Lillian Hellman’s Madhouse: ‘Abnormal’ Performance in The Children’s Hour

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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.