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## **Bullying at School: A Psychocritical Study in *Children's Hour***

**Asia Muzahim Abdulrazzaq\***

University of Tikrit

[Sbc.s5@tu.edu.iq](mailto:Sbc.s5@tu.edu.iq)

&

**Prof. Dr. Ansam Riyadh Abdullah Almaarof**

University of Tikrit

[Sbc.s5@tu.edu.iq](mailto:Sbc.s5@tu.edu.iq)

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### **Abstract**

This article explores the theme of bullying as it is portrayed by Lillian Hellman in her play *The Children's Hour* (1934), focusing on the psychological and social mechanisms of power, victimisation, and rumour. The play *dramatises* the consequences of one child's lie, Mary Tilford, which comes to the ears of the headmistress of an all-girls school, and the lie eventually leads to devastation, tragedy and death. This was a herd behaviour with widespread implications. In the context of the contemporary portrayal discourse on school bullying, the paper argues that Mary's action illustrates the forms of psychological aggression, manipulation, coercion and rumour spreading, which continue to extend bullying to the present day. Using a psychosocial approach, the examination investigates the production of power imbalances, the internalisation of stigma by victims, and the perpetuation of injury through communal silence. The paper asks: How does *The*

\* **Corresponding Author:** Asia Muzahim Abdulrazzaq, **Email:** [Sbc.s5@tu.edu.iq](mailto:Sbc.s5@tu.edu.iq)

**Affiliation:** Tikrit University - Iraq

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*Children's Hour* resonate with contemporary understandings of bullying and its effects? How does the play dramatise the results of unchecked rumour and group inaction? By foregrounding the lethal consequences of bullying, Hellman's drama underscores the importance of teaching empathy, responsibility, and social resilience. Finally, the research adds to the fields of literary studies and educational psychology, being the study of the dramatic representation of texts by a group of peers, looking at the perennial problem of bullying in schools and society.

**Key Word** : Bullying, Psychology, Victims, Before The Bell

### الملخص

تتناول هذه المقالة موضوع التنمر كما صورته ليليان هيلمان في مسرحيتها ساعة الأطفال (1934)، مع التركيز على الآليات النفسية والاجتماعية للسلطة، والضحايا، والشائعة. تجسد المسرحية عواقب كذبة طفلة واحدة، ماري تيلفورد، التي وصلت إلى مسامح مديرة مدرسة للفتيات، لتنتهي هذه الكذبة بالدمار والمأساة والموت، وهو ما يشكل سلوكاً جمعياً (سلوك القطيع) له تداعيات واسعة. وفي سياق الخطاب المعاصر حول التنمر المدرسي، تجادل الدراسة بأن أفعال ماري تمثل أشكال العدوان النفسي من تلاعب، وإكراه، ونشر للشائعات، وهي أشكال ما زالت تمتد إلى أيامنا هذه. ومن خلال مقارنة نفس-اجتماعية، يبحث هذا التحليل في إنتاج اختلالات موازين القوى، واستبطان الوصمة من قبل الضحايا، واستمرار الأذى من خلال الصمت الجماعي. وتطرح الدراسة الأسئلة التالية: كيف تتقاطع ساعة الأطفال مع الفهم المعاصر للتنمر وآثاره؟ وكيف تجسد المسرحية نتائج الشائعة غير المضبوطة وعدم تحرك الجماعة؟ من خلال إبراز العواقب المميتة للتنمر، تؤكد دراما هيلمان على أهمية غرس قيم التعاطف والمسؤولية والمرونة الاجتماعية. وأخيراً، تسهم هذه الدراسة في مجال الدراسات الأدبية وعلم النفس التربوي، من خلال مقارنة تمثيل درامي جماعي لمشكلة دائمة الحضور في المدارس والمجتمع، وهي مشكلة التنمر.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التنمر، علم النفس، الضحايا، قبل الجرس

### Introduction

Lillian Hellman (1905–1984) was an American playwright and screenwriter whose best-known plays include *The Children's Hour*, *The Little Foxes*, and *Watch on the Rhine*. Over the course of a nearly 50-year career, Hellman wrote a string of plays, including *The Little Foxes* (1939), *Watch on the Rhine* (1941) and *Toys in the Attic* (1960), that centred on issues of morality, power and civic duty. Politics were essential to her work (and her own political consciousness inextricably linked to the work); she openly opposed fascism and was famously called before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1952, where

she refused to betray her beliefs. Among her first efforts, *The Children's Hour* (1934) remains a controversial, still-produced, drawing-room drama of dread, about how rumour, social hysteria, and the misuse of authority can destroy innocent lives.

At the centre of the play is the character of Mary Tilford, a malicious student who falsely accuses her teachers, Karen Wright and Martha Dobie, of being in a lesbian relationship. This lies all the more deadly due to adult moral coercive authority and school community passivity, as psychological and social harm spirals downhill. The tragicomic trajectory of the play exposes what might be identified as a type of bullying practice today, where rumour-mongering, threats, and manipulation serve as weapons of aggression. While the word "bullying" was not then in the critical vocabulary, Hellman's drama anticipates many aspects of current definitions: the imposition of power over others, defenselessness to resist, the branding of victims as violated, and the prolongation of injury through silence and acquiescence.

In theme, the play highlights the ruinous consequences of unbridled gossip and groupthink, setting personal animosity in the larger social condition. This is what makes *The Children's Hour* such a valuable piece of writing to explore the psychology of bullying. According to current bullying literature (Olweus, 1993; Espelage & Swearer, 2003), bullying refers to a repetitive, purposeful form of aggression that results in a power differential between the bully and the victim. Such harm is also apparent in the behaviour of Mary Tilford, in which psychological aggression, in the form of manipulation and gossip, leads to spiralling victimisation, ostracism and the play's tragic outcomes.

The current research uses a psycho-social methodology, drawing on psychology and social theory, with careful consideration given to textual analysis. Flynn Poster-Silencing the ring is an editorial which introduces the rings by exploring how power imbalances are created, how children come to take on the victim identity of stigma, and how silence in school communities helps keep the situation the same. The paper engages in literary close reading of Hellman's play in terms of language, characterisation, and dramatic structure, grounded in educational psychology discourse of bullying. This approach guarantees that the play is not solely understood as a work of dramatic art, but as a cultural text that foreshadows contemporary notions of bullying as an enduring social issue. In foregrounding this interface between literature and psychology, the study seeks to address the following seminal questions: What is it about Hellman's play that dovetails with present-day theorisations of bullying? How does it stage the deadly effects of unbridled rumour and group inaction? And what does the moment say about the continuing necessity for empathy, accountability, and resilience toward social aggression? In the process, the study makes a useful contribution to literary criticism and educational psychology by inscribing the play as an enduring portrayal of the human toll exacted by bullying and social complicity.

## Literature Review

Early literature has conceptualized bullying, as intentional, repeated aggression that takes place within an imbalance of power (Olweus, 1993). Later syntheses have also confirmed strong correlates with behavioural and emotional adjustment, in the form of over-anxiousness and sadness (Jimerson, Swearer & Espelage, 2013; Swearer, Espelage & Napolitano, 2009, in *Oppositional Classroom Problems and Diagnosis*, P. 115). Further syntheses have confirmed strong links between being involved in bullying negatively and internal issues such as anxiety and depression, with academic perturbation to boot, as well as prospectives for later in life (Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Farrington, Ttofi & Piquero, 2016). National and policy-level reports have validated the continued presence of bullying in schools at a global level (UNESCO, 2020), with the most recent U.S. surveillance maintaining high prevalence rates and robust associations with mental health concerns (Centres for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2024). Meta-analytic evidence also supports the lethal nature of social aggression, as pooled analyses indicate that being victim, bully or bully-victim status are all linked to suicidal ideation and behaviour (John et al., 2019). This work of research signals and underscores a need to focus on the bullying problem as a psychosocial process that transcends the acts of “individual bad actors,” but includes the larger appreciable ecologies and community responses to those schools in which bullying occurs. The majority of all bullying takes place in the presence of peers, bystanders are therefore central. Whole-school, skill-based bystander programs are also effective in decreasing both perpetration and victimization, particularly when focusing on group norms, collective efficacy, and teachers’ consistent responses (Polanin et al., 2012; Evans et al., 2019; Dimitrelou et al., 2023). Successful interventions foster moral engagement, up stander confidence, and committed adult intervention, exactly the levers dramatized in Hellman detailing of *The Children’s Hour*, where silence and deference enable rumour-driven aggression to spiral.

The importance of rumour has always been recognized, from Allport and Postman’s (1947) the psychology of rumour, which showed how ambiguity, salience, and social transmission can spread rumours. Recent research on misinformation shows that false claims travel more widely and quickly than their debunked counterparts, especially when they are heightened or are new (Vosoughi et al., 2018), and that corrective attempts must address the strength of belief perseverance (Lewandowsky et al., 2020). And in schools, rumor acts to wield a weapon of relational aggression, often intensified by existing status and the credulousness of adults, dynamics that map precisely onto Mary Tilford’s lie and its reception by the powerful guardians in Hellman’s play. This process is further clarified within the framework of stigma. Goffman (1963) and his notion of “spoiled identity” elucidate the reputational demise associated with a believable, albeit false, blemish. More contemporary work on stigma has expanded the focus on prejudice at the individual-level to include structural-level or “structural” or “institutionalized” stigma, which documents how social norms and institutional practices contribute to the disproportionate health risks faced by stigmatized groups (Hatzenbuehler, 2016; Pachankis and Hatzenbuehler, 2023). Among sexual-minority young adults, structural stigma prospectively predicts worse mental health even after controlling for individual-level victimization. In the 1930s culture of Hellman’s drama, homophobic stigma serves both as a background and a mode of enforcement, where

the mere potentiality of lesbianism prompts institutional sanction, community silence and internalized shame, modes of injury that the play, precisely, dramatizes.

Critical responses to Hellman have focused on her dramaturgical dissection of rumour and its ruinous afterlife (Kolin, 2000), the politics of reputation surrounding her work (Wilkinson, 2005), and the play's central mediation of cultural accounts of the lesbian on the stage of interwar drama (Edwards, 2009; Williams, 2005). Newer work returns to *The Children's Hour* to consider it as a gendered moral panic and in terms of questions of communal complicity (Siena, 2018), for example, as biographical and historical work places the play in Hellman's wider discussion of power and social harm (Rollyson, 2005). But literary analyses rarely mean to get a grip on the play by way of recent bullying theory or current theory about mobs or up-to-date research on rumours and misinformation. The third lack is notable in the increasing cross-disciplinary practice at using drama work interaction with social/emotional learning, but only a minority of them explicitly employ model canonical plays as performative means to represent the psychosocial structure of bullying: power relation, rumour propagation, on looker paralysis, and institution validation. The current study suggests such a reading, providing a psychosocial model where theatre representation makes explicit the causal flow from rumour to stigma to institutional violence, and posits Hellman's play as a case study that remains of interest in terms of pressing contemporary questions of school climate and prevention. Three gaps stand out in the existing literature: a gap of synthesis in that Hellman studies of rumour, reputation, and queer stigma often disregard up-to-date bullying science; a gap of articulation in that psychological research shows processes of rumour spreading without specificity of theatre as a granular mechanism of violence; and a gap of emphasis in that contemporary stigma science focuses structural homophobia and institutions forces that literary treatments often understate (Allport & Postman, 1947; Vosoughi et al., 2018; Lewandowsky et al., 2020; Farrington et al., 2016; Evans et al., 2019; Dimitrelou et al., 2023; John et al., 2019; UNESCO, 2021; CDC, 2024; Goffman, 1963; Hatzenbuehler, 2016; Pachankis & Hatzenbuehler, 2023).

By grafting such bodies of knowledge together, the current study adds a cross-field model: a literary case study with relevance to current sociological research on bullying, rumour, and stigma, demonstrating how a 1934 play can bring into focus today's priorities in prevention: including bystander activation, credible adult response, and institution-level protections.

### **Methodology**

This research is qualitative and interpretive in nature, drawing on thematic analysis and informed by psychological and sociological theory. The purpose is to demonstrate how the theatre play *The Children's Hour* (1934), written by Lillian Hellman, manages to stage bullying through the mechanisms of rumour, manipulation and social connivance. As the abstract expressed: The paper explores how the production of power inequalities, the internalisation by the victims of stigma, and the sustaining of harm by community silence are at play in the research.

A methodological approach rooted in close textual analysis enables paying close attention to the dramatic dialogue, the interaction between characters, and the stage directions, and thereby to identify some of the mechanisms of psychological aggression in the play. This is extraordinarily apt for drama, in which language and performance combine to create meaning. The approach looks at scenes in which Mary Tilford bullies through control and intimidation as well as the reactions of the adult community, and suggests how the tactics of bullying are presented in a personal but also collective sense.

Beyond reading the texts, the research is interdisciplinary and psychosocial. This includes locating the play in relation to the wider academic discourse on school bullying, defined as repeated, intentional aggression with a power disparity between bully and victim (Olweus, 1993; Espelage & Swearer, 2003). Combining educational psychology with literary criticism, the study seeks to demonstrate how drama can both prefigure and represent consistent social aspects.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical background consists of psychological theories of bullying as well as social theories regarding rumours, stigma, and power. First, the study uses literature on bullying to frame Mary's behaviour. Olweus (1993) coined the first definition of school bullying, focusing on intentionality, repetition, and power differential. Building on this, Espelage and Swearer (2003) claim that bullying is not a simple pathology of individual students, but a systemic phenomenon that lies within peer-group dynamics, school silence and cultural acceptance of aggression. This corresponds with Hellman's depiction of how an entire society conspires with Mary and allows her lie to continue because it refuses to challenge it. Second, the model integrates social models of rumour and stigma. Allport and Postman (1947) suggest that rumour is a communicative interaction within the social medium that flourishes in ambiguous environments and tends to amplify fear and prejudice. Goffman's (1963) theory of stigma also helps explain how, after false claims of abuse are circulated, victims come to internalise them, resulting in their ostracism and shame. These thoughts are especially true of Karen Wright and Martha Dobie, two women whose good names and identities are destroyed by Mary's lie. Third, bullying is placed in power and discipline, which follows Foucault's (1977) belief that power works not just through the violent imposition of force but by surveillance, discourse and normalisation. Mary's power as a bully works because she plays the adult order, and the fear of the community, and is therefore the diffuse work of disciplinary power.

Collectively, these perspectives present an inclusive model: psychology elucidates how aggression works, sociology illuminates how rumour and stigma function, and critical theory grounds bullying in power structures. This triangulated design means that the play is read as a dramatic text; at the same time, it situates the play as a cultural artefact that looks forward to future discussions about bullying, victimisation, and social complicity.

### **Analysis and Discussion of *The Children's Hour***

Lillian Hellman's *Children's Hour* is a play that explores the theme of bullying in a boarding school setting. The play suggests that bullying behaviour can be perpetuated by individuals in positions of power, such as teachers and students with high social status. We hypothesise that the play will illustrate how bullying behaviour can have a profound impact on both the victims and the perpetrators, leading to feelings of guilt, shame, and social isolation. Additionally, we predict that the play will highlight the importance of speaking out against bullying behaviour and the role that bystanders can play in supporting victims and promoting a culture of respect and inclusivity. By analysing the portrayal of bullying behaviour in *Children's Hour*, we hope to gain a deeper understanding of the dynamics of power and social influence in group settings, as well as identify strategies for preventing and addressing bullying behaviour in schools and other social contexts.

Bullying is a pervasive and harmful behaviour that has been observed in schools, workplaces, and communities worldwide. Harassment, intimidation, and domination over another person or group are all components of this behaviour. Exclusion from social groups, verbal or physical abuse, and even cyberbullying are all examples of this kind of conduct. The impact of bullying can be devastating and long-lasting, affecting the victim's mental and physical health, academic and professional performance, and overall quality of life. Despite increasing awareness and efforts to prevent bullying, it remains a significant problem in many societies, highlighting the need for continued education and intervention (Arseneault, Bowes, & Shakoor, 2010, 717:89).

Bullying can occur at any age, but it is most commonly observed among children and adolescents. It often takes place in settings where there is a power imbalance, such as in schools where older or more popular students may bully their younger or less popular peers. However, bullying can also occur in the workplace, where a boss or coworker may use their position of authority to intimidate or harass others. Bullying can have serious and long-lasting consequences. Besides the obvious bodily harm, perpetrators may also suffer mental and psychological suffering, such as fear, sadness, and a diminished sense of worth. Suicide has been linked to bullying in some circumstances (Twemlow, Fonagy & Sacco, 215).

The bully themselves may suffer unfavourable consequences as a result of their bullying behaviour. Research has revealed that those who participate in bullying behaviours are more likely to develop mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression, and may have difficulty building healthy relationships later on in life. This may be the case because bullying conduct is associated with a lack of self-esteem. A multi-pronged strategy is necessary for both the prevention of and response to bullying.

This involves teaching people about the destructive impacts of bullying, supporting the development of healthy social interactions, and offering support to those who have been affected by bullying. Schools, workplaces, and communities can also implement policies and procedures to address bullying behaviour and create safe environments for all individuals. Bullying is a serious problem that affects individuals of all ages and can have long-lasting consequences. It is important to continue efforts to prevent and address bullying through education, intervention, and support for those who have been impacted (Olweus).

Bullying is a pervasive and harmful behaviour that can have long-lasting effects on individuals and communities. The concept of bullying refers to repeated and intentional acts of aggression or harm directed towards another person or group, with the intention of causing harm, distress, or exerting power and control over them. Physical, verbal, and psychological abuse are all different kinds of bullying that can occur in an assortment of situations, from the classroom to the office to the Internet (Olweus,1993:45).

Bullying can have serious consequences, especially for those who are attacked. Bullying victims may suffer a variety of negative emotions, such as anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. They might additionally struggle to concentrate at school or at work, and they could also be more prone to hazardous conduct such as substance misuse or self-harm. Bullying can result in physical harm or even suicide under catastrophic circumstances. Bullying can also have wider implications for communities and society as a whole. It can contribute to a culture of fear and mistrust, erode social cohesion, and undermine the ability of individuals to work together effectively. It can also have economic costs, such as lost productivity and increased healthcare costs (Swearer, Turner, Givens& Pollack,2008:167).

To address the problem of bullying, it is important to understand the factors that contribute to its development and maintenance. Research has identified a number of risk factors for bullying, including individual factors such as a history of being bullied, low self-esteem, and difficulty making friends, as well as contextual factors such as school climate, social norms, and community values. Effective strategies for preventing and addressing bullying typically involve a multi-faceted approach that targets multiple levels of influence. At the individual level, interventions may focus on developing social skills and promoting healthy relationships. At the school or workplace level, interventions may involve changes to policies and practices, such as increasing adult supervision, improving communication and collaboration, and providing resources for victims and bystanders (Farrington, Ttofi, & Piquero, 2016:91).

In recent years, there has been increasing recognition of the role that bystanders can play in preventing and addressing bullying behaviour. Bystanders are individuals who witness bullying but are not directly involved. Research has shown that bystanders can have a powerful impact on the outcome of bullying situations, either by intervening directly to stop the behaviour or by providing support to the victim afterwards. Effective bystander interventions typically involve a combination of skills training and social norms messaging. By promoting positive social norms and equipping individuals with the skills and confidence to intervene, bystander interventions can help to create a culture of respect and inclusivity that is less conducive to bullying behaviour (Ibid . 94).

In addition to addressing the problem of bullying at the individual and community level, it is also important to recognise the broader social and cultural factors that contribute to its development and maintenance. These may include societal norms around gender and power, as well as broader issues of inequality and discrimination. Ultimately, the concept of bullying represents a complex and multifaceted problem that requires a comprehensive and coordinated response. By working together to address the individual, social, and cultural factors that contribute to bullying behaviour, we can create communities that are more supportive, inclusive, and resilient (Bradshaw, Sawyer & O'Brennan, 2007:364).

Bullying may result in a variety of harmful consequences for pupils who are subjected to it in education. These effects can be both physical and emotional, and can have long-lasting consequences. One of the most immediate and obvious effects of bullying is physical harm. Victims of bullying may experience injuries such as bruises, cuts, and broken bones as a result of physical violence. These injuries can require medical attention and may result in missed school days (Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt & Hymel 38).

In addition to physical harm, bullying can have significant emotional and psychological effects on students. Victims of bullying may experience anxiety, depression, and a range of other mental health problems. They may also experience low self-esteem and difficulties forming positive relationships with peers. Bullying can also have negative effects on academic performance. Victims of bullying may have difficulty concentrating in class and may miss school due to physical or emotional harm. This can result in poor grades, missed educational opportunities, and long-term academic struggles (Nansel, Overpeck, Pilla, Ruan, Simons-Morton & Scheidt, 2001:92).

Moreover, bullying can contribute to a toxic and unsafe school environment. Students who witness bullying may feel powerless to intervene and may experience their own feelings of anxiety and fear. This can impact their academic performance and overall well-being, as well as contribute to a negative culture of bullying and aggression within the school community. It is important to note that the effects of bullying are not limited to the short term. Studies have shown that individuals who experience bullying in childhood or adolescence may continue to experience negative effects well into adulthood, including mental health problems and difficulty forming healthy relationships. The effects of bullying on school students can be severe and long-lasting. It is important for schools to take proactive steps to prevent and address bullying behaviour, create a safe and supportive environment for all students, and provide resources and support for those who have been impacted (Bradshaw, Sawyer & O'Brennan, 2007: 361).

The play is set at an all-girls boarding school administered by two young women, Karen Wright and Martha Dobie. Mary Tilford, the niece of a wealthy and important woman, accuses Karen and Martha of being in a lesbian connection. The accusation is false, but it spreads quickly through the community, damaging the reputations of both women and their school. Despite their attempts to clear their names, the rumour leads to the loss of their students and ultimately the closure of the school (Siena, 2018: 260).

In the end, it is revealed that Mary, who has a history of lying and manipulation, made up the accusation out of anger towards the two women. However, the damage has been done, and Karen and Martha's lives have been irreparably altered. The play explores themes of reputation, power, and the destructive potential of rumours and lies. It also addresses issues of homosexuality and the social stigma attached to it during the time the play was written, in the 1930s. The play is a powerful and thought-provoking play that continues to resonate with audiences today (Hellman, 1934).

In 1934, Lillian Hellman had her play *The Children's Hour* produced for the first time. The story takes place at Karen Wright and Martha Dobie's all-girls boarding school. Mary Tilford, a nasty student, starts a rumour that the two ladies are having a lesbian relationship, and it changes their circumstances dramatically. The rumour quickly spreads

throughout the town, leading to tragic consequences for Karen and Martha. The play begins with Karen and Martha discussing their plans for the school's future. They are interrupted by Mary Tilford, a student who is angry because she has been punished for misbehaving. Mary is a manipulative and vindictive young girl who is used to getting her way. When Karen and Martha refuse to change their decision, Mary decides to take revenge. She tells her grandmother, who is a wealthy and influential member of the community, that Karen and Martha are lovers (Hellman, 1981:23-66).

The rumour quickly spreads, and before long, Karen and Martha are faced with a community that believes they are engaged in an immoral relationship. The situation becomes increasingly difficult as parents begin to withdraw their children from the school, and the women are unable to defend themselves without revealing the truth about Mary's lies. Despite their best efforts to clear their names, Karen and Martha's reputation is ruined, and they are forced to leave the school. The play ends with Karen and Martha facing an uncertain future, as they try to rebuild their lives in the aftermath of the scandal (Hellman, 1981: 67-88).

*The Children's Hour* is a powerful and thought-provoking play that explores themes of prejudice, gossip, and the destructive power of lies. It is a reminder that the consequences of our actions can have far-reaching and devastating effects on the lives of others. The play's message is as relevant today as it was when it was first written, and it continues to be a powerful reminder of the importance of speaking the truth and treating others with kindness and respect (Davis, 1999:23).

A sort of violent conduct known as bullying is defined by the purposeful infliction of injury, an imbalance of power, and repeated incidents of bullying. Bullying may manifest itself in a variety of ways, including verbal, physical, and relational forms. In the play the character Mary Tilford participates in relational and verbal bullying by spreading a false tale about her friends Karen and Marth (Espelage & Swearer, 861).

The play demonstrates how bullying may result in harm to one's reputation, social isolation, and mental misery for the victim. Despite the fact that Karen and Martha are not guilty of the allegations that have been brought against them, the community has turned against them and has forced them to leave the school.

Martha: There's always been something wrong. Always, just as long as I can remember. But I never knew what it was until all this happened.

Karen: Stop it, Martha! Stop this crazy talk!

Martha: You're afraid of hearing it, but I'm more afraid that you.

Karen: I won't listen to you! (Hellman, 1934: 66).

This dialogue is one of the most devastating moments in *The Children's Hour*, as it dramatises the internalisation of stigma. Martha's anguished confession that there has "always been something wrong" reveals how rumour has penetrated her self-perception, transforming social accusation into personal guilt. Goffman (1963) describes this process as the production of a "spoiled identity," in which external stigma becomes internalised,

shaping the individual's sense of self. Here, Martha is no longer resisting the lie; she begins to embody it, seeing herself through the distorted lens of communal rumour.

Karen's interruption, "Stop it, Martha! Stop this crazy talk!", functions as a silencing mechanism, reflecting what contemporary bullying research describes as the cycle of silence (Swearer et al., 2008). Rather than offering support, Karen attempts to suppress Martha's expression of pain, which mirrors how bystanders in bullying contexts often deny or minimise the victim's suffering. Wilkinson (2005) suggests that Hellman's plays expose how private voices of pain are muted by social and institutional authority, and this moment exemplifies that pattern: Karen, though herself a victim, reproduces the silencing logic of the broader community. Through this exchange, Hellman dramatises the psychosocial effects of bullying: stigma (Goffman, 1963), internalised shame, and enforced silence. What began as a child's rumour escalates into a communal act of social violence that reshapes identity itself. The play also demonstrates how the impacts of bullying may linger for a long time, as Karen and Martha are left to confront an uncertain future at the conclusion of the play (Espelage & Swearer 872).

The piece also draws attention to the role that spectators may play in bullying situations. In the play, many of the characters are aware of the rumours, yet they do nothing to put an end to the bullying that is going on. Their indifference allows the bullying to continue, which eventually results in catastrophic repercussions. It is also uncommon for witnesses to experience this phenomenon in real-life instances of bullying, when they may feel unable to interfere or hesitant to speak out against the behaviour (Ibid).

A look is taken in this episode of at the effects that bullying has on the bullies themselves. Mary Tilford is described as an unhappy young girl who is motivated by envy and a desire for power. She is featured as the protagonist in the novel "Mary Tilford." Her actions eventually have disastrous repercussions for both Karen and Martha, in addition to having an effect on her own life. The play makes the argument that bullies are often victims of their own fears and the emotional turmoil that they experience: "My child is a victim of bullying" or "That student is a bully" (Hellman, 1934:45).

The play is an insightful and moving look at the destructive effects that bullying can have. The play highlights how vital it is to speak out against bullying, to stand up for one's ideas, and to treat other people with love and respect. Because bullying is still a pervasive problem in our culture, this classic piece of literature is as pertinent to modern audiences as it was when it was first published. We can make strides toward establishing a community that is friendlier, more accepting, and more secure for everyone if we educate people about the damaging effects of bullying and encourage empathy and acts of kindness.

The play dramatises how just one false accusation can escalate into a grotesquely disproportionate logic of social bullying against which there is no defence, no light, no way through the darkness of stigma, of scandal, accusation and silence, as we follow along the course of doom. Fundamentally, it is not just about a vengeful child, but about the cultural forces that make it possible for bullying to thrive.

Mary Tilford's behaviour demonstrates what Espelage and Swearer (2003) describe as relational bullying, a mode of aggression intent upon damaging an individual's reputation and social connections rather than their physical wellbeing. In branding Karen and Martha as lesbians, Mary wields rumour as a weapon. As Allport and Postman (1947) have noted in their classic study, *The Psychology of Rumour*, rumours proliferate in times where uncertainty and anxiety are widespread, frequently worsening bias. Hellman's play illustrates this process in a clear light: As soon as Mary lies, it's like wildfire, turning quickly through the community, the repetition of it by more adults and parents lending it an air of truth despite a lack of evidence. This comes in accordance with what (Mohammed, & Almaarouf, 2023, Pp. 337–344) mentioned in their study.

The damaging effects of this rumour underscore what Goffman (1963) refers to as stigma, the process of being marked as discreditable and thus reduced to a "spoiled identity." There's always been something wrong, Martha's anguished confession continued, and it finally looks Martha's anguished confession continued as though one man only was right, and he was a drooling imbecile. Forever, as far back as I can recall. It seems only natural that a fight should be fought on one ground or another, but nobody told me until all this came up" (Hellman, 1934, p. 66), demonstrates the internalisation of stigma by victims that leads to fear of self-stigmatisation. Karen shushing her ("Stop it, Martha!") is not just an individual inability to come to terms with their own past, but also, as Goffman writes, the "managing of spoiled identity," the victim's refusal to recognise themselves as a stigmatised individual even as their own self-image is undercut.

Hellman's own political consciousness also informs the play's indictment of power. According to Wilkinson, throughout her career, Hellman, in her plays, investigated the confluence of private lives with public politics, and, in doing so, dramatised how private grievances are amplified within a social context. Mary's bullying wins not just because she orchestrates it, but because the community, or, in this case, Mrs. Tilford and the other parents, exhibits herd mentality by pulling students from the school without the slightest piece of evidence. This silence is similar to what contemporary bullying scholars refer to as the bystander phenomenon, in which innocent bystanders fail to come to the victim's assistance, essentially colluding in the harassment (Swearer et al., 2008).

So the bullying is set within a kind of larger social and political grid of relations. The implications of rumour and stigma are not limited to the individual, however, as Goffman (1963) and Wilkinson (2005) point out, but are deeply embedded within cultural systems of power and discrimination. Hellman depicts bullying as a psychological and community act of cruelty and dereliction of responsibility: a highly refined conception, with modern overtones in understanding school bullying as systemic rather than as isolated acts (Olweus 1993; Espelage and Swearer 2003).

## **Conclusion**

Without a specific hypothesis provided, it is difficult to draw a conclusion related to the study of bullying in Hellman's play. However, we can make some general conclusions about the potential themes and messages related to bullying in the play. The play portrays the devastating effects of bullying and the power of rumours and lies to

destroy reputations and lives. The false accusation made by Mary Tilford against Karen Wright and Martha Dobie demonstrates how quickly bullying can escalate and how difficult it can be to clear one's name once accusations have been made.

Moreover, it highlights the harm caused by the stigma attached to homosexuality during the time period in which it was written. The characters' fear of being labelled as lesbian is a testament to the harm that societal norms and prejudices can have on individuals and their sense of self-worth. In addition, the play serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of bullying and the importance of treating others with kindness and respect. While written in the 1930s, its themes remain relevant today, as bullying and its consequences continue to impact individuals and communities worldwide.

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