
Lillian Hellman's Madhouse: 'Abnormal' Performance in The Children's Hour

Anne Fletcher*¹

¹(Southern Illinois University – United States)

Abstract

An insane asylum has been let loose . . . Martha, The Children's Hour
It was a madhouse . . . Martha, The Children's Hour

Lillian Hellman's 1934 play *The Children's Hour* offers an array of "deviance" to explore. Although, to some extent, the character Martha's latent lesbian has been examined, and similarities between the play's Mary Tilford and characters in *The Crucible* and *The Bad Seed* have been casually noted, both the psychological nuances inherent in *The Children's Hour* and the tight physical and dramaturgical framework the playwright establishes have been neglected for study. The bulk of the play's action transpires in a single room at a girls boarding school, a contained setting, semiotically well served by the "asylum" and "madhouse" metaphors. This paper will examine how Hellman pushes the boundaries of normalcy in *The Children's Hour* through the lenses of child psychology (each girl with a speaking role exhibits to some degree a classic behavior model) and abnormal psychology (Mary is pathological, a bully, and likely socio-pathic; Rosalie is possibly a kleptomaniac), suicide, sexual identity, and ways in which lesbianism has been viewed as "abnormal" ("unnatural," "crazy," and a "sin" in the play). It will also explore the psychology of women's friendship, as well as delusion, avoidance, and other behavioral strategies exhibited by characters in the play.

*Speaker