



FORUM

University of Edinburgh
Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts
Issue 24 | Spring 2017

Title	Taboo in the Next Room: Lesbian Suicide in Lillian Hellman's <i>The Children's Hour</i>
Author	Angus Young
Publication	FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture & the Arts
Issue Number	24
Issue Date	Spring 2017
Publication Date	29/05/2017
Editors	Anahit Behrooz and Vicki Madden

FORUM claims non-exclusive rights to reproduce this article electronically (in full or in part) and to publish this work in any such media current or later developed. The author retains all rights, including the right to be identified as the author wherever and whenever this article is published, and the right to use all or part of the article and abstracts, with or without revision or modification in compilations or other publications. Any latter publication shall recognise FORUM as the original publisher.

Taboo in the Next Room: Lesbian Suicide in Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour*

Angus Young
University of Leeds

*This article argues that Lillian Hellman's play *The Children's Hour* (1934) conflates two taboos: lesbianism and suicide. In so doing, the play creates a space of irresolution that suggests an inherent instability in the process of the taboo.*

This article analyses the conflation of two taboos in Lillian Hellman's play *The Children's Hour* (1934): lesbianism and suicide. While the former has been addressed in the scholarship on Hellman's play, the latter is often neglected. Separating the representation of lesbianism in the character of Martha Dobie from her suicide, however, is problematic. The lack of attention paid to the suicide, I argue, engenders a sense of incompleteness both in the play and the critical discourse around it. The suicide itself enacts this disturbance, as it is both a progressive recognition of lesbian identity while also being a reductive closeting. This article argues that the language of *The Children's Hour* tries but fails to contain the destabilisation of heteronormative society caused by homosexuality within the play. Finally, through a comparison between the normative conclusion of the play and Lee Edelman's *No Future* (2005), I argue that *The Children's Hour* inhabits a paradoxical, unstable space where the future is only understood through contradiction. *The Children's Hour* thus posits the process of the taboo as inherently destabilising. Whether it is through the closeting of sexuality, linguistic denial, or even academic neglect, social repression does not simply assign a mark of un/acceptability, but rather creates an irresolute space. I argue that *The Children's Hour* (re)produces a state of sustained contradiction surrounding lesbianism and suicide, and as such, is a play that can only unsettle and unnerve without offering any coherent social or political possibilities. *The Children's Hour* thus enacts a deconstruction of taboo, offering only uncertainty and an intrinsically unstable sense of reality in its place.

The Children's Hour is loosely based on a 19th-century Scottish law case and depicts two female teachers, Martha and Karen, losing their private school after being accused of having a lesbian relationship. In the play, the allegation stems from a spoiled child, Mary Tilford, overhearing some specific remarks from one of the teacher's aunts, Mrs Mortar. It is the third act of the play and the response to this accusation, however, that receives the most critical attention. In this act, the school is emptied and closed and Karen sends away her prospective husband, Joe. The revelation then comes when Martha kneels next to Karen and admits, much to her own shock as to her friend's: "*I have loved you the way they said*" (Hellman 71, emphasis in original). Moments later, Martha goes to the next room and shoots herself. The play briefly continues in an attempt to find some form of resolution.

Martha's confession points to the key concerns of both the play and its critical reception. The present perfect tense, "*I have loved*", implies both an end as well as continued affection. The suicide then enacts this sense of finality and continuance as it marks the end of Martha's life while also registering her lesbian love in a manner that can no longer be retracted. "*The way they said*" stresses Martha's inability to find terms outside of the heteronormative society in which she lives to express her sexuality and lesbianism. Suicide provides an alternative means for such expression. The association between lesbianism and suicide is, then, complex and not simply a case of disarming lesbianism's challenge to heteronormative orthodoxy by rendering homosexuality as self-destructive. Instead, Martha's death produces a sense of discord in both the play's internal logic and its external scholarship. Carol Strongin Tufts, for example, takes a hard line, suggesting: "Martha, as Hellman has created her, is little more than a victim, both of the melodramatic vicissitudes of the plot and Hellman's own male-identified point of view, which in *Children's Hour* equates lesbianism with sin" (73). Tufts' reading takes away Martha's agency and renders her a simplified subject within a rigidly demarcated social order, in which concepts such as "male-identified point of view" and "sin" are assumed and essentialised. This position problematically disregards Martha's role in her own death and overlooks the self-determination inherent in suicide. Tufts, however, opens her study with an acknowledgement of the play's uncertainty: "For all its 'well-made' qualities there is a disturbing confusion at the heart of Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour*, the feeling of something not quite thought through or worked out during the writing of the play" (63). While Tufts abandons this hesitancy in her analysis of Martha, it is this irresolution that dominates both scholarship on the play and the play's production history.

The Children's Hour has been repeatedly revisited and recreated in different forms, which, as Jenny Spencer suggests, destabilises any sense of a core authoritative text (44-45). The first production in 1934, and the focus of this study, is followed by a film entitled *These Three* in 1936, written by Hellman and directed by William Wyler. Hellman then returned to direct a revival of the play in 1952. Finally, Wyler also returned in 1962 to direct another feature film that was once again titled *The Children's Hour*. The directorial returns of both Hellman and Wyler imply a sense of incompleteness in the seeming need to revisit, rework, and retell this story. While there are changes made to the first two acts in all of these versions, it is always the third act in which the most significant alterations occur. Mary Titus identifies why this act draws the most variation: "The last scene creates discomfort, emphasizing all that is unresolved" (224). I would argue that the cause of this "discomfort" is the suicide. While Martha's death is always a focus for critics, if not for the characters of *The Children's Hour*, they rarely consider the significance of the fact that she dies by suicide.

Through focus on the suicide, this article suggests a reading that builds on Anne Fleche's interpretation, while reaching a different conclusion:

Martha's confession brings out the conflict between realism and lesbian sexuality in the play: it has no way to become realized (in either sense), and so it can never be resolved. It can't support a structure of closure and coherence. Hellman's early notes call Martha an 'unconscious lesbian' suggesting that the character would be arriving at self-knowledge in the

last act, but it seems clear that by the time she finally wrote the scene she knew there was nothing conclusive about it. It would be far truer to say that Martha produces an imaginary lesbian at the end of the play, to give her a way out (so to speak), and that Hellman shows how it is constructed out of the very need to produce the abject lesbian so clearly demanded by the homophobic community. (24)

Fleche suggests that lesbian sexuality cannot “become realized” and a major reason for this is “language’s incommensurability” (27) throughout the play. The events of *The Children’s Hour* are structured around gossip, misinterpretation, and lies. It is, however, only in the final scene, after Martha’s confession, that language itself comes to a critical juncture. The very concept of Martha and Karen continuing together after the acknowledgement of lesbian desire causes Martha to admit: “Tomorrow? That’s a funny word. Karen, we would have had to invent a new language, as children do, without words like tomorrow” (Hellman 72). Fleche takes this need for “a new language” to negate the possibility of an ongoing, performed lesbianism in the play, or at least within its social order and logic. However, it is in the absence of language, and the linguistic invisibility of lesbianism, that action provides a non-linguistic mode of signification. Indeed, these are Martha’s last words before walking into the next room and shooting herself.

On the surface, this act of voluntary death appears to be a rejection of a lesbian self. Indeed, Martha’s confession is infused with negativity:

(as though she were talking to herself) It’s funny; it’s all mixed up. There’s something in you, and you don’t know it and you don’t do anything about it. Suddenly a child gets bored and lies – and there you are, seeing it for the first time. *(Closes her eyes)* I don’t know. It all seems to come back to *me*. In some way I’ve ruined your life. I’ve ruined my own. I didn’t even *know*. *(Smiles)* There’s a big difference between us now, Karen. I feel all dirty and – *(Puts out her hand, touches Karen’s head)* I can’t stay with you any more, darling. (Hellman 72)

“Ruined” and “dirty” stand out in this passage; their connotations of corruption recall the now dated perception of homosexual desire as a social disorder. The implication that lesbianism is imposed on something once wholesome is, however, contradicted within this very passage. Mrs Mortar has already suggested Martha’s sexuality is ever-present: “You were always like that even as a child. If you had a little girl friend, you always got mad when she liked anybody else” (Hellman 20). Martha’s confession then compounds this acknowledgement, as it is threaded through with a subtle recognition that she is not at fault. Everything “come[s] back to [her]”, implying that the cause of suffering for Martha is external. The tentativeness of the language, “in some way”, reinforces a sense of uncertainty in articulating where the responsibility for the “ruin” lies. There is then a repeated and steadily emphasised innocence in ignorance: “you don’t know [...] I don’t know [...] I didn’t even *know*.”

Although this does not entirely counteract the restrictive and brutal terminology of “ruin” and “dirty”, it does conflict with it. Any singular interpretation of Martha either as victim or simply rejecting herself is disrupted by this tension. Karen’s response to this speech re-emphasises a linguistic inconsistency: “*(in a shaken, uncertain tone)* All this isn’t true. You’ve never said it; we’ll forget it by

tomorrow” (Hellman 72). Again, the importance is placed on language, specifically on the fact Martha has “said it”; she has vocalised her feeling and put it into words. But this same oral recognition is then something easy to “forget by tomorrow”. Finally, Karen reverts to the patronising and controlling words of a teacher to a student: “(*crying*) Go and lie down, Martha. You’ll feel better” (Hellman 72). Martha’s suicide can hence also be read as a rejection of Karen’s denial. Martha does not “lie down” and she refuses to “forget it”. Instead, she cements her love for Karen through an action that cannot be negated by language or forgotten by the next day.

Fleche argues that lesbian sexuality cannot “be realized” in the play and in a sense she is right, as Martha is alone off stage. Simultaneously, however, Martha, in her death, denies the possibility of not being a lesbian. Karen and her words cannot reign Martha back in, her closeted death is both pushed away unseen and yet also paradoxically present. “The closet”, Eve Sedgwick writes: “is the defining structure for gay oppression in this century” (Sedgwick 71). While there is a double meaning here in Hellman’s representation of the closet, its very existence points to both a realisation and a violent oppression of lesbian identity. As such, this visualisation of an unseen closet “that is both internal and marginal to the culture” (Sedgwick 56) represents the fundamental discord at the heart of the play. Martha’s suicide becomes, in Sedgwick’s terminology, both a silence and a speech act; both a denial and a realisation. It is a ‘coming out’ by the counter-intuitive act of killing oneself and thus staying within. This self-controlled death destabilises the very expression of identity by simultaneously announcing Martha’s lesbianism and killing it.

This unstable representation is emphasised in the manner of the suicide. The stage directions suggest: “*the sound of the shot should not be too loud or too strong*” (Hellman 72). But the gunshot nevertheless is heard, and inevitably reverberates and resonates around the theatre. The sound becomes the shocking knowledge of a sudden death and its echoes shape the ‘closet’ of the suicide. The act occurring off-stage indicates both a desire to discipline the suicide by hiding it, while at the same time drawing attention to it by making it seem tantalisingly forbidden. This contradiction suggests the taboo by codifying the experience as socially unacceptable and not to be discussed. This forbidding, though, also suggests the possibility, and the appeal, of individual rebellion by participating in these illicit acts. Here, the gunshot off-stage audibly announces a closeting of lesbianism, while inviting a disobedient engagement with such feeling by denying visual access to Martha’s death. In other words, this scene produces the (implicitly physical, sexual, and sensual) allure of the forbidden by situating the action out of sight.

In the play thus far, the only physical confrontation has been bullying by school children. The suddenness of the gunshot and the unexpected escalation of intense violence disrupt the logic of quaint, heteronormative, small-town America that the play has engaged with up to this point. Tufts notes: “Martha kills herself with a gun, a potent symbol of male power” (Tufts 69), arguing that this is a representation of male oppression. However, this reading, standard in the scholarship on *The Children’s Hour*, ignores Martha’s agency. She co-opts this “potent symbol of male power” and turns it on herself. The gun here, in Judith Butler’s terminology, is a ‘lesbian phallus’. While the play as a whole fragments its representation of lesbianism as both existent and denied, Martha, in the act of self-

killing, counter-intuitively affirms her own lesbian identity. Martha takes hold of the locus of power that is the gun and uses it as a means of self-identification and secures her sexuality in a manner that cannot be made invisible through linguistic negation. At the same time, she is physically not present on the stage and thus a different invisibility is being enacted.

This problematic rendering of presence and absence is further emphasised when Hellman's original play is compared to Wyler's 1962 film. Wyler makes a significant number of changes, including many in the final act (see Spencer 58-59). Although a number of these, such as lingering camera shots and Martha looking to Karen from her bedroom window, (re)present Martha's feelings in a more positive light, the actual means of death runs counter to this tendency. In the film, the suicide is rendered through the literal shadow of a hanging: a noose on crossbeams, toppled chair, and dangling high-heeled shoes are all outlined. Moreover, Wyler shifts the phallic imagery from a firearm to a candle stand that Karen uses to break open the bedroom door. The noose, an actual rope rather than the usual domestic hanging implements of a scarf or belt, suggests criminality and authoritative discipline rather than the autonomy of a gun. The rope also indicates the suicide takes place in a public setting, underlined by Karen's finding the body, and takes the scene out of its domestic space. This leads to a displayed, and thus emphasised, social prohibition of lesbianism, as opposed to the privacy of Martha's death in Hellman's original play. The crossbeams further imply a religious undertone, in particular intimating the hanging of Judas, a traditional image associated with betrayal and punishment. In this manner, the film's rendering of Martha's death places her within a codified imagery of suicide that suggests Martha is self-disciplining her transgression of social order, rather than reifying her lesbianism through her suicide. In comparison, the sense of agency suggested by Martha shooting herself in Hellman's original play stresses her autonomy. This shift in the portrayal of the suicide underlines the complex and only ever partly accomplished efforts to contain the destabilising self-control inherent in Martha's death.

Regardless of the method of suicide, the fundamental disruption and irresolution that is engendered by Martha's suicide in the original play is never overcome. Martha represents pride and self-worth but also self-hatred and a feeling of being "dirty". Her suicide announces the presence and absence of Martha herself, as well as that of her lesbianism. This conflict creates the sense of discordance that plagues *The Children's Hour*, as the concurrent realisation and denial of lesbian identity haunts the play. I do not intend to resolve this tension — indeed, the various reproductions of the play imply it cannot be settled — but instead seek to explore the deconstructive instability it implies further in conjunction with Lee Edelman's *No Future* (2004). I suggest that Martha represents both an affirmation and a rejection of Edelman's notion of futurity, and that this is seen in her act of self-identifying suicide. In turn, the suicide then destabilises not just a social order that denies lesbian identity within the text but the internal logic of the text itself. The play thus engages with and deconstructs the prohibition of the taboo by exposing lesbianism through the act of suicide.

Edelman argues that the socio-political power of queerness lies in its opposition to the heteronormative social order that is rendered primarily through the symbolic figure of the innocent child. He terms this order 'reproductive futurism', by which he is referring to a political position

informed by the desire to make the future better for one's children, and outlines the potential for queer theory to enact a radical challenge to the restrictive normativity of what is often referred to as the 'good', i.e. a 'common sense' heteronormative futurity. Central to his thesis is the 'death drive', which: "names what the queer, in the order of the social, is called forth to figure: the negativity opposed to every form of social viability" (Edelman 9). The ultimate expression of this 'death drive'-based dissent against a normative social future is a figure he terms the '*sinthomosexual*'; or, a queer individual who challenges the foundations underlying heteronormative notions of 'social goodness' that are based on heterosexual reproduction by refuting, and actively working against, such 'goodness'. I suggest Edelman's thesis offers a direct opposition to the heteronormative conclusion Karen invokes at the end of *The Children's Hour*, and can thus help delineate a liminal space, which I argue the play as a whole inhabits. In other words, *The Children's Hour* creates and exists within an irresolute space between a heteronormative social future and its simultaneous deconstruction.

Children are central to Edelman's theory, functioning as a symbolic representation of a heteronormative social order, with the key phrase 'Children are our Future' being called into question. The rejection of children, or an affirmation of queer negativity can, in this framework, be a positive or productive act of rebellion. Martha, comparatively, represents a more conservative approach. She is intensely supportive not only of children being the future but, in the end, of Karen and Joe's potential marriage. She thus initially appears to be in direct opposition to Edelman's thesis, and particularly his concept of the '*sinthomosexual*', as she actively encourages a heteronormative future. Speaking of the separation of Joe and Karen, she shows genuine sadness: "It's all wrong. It's silly. He'll be back in a little while and you'll clear it all up – (*Realizes why that can't be, covers her mouth with her hand*) Oh, God, I wanted that for you so much" (Hellman 70). Once again, however, the suicide disturbs any such simplification of the play.

Martha's voluntary death, as an expression of the 'death drive', appears to be an act of productive negativity more fittingly ascribed to Edelman's '*sinthomosexual*':

the *sinthomosexual*, himself neither martyr nor proponent of martyrdom for the sake of a cause, forsakes *all* causes, *all* social action, *all* responsibility for a better tomorrow or for the perfection of social forms. Against the promise of such an activism, he performs, instead, an act: the act of repudiating the social, of stepping, or trying to step [...] beyond compulsory compassion, beyond the future and the snare of images keeping us always in its thrall. (Edelman 101)

Martha's step is a suicidal one as she fundamentally "forsakes *all*" in giving up her life, but it is not the act of a martyr as she has no social "cause". In her death, she "repudiat[es] the social". It is not "the snare of images" but language that has been "keeping us always in its thrall" within *The Children's Hour*. The invisibility created by a refusal to enunciate feelings, the "snare" of gossip, and the whispered half-truths among children create the trappings that eventually push Martha into the next room. However, here, off-stage and physically invisible, her sexual identity becomes present and realised in action. She thus escapes words, "causes", and "responsibility", in order to self-identify and refute the possibility that she has not felt sexual love for Karen. Martha's suicide both reinforces and

challenges a heteronormative future by opening the space for a new birth in the potential reunion of Karen and Joe, while simultaneously expressing lesbianism through a death that repudiates this heterosexual future.

This death then brings contradiction to the fore by suggesting both a heteronormative future and 'no future'. The irresolution in Martha's confession between innocence and 'dirtiness' and the absent presence of her death is repeated, as the future itself becomes another source of discord. As the play continues, the text and its logic are actively disrupted by the suicide. Mrs Mortar puts it best when she speaks of Martha's body: "It seems so queer – in the next room" (Hellman 73). Throughout the events that follow the suicide, the surviving characters desperately try to avoid but are always eerily conscious of the body next door and the lesbian feeling it registers. Mrs Tilford comes to apologise, assuage her guilt, and right her mistakes, and Karen, after some time, comforts her: "We're not going to suffer any more. Martha is dead" (Hellman 76). This, in one sense, appears to assign blame to Martha as the cause of suffering but it also highlights the callousness of the social order. According to Karen's interpretation, here, Martha's death is almost Christ-like in its self-sacrificial nature. However, this conversation equally implies a process of scapegoating. Furthermore, on stage, in most versions of the play, Tilford's and Karen's shock and loss challenges the sense that the suffering has ended.

There is then a new attempt to deny the violence of Martha's death, and thus her sexual identity, through language. Karen goes on to suggest that perhaps there should be no blame: "I don't think anyone did anything, any more" (Hellman 77), but now this sentiment has been rendered hollow by the gunshot that has emphasised action over words. The violence and disruption of sudden death cannot be overcome through these simple, oral denials. Off-stage there remains the reality of Martha's lesbianism,, lingering and haunting the text, the audience, and the theatre space itself. The play then ends with fraudulent hope as Karen, in a deeply incongruous act set against the spectre of death that is still so close, opens the curtains on a bright new day. This is, in essence, a heteronormative future being built on a "queer" dead body "in the next room".

This moment encapsulates the ultimate instability of the play as the future is destabilised by its foundation on a lesbian suicide. Fleche expands:

Martha's suicide is part of [Karen] *and* Hellman's desperate need for closure. But we've seen too the classical references in Act One, the Shakespeare and Latin lessons, all imperfectly learned, a babel of languages without referents. The new beginnings promised by tragic endings – including, in Shakespeare especially, the need to begin language again – are implied at the end of *The Children's Hour*, where language's incommensurability is so pointedly recognized. (27)

The same resolution enabled by the realisation of lesbian identity through suicide opens up a new conflict with futurity, between "new beginnings" and "tragic endings". "Language's incommensurability", the lack of standard measures, suggests the core disorder at the heart of the play's conclusion. The suicide creates a fundamental discord: between self-identity and self-hatred, heteronormative future and 'no future', lesbian existence that is only realised in the moment of death,

and a social order built on what it denies. This disruption and disturbance is then papered over by Karen's seeming ambivalence and desire to continue as if unaffected. The play thus creates a new closeted space. Lesbian identity is made invisible not by language but by Karen's physical, almost deranged act of ignoring. However, lesbian identity is still, contradictorily present. Karen's behaviour is so atypical a response to a friend's death that it becomes a reminder of the lesbianism that informed the suicide. Her erasure of the event is caused by its taboo nature, but the conspicuousness of that erasure only draws attention to the taboo. The taboo of the lesbian suicide, enacting the allure of the forbidden, emphasises the continuing presence of Martha, and her lesbianism, even when she is not physically visible. This process of disregarding Martha's death is ineffective as the play is structured around the dramatic moment of her suicide. This juncture acts as a revelation of lesbianism that forces a reinterpretation of all that has come before, namely Karen and Martha's interactions, as well as all that will come after.

Karen, in the end, becomes a closed off, disconnected subject unable to relate to the world around her. She sits looking to a heteronormative future in a bright new day but in the next room, Martha's body waits. Martha's suicide thus epitomises a central sense of irresolution, as the taboo of her feeling and her death cannot be contained, and her suicide becomes a fracture that tears through Karen, the play, and any sense of a settled future. The final implication of *The Children's Hour* is that a failure to recognise and attend to the taboo in the next room will not simply lead to a heteronormative future or 'no future', but will lead instead to a future that is disrupted, fractured, and disturbed, as it is built on an incomplete, unstable past. In other words, the process of the taboo, the prohibition defined within the term and its practice, creates an inherent instability that unsettles itself. While this deconstruction of the operations of social disregard, denial, and dismissal may be welcome and necessary to suggest a movement away from the process of the taboo, it offers no coherency for more practical social or political change. *The Children's Hour* thus destabilises the process of the taboo while implying that the future may inevitably be inconsistent and irresolute.

Works Cited

- Butler, Judith. *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*. New York, NY: Routledge, 1993. Print.
- Edelman, Lee. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2005. Print.
- Fleche, Anne. "The Lesbian Rule: Lillian Hellman and the Measures of Realism." *Modern Drama* 39.1 1996: 16-30.
- Hellman, Lillian. *Six Plays by Lillian Hellman*, London: Random House/Vintage Books, 1979. Print.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 2008. Print.
- Spencer, Jenny S. "Sex, Lies, and Revisions: Historicizing Hellman's *The Children's Hour*." *Modern Drama* 47.1 2004: 44-65.
- Titus, Mary. "Murdering the Lesbian: Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour*." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 10.2 1991: 215-232.
- Tufts, Carol Strongin. "Who's Lying?: The Issue of Lesbianism in Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour*." *Minnesota Review* 33 1989: 63-78.

Author Biography

Angus Young is a final year PhD research scholar at The University of Leeds working on the representation of suicide in American cultural production during The Great Depression. His research interests include: hegemony, suicide, American studies, Cultural studies, mixed race theory, and the work of Raymond Williams.