

Comparing Suicide Portrayals in 20th-century Drama

By Luke Daniel White

Suicide has appeared in nearly every period of drama in recorded history. From the Greeks, to Shakespeare, to the Modern period, and the present, playwrights have been drawn to human phenomenon of suicide for various reasons. The nature of these depictions across the centuries naturally reflect the age's understanding or speculation of suicide. Being an art form peculiarly interested in the nature of human action, how could a dramatist not be curious to explore a human action of such gravity and finality? However, the fact that medical professionals have only begun to understand the nature of mental health, the various illnesses by which it can be compromised, or how suicide is almost always the effect of these illness in the last century or so, with new discoveries about the nervous system and genetics being made every day, begs us to re-examine the dramatic cannon's intersections with suicide in an effort to square it with what we know now.

For this particular examination, we will narrow our focus to the 20th-century with two plays containing a portrayal of a suicide. The first is Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour*, which premiered at Maxine Elliot's Theatre in New York City on November 20, 1934 and portrays a suicide of the character Martha in the final act (Hellman 3). The second is Velina Hasu Houston's *Tea* which premiered at the Manhattan Theatre Club in New York City in 1987 ("Biography") and portrays the suicide of its lead character Himiko in the first moments of the play. Both plays reflect the decades in which they were written, and much was learned about the true nature of suicide in the four decades between Hellman and Houston's respective premiers. While it is not fair to judge either play too harshly within the context of their time, a discussion of each play's portrayal of suicide is merited in the context of performance today, as each play has been produced in recent years and may be considered for future seasons (Billington; Conklin). Hellman's play *The Children's Hour* portrays suicide in a manner devoid of contemporary notions of suicide, posing a real problem for contemporary theatre artists looking to tackle the material. Houston's *Tea* portrays suicide in a manner which does take stock of contemporary notions of suicide but is not without its own set of problems. Though, the latter is perhaps far less dangerous than the former.

Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour*

The protagonist Karen tells Martha, “You’re crazy,” in the pivotal third act of *The Children’s Hour*. This comes immediately after Martha has confessed her love for Karen, a question on which most of the play has hung in suspense, and just moments before Martha’s silent and final exit from the room – a silence which is then punctured by a pistol shot indicating Martha’s suicide (Hellman 71). In her final moments of life, Martha confesses a “guilt” for this love she has kept secret from Karen. Karen dismisses this, but when Martha will not back down from the truth of her confession, Karen “carefully” tells Martha that she is “tired and sick” and that they will “forget it by tomorrow” (Hellman 72), a tomorrow which Martha knows will never come.

Hellman draws an unmistakable line between cause and effect in the final moments of her character’s life. Of Hellman’s 78-page script, Martha’s confession, rejection, and offstage suicide occur over just two pages; and six pages before the end of the play. It is admitting to her queer desire for Karen, as well as the rejection from and pathologizing of that love, that leads Martha to her death by suicide. Moments before Martha’s final exit Martha describes, “I feel all dirty...” and a stage direction calls for her to touch Karen’s head (Hellman 72). Here the relationship between Martha’s “dirtiness” and the object of those dirty feeling is physicalized. When the character Mrs. Mortar soon after assumes Martha’s suicide is the result of her and Karen losing their school, Karen replies, “That isn’t the reason she did it,” which reaffirms the cause of Martha’s suicide being her queer desire (Hellman 73).

In her 1991 article titled “Murdering the Lesbian,” Mary Titus argues that “outside the play another society forced the playwright to murder the lesbian in her text” (Titus 229). Titus places Hellman’s choice to kill off her character Martha within the context of the 1930s in which a commercially successful run on Broadway and a play endorsing lesbianism were culturally and lawfully incompatible. She finds further evidence in Hellman’s own initial outlining of the play that reveals a preference for a play ending in classical tragedy, in which “Martha’s unacknowledged desire is her fatal flaw; it brings on the tragedy and provides the “cause” and “possible justice” of her death.” (Titus 223) From this we can see that Hellman’s choice to end Martha’s life by suicide does not spring from a logic grounded in any notion of how suicide functions in reality. Rather, it springs from a choice on the part of the playwright for a convenient plot device that would afford her play a palatable and dramatically satisfying conclusion according to the tastes of her time. The suicide, therefore, strikes a double offense.

One, for problematically reducing the psychological complexity of suicide to an absurdly fast and convenient plot device, and for contributing to an odious lineage of works of art that perpetuate the “bury your gays” trope – a problem which persists today, particularly in television (Snarker).

Velina Hasu Houston’s *Tea*

It is perhaps worth first mentioning the obvious: that the death of the central character, Himiko, by suicide takes place at the beginning of *Tea*, in contrast to Martha’s suicide in the final pages of *The Children’s Hour*. With Himiko’s death operating as the frame through which all subsequent events will be interpreted, Houston’s use of suicide is not the convenient plot device Hellman uses to tidily conclude her play, but the genesis of the play itself. Moreover, the titular conceit of the play, the ritualized sharing of tea, occurs as a direct result of Himiko’s suicide. The suicide is inextricable from Houston’s story and therefore necessary.

Before the first word of the play is uttered by Himiko, the playwright offers us the stage direction: “There is no lunacy in this woman. Rather the sense of one who has been pushed to the edge, tried desperately to hold on, and failed. She is, indeed, resolute.” (Houston 163) This precedes Himiko’s address to her unseen husband, Billy, and daughter, Micko, before dying by suicide. Though stage directions are not heard directly by a viewing audience, we the reader or prospective actor have a window into Houston’s far-more nuanced and complex understanding of how suicide realistically and psychologically functions. She stops any sort of attempt to play a suicidal woman as the stereotypical crazed, irrational, lunatic we frequently see on stage and screen; a marked difference from Hellman’s spiraling, nearly-nonsensical Martha, moments before her own suicide.

Furthermore, Houston offers us several credible causes for Himiko’s suicide, far beyond the singular reason Hellman affords us for Martha’s suicide. Early in the play, the character Teruko reads Himiko’s obituary, and from it, the others gathered for tea and the audience are made aware that Himiko was preceded in death by her husband and daughter (Houston 167). We can therefore easily assume that some degree of grief played a role in her suicide. Himiko later reveals the truth that she herself murdered her husband Billy and was let “go on self-defense,” and goes on to say, “It took one shot – right through the heart I never knew he had” (Houston

169). This introduces the notion that her relationship with him was fraught, obviously marked by violence, and likely a pattern of violence over the course of their life together. Information we get later in the play about her husband confirms as much (Houston 173). The murder also helps justify the reason why Himiko has access to a firearm and knows how to use it in the first place. This justification is markedly different from Martha's seemingly inexplicable possession of a pistol that is never mentioned prior to the moment it is used offstage. Of course, in *The Children's Hour*, Martha and Karen co-heads an all-girls school out in the country, so one might assume they would need some form of protection for themselves and the students. However, I think the sudden appearance of the pistol ultimately furthers the notion that the given circumstances of Martha's suicide are not woven into the world of Hellman's play – certainly not as much as Houston has in own play.

In scene two of Houston's *Tea*, Himiko offers a startling monologue in which she describes her mother's suicide by drowning. It happens soon after World War II. General Douglas MacArthur was tasked with rebuilding Japan, but could not "preserve the common soul" (Houston 176). After a wedding, in which a Japanese woman presumably married an American soldier, Himiko watches her mother walk into a river, fills her kimono with stones, and jumps into the current. This is perhaps most remarkable because it points to the fact that suicide is contagious. Himiko witnesses her mother's suicide first-hand and has likely never erased the trauma and grief of watching something so horrific. From this we can understand a possible ideation for her own, especially from the last line of the monologue in which she wonders "what it felt like to be a flower in a storm" (Houston 176). We hear a kind of awe for the beauty she finds, the 'flower,' in her mother's final act amidst torment, the 'storm', which we can only imagine. Himiko is therefore placed not only within a legacy of familial suicide, but within a larger historical context of pain and suffering: war on her adolescent doorstep, the painful fall-out from that war, invaders, and subsequently being swept away into a new land that does not treat people who look like her very kindly, least of all in Junction City, Kansas. MacArthur could not "preserve the common soul." Houston neatly and thoroughly weaves a narrative of suffering and suicide ideation that stretches from Himiko's early years in Japan to her own final act in the United States, successfully acknowledging that the cause of suicide is never singular

For all the ways Houston's play depicts suicide in a realistic and meaningful fashion, it is not without its problem. Himiko's suicide leaves the four other women to gather in her absence,

drawn together by forces that become clear over the course of the play: a loosened grip on their Japanese identity by virtue of their being in America for so long, fear that their fate may be as equally bleak as Himiko's, and a growing desire and need for community amongst each other. In that way, the coming together to clean Himiko's home and share tea with another becomes a redemptive, or restorative act on the part of the four women. A stage direction calls for a final action of Himiko in which she, in death, drinks tea in an imagined cup in her hands in unison with the other alive women gathered in her home and then utters the final word of the play: "perfect" (Houston 200) Houston is leading us toward the conclusion that Himiko might, too, agree that peace has been restored to this fractured community. It offers a kind of greater purpose for her suicide, or redemption for it, now that it has led to this reunification within this community.

However, we should reject this romantic notion that Himiko can share in that redemption through the act of sipping imaginary tea. In life, Himiko obviously shared much of the same strife of these other women due to their collective ancestry and experience as "war brides", but ultimately her suicide is particular to her only, that is ideation caused by witnessing her mother's suicide, the domestic violence she faced at the hands of her husband, and her daughter's violent murder. That is by no means a universal experience of this community of women gathered in her home after her death— the rest of the women are living challenging lives, but are not tormented in this particular way, and Houston gives us no indication that these women had any bearing on Himiko's mind during her final moments of life. Yet, Himiko's suicide becomes the glue that reunites her survivors. While it is true that tragedy often brings those remaining together, to portray the ghost of Himiko sipping tea with these women in the final moment of the play, calling it "perfect", reduces and strips away the particularities of Himiko's suffering to forge a universalized healing for a community that rejected her up until her last breath. She has no reason to share in that restoration. Furthermore, to allow her to share in that restoration, promotes a dangerous notion that suicide can achieve results – a notion which many media guidelines caution against for its potential to inspire vulnerable individuals to attempt suicide for similar results in their own lives ("Media Guidelines" 8).

Conclusion

According to the American Association of Suicidology's latest report on suicide in the United States, approximately 45,000 deaths by suicide occurred in the span of a year, or one

suicide every eleven minutes and more recent reports appear to indicate that that number is climbing nationally (Drapeau). Considerable efforts have been made to address the way suicide is discussed and portrayed in other fields adjacent to theatre e.g. media, film, and television. These industries, with the help of entities such as the World Health Organization, have developed concrete ways to safely handle the topic as an effort of suicide prevention with resources such as guidelines for journalists to report on suicides (World Health Organization). While the American theatre may not currently, or ever, be capable of gathering credible data on the ways its stories play a role in suicide ideation across its audiences in the way that mass media can, it can and must take its cues from these other industries and the ever-growing wealth of knowledge amassed by today's leading mental health professionals. We can begin by marrying this knowledge with a critical examination of the suicide portrayals in our canon in effort to determine whether certain stories are worth performing today, as this essay has sought to accomplish. Though more work will need to be done in the way of establishing clear frameworks for those decisions and clear paths for mitigating those problematic suicides when we they do occur in stories deemed necessary for the stage. As storytellers, the potential to supply suicide ideation for vulnerable members of the audience is real, but theatre artists are creative individuals who are up for the task of minimizing this risk without compromising on the stories they wish to tell.

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