

New Orleans and Its Influence on the Work of Lillian Hellman

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**Volume 5 Issue 3 (September 2003) Article 3****Charlotte Headrick,****"New Orleans and Its Influence on the Work of Lillian Hellman"**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol5/iss3/3>>

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**Abstract:** In her article, "New Orleans and Its Influence on the Work of Lillian Hellman," Charlotte Headrick explores playwright Lillian Hellman's life and work. Headrick proposes that Hellman was indelibly shaped by her years in the city of New Orleans. In her early childhood, Hellman would spend half a year in New York and half a year in New Orleans, home to her parents. Despite this seemingly schizophrenic upbringing, she considered herself a Southerner to the end of her days and, in fact, defined herself less by her Jewishness than by her "Southernness." Hellman's plays and memoirs are peppered with references to food and the last volume she published was neither a play nor a memoir but a cookbook. Hellman's life continues to fascinate and, since her death, there have been several plays written about her life and a television film based on her love affair with Dashiell Hammett. Headrick explores Hellman's love affair with New Orleans and how this city infused her memories, her plays, and her love of fine food.

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**Charlotte Headrick**

**New Orleans and Its Influence on the Work of Lillian Hellman**

In order to follow this paper, it might be useful to give the reader a road map. There are three "trails" that cross and diverge: the main trail traces Lillian Hellman as southern playwright, the second is the influence of her native New Orleans on her writing, and the third explores my own connection to Hellman as a fellow southerner who, like her, has spent a large portion of my life outside of the South. Southerners outside of the American South often occupy the space of outsider. I was drawn to Hellman's plays as a way to understand my own world as a transplanted, uprooted Southerner, an outsider. It is the culture of New Orleans -- reflected in its art -- that most clearly exemplifies the mongrel nature of island culture in the South. New Orleans was the center of exchange -- in everything from bodies to cotton, from food to language. The cosmopolitan dimension is offset by its provincialism (see

<[http://www.lonelyplanet.com/destinations/north\\_america/new\\_orleans/history.htm](http://www.lonelyplanet.com/destinations/north_america/new_orleans/history.htm)>). By her New Orleans connection Lillian Hellman captures the tension of Southern life in a magnified manner and makes us reflect on how individuals navigate through the hybrid social constructions of contemporary life.

Hellman's place in the American theatre often placed her as the outsider. Some might argue that her status as a Jew in New Orleans also placed her as an outsider. The fact is that despite spending the majority of her life outside of the South, Hellman always considered herself a southerner and it was that part of her character that shaped her and her work. New Orleans is unique in the South, a city that Benton Komins has described as an "inland island in the Southern sea" (Komins, e-mail). New Orleans shares more in common with the other port cities of the South, Charleston, and Savannah, than with Richmond, Memphis, or Atlanta. Despite its unique nature, its hybridity, it still remains a Southern city, albeit a very distinct Southern city. Hellman as a Jew and as a native New Orleanian was doubly different from other southerners, largely Protestant and not from the very special hybrid world of New Orleans itself. However, in her life, her Jewishness seemed to matter less to her than her sense of being southern, so that she did not define herself by her Jewishness, while others did. For Hellman, it was her southern heritage that defined her much more than her Jewish heritage. In an interview she said "I wasn't brought up as a Jew. I know almost nothing about being one -- I'm sorry to say -- though not sorry enough to go to the trouble of learning" (Meras 291). The New York Times obituary of Hellman read "Lillian Hellman, Playwright, Author and Rebel, Dies at 79." Rebels often assume the role of outsider and that was certainly true of Hellman (see <<http://www.imagi-nation.com/moonstruck/clsc55.html>>).

Hellman's plays have continued to hold the stage; they have, as we say in the theatre, "legs." They have and will continue to "walk" into the future on stages around the world. There have been major revivals of Hellman's plays in London, New York, and at regional repertory theatres, and they continue to be produced all over the United States at colleges and universities. Hellman occupies a very unique place in American theatre history. Oscar Brockett writes that in the early part of the twentieth century "There were many female playwrights working during this period" (Brockett 504). He then lists writers such as Rachel Crothers, Zona Gale, Susan Glaspell, Zoe Akins, Edna Ferber, and Sophie Treadwell. In his *History of the Theater*, he states, "Despite the accomplishments of these women during the inter-war years, they were, unlike their male contemporaries, subsequently relegated to oblivion. Only recently, under the influence of the women's movement, has interest in them revived. The only female playwright to escape this amnesia was Lillian Hellman" (504). It is not difficult to do an Internet search and find dozens of her plays, especially the Southern plays, still being produced.

The 1980s saw Elizabeth Taylor as Regina in *The Little Foxes*, which played New York and London. This play also received a strong production in 1997 at the Lincoln Center with Stockard Channing in the lead. It was revived in London in 2001 and was produced by the Shakespeare Theatre at the

Folger in Washington D.C. in the 2001-2002 season. In recent years, The Autumn Garden received professional productions by the American Conservatory Theatre in San Francisco, the Seattle Repertory Theatre, and the Ahmanson in Los Angeles. As to *Toys in the Attic*, which was nominated for a Tony Award, it won the New York Critics' Best Play Award (1959-60). A film version of the play was done in 1963 and in 1992 it received a major remounting by the Oregon Shakespeare Festival; it was most recently produced at the Berkshire Theatre Festival in 2000. In 2001, London saw a strong mounting of *The Little Foxes* at the Donmar Warehouse, the most prestigious Fringe venue in London. In addition, Hellman herself has been the subject of three plays about her life. The first was the one-woman production *Lilly* by William Luce in 1986. In 1991, *I Can't Get Started*, a play about Hellman and Dashiell Hammett by Irish playwright Declan Hughes, toured to the United States after a successful run in Dublin. *Cakewalk*, by her longtime companion Peter Feibleman, who also hails from New Orleans, was produced in 1996 with Linda Lavin as Hellman. *Cakewalk* won an "Audie" award in 2001 for the best multi-voice presentation with Elaine Stritch in the role of Hellman. In 1999, a made-for-television movie entitled *Dash and Lilly*, about Hellman's relationship with Dashiell Hammett, was produced with Sam Shephard and Judy Davis in the main roles (see <<http://www.aetv.com/tv/shows/dashlilly/>>. Finally, in February 2003, Nora Ephron's play with music *Imaginary Friends* closed on Broadway. This play depicted an imaginary meeting between Lillian Hellman (Swoosie Kurtz) and her longtime enemy Mary McCarthy (Cherry Jones). Not only are Hellman's plays holding the stage, but her life also continues to fascinate.

The theatre is the most communal and collaborative of the arts, involving a live audience reacting and interacting with live actors on stage. Language and action bridge the gulf between audience and actor. The theatre is the art form that often "leads" popular culture. It is a truism in the theatre that popular concerns and issues of the day first find their way into the public consciousness via the stage. So for instance, Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* may have reached a wide audience but it was the dramatization of the novel that spread the book's story in a much more visceral way. Ironically, some may only know the Stowe story via its incredible rendition in the musical *The King and I*. Film and television reach huge audiences, much wider than those of the theatre, but the source is often the theatre. The tragedy of AIDS first reached audiences through the theatre. Matthew Shepard's horrific murder in Wyoming was national news, but Moisès Kaufman and the Tectonic Theatre Company made it into theatre in their *The Laramie Project* which went on to be turned into a made-for-television film for Home Box Office. In short, theatre works as art, as communication, as entertainment, and as a reflection of popular taste. If a play is not popular, it closes; and over the years, many plays, despite being panned by critics, have held the stage by public demand. For example, Anne Nichols's *Abie's Irish Rose* was negatively received by the critics when it first opened, but it ended up breaking all box office records for its time.

When the film *The Big Easy* came out several years ago, during a discussion of Dennis Quaid's acting one of my theatre students at Oregon State asked what was that strange word Quaid's character kept using in the film. What did that "sher" thing mean? I explained to her the French heritage of New Orleans and how that heritage was still today alive in the language, and that "sher" was "cher" and it meant "dear", and how a sidewalk in New Orleans was called a *banquette*. Similarly, a friend of mine here in Oregon asked me to cook that gumbo that he so liked. I explained to him that the dish I cooked for him was really creole, involving pepper, onions, and tomatoes in the sauce. To make a gumbo, I had to use *filé* (a spice derived from sassafras) and okra, dear to every Southerner's palate and repulsive to many outside the culture. Twenty years ago, I left my native Southeast to teach in the Pacific Northwest. To this day, I have been in semi-culture shock particularly where it concerns food. My friends are accustomed to my telling them not to use the word "barbecue" around me unless it involves sauce. "To barbecue" in the Northwest is used as the Australians use it, meaning to grill outdoors. Southerners will wax poetic over barbecue and variations on its sauce: vinegar, mustard, tomato-based, wine, beer, whiskey added; is it marinated and for how long and does it

involve digging a pit in the backyard, hot coals, and a side of beef or a whole pig? Desperate for really good cornmeal, I now "import" it to Oregon from Tennessee. I was thrilled that White Lily in Knoxville, Tennessee, my home-town, ships all over the United States. Like language, food is an indicator of culture. As a theatre director, I became fascinated with my own southern culture when I left it twenty years ago. Most particularly, I was fascinated with the way that southern women playwrights Beth Henley, Carson McCullers, Marsha Norman, Sandra Deer, Barbara LeBow and especially their distinguished predecessor Lillian Hellman viewed their culture through their plays. In an attempt to understand my own background, having been thrust after some thirty years in the South, into the Northwest, I began to explore my southern roots via my own field of theatre.

Just as Hellman often resented being called a "woman" playwright (Harriman 219), many contemporary playwrights, male and female, have resisted being called "southern," feeling that the term marginalized their work. The American South more than any other region in the United States has left its mark on literature in a very distinct way. Every year a volume of the best Southern short fiction is published. Publishing a volume of the best Midwest fiction simply doesn't have the cachet of the writers of the South. The South may be one of the few places left where there is a tangible regional sense. A friend of mine, another southerner transplanted to the Northwest who teaches in Washington state, contends that there are more artists produced per capita in the South than in any other region in the country. He argues that this is a natural state for those of us in theatre: given the schizophrenic nature of theatre, is it a logical calling. For those non-southerners, it is somewhat difficult for them to grasp the craziness of the South, the tolerance of the bizarre, the macabre. What seems a natural world to me in Beth Henley's *Crimes of the Heart* or Robert Harling's *Steel Magnolias* is slightly odd to some audience members. I finally had to direct a production of *Crimes of the Heart* because I became so irritated with some of the productions I had seen which lampooned the characters instead of understanding that these women were real people. Actors are advised that the strongest character choices they can make usually involve sex and violence. For southerners, we understand that advice clearly. This is exemplified in the musical *Shenandoah*. Based on a film about the split in a Virginia family during the Civil War, there is a tune in the musical which goes "Next to Lovin', I like Fightin' Best."

In her "southern" plays, Lillian Hellman captures and understands this southern milieu of sex and violence, for it was the world into which she was born in New Orleans, Louisiana. Hellman's New Orleans roots, and that special culture, deeply shaped the world of her plays in her depiction of the city and in particular its food. In writing of Hellman's feelings about New Orleans, William Wright says, "Of all her childhood moving about, Hellman has no hesitancy in naming New Orleans as her favorite stopping place" (23). To Southerners and those in the city of New Orleans, food is serious business. The last volume that Hellman published prior to her death was a cookbook, *Dining Together*. To those who know Hellman's background, it is no surprise that many of the recipes are southern in origin, something that, according to W. Kenneth Holditch, "attests to Hellman's never having lost touch with her origins" (11). Prior to *Dining Together*, she had published *Eating Together: Recollections and Recipes* with Peter Feibelman in 1984.

In discussing the food of New Orleans, it may be useful to define terms for those not familiar with some of the food mentioned in Hellman's plays, most especially in *Toys in the Attic*. Beignets are square-shaped doughnuts dusted liberally with powdered sugar. Café au lait is usually a mixture of half hot coffee and half hot milk, and in New Orleans coffee is often brewed with chicory, an herb which was a coffee substitute at one time and whose roots now are dried, ground, roasted and added to coffee. Etoufee is a tomato-based sauce most often made with shrimp and crayfish. Crayfish, resembling small lobsters, are sometimes spelled "crawfish" and are known locally as "mudbugs" because they live in the mud of freshwater streams. Gumbo is a thick soup with dozens of variations, but usually containing okra, a pod-shaped vegetable of African origin, and *file* or ground sassafras (see <<http://www.gumbopages.com/food/soups/>>). This vegetable, okra, is much loved by

southerners and much maligned by outsiders. Jambalaya is usually composed of whatever is at hand: ham, shrimp, chicken, pork, celery, onions, tomatoes ... cooked with rice and many seasonings. Po-boys were made originally for a few cents on crusty French bread for "poor boys." Oyster po-boys are one of my personal favorites. Pecan pralines are traditional Cajun fare made of sugar, pecans, and water, and they will literally melt in your mouth (a professor in the English Department at Oregon State, educated at Tulane, requests pralines whenever I travel to New Orleans). Bisque is heavy cream soup most often made with shellfish and seafood. In relation to food, it must also be explained that the adjectives "Creole" and "Cajun" denote differences in the type of cooking. Creole is a term initially applied to people of French and Spanish blood, born in South Louisiana (see <<http://www.landrystuff.com/cuisine.html>>), while the French-speaking Acadians came from Nova Scotia to South Louisiana in the eighteenth century and the adjective "Acadian" was eventually corrupted into the slang "cajun" and while Creole is "city-fied" and is of "aristocratic origin, exemplified by sauces," Cajun is its "country-cousin" and "tends to be more robust and hot-peppery."

For those who have visited New Orleans, heat and food are often inextricably entwined. Consider the following thoughts on New Orleans in Blanche Farley's poem "Humidity, Hunger":

On muggy days in the Georgia mountains, I / sometimes fade through stifling air / to the other side of  
Three Sisters past all / hills to rivers, bayous / to a denser air that sucked my breath rising / like lust in that  
far New Orleans summer // At four o'clock each day it rained / You can set your watch by it, I was fond of /  
Saying -- dotting my letters with joy like bright / Parasols my name at home on the page / with Streetcar  
and Elysian Fields // But it is hunger I remember most, how I / moved, heavy with it how it sat -- fat  
droplets / under my skin clung to me fast like damp / clothing Not all the hungers were physical / Though I  
talked of art haunted, between / jobs, the Del Gado Museum it was words I / consumed like crabmeat -  
Millay, Penn Warren in library books with dull covers // My plans were hazy, far off as cathedral bells /  
There was a rawness, an uncertainty a bitter edge / I still taste like the cheap Mogen-David / sold there in  
the drugstores or underdone shrimp / picked up in some Quarter café/ It is different here. Humid days are  
uncommon / I am wellfed, suffer little But oh, I would / take new Orleans that way again -- for the quest /  
for the wonder of it for July going past like / the St. Charles trolley for the music -- live and / pervasive -  
that emblazoned the summer nights // Life should be more than absence of pain / It is a terrible thing  
walking the edge of / rawness wonderfully terrible to be twenty-two and / be hungry like that" (n.p.).

Another view of New Orleans is found in Tom Robbins's *Jitterbug Perfume*: "Louisiana in September is like an obscene phone call from nature. The air -- moist, sultry, secretive, and far from fresh -- felt as if it were being exhaled into one's face. Sometimes it even sounded like heavy breathing. Honeysuckle, swamp flowers, magnolia, and the mystery smell of the river scented the atmosphere, amplifying the intrusion of organic sleaze. It was aphrodisiac and repressive, soft and violent at the same time" (60).

Food is only one facet of Southern culture, but one that reflects a multi-cultural essence. Hellman was in love with the Crescent City long before Farley and Robbins. Born on 20 June 1905, Lillian Hellman was the only child of Max Hellman of New Orleans and Julia Newhouse of Alabama. When she was five, her family moved to New York, thus beginning the schizophrenic upbringing that was to mark her early years, traveling between New Orleans and New York, spending half a year in each until the time she was sixteen, attending schools in both cities. Hellman viewed herself a Southerner. She observed that "people who grew up in the South ... consider themselves Southern" (Bryer 150). It was not simply a matter of growing up Southern for Hellman; both sides of her family "had been Southerners for a great many generations" (Bryer 186). Hellman's time in New Orleans shaped her for the rest of her life. In *Lillian Hellman, Playwright*, Richard Moody says that it was in New Orleans that "she discovered her sensitivity to the sights and sounds around her, her fascination with what people said and did, her power to spark adventures with her imagination" (21). In a very special way, New Orleans was always home to Hellman in a way New York could never be; she writes in *An Unfinished Woman*: "We went back to New Orleans the next year and the years after that until I was sixteen, and they were always the best times of my life" (16). New Orleans, its Southernness, Hellman's southern roots and family are major influences on her Southern plays. These include *The Autumn Garden*, *The*



Little Foxes, Another Part of the Forest, and most particularly Toys in the Attic, the only play actually set in New Orleans.

When I think of New Orleans, my first memory is of food. My mouth waters at reminiscences of beignets and delicious café au lait, specialties of that New Orleans' landmark, the Café du Monde; a bottle of Pouilly-Fuissé at Morans, fish at Brennans, turtle soup at Kolb's, po-boys, oysters, crawfish, etoufee, shrimp creole, jambalaya, pecan pralines. My second memory is of heat, shimmering on an August afternoon. My third thoughts are of lust, decadence, and a sense of danger. New Orleans is the only city in which I have ever been robbed. But my memories are not that unique. New Orleans is a hybrid cultural island drawing musicians, writers, cooks, derelicts, and roués to her. For many, New Orleans lives on the pages of Anne Rice's novels. "The Big Easy" was not only the nickname of the city but also the name of a major film, and New Orleans has been the location of dozens of films. Certainly, Tennessee Williams gave us a memorable impression of the city in *A Streetcar Named Desire* and several other plays. And on the pages of Hellman's biographies and in the lines of her plays, images of delicious food, shimmering heat, decadence, lust, and a sense of danger are forever locked on the page, her legacy to the American theatre. It is in *Toys in the Attic* that these images are blended, and where the city of New Orleans becomes a definite shadow character, even more than in Williams's *Streetcar* in spite of its name.

Even in *The Autumn Garden*, which is set on the Gulf Coast, Hellman links New Orleans to a sense of danger and sensuality, and connects characters to New Orleans and its food. In one line Constance recalls Nick's love of stuffed crabs and two lines later we hear that he was a young man from New Orleans headed to Paris. Perhaps it is Hellman's own longing to return home to New Orleans that she puts into Nick's mouth: "These are my oldest friends. I think as one grows older it is more and more necessary to reach out your hand for the sturdy old vines you knew when you were young and let them lead you back to the roots of things that matter" (*Collected Plays* 506). Furthermore, in *The Autumn Garden*, New Orleans is a place for potential disaster, a place where dangerous deeds may happen. Another character, Nina, advises her husband Nick not to go to New Orleans: "You're setting up a silly flirtation with Mrs Griggs. I'm not going to New Orleans, Nick. I am not going to watch it all again. I can't go on this way with myself -- (Then softly) Don't go. Call it off. You know how it will end. Please let's don't this time -- We're not young anymore, Nick. Somewhere we must have learned something" (*Collected Plays* 544).

Although Hellman's *The Children's Hour* is one of her great successes, out of all her other work it is the "southern plays" on which her reputation rests. In all of Hellman's plays but particularly the Southern ones, she explores the nature of evil, the dark side of human nature: greed, lust and unfulfilled desire. Hellman had strong, clear-cut values of right and wrong and these values surface in her plays, along with a fascination with money. She grew up in a family where money was important, as well as developing a sense of generosity. Robert Brustein writes that in her plays money becomes a major theatrical subject: "How it is made how it changes lives, what people will do to acquire it. Money, in fact, is usually an additional shadow character in her plays, often the most important one. It can function symbolically, but it also has a tangible, concrete, almost organic nature -- in *Toys in the Attic*, money is stroked as if it were a domestic animal. Lillian sometimes seemed to divide the world according to how people's loyalties and values were affected by money (though she loved money herself and usually maintained a sneaking admiration for her villains)" (24).

In *Toys in the Attic*, Hellman explores expressly this dark side: jealousy, mental instability, miscegenation and incest. But this plot also revolves around money as one of her favourite themes. Bernard Dick describes it: "The main character is the raffish Julian Berniers, who returns to his New Orleans home with his childlike bride, Lily, and an embarrassment of gifts for his two unmarried sisters, Anna and Carrie. Initially, the sisters are overwhelmed by the presents... Soon, however, Carrie starts to resent the chaos Julian's sudden wealth has brought into her life, particularly the way it has upset her routine and given the house the air of a bordello. One senses it will be only a matter

of time before the fool and his money are parted, but one does not realize how tragic that parting will be. Eventually Carrie learns the money came from some real estate that Julian sold to a shady lawyer, Cyrus Warkins, knowing in advance that Warkins needed the property for a deal of his own. The source of Julian's information was Charlotte Warkins, the lawyer's wife and Julian's former mistress. Lily, believing her husband will leave her for Charlotte, is willing to sacrifice their wealth if this will enable her to keep him. She phones Warkins, begging him to ask Charlotte to give up Julian just for a year. Carrie stands by during this incredible conversation and even makes it possible for Warkins to take revenge on Julian and Charlotte by disclosing their meeting place to Lily. Warkins dispatches his thugs, who rob Julian of the money and slash Charlotte's face so she will be permanently disfigured" (120). Lily is the daughter of Albertine Prine. Henry, Mrs Prine's chauffeur, is a "colored man." Hellman makes it very clear that Mrs Prine's affair with Henry is not that unusual. And there are connections between Hellman's characters and her own family environment. Mrs Prine and her relationship with Henry is based on Hellman's own Aunt Lilly and her fancy man Peters. Hellman's New Orleans aunts Hannah and Jenny are the basis for Carrie and Anna Berniers in *Toys in the Attic*. Hannah and Jenny's boarding house and their eccentric guests provided the model for the setting and characters of *The Autumn Garden*. In some of his positive characteristics, Julian resembles Hellman's father, brother of Hannah and Jenny. The devotion of Carrie and Anna to Julian is like that of Hannah and Jenny to Hellman's father. Like Anna and Carrie, Hannah and Jenny were southern old maids. With Jenny it was by choice. Hellman in *Pentimento* remembers Jenny saying "Women were injured by the loss of husbands, no matter what stinkers, which is why she never wanted one" (17-18).

Hellman's preoccupation with food in her plays reflects her New Orleans background. The detail with which Hellman remembers food in her memoirs is remarkable. An excellent example is the following passage from *Pentimento*: "The dinner was wonderful: jambalaya, raccoon stew, and wild duck with bitter pickles, all hot with red pepper that made the barrel-wine necessary after each bite" (78). With trepidation, Hellman took Dashiell Hammett home to New Orleans to meet her Aunt Hannah (see <[http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/database/hammett\\_d.html](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/database/hammett_d.html)>). Knowing that she would not approve of a relationship outside of marriage, Hellman feared her reaction, but Hammett won Hannah over. Hellman writes in *Pentimento* that when Hammett told Hannah "all he had ever wanted in the world was a docile woman, but instead, had come out with me, the cost of dinner at Galatoire's ceased to worry her" (10-11). In *Toys in the Attic*, Albertine Prine says "Tonight we'll have a celebration -- if I still know how. Shall we dine at Galatoire's?" (Collected Plays 749). As Julian arrives home, he says "I'm hungry, Anna. Hungry for your cooking. Not a good restaurant in Chicago. Would not know a red pepper if they saw one" (731). Hellman writes in *Pentimento*: "The food in our house was good: at one end of the serving table there was always the New Orleans cooking of my father's childhood, but at the other, the Negro backwoods stuff of my mother's Alabama black-earth land. Food in other places seemed inferior" (21-22).

In all of Hellman's southern plays, there are numerous references to food, but the most are found in *Toys in the Attic*: candied oranges, anchovies, jambalaya, hot black chicory coffee, crayfish bisque, pate, crayfish, champagne and caviar. Moody writes that it was in her aunts' boarding-house that Hellman learned to knit, embroider, sew, and especially to cook. It was there that she became "expert at cleaning crayfish and preparing the bisque, at making turtle soup, at cleaning chickens and ducks" (21). In *An Unfinished Woman*, Hellman writes: "Each Sunday it was my job to clean the crayfish for the wonderful bisque, and it was Jenny and Carrie the cook who taught me to make turtle soup, and how to kill a chicken without ladylike complaint about the horror of dealing death, and how to pluck and cook the wild ducks that were hawked on our street every Sunday morning" (17-18). One of Carrie's first lines to Julian in *Toys in the Attic* is "There's crayfish in the icebox, thank God, and jambalaya on the table --" (Collected Plays 731). At the end of the play, she comes full circle, comforting Julian, talking not only of food but also echoing both *Little Foxes* and *Scarlett* in *Gone with the Wind* with a very famous southern echo, like a familiar musical motif: "CARRIE. I'm going to get



something nice to make soup with. You always liked a good soup when you didn't feel well. Meat and marrow, the way you like it. Tomorrow's another day. Goodbye Mrs Prine. HENRY. Goodbye" (Curtain) (786-87).

To Margaret Harriman, Dorothy Parker confided, "When Lillian gets mad, I regret to say, she screams" (228). The angst and pain in those final moments of *Toys in the Attic* are emotions Hellman might have drawn from her colorful southern past. On the other hand, the child-like confusion of the character Lily (Hellman's own nickname) and her night-time walk around New Orleans recall Hellman's own childhood escapade to the Quarter. In the play, Lily says: "And so I want out and walked and walked. I had never seen that street before ... The lady said the knife of truth would dress me as in a jacket of iron flowers and though I would do battle, I would march from the battle cleansed. Then I fell asleep" (Collected Plays 752-53). And like Bloom in Dublin, in *An Unfinished Woman* Hellman describes her own "night-town" journey through New Orleans when she was fourteen: "Toward evening, I moved to the French Quarter, feeling sad and envious as people went home to dinner. I bought a few Tootsie Rolls and a half loaf of bread and went to the St. Louis Cathedral in Jackson Square... After my loaf of bread, I went looking for a bottle of soda pop and discovered, for the first time, the whorehouse section around Bourbon Street... one of the girls called out to me. I couldn't understand the words, but the voice was angry enough to make me run toward the French Market... I fell asleep... behind a shrub in Jackson Square ... I woke ... ran up the steps of St. Louis Cathedral and pounded on the doors" (22-24). She continued to roam the streets of New Orleans, claiming that she was half-black, using the name of her beloved nurse Sophronia to pass and cajole her way into a boarding house. Her father found her, fed her and brought her home (23-24).

Hellman's biography and *Toys in the Attic* are peppered with New Orleans French. Hellman's roam through the Quarter, her exposure to prostitution, to the relaxed moral code of the city, the tradition of easy-going race relations -- all these influences can be found in *Toys in the Attic*. Henry's relationship to Albertine, and Gus the black iceman's easy banter with the sisters, advising them to get a cat to replace Julian, all reflect the ambience of the city. This is New Orleans, after all, where in an election in the 1990s, there were bumper stickers that read "Vote for the Crook; It's the Right Thing to Do." The "crook" was elected, defeating David Duke of Ku Klux Klan background. One of my childhood best friends commenting on raising her children in New Orleans said that she knew that her children were going to drink. "After all," she said, "this is New Orleans; one has to be realistic." The challenge would be to teach them how to drink in moderation. She then pointed out that, although there certainly were drunk-driving laws, this was the home of the drive-through daiquiri. Some cultures have McDonalds where you can drive through and purchase a Big Mac; in New Orleans, you can drive through and purchase alcoholic beverages. New Orleans is a city of contrasts, of conflicting tensions, of startling gracious touches. In *An Unfinished Woman*, Hellman writes: "I was taught, also, that if you give, you did it without piety and didn't boast about it. It had been one of my grandfather's laws, in the days when my father and aunts were children, that no poor person who asked for anything was ever to be refused, and his children fulfilled that injunction. New Orleans was a city of many poor people, particularly black people, and the boarding-house kitchen after the house dinner was, on most nights, a mighty pleasant place: there would often be as many as eight or ten people, black and white, almost always very old or very young, who sat at the table on the kitchen porch while Carrie ordered the kitchen maids and me to bring the steaming platters and the coffeepots" (18). In fact, Moody cites how Hellman was fond of saying that she could never forget "how much of me had been molded by a Negro woman, and molded to last for good" (18).

Doris V. Falk in her *Lillian Hellman* notes that in an early draft of *Toys in the Attic*, Anna was called Hannah and Hellman used the name of her childhood family cook Carrie for the name of the other sister (90). Hellman's aunts were: "strong and industrious ladies who uncomplainingly accepted the necessity of earning their own way and who maintained their dignity and their genteel manners as they catered to their eccentric boarders. Lillian loved her aunts, loved the six months of the year she

lived with them, loved the real and imagined adventures available in their house-hold and in New Orleans. Being with them also gave her a chance to be with Sophronia, 'the first and most certain love of my life'" (Moody 18). At times, Hellman was quite conscious of how she had mined her own life in her plays. At other times, according to Falk, she was unaware of what she had done. According to her, the memoirs contain other hints about characters and situations in *Toys in the Attic* -- after all, many of them "started out as toys in Hellman's own attic" (Falk 91). Sometimes, Hellman said they "appeared in the plays without her conscious knowledge: she had not realized, for example, until it was pointed out to her, that her great-aunt Lily, whose mulatto chauffeur had been her lover, had provided the "seed" of the character of Albertine Prine. Hellman's surprise at this realization may sound a bit disingenuous, but except for the lover, there is little similarity between Aunt Lily of the memoirs and Albertine. (There may be more of grandmother Sophie Newhouse in Albertine, and something of Hellman's mother in Lily -- a rich girl who was afraid of her mother and married to a poor man)" (91).

Images of the bayou and New Orleans are recurrent images not only in Hellman's southern plays but also in her memoirs. Falk says these "unify her books as they did her life" (99). Many of her memories center on her aunts. Hellman's aunts were not spinsterish; they knew the world and introduced their niece to the delights of a well-developed sense of humor. All of Hellman's southern plays have humor but *The Autumn Garden* is the one that has the most bon mots containing one of my personal favorites. Crossman says the following about the world-traveling artist Nick: "Nick is still a southerner. With us, every well-born lady sacrifices her life for something: a man, a house, sometimes a gardenia bush" (Collected Plays 504). Brustein tells about Hellman getting out of her sick bed a few years before she died, putting on make-up and cooking a goose (24). Throughout the southern plays, "southernisms" repeatedly occur, reflecting not only references to food but also references to southerners in general. Because the company in *The Autumn Garden* is mixed, southerners and non-southerners, it contains many of these comments. Rose says, "Have I too much rouge? Know what she used to say? Ben's mother, I mean. She used to say it before she died. She used to say that Southern women painted a triangle of rouge on their faces as if they were going out to square the hypotenuse. Ben came from Boston and his mother was sometimes a little sharp about Southerners." To which Mrs Ellis replies "Who could blame her?" (Collected Plays 488). Later in the play, Rose's preoccupation with her looks surfaces again, "I must fix my face. As you get older your face needs arranging more often" (490). And Hellman penned words in *An Autumn Garden* that echoed for me during the Clinton scandals in the White House. Crossman remarks "Haven't you lived in the south long enough to know that nothing is ever anybody's fault?" (Collected Plays 500). Crossman says of Nick's involvement with Sophie: "You're a home-town boy and as such you didn't do anything they wouldn't do. Boys will be boys and in the South there's no age limit on boyishness. Therefore, she led you on or whatever is this morning's phrase. You'll come off all right, but then I imagine you always do" (555).

North Carolina novelist Reynolds Price once described southern women in general as "A Mack Truck disguised as a powder puff" (Daniel 32). With her sense of vanity, her interest in clothes and makeup, she might not have been exactly a powder puff, but Hellman was certainly a Mack Truck in disguise. Brustein recalls how Hellman, prior to launching into an attack on someone's mores, ideas, politics, "would say, 'Forgive me,'... before discharging an eloquent fusillade of contradiction concerning some innocent remark by one of her guests. But I think she truly wanted forgiveness for whatever wounds her opinionated nature inflicted" (24). Hellman never shied away from a good fight (<<http://dept.english.upenn.edu/~afilreis/50s/hellman-per-fbi.html>>). In a tribute to Hellman, playwright Marsha Norman of Kentucky wrote of how Hellman had inspired her, "It was Lillian Hellman who finally told me the truth. It's all a fight, she said, the thing is a fight but if you are willing to take the punishment, you are halfway through the battle" (1).

Illustrative of both Hellman's argumentative nature and her love of good food is the story Brustein

relates in a reminiscence he wrote following her death. He recalls, "She quarrelled with everyone, often over the most trivial issues -- she broke with Bill Styron for an entire summer in a dispute over the proper way to cook a ham"(24). What Brustein fails to note is the argument was between two Southerners -- Louisiana born and bred Hellman and Virginian Styron. She was, according to Brustein, "an inspired cook" (24). Hellman's quarrels during the run of *Little Foxes* with Tallulah Bankhead of Alabama are the stuff of theatre legend.

*Toys in the Attic* is the most sexual of Hellman's scripts, with Carrie's lust for Julian, Lily's description of her good times in bed with Julian, Julian's past affair with Charlotte Warkins, the brutal beating of Julian and Charlotte, Julian's impotence once he returns to the Berniers household, and the hinted passion between Albertine and Henry. Hellman sets the play in the summer, a time when either violence or passion can erupt. In *Romeo and Juliet*, Benvolio advises "I pray thee, good Mercutio, let's retire:/ The day is hot, the Capulets abroad,/And if we meet, we shall not scape a brawl;/ For now, these hot days, is the mad blood stirring" (III, i). And so it stirs in *Toys in the Attic*, set in sultry, humid New Orleans. It has, as one critic put it, "Southern Gothic flavoring" (Ansen 73). Anything is possible in New Orleans, often considered the most European of American cities, blessed or cursed with a semi-tropical climate, a city noted for its decadence, for "Laissez les bons temps rouler" (Let the Good Times Roll). William Luce's play *Lillian* centers itself on Hellman's childhood in New Orleans, "presumably chosen to prefigure her spirit and spunk as an adult child" (Fuhrman 2). And it was in New Orleans that Hellman learned about injustice: she was once dragged kicking and screaming off a public streetcar after insisting that her beloved Sophronia sit with her in the front of the car.

Andrei Codrescu celebrates the many delights of New Orleans in the introduction to *New Orleans Stories*: "There are certain cities and certain areas of certain cities where the official language is dreams. Venice is one. And Paris. North Beach in San Francisco. Wenceslaus Square in Prague. And New Orleans, the city that dreams stories.... Near where I live, there is the Lafayette Cemetery on Prytania Street. Anne Rice's *Vampire Lestat* lives in one of the tombs. F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote *This Side of Paradise*, his first novel, in an apartment overlooking the cemetery... [Fitzgerald's apartment is] still available, cheap, like everything else in New Orleans. There is no memorial plaque. If New Orleans went into the memorial plaque business for all the writers who ever lived here they would have to brass-plate the whole town..." "When writers come here they walk about smelling everything because New Orleans is, above all, a town where the heady scent of jasmine or sweet olive mingles with the cloying stink of sugar refineries and the musky mud smell of the Mississippi. It's an intoxicating brew of rotting and generating, a feeling of death and life simultaneously occurring and inextricably linked. It's a feeling... that the mysteries of night could go on forever and that there is little difference between life and death except for poetry and song.... New Orleans is a small city but it seems spacious because it is always full of people.... And there is more subjective time and space here in New Orleans than almost anywhere else in the United States... The city can drive a sober-minded person insane, but it feeds the dreamer. It feeds the dreamer stories, music and food. Really great food" (v-vii).

Codrescu captures the images and emotions that permeate Hellman's work. She was a dreamer whose life in New Orleans gave her the fodder of the stories she told in her plays and in her memoirs. Hellman's interest in good food was instilled in her early on and her disdain for badly-prepared food is quite evident in the pages of her memoirs. There is an old New Orleans joke that as people are sitting around at a fabulous restaurant having surfeited themselves on some of the best food in the world, the conversation takes a turn. Amidst the detritus of jambalaya or crayfish bisque or shrimp creole, someone will say, "Where are we going to eat next?" For Hellman, the city of New Orleans and its culture of music, food and decadence was central to the heart of her great Southern plays (<<http://www.neworleansweb.org/recipes.html>>). In *Pentimento* in 1973, in the chapter on her Uncle Willy, she describes a trip back to New Orleans and declares, "I like my farm in Pleasantville. But there's nothing like the look of Southern land, or there's no way for me to get over thinking so. It's

home for me still" (94).

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