WORDS on PLAYS
IN SIGHT INTO THE PLAY, THE PLAYWRIGHT, AND THE PRODUCTION

The Little Foxes

BY LILLIAN HELLMAN
DIRECTED BY LAIRD WILLIAMSON
AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Characters, Cast, and Synopsis of *The Little Foxes*

6. Design Presentation for the A.C.T. production of *The Little Foxes*

12. *The Little Foxes* Production History

18. A Brief Biography of Lillian Hellman

22. Sources for *The Little Foxes*

24. The New South and the Rise of Industry
   by Michael Paller

35. The Glorious Cotton Mill
   by Ariel Franklin-Hudson

40. Is Money the Root of All Evil?

42. Questions to Consider

43. For Further Information . . .
Take us the foxes, the little foxes that spoil the vines
For our vines have tender grapes.

—Song of Solomon (2:15)
CHARACTERS, CAST, AND SYNOPSIS
OF THE LITTLE FOXES
The Little Foxes premiered at the National Theatre in New York City on February 15, 1939.

CHARACTERS AND CAST

REGINA GIDDENS
Jacqueline Antaramian

HORACE GIDDENS, her husband
Nicholas Hormann

ALEXANDRA “ZAN” GIDDENS, their daughter
Grace Heid

BENJAMIN HUBBARD, Regina’s elder brother
Jack Willis

OSCAR HUBBARD, Regina’s brother
Robert Parsons

BIRDIE HUBBARD, Oscar’s wife
Julia Gibson

LEO HUBBARD, Birdie and Oscar’s son
John Bull

WILLIAM MARSHALL, a savvy businessman from Chicago
Stephen Klum

ADDIE, a porter in the Giddens household
Margarette Robinson

CAL, a maid in the Giddens household
Rhonnie Washington

SETTING
The scene of the play is the living room of the Giddens house, in a small town in the South, in the spring of 1900.

SYNOPSIS

ACT 1. Evening. The living room is quiet as Cal and Addie prepare for the family to come in from the dining room after supper. Birdie Hubbard sneaks away from the dinner table to send Cal to her house to retrieve some music she wants to show William Marshall, the guest of honor at dinner. As Cal is about to leave, Oscar enters; he tells Cal not to bother with Birdie’s errand and chides Birdie for boring their guest with chatter.

The rest of the party enters, including Regina, Ben, Alexandra, and Leo. Marshall is interested in investing in a deal with the Hubbard brothers, to build a cotton mill in their town, a deal likely to make them all wealthy. Marshall is pleased by the Hubbards’ promise to prevent labor problems, a “certain benefit” of doing business in the South. One family member who stands to gain from the transaction is missing, however—Horace Giddens, Regina’s husband, a banker. He is unwell and away receiving treatment for a
heart condition in Baltimore. Leo, Oscar’s son, who works at Horace’s bank, has been “keeping an eye on things” during Horace’s absence. Marshall and Regina flirt openly, and she promises to visit him in Chicago.

The members of the party exchange pleasantries over port, as Marshall compliments the Southern hospitality and way of life. Birdie and Alexandra agree to perform a duet to entertain Marshall. Ben, Oscar, and Regina tell tales of Southern aristocracy, of which their family was never a part, but of which Birdie’s family were noted members. Regina reminds them of the business deal on the table, but Marshall insists that the business that needed attention was settled earlier in the day. He announces that he must leave to catch a train.

The siblings begin to plan what they will do with their share of the profits from the deal with Marshall. Birdie, who becomes increasingly drunk as the evening wears on, wants to return to her family’s plantation, Lionnet, and restore it to its pre–Civil War elegance. She also wants Oscar to stop shooting the game their black neighbors need for sustenance. Oscar scornfully hushes her. Regina intends to move to Chicago and become part of high society. Ben remarks that it will take a lot of money to move to Chicago, money that Regina may not be getting since her husband has not yet put up his share of the deal. Marshall is investing more than half of what it will take to build the mill; the rest of the money is supposed to come from Ben, Oscar, and Horace. Horace, however, has not responded to any of Regina’s letters; if he does not put up his share of the money, Ben and Oscar intend to seek investment from someone else, leaving Regina with nothing.

Regina argues that she can get the money from Horace, but refuses to ask him until she is promised a larger piece of the profits. For the sake of keeping the business in the family, Ben agrees, but says the larger share must come out of Oscar’s portion, not his own. Oscar is irate, but agrees to go along if the money stays in the family and if Regina agrees to the marriage of Alexandra and Leo. Regina says she will think about it.

Regina tells Alexandra to go to Baltimore in the morning and bring her father home. She retires upstairs to pack for Alexandra, while Ben, Oscar, and Leo depart for home, leaving Alexandra and Birdie alone together. Birdie tries to convince Alexandra not to marry Leo. Oscar, who has overheard their conversation, slaps Birdie hard across the face.

**Act II.** A week later, early morning. The family anxiously awaits Horace’s return. He and Alexandra were supposed to have arrived the night before. Leo enters, and Oscar reminds him that he will need to work hard and give up his other women to convince Horace that he will make a good husband for Alexandra. He is also doubtful that Horace will agree to invest in the deal with Marshall. Leo assures his father that Horace has the money, in the form of bonds sitting in his safety deposit box at the bank. Leo
reveals that he has stolen the keys and opened the box himself to look inside, and that Horace only looks in the box once every six months. Oscar and Leo devise a scheme to “borrow” the bonds and replace them before Horace can realize they’re gone.

Addie goes to the front door, responding to the sound of voices outside. She reappears helping an exhausted Horace into the room. Alexandra follows them, explaining that her father did not feel well enough to make the trip in one day, so they stopped overnight. Alexandra is sent upstairs to clean up. Addie and Horace reminisce happily; she complains about everyone’s preoccupation with the business deal and reveals to Horace the plan for Alexandra to marry Leo.

The family enters and welcomes Horace home. They flatter him and lie, telling him how well he looks. Regina asks the men to return to their breakfasts so she can have a moment alone with her husband. She then forces a discussion of the investment, in spite of Horace’s obvious fatigue. Horace discovers that the Hubbards have promised Marshall low wages and no strikes; he comments that Ben will certainly accomplish this by playing the workers against each other. Horace intends to thwart the Hubbards’ plans by refusing to allow Alexandra to marry Leo and not giving Regina his money. Regina pursues him as he retires upstairs, even though Ben urges her to wait and take a softer approach.
Ben, Oscar, and Leo discuss ways to salvage the deal if Horace refuses to put up his money. Oscar tells Ben that Leo has a “friend” at the bank who is in possession of bonds that he rarely looks at, bonds that could be “lent” to Leo to close the deal. Although Oscar and Leo try to be sly, it is clear they are talking about Horace’s money. Ben agrees to the plan and Oscar and Leo leave to put together the funds to take to Marshall.

Regina and Horace continue to argue upstairs, causing Alexandra to plead with Ben to make the fighting stop. Ben tells Regina that Oscar is leaving to deliver the contracts and money to Marshall, and that she and Horace have been cut out of the deal. When Horace comes downstairs to relish the Hubbards’ dispute, Regina cruelly accuses him of wishing her ill because of his own impending death. Horace responds that he refuses to help the Hubbards “wreck the town and live on it.” As Ben leaves, Regina, furious with Horace, accuses him of wanting to hurt her for spite and says she can’t wait for him to die.

**Act III.** Two weeks later, late afternoon. Birdie and Alexandra are playing the piano and Horace is sitting in a wheelchair with a deposit box from the bank. Birdie, Alexandra, and Horace enjoy the quiet of the house without the rest of the family. Cal comes in to get instructions for an errand from Horace. Horace tells him to go to the bank, which will be closed, and to go in the back door. Cal is to ask that Mr. Mander, the banker, and Mr. Fowler, Horace’s lawyer, come to the house after dinner that night. Alexandra asks Birdie stories about her youth; Birdie reminisces about the happy days when Horace would play his fiddle. Her mother would never associate with the Hubbards; Birdie knows that Oscar only married her because Ben wanted her family’s cotton fields. Oscar has been unkind to her ever since. Birdie hopes that Alexandra will not turn out like herself, living like a faded ghost at the mercy of those who hold the power. Addie’s remark sums up the play: “Well, there are people who eat the earth and eat all the people on it. . . . Then there are people who stand around and watch them eat it.”

Alexandra walks Birdie home, and Horace assures Addie that it’s better for his daughter to hear the unpleasant details of their family life, so she will be aware of the lengths to which her uncles will go for the sake of their greed. He makes Addie promise to take care of Alexandra after his death and tells her that he plans to make a new will with his lawyer; he promises that he will see to it that Addie is taken care of. Cal returns and Horace appears satisfied that his message was received.

Regina returns home. Horace tells her that they have invested their money in the Hubbard cotton mill after all, despite his refusal to participate. He shows her the empty deposit box and explains that the bonds were removed by Leo and used to invest with Marshall in Chicago without his consent. Regina is delighted to have this knowledge to
hold over her brothers in order to negotiate a better deal, but Horace says he will let them keep the bonds, as a loan from Regina. In his new will, he will leave Regina only the bonds, and everything else will go to Alexandra. Once he has died, Regina will be left with the bonds that her brothers will by then have replaced, but nothing else.

Regina accuses Horace of hating her, which he denies, although he admits to taking pleasure in her greed-induced suffering. Horace’s pain worsens as the conversation wears on. When he tries to take his medicine, the bottle slips from his hands and breaks. Regina does nothing to help him; he calls out to Addie, but his voice is too weak to reach her. He tries to make his way up the stairs, while Regina stands by and silently watches him struggle. Once he collapses, she calls for Addie and Cal to help her take him upstairs.

Alexandra comes in from the rain, and, seeing the wheelchair empty, rushes to find her father. Addie runs off to fetch the doctor, and Leo enters looking for Oscar and Ben, who follow a minute later, after encountering Addie. The two brothers speculate about Horace’s chances for survival as Leo tries to break into their conversation. He tells them that Horace knows about the bonds, and that he has called for his lawyer. Believing themselves to be caught, they panic and try to figure out what to do.

Regina comes down the stairs and her brothers inquire about Horace’s health. She dismisses their questions and tells them that she knows they have stolen Horace’s bonds. Oscar and Leo try to deny their involvement, but Ben, knowing better, silences them and listens to what Regina has to say. Because Horace was not able to execute his plan to change his will and deprive Regina of the money before the collapse, she is now in a position to negotiate the use of the bonds with Ben.

She tells Ben that she wants 75 percent of all of the profits from the new business in exchange for allowing them to use the bonds. Since Horace is not able to refute either her story or theirs, she claims that she will put them in jail for theft if they refuse to agree to her terms. As Ben warns Regina that she will not succeed in her efforts to blackmail the brothers, Alexandra comes down the stairs with the news that Horace has died.

Alexandra asks why her father was on the stairs when Addie and Cal found him. Regina continues negotiating with Ben and Oscar, demanding the 75 percent and threatening to go to the judge in the morning if they refuse her. Oscar incredulously asks Ben if there is another way, but Ben is resigned, and with admiration for Regina’s resolve agrees to her terms. The brothers and Leo exit, with Regina telling Ben that he can find her in Chicago.

Alexandra and Regina are left alone. Regina begins to make plans for the two of them to travel to Chicago. Alexandra informs her mother that she won’t be going to Chicago, that her father wouldn’t want her to. Instead, she says, she is going to fight hard against the Hubbards and all the “people who eat the earth.”
LAIRD WILLIAMSON, DIRECTOR

The central point, basically, is the idea that greed never goes out of fashion. In fact, I think we've reached critical mass. The Little Foxes is like a new play—it is so alive for today that when it was written is really beside the point. I think Hellman hits the nail on the head and opens the door to a lot of thinking about the subject.

I ran across this statement recently, which was posted as a response to a blog on the Huffington Post that attempted to mitigate the results of the invasion of Iraq. On July 24, 2006, at 5:14 p.m., this guy writes: “Give it up! Iraq is an unmitigated disaster for the u.s., for world peace, and, especially, for the Iraqis. May the gods forgive us. We've washed the cradle of civilization in blood. So much for the executive skills of the greedy, the power-crazed, and the stupid. When I think of Cheney and Bush, I think of The Little Foxes—that is, there are people who eat the earth, and those who stand around and watch them do it.”

But I don't think there are two different groups of people—people who eat the earth, and those who stand and watch them do it [as Addie says in the play]. It's really that both of those things are going on at the same time. I have always perceived this play as a depiction of the microcosmic genesis in a chapter of a new religion, which will reach its pinnacle in what I would call the globalization of greed. We see the seeds of it in this play, in just a few quotations about America being the prime practitioner of this “gospel.” Regina says, “It would seem that if you put up a third you should only get a third . . . but then again, there’s no law about it, is there? You might want to say, I want more, I want a bigger share.” It's so much about trying to get a bigger piece of the pie, a bigger share of it, maybe more than one really deserves. The metaphor also exists in Oscar, who kills more animals than he could possibly eat, throws the meat away, destroys it. You wonder if, for some people, the objective is to accrue more money than they could possibly ever use or give away.

And then there’s Ben, a swell guy, with a positive view of the world as open: “It's ready for us. This is just the beginning.” I love the power of that idea in him, that he can see where this country and, I think, subsequently the world will go. Of course, he will turn the family business into a kind of megabusiness, and probably a multinational corporation in
the long run, before things are all over. I will remind you that *Forbes*’s list now requires billionaires, instead of millionaires; that seems to be the way the trend is heading.

Whether or not you take offense at [Venezuelan president] Hugo Chavez’s remarks [at the United Nations] regarding President Bush’s level of “devilness,” his comments indicate a widely held view of the administration’s exploitative foreign policy. Mr. Chavez said [about Bush], “The devil came here yesterday. It still smells of sulphur today.” The thing is, Bush is not the devil, and that’s the scary part. I think unless we realize that we’re dealing with a complex human being, who is a product of every moment in his life that led up to this moment, then we’re deluding ourselves. He’s not some demon from outer space. My point in this, and a major thrust of this production for me, is that we recognize these characters in ourselves and in the people we know. That we see them. That we acknowledge: he sits next to me on the board, or lives down the street from me, or shares my driveway. This production for me is about actually recognizing—and helping the audience recognize—who these people are in a very specific, detailed, and real way.

*The Little Foxes* has been called a morality play, a satire, a dark comedy of human corruption. It has also been criticized for being melodramatic. An interesting definition of melodrama for me has been, and someone in a biography of Hellman actually said, “Melodrama is when you care what happens next.” Is that such a bad thing? [laughter] I think some of the criticism is really about the conclusion that this is a plot-driven drama, as opposed to character-driven. But I think we are set out to prove with this production that it is a character-driven drama. It is our job to make the characters, the moments that exist onstage, the details all add up to this very moment in life, to make this conflict, this interchange, these relationships inevitable in the long run, rather than having been plotted out by Miss Hellman—who did it quite well, actually. Just as we are sitting here, something has led us to this moment in time—the choices we have made, the backgrounds we have had, the people we’re related to . . . all these things have led us to this moment.

Take Regina Giddens, for example. She’s the character critics and appreciators of the play talk about most. I would just ask, What has created her? She didn’t just spring full-blow out of the earth or the sky or the vapor. Every moment in her life has led to the events of this play. I ran across a comment that has stayed with me, gestating in me in relationship to this play . . . I don’t know if you know Fritz Koenig. He designed the sphere that stood in the courtyard of the World Trade Center. When the Trade Center collapsed, it was the only work of art to survive the cataclysm. When he came back to look at it after the attack—it was not exactly intact, it was battered and broken, and had to be stuck back together, halfway backwards—he said, and he might have been quoting someone else at this point, “The truth in art is the pain that lies beneath.” What is the pain that has cre-
ated Regina? If our lives were depicted as works of art, where would the pain be? I make this point because I think that in each character of this play there is a background of pain, to some degree or another. Not that it’s always evident. But that is the groundwork, or at least part of the array of groundwork, on which we stand.

So, in Regina, I see a woman with control issues; she’s become quite manipulative, kind of a perfectionist, with a desire to make her place in the world. Unfortunately, she has married an honest man, which complicates her life. I was attracted to a note about the relationship between [director] William Wyler and Bette Davis, who played Regina in the film version of *The Little Foxes* [and was criticized by some for too closely copying Tallulah Bankhead’s performance in the role on Broadway]. They had a bit of conflict in how they saw the character. Wyler told Davis that he felt Regina should be “amusing, worldly, very attractive, very appealing to the audience.” I think what he was getting at was that it’s simply too easy to make her into a devil, or to say she’s a devil, or to put that stamp on her. Bankhead actually said, after playing the character, “Regina Giddens is a rapacious bitch, cruel and callow, etched in acid by Miss Hellman.” I would have loved to see that performance, just out of curiosity. [laughter] The *New York Times* called Regina “that malignant Southern bitch-goddess.” All of which seems to distance us from Regina, to say, Well, she’s not one of us. *I* would never know her. *I* would never meet her. *I* would never *be* her.
But I believe the point Hellman is making is, Yes, you do know her; you do know Ben; you do know Oscar, and the whole array of people in this play. I think the most interesting question is, What adds up to Regina as a human being? That’s also true of Ben, Oscar, Leo, Bertie, and Zan, as well as Cal and Addie, who, being disenfranchised, are expected or asked to watch all of this from the outside, and do observe it for a long period of time.

I want to encourage you, as you’re working on this play, to remind yourself of all of these things. We can only get behind our heroine, Alexandra, who finally says, “I’m not going to stand around and watch you do it,” regarding the eating of the world. “Tell him I’ll be fighting as hard as he’ll be fighting, someplace where people don’t just stand around and watch.” That’s what we’re going to be doing from now on. Let’s see if we have any effect.

The dramaturgical information gathered by [A.C.T. Resident Dramaturg] Michael Paller about the rise of industry in the New South is also very valuable in giving the play a context in the specific world of these characters. The milling of cotton was not a new thing in 1900. The Hubbards are following a trend that is in the process of remaking the South at this time. Another important thing in the gestalt of this play is the exploitation of labor, which they seem to be almost reinventing, and which we see proceeding down to the present day in the outsourcing of jobs, diminishment of union powers, refusal to pass a minimum wage, etc.

With regard to the setting of the play, the idea that guided us was that of seeing this world as the beginning of a new religion, the religion of greed, as I mentioned at the start. We began working on the level of specifics, considering what kind of furniture and other things, the chandelier, etc., might actually be in a Victorian drawing room, which then evolved into the much more abstract idea that [the Hubbard home] is the temple of the new religion. So the set gradually becomes more abstract, and we see something that is more suggestive of a temple or a cathedral.

A note about the sound design: basically, the imagery is the old world represented by the piano. We’re working with a Schubert piece that becomes the theme of the play, which then in turn becomes overpowered by the sound of the machine, obliterating it.

ROBERT BLACKMAN, SCENIC AND COSTUME DESIGNER

SCENERY: We started with a naturalistic interior. You know, spandrels and woodworking, woodworking, woodworking. It was all great fun, and something I don’t usually do. And then it slowly evolved. We decided we needed something more. Laird had done a little scratching that he gave to me, and I took it, and we started talking about it. We decided to get rid of anything that indicates actual domestic reality and make the set
abstract, a kind of temple. And then we talked about what the surface could be—maybe marble, maybe stone, maybe this, maybe that—and, Bing!, my Yale years came into mind, and the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. If any of you have been to Yale and seen that building . . . it’s amazing. It’s a cube, essentially, a marble cube, with coffered walls, out of marble, out of kind of golden alabaster sheers, so when you’re inside it, what you get is this amazing glow of antique light that preserves the books, won’t dry them out or yellow the pages. When I went in there, I first thought, pardon my language, Fuck the books, let me stand in this light for a while, because it’s so amazing! So I pitched that idea to Laird, and we’ve done a version of that. The walls are all coffered, so that this section here [indicates on drawing], for all intents and purposes, is essentially translucent, all the way around the set, so we get this amazing glow.

So, in this temple of the new religion, is a color that Laird and I use a lot, but very selectively. We call it, well ... scab. That’s the color: dried blood, versions of dried blood, from fresh wound to scab to nearly falling off. It sounds grim, but it will be unbelievably beautiful. Think of the taste of overripe fruit. It is almost to the point of rancid, but not there yet. There are many people here at A.C.T. who go back with me [over the years], and Demarest Campbell, the scenic artist, is one of them. Years ago I asked her what she was doing, and she said to me, “Well, I’m working on Maxwell’s Plum [the restaurant once in Ghirardelli Square] and we’ve done the interior.” I said, “What’s that like?” and she said, “Oh, horrible.” I said, “What does that mean?” and she said, “Well, it kind of rapes your eyes and leaves them for dead.” [laughter] That’s the idea.

The rest of the set is as real as we can get, in a kind of iconic way. In other words, the sofa is that medallion-backed Victorian sofa that you see and immediately say: “American Victorian.” No question, no nothing about it—American Victorian. There is a side chair
that is his chair; there's a side chair that is her chair. And then we're pulling things from stock to match to that. It's all dark mahogany. Hellman refers to it as “expensive, but characterless.” There are no carpets, no softening of the marble at all, but all of this stuff that’s kind of floating. It’s all kind of semi-satin, so there’s a glisten to everything. So hopefully the furniture will rise off of it. The details that sit on those furniture pieces—the lamps, everything that the actor touches—will be real. It is not a relative reality; it is reality.

Costumes: Some of the things we are creating, and some of them we are gathering and putting together; it’s a work in progress. The things I’ve pulled from rental houses that are arriving today and tomorrow are authentic clothing from the period that are sturdy and that these folks in Los Angeles are kind enough to rent to us, which they don’t usually do for theatrical productions. The first act is very cool, meaning all the men are in white tie, except for Leo, who is in black tie, and Regina comes out and she’s in black, but it’s fabulous black. It’s black sparkle, with white kid gloves. I think of her as Madame X, if you know John Singer Sargent’s painting. I think that’s who she is. I think she’s a woman who really understands what she looks like, what she’s about, and how she uses that on a day-to-day basis. It is one of her major operating tools. It’s what she’s got, and it’s what a woman of that period had. They couldn’t really live up to the description Tallulah Bankhead gave of Regina, because they would be shunned. They had to find a way, in their secondary position, as women in a male-oriented community, to exist. So Regina uses what God gave her, which is amazing beauty and a kind of sensuality, an allure. So there is a black-widowness to her; she’s a kind of magnet. She got Horace; when she sees Marshall, he becomes her target, and she thinks: How can I get that? That’s what I want.

In general terms, the members of this family are all well dressed. Having grown up in the South, I understand quiet money. They must look impeccable; their clothing must be perfect. It’s a way to elevate and to put down at the same time. And, having spent the 22 years since I was last at a.c.t. in Los Angeles, working in another venue [film and television], I’m very attuned to profit margin and to the notion of, What is enough? If you’re not psychologically and emotionally prepared to be confident about yourself, nothing is enough. The hole is huge, and the easiest way in that community to handle it is to just keep filling it with money. For example, one person has this special Swiss watch that nobody knows is different from anybody else’s Swiss watch, unless they themselves buy the same Swiss watch, and then it’s about the inner circle recognizing each other, because they recognize the watch that you and I don’t recognize. It just looks like a watch to me, but it’s a $50,000 watch on their wrist. It’s that kind of thing these characters are striving for, in my mind.
THE LITTLE FOXES: PRODUCTION HISTORY

Lillian Hellman completed *The Little Foxes* in 1938 and turned the script over to her future lover, the producer Herman Shumlin. Shumlin immediately went to work on producing the play, aiming at an opening in early 1939. He assembled the following cast: Abbie Mitchell as Addie, John Marriott as Cal, Patricia Collinge as Birdie Hubbard, Carl Benton Reid as Oscar Hubbard, Dan Duryea as Leo Hubbard, Tallulah Bankhead as Regina Giddens, Lee Baker as William Marshall, Charles Dingle as Benjamin Hubbard, Florence Williams as Alexandra Giddens, and Frank Conroy as Horace Giddens. Howard Bay designed the set and Aline Bernstein designed the costumes. Shumlin decided to direct the play himself and began rehearsals on January 9, 1939.

Hellman attended rehearsals regularly, ready to protect her text from actors wishing to be authors. Only one significant change was made after the play was in rehearsal: Originally the play ended with a final scene between Addie and Alexandra in which Addie mocks Zan for not defying Regina and leaving. Arthur Kober suggested cutting the scene and giving the final moments to Regina and Alexandra. Hellman liked his idea. She also liked Dorothy Parker’s comparison of her play to the biblical passage in the “Song of Solomon,” “Take us the foxes, the little foxes, that spoil the vines, for our vines have tender grapes,” and took her title from the quote. By the end of the month, the play was ready to move to Baltimore for a preview. *The Little Foxes* opened at the Ford Theatre in Baltimore on February 2, 1939.

On February 15, Hellman’s play moved to the National Theatre in New York City, where it was a huge success. George Kaufman sent Hellman a telegram after the opening with the praise, “That’s telling them.” The production ran for 410 performances and closed on February 2, 1940. Critics were impressed with both the production and its performers. Brooks Atkinson’s *New York Times* review reflected the general opinion, “Miss Hellman can write for actors, and the cast of *The Little Foxes* includes some of the best.”

The role of Regina brought Tallulah Bankhead the much-needed attention to jump-start her career in the United States. In his *Broadway Scrapbook*, John Mason Brown maintains, “If *The Little Foxes* gave us no other cause for gratitude, the mere fact that it at last provides Tallulah Bankhead with a part in this country which reveals her full splendors as an actress would be enough to put us all in Hellman’s debt.” Bankhead was not Hellman’s first choice for the role. Hellman initially approached Ina Claire, who, to Hellman’s dismay, was bound to a prior Hollywood commitment. Luckily for Bankhead, Shumlin convinced Hellman that she was perfect for the role of Regina. The critics agreed with
Shumlin—Richard Watts, Jr., of the New York Herald Tribune claimed Bankhead's portrayal of Regina was “the finest performance of her local career, a portrayal that is honest, merciless, and completely understanding.”

The two terms most often used to describe Hellman’s play were melodramatic and well made. For many critics, such words were not intended as insults. George Ross wrote in the New York World-Telegram, “Miss Hellman is narrating this grim plot in a melodramatic fashion and if some of the tricks she uses are as obvious as the ruses for suspense in, say, an Agatha Christie novel they command the playgoers’ undivided attention.” However, a small group of critics used the same terms to describe flaws with Hellman’s work. Brook Atkinson wrote in the New York Times, “She writes with melodramatic abandon, plotting torture, death, and thievery like an author of an old-time thriller. She has made her drama airtight; it is a knowing job of construction, deliberate and self-contained. But The Little Foxes is so cleverly contrived that it lacks spontaneity. It is easier to accept as an adroitly designed theater piece than as a document in the study of humanity.”

In February 1939 in a New York Times article titled “Back of Those Foxes,” Hellman entered the critical commentary regarding melodrama and its relation to her play. While Hellman believed The Little Foxes to be a melodrama, she felt uncomfortable with negative connotations attached to the word. “I used to say to myself that The Little Foxes was a melodrama. Melodrama is an interesting word because it has a corrupted modern meaning. It used to be a good word. For many centuries of writers a good way to write.” The article attempts to rethink melodrama and find a better way to evaluate its use in modern theater. Hellman maintains that melodrama “is only a bad way to write if your solutions are melodramatic.”

Melodramatic or not, The Little Foxes was nominated for the 1940 New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award for best play. Other nominees included Robert E. Sherwood’s Abe Lincoln in Illinois, Clifford Odets’s Rocket to the Moon, and William Saroyan’s My Heart's
in the Highlands. Although The Little Foxes received the most votes—six to Abe Lincoln in Illinois’s five—no play held a three-fourths majority, so the four plays shared the award.

Hellman did not attend the banquet held in 1940 to honor the four nominated plays. Instead she was off to Hollywood to adapt The Little Foxes for Samuel Goldwyn. Goldwyn teamed Hellman with director William Wyler and cinematographer Gregg Toland. All three had collaborated on two previous pictures—These Three and Dead End—both Broadway adaptations [These Three of Hellman’s The Children’s Hour]. Four original cast members followed Hellman to Hollywood: Patricia Collinge (Birdie), Dan Duryea (Leo), Charles Dingle (Ben), and Carl Benton Reid (Oscar). New cast members included: Bette Davis (Regina), Herbert Marshall (Horace), Teresa Wright (Alexandra), and Davis Carson (David Hewitt). rko Pictures released the film in 1941.

In order to successfully adapt her play for the screen, Hellman made several changes to her original script. Most noticeably, she added a new character—David Hewitt, the town’s liberal newspaper editor—to be Zan’s love interest. She enlarged Zan’s part (as well as strengthened her character) by dramatizing the narrated incident in the second act in which Zan spends the night in Mobile with her father. In order to extend the action out of the living room, Hellman cut the first scene between Addie and Cal and substituted a cinematic prologue of the town the morning before the dinner party. To appease the Hays Production Codes, Hellman deleted all references to Horace’s adultery and to Regina cheating Horace out of his marital rights. Regina’s character changes from a Southern Circe into a middle-aged woman uncomfortable with the aging process. The producers were somehow able to circumvent the section of the Hays Codes that required all murderers be punished or killed on screen. The Little Foxes premiered in New York City at Radio City Music Hall on August 21, 1941. The New York Times proclaimed it “the most bitingly sinister picture of the year,” Bette Davis at “her brittle best, playing one of those Borgias with cut-glass brilliance, a serene cupidity, a frightening frigidity.”

During the 1940s, The Little Foxes went on a national tour. It was also produced internationally in London, Paris, Denmark, and Sweden. In 1944 Hellman went to Moscow for the staging and opening of both The Little Foxes and Watch on the Rhine; in 1948 she went to Yugoslavia. The Little Foxes made Lillian Hellman an international celebrity.

During the fall of 1967, Arnold Saint-Subber and Jules Irving revived The Little Foxes at Lincoln Center’s Vivian Beaumont Theatre with a cast that included: Anne Bancroft (Regina), George C. Scott (Ben), Margret Leighton (Birdie), e. g. Marshall (Oscar), and Maria Tucci (Alexandra). Hellman collaborated with Mike Nichols, the director, and Howard Bay, the set designer. The critics deemed the production “an incredible theatrical experience.” Clive Barnes of the New York Times wrote, “For the first time at the Vivian
Beaumont I have seen something that looks, moves, and behaves like national theater.” The audience was equally impressed. For the scheduled limited run of 60 performances from October 26 to December 16, the show was a sellout. Though an extension required a number of cast changes, the demand for tickets was so great that the production was moved to the Ethel Barrymore Theatre for 40 additional performances.

In 1981 Elizabeth Taylor made her first ever stage appearance in the role of Regina. The production ran at the Kennedy Center, in New York, and finally in London, receiving mixed reviews for both Taylor and the production. Those who found the production tedious frequently went on to describe the play itself as old-fashioned and no longer relevant. Taylor was either praised for her star turn or mocked for her lack of stage experience. Taylor and the company were directed by Austin Pendleton, who played Leo in the 1967 revival, with Maureen Stapleton playing Birdie, Anthony Zerbe as Ben, and Tom Aldredge as Horace. Hellman was by this time in her 70s and nearly blind, but remained an active part of the production, insisting on final approval of all casting choices.

Since then The Little Foxes has become a favorite in the American regional theater scene. [a.c.t. produced the play in 1979, with Elizabeth Huddle portraying Regina Giddens and Peter Donat as Horace.] A 1997 Lincoln Center production starring Stockard Channing and directed by Jack O’Brien was not well received.

A discussion of The Little Foxes would not be complete without mentioning Regina, Marc Blitzstein’s 1949 operatic adaptation. Already a successful composer and adapter by the mid 1940s, Blitzstein was looking for opera that would be distinctly American and was looking at texts by O’Neill and Twain when a friend suggested The Little Foxes. Blitzstein is said to have considered The Little Foxes the finest play written in America and with his adaptation hoped to transform it into “something as real musically to Americans as Italian opera is to the Italians.” He worked for three years on the opera, under the scrutiny of Lillian Hellman, who had granted him rights on the condition of her acceptance of the final product. Regina opened on Broadway in October 1949 and ran for 56 performances. While it was not an exceedingly long run, it was respectable for a contemporary opera. More importantly, the opera received extensive critical acclaim; it is considered by many to be Blitzstein’s masterpiece. Regina was revived by New York City Opera Company in 1953 with Brenda Lewis as Regina, and again in 1956 when the Herman Shumlin–Howard Bay team from the original production of The Little Foxes returned to direct and design. Arvin Brown’s 1988 production at Long Wharf Theatre was critically acclaimed and starred Rosalind Elias, who went on to direct City Opera’s third revival of Regina in 1992. That both The Little Foxes and Regina continue to experience such frequent revivals speaks volumes for the timeless nature of the story and characters Hellman created.
LILLIAN HELLMAN ON *THE LITTLE FOXES*

It seemed to me, in *The Little Foxes* [sic] an essay in dramatic technique as well as an interesting business to depict a family just as it was on the way to the achievements which were to bring it wealth or failure, fame or obloquy. At the final curtain the Hubbards are just starting to get on in the world in a big way, but their various futures, individually and collectively, I like to think I leave to the imagination of the audience. I meant to be neither misanthropic nor cynical, merely truthful and realistic.

—Interview with Lucius Beebe, *New York Herald Tribune*, 1939

I had meant to half-mock my own youthful high-class innocence in Alexandra . . . I had meant people to smile at, and to sympathize with, the sad, weak Birdie, certainly I had not meant them to cry; I had meant the audience to recognize some part of themselves in the money-dominated Hubbards; I had not meant people to think of them as villains to whom they had no connection.

—*Pentimento: A Book of Portraits*, 1973

**CRITICAL COMMENTARY**

As a theatrical story-teller Lillian Hellman is biting and expert . . . It would be difficult to find a more malignant gang of petty robber barons than Miss Hellman’s chief characters. . . . It is an inhuman tale. Miss Hellman takes a dextrous playwright’s advantage of the abominations it contains. Her first act is a masterpiece of skillful exposition. Under the gentility of a social occasion, she suggests with admirable reticence the evil of her conspirators. When she lets loose in the other two acts she writes with melodramatic abandon, plotting torture, death, and thievery like the author of an old-time thriller. She has made her drama air-tight; it is a knowing job of construction, deliberate and self-contained. In the end she tosses in a speech of social significance, which is no doubt sincere. . . . Miss Hellman has made an adult horror-play. Her little foxes are wolves that eat their own kind.


Lillian Hellman refuses to compromise. When she writes a drama she hews to the line, and lets her audience find its sympathetic emotional compensations, if any, where it can.


*The Little Foxes* denies us all sense of tragedy, offers us nothing of the tragic sense of life. For just that reason *The Little Foxes* comes through as the most effective kind of protest; it sends us out of the theater, not purged, not released, but still aroused and indignant.

—Louis Kronenberger, *Stage*, 1939
The Little Foxes is a play to put into a small box and tuck under your pillow at night. You may have nightmares, but they will do you good.

—Robert Benchley, *New Yorker*, 1939

Miss Hellman has a genius for plotting. Such close-knit plotting as she is adept at is slightly old-fashioned in the theater; it is a lost art.

—John Mason Brown, *Broadway in Review*, 1940

Miss Hellman's first act is as gripping an opening as the season has afforded. She succeeds in evoking an immediate interest in her people and the situation in which they are involved. Her people are not mere outlines of types, they are three dimensional. They have lived their pasts and are projected into a future as turbulent as their present.


Miss Hellman's new play is a grim, bitter, and merciless study; a drama more honest, more pointed, and more brilliant than even her triumphant previous work. . . . With Ibsenesque directness, it contemplates the relentless emergence of a new industrialism from the ashes of a sentimental past, the coming to power of a social order that lifted itself from the ranks of the one-time poor whites and used the emotional code of the old South only as a mask for its ascent. All of this Miss Hellman achieves in a quiet play that never leaves the living room of a family home. Here is another fine and important American drama.

—Richard Watts, Jr., *New York Herald Tribune*, 1939

[Tom] Moore has directed a tight, totally gripping show. . . . The play is nearly half a century old, now; but, alas, it has scarcely dated. Or, rather, it has dated only in one respect: Hellman underlines her message about the evil of human greed, preaching to us about an upcoming century of Hubbard-style ruthless grasping; and we do not need to have this message emphasized, for the truth of her predictions is all too obvious in today's world. Indeed, during the earlier scenes of the play, the craven plottings and counterplottings of the Hubbards get laughs from the audience—it is, I believe, the laughter of recognition.


A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF LILLIAN HELLMAN

Lillian Hellman’s career spanned 50 years and touched some of the most turbulent events of the 20th century. Her canon includes more hit plays than any other female playwright, and she ranks consistently among the most widely produced dramatists in the world. In her life and her work alike, she addressed fundamental issues: family, money, sex, loyalty, treachery, integrity, and justice. By her own admission, she was an angry woman, but her anger was galvanic. “I came from a family of Southerners. It wasn’t simply a question that I was brought up and down from the South. I came from a family, on both sides, who had been Southerners a great many generations.”

Lillian Florence Hellman was born in New Orleans in 1906. Her family was German-Jewish on both sides, having come to Alabama and Louisiana in the early 1800s. One grandfather fought for the Confederacy and another grew wealthy during the Civil War—as does Marcus Hubbard, the patriarch of her play, Another Part of the Forest, and father of the main characters in The Little Foxes. When Hellman was five, her family moved to New York City. But she spent half of every year in New Orleans until she was 19, and she always considered herself a Southerner.

Hellman attended NYU for three years before taking a job as a manuscript reader for Boni & Livewright publishers. She also worked as a book reviewer for the New York Herald Tribune and as a theatrical publicist. In 1925, she married Arthur Kober, then press agent to Broadway producer Jed Harris. Five years later, Kober was offered a screenwriting job at Paramount Pictures, so the couple moved to Hollywood. By this time, Hellman had published some short fiction, but she later dismissed it as “lady writer” stories.

While her husband worked as a screenwriter at Paramount, Hellman led the rather aimless existence of a Hollywood wife. Through Kober, however, she entered the social circle of Hollywood writers who had been rushed west by the studios to provide scripts for the
new talking pictures. She found a script-reading job at MGM, and shortly after that she met the man who would be a powerful force in her life and work for more than 30 years—the respected mystery writer Dashiell Hammett. They soon moved in together, then returned to New York, where their circle included William Faulkner, Dorothy Parker, s. j. Perelman, and Nathaniel West. Hellman and her husband, Kober, divorced amicably, and she found work as a play reader for producer-director Herman Shumlin, who would later direct many of her plays.

Hellman blossomed under Hammett’s rigorous guidance. She moved from short stories to satire, but she felt comfortable in neither genre. Her first effort at drama was *Dear Queen*, a comedy she wrote with an old colleague from her publishing days. It was never produced. Hammett, who at the time was pushing to finish *The Thin Man*, suggested that she write a play based on a true story he had hoped to use in some way. Many drafts later, Hellman placed an unsigned script on Herman Shumlin’s desk; soon after that, *The Children’s Hour* rocked Broadway.

At a time when few contemporary plays openly discussed any form of sexuality, this indictment of a child’s lie about a lesbian love affair and that lie’s consequences caused a sensation on Broadway and transformed Hellman from what one biographer calls “a celebrated writer’s girlfriend” to a figure of sudden celebrity, lifelong controversy, and undeniably the first rank of American playwrights. It played more than 600 performances, and popular opinion acknowledged it to be the outstanding drama of the 1934–35 season. Yet the Pulitzer Prize committee chose to bypass *The Children’s Hour* for the drama award. The literary and theater communities were outraged; they declared that a new and more worthy award for playwriting was needed. The following season, the New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award for best play was created. Lillian Hellman would win it twice—in 1941 for *Watch on the Rhine* and in 1960 for *Toys in the Attic*.

The success of *The Children’s Hour* earned Hellman a lucrative offer to write screenplays for producer Samuel Goldwyn, and she returned to Hollywood. Free to choose her own projects, Hellman soon adapted *The Children’s Hour* for the screen. Retitled *These Three* and directed by William Wyler, it brought Hellman further acclaim as a major writer for both theater and film. Ironically, her success came just as Dashiell Hammett’s creative decline...
began. *The Thin Man* (featuring the charismatic Charleses, Nick and Nora) was to be his last novel.

Throughout the 1930s, labor unrest and continued economic depression led to a surge in political organization nationwide. Film industry writers, long powerless in their dealings with studio heads, became particularly active. Hellman and Hammett both joined the fledgling Screen Writers’ Guild. Hammett and many others also joined the Communist Party. During this time, Hellman’s confidence as a playwright grew, but her next play was the ill-fated political drama *Days to Come*, which played just six performances. After adapting Sidney Kingsley’s play *Dead End* for film, she traveled to France, Russia, and then Spain to see firsthand the brutal civil war there. She returned to America a fervent antifascist, yet like many young American intellectuals of the time, a great admirer of Soviet Russia and Stalin.

In *The Little Foxes*, arguably her masterpiece, Hellman achieved a new harmony of character and construction. And, in Regina Giddens, the playwright realized one of the memorable creations of the American theater, a villain to root for. In fact, the play is distinguished by the unrepentant malevolence of its appealing protagonists. The play opened on February 15, 1939, and ran for a year, amassing 410 performances and confirming Lillian Hellman as one of the preeminent American dramatists of the day. The film, starring Bette Davis, was equally successful. Hellman followed in 1941 with *Watch on the Rhine*, an antifascist thriller that introduced something new for the author, a genuinely sympathetic hero. It served notice that when it came to fighting fascism, even Hellman the Russophile could do her patriotic best. During the war, Hellman traveled to Moscow as a guest of the Soviet government; she was even permitted to spend two weeks at the front, an experience she recounts with telling detail in her memoir, *An Unfinished Woman*. Works of this period include: *The North Star*, a film about a Russian village during Nazi occupation; *The Searching Wind* and, in 1946, *Another Part of the Forest*, a second play about the Hubbards, set 20 years before *The Little Foxes*.

“A sickening, sickening, immoral, and degrading week,” Hellman wrote in 1947, as Hollywood producers agreed to blacklist communist, former communist, and suspected former communist writers and directors. Hammett was jailed for six months in 1951. Hellman would be subpoenaed to testify in 1952, but she had already been blacklisted since 1948 and would remain so until the early 1960s. [One of her most oft-quoted lines is from a 1952 letter she wrote to the House Un-American Activities Committee: “I cannot and will not cut my conscience to fit this year’s fashions.”] Hammett’s health deteriorated after a heart attack, and he came to live with Hellman in 1958. She supported and cared for him until his death in 1961.
Hellman continued to work in the theater. Her works in those years include *Montserrat*, an adaptation from the Spanish play by Robles; *Regina*, Marc Blitzstein's opera adaptation of *The Little Foxes; The Autumn Garden* (1951); *The Lark*, adapted from Anouilh; the libretto for Leonard Bernstein's *Candide, Toys in the Attic* (1960), and her final play, *My Mother, My Father and Me*, an adaptation of Burt Blechman's novel *How Much?* (1963).

Hellman would write a few more screenplays but nothing more for the stage. She spent much of the '60s teaching and traveling, and she continued to involve herself in intellectual and political causes, most notably the Committee for Public Justice, which she co-organized to prevent a repeat of the excesses of the McCarthy years.


The veracity of Hellman's memoirs was called into question by intellectuals like Elizabeth Hardwick and Mary McCarthy (author of *The Group*). Hellman became embroiled in a very public feud with McCarthy, who had called Hellman “a liar” on television. Hellman sued for defamation; the literary world took sides and enjoyed the uproar. But Hellman was infirm. Her eyesight was gone. She suffered from severe arthritis, congestive heart failure, and emphysema. Her furious lawsuit was finally resolved by her death at Martha’s Vineyard in June 1984. Her last book, written with Peter Feibleman and issued posthumously, was *Eating Together: Recollections and Recipes*.

Lillian Hellman wrote eight original plays, four adaptations of plays, six screenplays, three volumes of memoirs, a novella, and many short stories and essays. Her numerous awards included the Gold Medal for Drama from the National Institute of Arts and Letters, honorary degrees from Yale and Columbia universities, the Brandeis University Creative Arts Award, and the MacDowell Award for outstanding contributions to the arts. She interviewed heads of state. She reported on the Republican convention of 1940 and the march on Washington of 1963. She fictionalized her own life. She smoked incessantly. She provoked compulsively. For decades, passionately, she fished.

Lillian Hellman long ago admitted to modeling the vicious Hubbards of *The Little Foxes* after her maternal grandmother’s family, the Marxes. The family is furthered represented in *Another Part of the Forest*, the prequel to *The Little Foxes* that was written eight years later. *Another Part of the Forest* tells of the life of the Hubbard (Marx) family as they were 20 years before the events of *The Little Foxes*.

Isaac Marx, Hellman’s great-grandfather, moved to Alabama from Germany in 1840. Like many German-Jewish immigrants of the time, he settled first in Mobile, Alabama. Marx started out as a peddler, but was soon running his own dry-goods store and was able to establish his family as comfortably middle class. After the Civil War, the Marxes moved to Demopolis, Alabama.

Demopolis was founded in 1817 by Frenchmen who immigrated to the United States after Napoleon’s defeat. Because it was built on two rivers and situated between Birmingham and Mobile, Demopolis was a natural stopping point for many on their way through the state. Its accessibility to immigrants who had initially settled in Mobile made it both a good place to set up business and also a more tolerant and better integrated town than others in the South. Isaac Marx and his sons went on to become quite prosperous here; from the characterizations in *Another Part of the Forest*, Hellman seems to suggest that the family profitted from the war by betraying the Confederates for money.

Direct parallels can be made between the characters in *The Little Foxes* and members of Hellman’s mother’s family. Sophie Marx Newhouse was the second oldest of Isaac’s ten children and the matriarch of the Marx clan. Like Regina Giddens, Sophie Newhouse had a different married name, but she was a pivotal figure in family politics. The Marx brothers congregated at the home of their sister to talk and scheme about money, just as the Hubbards congregate at the home of Regina. Reminiscing about the many family gatherings at her grandmother’s house, Hellman remarked, “My mother’s family used to have fun cutting each other’s throats.”

Jacob (Jake) Marx was the oldest child of the family, and the propietor of the successful Marx Bank in Demopolis. Just as Ben Hubbard battles with Regina, Jake was the only member of the family who questioned Sophie’s authority. Hellman described her Uncle Jake as “witty and rather worldly, seeing his own financial machinations as natural not only to his but the country’s benefit, and seeing that as comical.” Eventually, Jake sold the bank in Demopolis and moved to New York where he experienced even greater success. Sophie,
who was by that time a wealthy widow, followed him there and relied on him to look after her investments.

Leonard Newhouse was Sophie’s husband and at least a partial model for Horace. While he was not as wealthy as Jacob Marx, he amassed enough capital to leave his wife plenty of money when he died. In an early draft of *The Little Foxes*, Hellman had Regina out riding her horse around the town while Horace lay dying, a reference to Sophie Newhouse’s behavior during Leonard Newhouse’s death.

Hellman’s mother, Julia, did not share her family’s aggressive characteristics and did not stand up for herself, characteristics echoed in Hellman’s portrayal of Birdie. Hellman described her mother as “kind of sadly whacky, not crazy, but fey, and disjointed, and sweet, and lost.” Though Hellman despised the behavior of her wealthy relatives, especially the way they grew rich from the “borrowings” of poor Negroes, she also looked down upon her mother’s weakness and was surprised to learn that audiences could perceive Birdie as anything but silly.

Part of her enmity for the Marx and Newhouse families must have come from their treatment of her father’s family, whom Hellman adored. She constantly felt that her mother’s family looked down on them and their lower-middle-class existence. As a child, she was ashamed of her family’s shabby surroundings, but by the time she was an adult, Hellman was proud to claim the Marxes’ disapproval. She liked to tell the story of a friend who went to visit one of her Newhouse aunts while in Demopolis. When he introduced himself as a friend of Hellman, the aunt responded, “We don’t like her,” and slammed the door.

“THE THERE MUST BE BETTER WAYS OF GETTING RICH THAN CHEATING NIGGERS ON A POUND OF BACON. WHY SHOULD I GIVE YOU THE MONEY? TO POUND THE BONES OF THIS TOWN TO MAKE DIVIDENDS FOR YOU TO SPEND? YOU WRECK THE TOWN, YOU AND YOUR BROTHERS, YOU WRECK THE TOWN AND LIVE ON IT. NOT ME. MAYBE IT’S EASY FOR THE DYING TO BE HONEST. BUT IT’S NOT MY FAULT I’M DYING. I’LL DO NO MORE HARM NOW. I’VE DONE ENOUGH. I’LL DIE MY OWN WAY. AND I’LL DO IT WITHOUT MAKING THE WORLD ANY WORSE. I LEAVE THAT TO YOU.”

—Horace Giddens, *The Little Foxes*

THE NEW SOUTH AND THE RISE OF INDUSTRY

BY MICHAEL PALLER

Lillian Hellman was famous for the amount of research she did before writing a play. *The Little Foxes*, she said, was based on stories she heard her family tell about their experiences in business, and apparently she also read a lot of history. Nonetheless, she took a fair amount of liberty with details. The desire to attract Northern industry and money to the South that she portrays in *The Little Foxes* was underway long before 1900, when the play is set. Ben Hubbard’s ambition is “to bring the machine to the cotton, and not the cotton to the machine.” A few minutes later he paraphrases American industrialist Henry Clay Frick: “Southern cotton mills will be the Rembrandts of investments.” Actually, by 1900, cotton and textile mills had been an important part of the South’s economy for 20 years. They were an integral component of what had come to be called “The New South.”

The Hubbards represent the desires of a rising class of merchants and capitalists for whom the New South meant extending to themselves and the region the opportunities of the developed North. In 1898, the Richmond banker and railroad president John Skelton Williams said that he was “hoping to see in the South in the not-distant future many railroads and business institutions as great as the Pennsylvania Railroad, the Mutual Life Insurance Company, the Carnegie Steel Company, or the Standard Oil Company.” As the historian C. Vann Woodward points out, “It was assumed, of course, that as such corporations developed, Southern counterparts of the Morgans, Carnegies, and Rockefellers would rise with them.” One can imagine the Hubbards seeing themselves as part of this exclusive company.

The New South got its name from a speech given by the editor of the *Atlanta Constitution*, Henry W. Grady, at Delmonico’s restaurant in New York at the end of 1886. He was among a number of prominent Southerners who believed that the South’s future lay in industrialization and that the agrarian, plantation economy that had dominated the South until 1860 was a thing of the past. Even by 1886, the idea was not new. The South had joined forces with Northern industry and capital in developing not only the textile industry but also railroads, mining, steel, furniture, and lumber. Tobacco, another antebellum staple, also saw exponential growth with the introduction of cigarette manufacturing in 1880. By 1884, the Duke tobacco company was selling 400,000 cigarettes a day. (In another 20 years, the company would be transformed into the American Tobacco Company, operating out of New York.) Here’s an excerpt of the Grady speech that gave this movement toward a modern economy its name:
The South found her jewel in the toad's head of defeat. The shackles that had held her in narrow limitations fell forever when the shackles of the negro slave were broken. Under the old regime the negroes were slaves to the South; the South was a slave to the system. The old plantation, with its simple police regulations and feudal habit, was the only type possible under slavery. Thus was gathered in the hands of a splendid and chivalric oligarchy the substance that should have been diffused among the people, as the rich blood, under certain artificial conditions, is gathered at the heart, filling that with affluent rapture but leaving the body chill and colorless.
The old South rested everything on slavery and agriculture, unconscious that these could neither give nor maintain healthy growth. The new South presents a perfect democracy, the oligarchs leading in the popular movement—a social system compact and closely knitted, less splendid on the surface, but stronger at the core—a hundred farms for every plantation, fifty homes for every palace—and a diversified industry that meets the complex needs of this complex age.

The new South is enamored of her new work. Her soul is stirred with the breath of a new life. The light of a grander day is falling fair on her face. She is thrilling with the consciousness of growing power and prosperity. As she stands upright, full-statured, and equal among the people of the earth, breathing the keen air and looking out upon the expanded horizon, she understands that her emancipation came because through the inscrutable wisdom of God her honest purpose was crossed, and her brave armies were beaten.

Indeed, even by 1886, the industrialization that Grady spoke of had been underway for at least six years. According to the *Dictionary of American History*, “Between 1860 and 1880 several southern states more than doubled their prewar production [of cotton textiles]. . . . In a dizzying period of expansion, the number of mills in the South rose from 161 in 1880 to 400 in 1900. The rate of growth in the 1890s was 67.4 percent, compared with the national increase of 7.5 percent. Capital investment in southern cotton mills increased by 131.4 percent between 1880 and 1900, while investments in New England mills increased by only 12.1 percent.” This was only a part of the rapid industrialization the South was experiencing; miles of railroads also increased tremendously: “Southern railroad mileage increased from 16,605 miles in 1880 to 39,108 in 1890, a 135.5 percent increase, in comparison with an 86.5 percent increase for the nation as a whole. In the 1880s more than 180 new railroad companies instituted activities in the region.”

What Southerners had less in mind, perhaps, was the amount of control that the Northern companies and investors would exert. Since Southern businessmen—a relatively new class—had comparatively little capital of their own, most of the investment money came from the North and from England. Indeed, the iron and steel industries that sprang up in the South would be dominated by Northern money well into the 20th century. The unspoken wish of John Skelton Williams, to populate the South with homegrown equivalents of the Northern business titans, didn't develop. Instead, most of the rising Southern businessmen became managers, and Woodward tells us that the economy they presided
over was “one of branch plants, branch banks, captive mines, and chain stores.” Certainly, it’s a wish of the Hubbards to keep the business in the family. If they succeeded, they would be one of the few families that did.

**THE DECLINE OF THE PLANTER CLASS**

The rise of industry meant the decline of the old aristocratic planter class, just as the Hubbards had replaced Birdie’s family, the Bagtrys. Thomas D. Clark and Albert D. Kirwan, in *The South Since Appomatox*, relate:

> Although they resembled the oligarchy of the antebellum period, actually, the new leaders [of the postwar South] were not as a rule primarily concerned with the planting interests . . . . The overwhelming majority of the people would continue to be occupied with agriculture, but there were richer rewards now to be found in other economic pursuits; for the war effected a revolution in the towns, where many returning soldiers took up banking, merchandising, railroad promotion, manufacturing, and other occupations. Even in the rural areas, the storekeeper soon replaced the planter as the dominant influence and many antebellum slave owner turned merchant and furnished supplies to his former slaves as well as his yeoman neighbors.

In 1929, a writer named Clarence Cason wrote about his native Alabama and the changes that his hometown had seen since the rise of the industrialists: “Fifteen years ago in the town where I lived the important names were invariably those of families who had held their land for generations . . . [but] the moment that cotton as a commodity passed from the agricultural to the industrial stage, there were signs of unnaturalness and unfamiliarity on the part of the people.” Since the early years of the century he had witnessed “that old order—which placed living before livelihood—losing its social and economic grip in many sections of the South.”

By 1897, a traveler through the Black Belt—the great swath of land stretching from Mississippi in the West to South Carolina in the East—witnessed scenes like this: “Most of the ancestral homes have been abandoned by their owners for a residence in the cities, the white-columned porticoes of the favorite colonial architecture resounding only to the rough banter and quarrels of the negro tenants and their children.”

In truth, the transition from agriculture to manufacturing, with the replacement of the aristocratic planter class by the new merchant class, was not nearly as stark as Cason and Hellman paint it. In the minds of the nostalgic (and they were many), there was a signif-
icant change—a change in values, from a gentler way of life where the emphasis was on living, to the modern, harder way of life, where the important thing was livelihood. Although the facts did not back it up, many Southerners, looking back upon the antebellum years, increasingly saw history divided between the Birdie Bagtrys before 1860 and the Ben Hubbards after.

In fact, although much plantation land was broken up and taken over by small farmers, there were still enough powerful planters (now renting their land to sharecroppers) to team with the new industrialists and merchants. Together, especially in Alabama and North Carolina, they presided over a New South that politically and socially was, in the words of James C. Cobb, “agrarian-oriented, [while] manufacturing growth centered on low-wage, labor-intensive industries, most of which were involved in processing raw materials or agricultural products” such as cotton. The New South at the turn of the century “remained a closed society, heavily influenced if not dominated by conservative planters but nonetheless offering industrial investors a relatively free hand to exploit the region's human and natural resources.”

THE RISE OF THE MERCHANT CLASS

Our grandfather and our father learned the new ways and learned how to make them pay. They were in trade. Hubbard Sons. Merchants. Birdie’s family, for example, looked down on them. To make a long story short, Lionett now belongs to us. Twenty years ago we took over their land, their cotton, and their daughter.

—Ben Hubbard, The Little Foxes

Many of the plantations had been destroyed in the war but others remained, often still in the hands of relatively wealthy and powerful owners. Because they no longer had slaves, most of the owners leased their farms to tenant farmers and sharecroppers, black and white. Although none of these farmers were in the legal sense slaves, they quickly became part of what was essentially a feudal system in which most of the cotton they grew was turned over to the landowner. A good guess would be that the Hubbards, as the owners of Lionett, controlled a plantation cultivated by tenant farmers who turned most of their crop over to either their landlord or the merchants who had lent them credit—again, the Hubbards. In fact, the Hubbards seem to be pioneers in the concept of vertical business organization in the South: they own the raw material and, once the mill is built, the means to manufacture the finished product. Their power would extend beyond the mill; with such an arrangement, they would control the livelihood of virtually every member of the com-
munity: the blacks who sharecropped on the Hubbard land and were so poor that they relied for food on the little they could hunt once Oscar was through, and the poor whites who either farmed or worked for low wages in the mill.

In general, the farmers relied either on the landowner or the newly emerging merchant class for their supplies, from seed to plows and food with which to feed their families. The cost of those supplies was in most places so high that the farmers were endlessly in debt, since the great share of the little they might make from each year’s crop went back to the merchant to pay off the credit he had extended them. Clark and Kirwan: “All farmers lived on credit. If they owned land they mortgaged it and used the money to provide necessities. If they owned no land they mortgaged next year’s crop to the storekeeper and used up the proceeds.” Here’s how it worked:

[T]he merchant, being part banker, part landlord, part storekeeper, in local circles had the power of a despot. Holding a mortgage both on the farmer’s growing crop as well as on any personal property he might own, such as a mule and a wagon, he extended credit for all the farmer’s needs during the summer through the fall until the cotton was harvested and sold. He supplied the tenant with food, clothing, tobacco, and even medicine—all at a 50 to 100 percent mark-up. The landlord and the merchant watched over the crop as eagerly as the tenant, for indeed their interest in it was as great as was his and their control even greater.

Merchants like Hubbard Sons occupied an ambivalent position in the postwar South. On one hand they were welcome: sharecroppers, tenant farmers, and small independent farmers had no access to banks because they had no money or significant property for collateral, and each year it was far from certain that they could produce a crop—almost always cotton—that would bring a return on a bank’s investment. They turned instead to the merchants (owners of general and dry goods stores, usually) who were almost always willing to extend credit for whatever the farmers needed. The merchants were the only ones willing and able to extend credit in the closed system that cotton farming was, where cash was virtually nonexistent. Clark and Kirwan tell us, “Their stores, because of the diversity of their merchandise, and their functions as community centers, bore a kinship to the New England and Midwestern country stores.” On the other hand, they were quick to take advantage of their position as lender of the last (and only) resort. “By granting credit on lien notes, merchants became virtual overlords of their patrons’ economic and social lives.”

The merchants would usually greatly mark up the goods they sold, but it should be remembered that they would often be held hostage by their wholesalers, who marked up
at very high rates, as well. Also, landlords would often act as middlemen between the merchants and the farmers, so that some of the high mark-up was never seen by the merchants.

Because of their power—and the abuse it was often subject to—the merchants were accused of all manner of crimes: charging high prices for shoddy merchandise, astronomical interest rates, shoddy or dishonest bookkeeping, and so on. And of course, many merchants did these things. “As agents for fertilizer companies,” Clark and Kirwan point out, “they sold ineffectual chemicals which only drove farmers into debt and caused them to wreck their land.”

Since the merchants’ livelihoods depended on a good crop almost as much as the farmers’ did, most merchants had to learn everything about local farming conditions. Before a merchant would give credit, he usually wanted to know the details: how much land was the farmer going to plant, what kind of work force he had (usually meaning the number of family members), the number and condition of his animals. Often, the merchants would inspect the farmers’ fields themselves to see how the crop was coming. Although they set up the system so that they would benefit far more than the farmers did in good years, when there were bad years they lost, too. As Clark and Kirwan point out, “There were risks connected with a business that depended upon the frailties of ignorant human beings, the weather, and the uncertainties of national and world markets.”

The merchants’ position in the cotton industry gave them almost total control over their farmer customers:

> When it was ready for market, the merchant took possession, sold it, paid the landlord his share for rent, deducted his bill, and if anything remained, gave it to the tenant. Cotton thus became the currency of the rural South, and since landlord and merchant would accept rent or extend credit on no other crop, the system produced a surplus which depressed the price and held the tenant in all but perpetual debt.

W. E. B. DuBois reported that of 300 tenant families in a Black Belt Georgia county in 1898, 75 made an aggregate profit of only $1,600, while the remainder ended the year with a total debt of $14,000.

As domestic workers, Addie and Cal are relatively lucky. Of course, they have to endure Jim Crow, since democracy and equality for the black population were not part of the plan of the New South. They would certainly not be employed in the textile mills. While the workforce in virtually every other industry in the South was almost balanced between black and white workers, in the textile mills, the workers were almost exclusively white. The explanation can be found in the fact that the mills employed so many women and girls;
Ayers tells us that most workers, male and female, were in their teens or early 20s; a third of the women were 15 or younger. “Mill owners,” Ayers says, “would not allow blacks to work alongside the white women and girls who made up the bulk of the workforce.” The few blacks who found employment at the mills worked outside, loading or unloading, “and in the suffocating rooms where they opened bales for processing.”

**Banking**

In a rural state like Alabama, banks were few and located mostly in the county seats, towns that housed county offices. These were bustling places where you could find cotton gins, “warehouses, cotton buyers, tobacco sales floors, livestock pens, and railroad depots.” They were the sites of livestock markets, general stores, and drummers—traveling salesmen such as Tennessee Williams’s father—“representing big city wholesale houses [who] came with their wares to canvas both town and country merchants, to corrupt local morals, and to patronize the rambling old-fashioned hotels which were often more famous for the tables they set than for the comfort of their beds,” writes James Cobb in *Away Down South*. This was the place where, in addition to the bank, local farmers would find doctors, dentists, and lawyers. Ice houses and lumber and coal yards were located there, as were the newspaper and the textile mill.

Horace’s success as a banker would have been the result of long, hard work. Nationally, there was a bank for every 16,000 people, but in the South, there was one for every 58,130. Most small towns had no banks until after the turn of the century, even though the amount of capital required by law in 1900 was only $25,000. (In 1895 in Georgia, there were 125 counties without any banking facilities at all—another reason farmers had to rely on merchants for credit.) Although by 1900 there were about 7,000 banks in the former Confederate states and more than $50 million available as capital, it had taken years for the South to build a banking system with significant assets. Indeed, most of those 7,000 banks didn’t exist before 1880, and the growth of banks in those 29 years was directly tied to the growth in industry. Still, $50 million, even in 1909, was a paltry sum compared to the assets held by Northern banks, which is where much of the new industry turned for capitalization. So Horace had done well for himself in building a business with enough assets to invest even a third of the cost to build a textile mill.

The play tells us that Horace employs at least three people at the bank: Leo, Mr. Manders, and Joe Horn. This is another clue as to how well Horace has run the business; in a small Southern town in 1900, a private, independent bank (that is, a bank that isn’t a branch office of a larger one) could be run efficiently by one or two people.
A banker in a small town would be known to everyone, and he, in turn, would know them; service was very personalized. This description of a typical banker in a Western small country bank, written in 1903, would largely apply to Horace’s position:

The American country banker is a personality that cannot be spared. He knows the people who visit his bank better than the city banker knows those who come to his own, for the country banker is a teller as well as a manager. Then, too, the country banker is constantly driving over his territory, counting the cattle mortgaged to him, observing their condition and estimating their weight and selling price. He watches the seeding and the harvest, and keeps track of the country’s development by the new barbed wire fences that block his short cuts, one by one. He knows his clients in their own homes, knows who is wasteful and who is getting ahead. He learns the character of the men who are at the beginning of production, and often he makes character and ability the basis for bank loans.

If Horace’s bank was like other small banks in the South in these years, he would have had a connection with a bank in a nearby larger city—probably Birmingham or Mobile—which in turn would maintain a connection with yet larger banks in Richmond, then the financial capital of the New South, and with the principal financial centers in the North. These connections would allow him to deposit his reserves in these larger institutions at those times of the years when they weren’t needed by his local customers, and also to borrow capital when there was need for more credit or currency in his area.

**A WORD ABOUT COUPONS**

Leo mentions to Oscar that Horace has bonds in his safe deposit box, and that every six months he cuts the coupons. What does this refer to? In those days, bonds that were issued by commercial ventures to raise money had coupons attached to them. The owner of the bonds would clip those coupons and send them to the issuing company every six months or so to collect the interest on the bonds.

**THE CONDITION OF AFRICAN AMERICANS**

As mentioned earlier, Cal and Addie are relatively lucky to have jobs as domestics in Regina’s household. Existence for most African Americans in the South was likely to be tenuous and grim. One reason that Birdie objects to Oscar’s hunting is that he kills hundreds of animals but never eats them, while the poor black population of the town is, she says, starving. The reasons aren’t hard to find, since the proponents of the New South
promised paternalistic concern and fairness for blacks but not social equality, equal opportunity, or political rights.”

Most of the black population that lived in rural areas or even small towns were sharecroppers, and, as we’ve seen, life for them could be brutal. They faced the increasingly degraded condition of the over-farmed soil, perpetual indebtedness to merchants and landowners, and, to make things even worse, a boll weevil infestation across the South that destroyed millions of tons of cotton in the last years of the 19th century and the first years of the 20th. Also as mentioned, African-American men and women were almost entirely excluded from jobs in the cotton mills that were making people like the Hubbards rich. This was part of a pattern of occupational segregation in Southern towns and cities that, according to historian Stewart Tolnay, “concentrated male workers into unskilled jobs and female workers into domestic service.”

Economic, cultural, and political segregation was not the entire story. Blacks constantly lived under the threat of physical violence. Historian Joe William Trotter, Jr., tells us, “In 1917, the African Methodist American Church Review articulated the forces that propelled blacks out of the South. ‘Neither character, the accumulation of property, the fostering of the Church, the schools, and a better and higher standard of the home’ had made a difference in the status of black southerners. ‘Confidence in the sense of justice, humanity, and fair play of the white South is gone,’ the paper concluded.”

Jim Crow laws had been in growing force since 1883, when the Supreme Court declared the Civil Rights Act of 1875 unconstitutional. That law stipulated, “That all persons . . . shall be entitled to full and equal enjoyment of the accommodations, advantages, facilities, and privileges of inns, public conveyances on land or water, theaters, and other places of public amusement.” (Unfortunately, one of the cases brought before the court to strike the law down was over a case of discrimination in a San Francisco theater.) In 1896 the court ruled in Plessy v. Ferguson that segregation was legal. Separate public accommodations—everything from drinking fountains to restaurants to theaters to schools—were constitutional. “Separate but equal” was the law of the land.

The most conspicuous threat was the constant danger of lynching. Between 1889 and 1932, more than 3,700 people were lynched in the United States, more than 85 percent of them in the South. During the early years of the Great Migration, which began in the first decade of the 20th century, migration was significantly higher out of counties that recorded many lynchings; during these years, the Chicago Urban League reported that after each lynching, the number of people arriving from the area where the murder had taken place increased.
The Southwestern Christian Advocate, an African-American newspaper, wrote on April 26, 1917: “[S]ome months ago Anthony Crawford, a highly respectable, honest, and industrious Negro, with a good farm and holdings estimated to be worth $300,000, was lynched in Abbeville, South Carolina. He was guilty of no crime. He would not be cheated out of his cotton. That was insolence. . . . [The mob] overpowered him and brutally lynched him. Is any one surprised that Negroes are leaving South Carolina by the thousands? The wonder is that any of them remain.”

The Schomberg Center for Research in Black Culture tells us that by the turn of the 20th century, lynching had become more gruesome. “Whereas in the past, lynching often happened in secrecy, by the early 20th century, it was commonly seen as a form of family entertainment. Local newspapers widely advertised the place and time of upcoming lynchings.”

The Great Migration hardly ended violence against African Americans; if anything, it increased as tenant-farm owners and other employers saw their very inexpensive labor force disappearing. Many blacks were forcibly kept from leaving: roads were blocked, threats were made, and hundreds, perhaps thousands, were terrorized into staying behind.
At the end of the 18th century, two men, Samuel Slater and Eli Whitney, independently and irrevocably altered the history of cotton textiles in America. In 1789 Slater, apprentice to English textile industrialist and inventor Richard Arkwright, immigrated to America. English law prohibited the emigration of textile workers or textile secrets, so Slater hid his knowledge from the authorities. Once he was financially backed by American industry, Slater reconstructed Arkwright’s inventions from memory, and built the first American cotton mill in Pawtucket, Rhode Island. In 1793, at about the same time that Slater was building the Pawtucket mill, Whitney invented the cotton gin. The cotton gin was a small, simple device for cleaning cotton, easily powered by man, animal, or water, which did quickly what slaves had been doing slowly by hand for years. The cotton gin turned cotton into a viable cash crop, and effectively institutionalized Southern slavery.

According to the *Gale Encyclopedia of U.S. Economic History*, Slater’s cotton mill “marked the beginning of New England’s transformation from an agricultural region to a manufacturing one producing the modern forms of ownership, management, and big business.” Following in Slater’s footsteps came big-business manager Francis Cabot Lowell who, in 1813, introduced waterpower looms to his textile manufacturing company. Lowell’s company was enormous and incorporated: he built boarding houses and provided room and board for the women and girls who worked in his mills. In *The Story of Textiles*, Perry Walton attests that Lowell’s Boston Manufacturing Company was the “first mill in the world where the whole process of cotton manufacturing, from spinning to weaving, was carried on by power.” Still, all the cotton for the mills of industrial New England—and many of the mills of England—came from Southern cotton plantations.

The Civil War changed everything. South Carolina’s secession from the Union was strongly influenced by the conflicts between Northern industry and Southern agriculture. The industrial North could afford to be abolitionist; to the plantation owners of the agricultural, cotton-powered South, slaves were an absolute necessity. The Civil War was not about cotton, but cotton played a major role. Cotton was also a major casualty. Stephen Yafa, in *Big Cotton*, describes the cotton industry during the Civil War:

> [T]he Union established an effective navy blockade along the South’s seaboard shortly after the war began. In a brief conflict it might have mattered less; but both sides compounded their problems by not prepar-
ing for the long, ferocious struggle that ensued. Fighting would be over in ninety days to six months at the outside, or so they believed. In the North, Lowell’s textile aristocracy sat back complacently to await the impending Confederate surrender. Underestimating the enemy was hazardous; selling off all their new cotton inventory to other New England and British mills was moronically shortsighted. The heirs of the original Lords of the Loom now ran these mills with their forebears’ money but not with their acumen; they eagerly dumped cotton reserves at a handsome profit. Shutting down eight factories in Lowell overnight, they put 10,000 workers on the streets in 1861. They planned to rehire these workers in a few months, after the war, when they received new cotton shipments from the defeated South.

In the South, Confederate troops burned thousands of acres of cotton fields to make them worthless to the North, and Union troops burned thousands of acres of cotton fields to hurt the South. England, too, suffered from a lack of American cotton. By the end of
the war in 1865, the cotton textile industry was falling to pieces. North and South were both invested in the rapid return of their greatest cash crop, but the postwar economic depression caused cotton prices to drop. In turn, many cotton planters lost their land, and the South had to resort to sharecropping. As Yafa describes it, “The South’s fixation on its monoculture cash crop sank everyone, black and white alike, in the same economic quicksand,” and in the North, “The operating expenses of New England’s textile factories continued to escalate.” Something about the system had to change.

To the Northern industrialists, the South was the perfect place for cotton mills. The South had cheap labor—thousands of poor, rural white people who desperately needed work—and moving the mills south would eliminate the costs of transporting cotton north. Steam power was cheaper and far more mobile than waterpower; and in 1894, J. J. Northrop invented an automated bobbin changer, which cut back on the necessary skill level of mill workers and “severed the last ties that bound mill owners to the North.” Economically, bringing the mills to the cotton was ideal. At long last, Northern investors could once again make money off of cotton.

Industry and cotton mills meant that the South could work hard, and hard work meant freedom and redemption—according to Grady and the other journalists whose rhetoric drove the “Cotton Mill Campaign” of the 1880s. There had been cotton mills in the South before the Civil War, and resurrecting those mills—as well as building new ones—was a huge part of the campaign, or the “drive to firmly establish the ‘New South’ as a textile manufacturing power,” according to Auburn University’s Pamela Ulrich. By embracing industry, the South reshaped itself politically, socially, economically, and ideologically. In Ulrich’s words:

Cotton mills were the salient symbol of the postwar “New South,” particularly in the post-Reconstruction years. Antebellum cotton mill campaign ideas were incorporated into the broader concept of a South working to become industrialized and urbanized, a South unapologetic for the past but striving for a different future. This New South began as an idea which recognized the traumatic fission of the Civil War, became a promotional campaign, and was established by 1890 as part-myth and part-fact.

**MILL WORKERS**

The lure of cheap labor was one of the things that brought Northern investors south to build cotton mills. To the investors, builders, and farmers-turned-mill-owners, cheap labor was one more argument, one more ideal condition that the South had to offer. For the poor Southern
mill workers, however, the glorious Cotton Mill Campaign of the New South mostly meant unbearably long hours, horrifically low wages, disease, and early death. Cotton mills were supposed to appeal to everyone, including the workers; indeed, at first glance cotton mill work had much to recommend it. In *The Promise of the New South*, Edward Ayers writes:

People caught in the excitement of mill building spoke often of the benefits the mills' working people would enjoy. The argument took different shapes depending on the context. Sometimes the mills were healthy because they would employ “white women and children who could find no other work equally well adapted to their strength, and producing as large a return for their labor”; sometimes the mill village seemed wholesome because it brought isolated rural folk “together in groups” where they are subject to elevating social influences, encourages them to seek education, and improves them in every conceivable respect, as future husbands and wives, sons and daughters, parents and children.

The people who built and praised cotton mills misled cotton mill workers; while their arguments were not entirely unfounded, working conditions were not as wholesome and elevating as they probably liked to believe.

Because cotton mills employed entire families, they—unlike most other jobs available to poor Southern whites—allowed families to stay together. To mill owners, this was a significant benefit. Not only did they have a larger workforce, their workers were tied to their families as well as to the job. Leaving the job would mean leaving their families. Mill owners also created mill towns for their workers, providing housing and a “company store.” As Ayers puts it: “The famous 'mill village' setting increased . . . stability, for the company provided the school, the church, the recreation, and the store as well as the work. At the turn of the century, 92 percent of Southern textile workers lived in such settlements.” Having all their needs met by their employers might—at first—have seemed ideal to poor mill workers, but in the long run it was anything but ideal. The mill village and company store gave mill owners complete control over their workers. The stores charged exorbitant prices—prices mill workers could never meet on their meager salaries. When the workers couldn't pay, the store gave them goods on credit, but kept track of their debts. Those debts built and built; the only way the workers could even hope to pay them off was to keep working at the mill. The company store—and the mill owners—effectively trapped workers in the mill. By the turn of the century “only a third of the mill villages had a company store,” which may have made some things better for the more rural workers. Nevertheless, “new and larger mills appeared near towns and cities of considerable size,” and the workers those mills employed still suffered low wages, long hours, and the results of overwork.
Even if the wages had been reasonable, the company store would have been a problem; as it was, wages were extraordinarily low, even in comparison with mill workers in other parts of the country. According to James Cobb, in *Industrialization and Southern Society 1877–1984*, “Interregional wage differentials were striking. In 1900, spinners in New England mills earned 20 cents an hour, hardly an impressive wage unless it was compared with the 5 cents an hour earned by Southern spinners in the same year.” Mill workers worked long hours, too: “Weeks were long, often as much as or even more than 70 hours (12 to 14 hours longer than New England work weeks).” And while employing the whole family had benefits, it also meant that mills employed children. Again according to Cobb: “In 1900, 30 percent of the South’s textile force was under 16 years of age. In the same year, 75 percent of the spinners in North Carolina mills were under 14. . . . One labor leader claimed in 1887 that a Huntsville, Alabama, mill employed children as young as 6.”

The long hours, low wages, and generally poor conditions bred disease and early deaths. Mill workers always looked ill—their physical conditions testament to stressful and endless labor. Cobb quotes a standard description of the typical mill worker from Wilbur J. Cash:

A dead-white skin, a sunken chest, and stooping shoulders were the earmarks of the breed. Chinless faces, microcephalic foreheads, rabbit teeth, goggling deadfish eyes, rickety limbs, and stunted bodies abounded—over and beyond the limit of their prevalence in the countryside. The women were characteristically stringy-haired and limp of breast at 20, and shrunken hags at 30 or 40.

Cotton mills were emblematic of the New South, of the Southern need to remake itself into a land of glorious industry. From the owners’ perspective, cotton mills were glorious. Things were otherwise for the workers.

When you go to work, you work like the devil
At the end of the week, you’re not on the level
Pay day comes, you pay your rent
When you get through, you’ve not got a cent
To buy fat back meat and pinto beans
Now and then you get turnip greens
No use to colic, we’re all that way
Can’t get the money to move away
I’m a-gonna starve, everybody will
’Cause you can’t make a livin’ at a cotton mill.

—“Cotton Mill Colic,” by David McCarn
IS MONEY THE ROOT OF ALL EVIL?
Salon asked the experts (1997)

MATTHEW FOX, EPISCOPAL PRIEST, PRESIDENT OF THE NEW UNIVERSITY OF CREATION SPIRITUALITY
That comes from the Bible. And everything in the Bible isn’t to be taken literally. The root of all evil is a relationship to money or to any other addiction that looks attractive to us or is a good distraction. I think this is an aphorism that the elders were teaching young people in ancient Israel. And there’s obviously some truth to it. The truth to it is about our relationships, but money itself is not the root of all evil, it’s human choices that is the root of all evil, human relationships. So if we get too attached to the money, that’s what fills our hearts. Then all kinds of disturbing things will follow. In terms of Christian tradition, the word greed is considered one of the capital sins, and that’s what’s really being talked about here; that greed can become a god for you. Really, you can take the seven capital sins and say that any one of them is the root of all evil.

I think misdirected love is the root of all evil. Whether that’s money or some other addiction isn’t really the point. So I think our love of power or alcohol or drugs or escaping from the deep feelings of life and feelings of grief—I think that’s the root of it. I don’t think that the problem is money. I think it’s the not having something equally interesting to fill our souls with.

STEPHEN A. DIAMOND, PH.D., AUTHOR OF ANGER, MADNESS, AND DAEMONICS
Money itself doesn’t do anything: It’s just inert, pressed dead wood pulp and thread, pictures of dead presidents, and lots of ugly green ink. It is what people project onto money—its symbolic psychological significance—that comprises the powerful force which drives us all to do such outlandish things to procure it. Sometimes, these behaviors are simply foolish, innocuous, or misguided, and no one really gets hurt. But other times, they fall into the category of what I call “evil”—attitudes and behaviors like aggression, cruelty, hostility, disregard for the integrity of others, self-destructiveness, psychopathology, and human misery in general.

CHRISTOPHER BYRON, COLUMNIST, NEW YORK OBSERVER
Bernard Shaw said the absence of money is the root of all evil. If you don’t have money in an affluent world, it’s pretty dreadful, it’s pretty difficult to get along. And getting money
isn’t easy in spite of what many on Wall Street seem to think in the last couple years. It’s an aberration, what’s going on down there right now.

**ALLAN SLOAN, WALL STREET EDITOR,** *NEWSWEEK*

I sure hope money is the root of all evil because that could explain why I’m so nasty. Or actually, if I’m as nasty as people say, how come I’m not rich?

**ROBERT I. SIMON, M.D., AUTHOR OF** *BAD MEN DO WHAT GOOD MEN DREAM: A FORENSIC PSYCHIATRIC ILLUMINATES THE DARKER SIDE OF HUMAN NATURE* *(AMERICAN PSYCHIATRIC PRESS)*

It’s too simplistic an idea. People do evil things for all kinds of reasons. You have the little evils of every day, the discourtesies, the insensitivities, and much of it is based on the inability to really think about what other people are thinking and feeling. Then you have the real big evils, the people who are serial sexual killers that kill people strictly for their own sexual gratification for purpose of an orgasm. What evil is is the inability to put oneself into someone else’s shoes. The psychopaths can’t do this at all.

**ANDREW TOBIAS, PERSONAL FINANCE EXPERT AND AUTHOR**

Money itself—the medium of exchange—is of course this miraculous invention that is as fundamental to economics and prosperity as language is to civilization and culture.

It’s not money that causes evil, it’s desire (whether material or sexual or egomaniacal). Not to knock desire; just to say that a “good” person will not allow it to trample basic notions of fairness and honesty. So it’s perhaps the lack of scruples or conscience that’s the root of all evil. A chemical imbalance, no doubt. One day there will be a pill. Or a patch. (Imagine the money in that!) And the truly evil people will find a way to get everybody to take it, or wear it, but them. And they will take over the world. Except that George Clooney and Nicole Kidman will find those people in the nick of time—I mean with just seconds to spare—and stick patches on them and it will all work out OK.

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1. The Southern economy changed greatly after the Civil War. What are the economic factors motivating Ben and Oscar? Why are they so determined to close the deal with Marshall? How are the differences between the plantation style economy and the industrialized New South likely to affect the Hubbards’ business?

2. Why does Horace turn down Ben and Oscar’s offer to participate in the deal with Marshall?

3. Who is the most sympathetic character in *The Little Foxes*? Who is the least sympathetic? Why?

4. How are Ben and Oscar different? How are they similar? How do they each compare to Horace? Whom do you think Leo will emulate as he matures?

5. At one point, Cal mentions to Oscar that he could feed nearly every poor black in town with the meat Oscar throws away after his shooting trips. Why doesn’t Oscar share resources he doesn’t need? What does that say about his character?

6. In the third act, Addie says to Horace, “There are people who eat the earth and eat all the people on it like in the Bible with the locusts. Then, there are the people who stand around and watch them eat it.” What does she mean? How does that statement apply to the characters in the play? How does it apply to contemporary politics and culture?

7. What do you think of Horace and Regina’s marriage? How did they come to the arrangement they have? Do you think they love each other? Did they ever?

8. What was a woman’s social, legal, economic, and political status in the American South at the turn of the 20th century? Which sectors of Southern culture and society does each of the female characters in the play represent, and how? How do they each react to the events of the play? With which of the women do you most identify? What significant events had created change in the role of women by 1939, when Lillian Hellman wrote the play? How have things changed further today? What has changed in the rights, treatment, or position of women and what has not?

9. Consider the same questions for African Americans in the play and in American society and culture.

10. What does Regina really want? Do you think she succeeds in getting it? What price does she pay for her success? Is she a “villain”?
FOR FURTHER INFORMATION...

ON AND BY LILLIAN HELLMAN


Kronenberger, Louis. “Greed.” *Stage*, April 1,1939, 36–37, 55.

**ON THE NEW SOUTH AND THE RISE OF INDUSTRY**


