories within the scope of a single plot as in the case of *The Children's Hour*. The critics seem to have taken a from T. S. Eliot's critical pronouncement on Shakespeare's *Hamlet* that the play is a film on which two photographs have been taken.

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

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

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

The Searching Wind, even more than *Watch on the Rhine*, drives its strength from its immediacy. In the words of Richard Moody, "With Eisenhower's invasion of France two months away, with the Nazis still threatening, we struggled to know where we went wrong in bringing the civilized world to the edge of disaster."^{xi} The 1920s were a time for history to test the convictions of the 1920s, it turned out that there were none. The endless parties in *The Searching Wind* are spin-offs of Jay Gatsby's extravaganzas where it made no difference who attended. Such a lack of discrimination may have been acceptable then. But the careless men of the 1920s spilled over into the next decade when frivolous Emilies sat next to Nazis and fascist at soirees, making small talk and never challenging their political beliefs for fear of breach of etiquette.

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

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

2. Conclusion

Thus, *The Searching Wind* is not a formal play, though it is concerned with a profound truth. There is no true villain in the play. The only villain seems to be appeasement of people. All the major characters just let things happen, stand around and watch the earth and the people on it being eaten. And, as Lederer observes, "a searching wind blows away the rationalizations of all the characters by the end of the play, as they learn the truth about themselves."^{xiv}

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