The Need for Tolerance & Self Acceptance

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Media today has caused homosexual matters to seem as a topic that is widely accepted. Shows such as *The 100* and *Orange Is The New Black* lack in contemplating the social and psychological hardships the LGBT community face for deciding to be themselves. By not reminding society of the pain these individuals endure, people begin to forget that homosexuality continues to be a taboo topic. According to CNN, Wisconsin became the first state to outlaw discrimination against those with a different sexual orientation in 1982 (“LGBT Rights Milestones Fast Facts”). However, it’s critical to remember that there were artists who addressed this issue back when homosexuality was heavily frowned upon. The play *The Children’s Hour* by Lillian Hellman is a piece that notoriously brought up the subject of homosexuality during an era in which art experienced an extreme number of regulations on what it could express. The play follows the aftermath of a student falsely blaming her two female teachers of engaging in homosexual acts. This accusation causes the two women to lose their family and community’s respect. One teacher even reveals that she loses respect for herself. I would like to propose *The Children’s Hour* by Lillian Hellman as one of the theatrical performances to be produced next year at College of DuPage and that each production held will be followed by a group discussion. Both the play and discussion will provide awareness on the importance of tolerance and self-acceptance in regards to homosexual matters.

The first step in accepting new beliefs begins with tolerance, which is a characteristic society in the 1930s was not implementing. Written in 1934, *The Children’s Hour* by Lillian Hellman highlights the lack of tolerance two young self-employed teachers, Martha Dobie and Karen Wright, receive when they are falsely accused of having an affair by their student Mary Tilford. Due to the lack of tolerance that existed towards homosexuals during this decade, Martha and Karen’s academic business was immediately destroyed because of this accusation. Martha describes the scene as “(…) a madhouse. People [were] rushing in and out, the children [were] being pushed into cars” (Hellman 47). Rather than focusing on the level of education, work ethic and values these women exemplified, the parents solely focused on their supposedly abnormal sexual preference, and they had no interest in tolerating it. Amelia Tilford (Mary’s Grandmother) states, “This—this thing is your own. Go away with it. I don’t understand it and I don’t want any part of it” (Hellman 49). Even though these women were not truly in an affair, the treatment they received from the town (who believed the accusation) will allow the audience to feel sympathy for their hardships. Providing students with an understanding of the pain discrimination and a lack of tolerance can induce. Society continues to tackle these problems, but surprisingly, has not found a path towards resolution.

According to research conducted by GLAAD (an LGBTQ media advocacy organization) on the years 2016-17, “Of the 901 regular characters expected to appear on broadcast scripted prime time programming this season, 58 (6.4%) identify as LGBTQ” (France). This statistic is a record in the 21 years GLAAD has been tracking these numbers (Sidahmed). However, such attention has not improved the treatment the LGBT community faces. In fact, the FBI found that “In 2016, 6,121 hate crime incidents were reported --an increase of five percent from 2015.” (Dashow). In addition, a survey conducted by the Harris Poll found that society has become increasingly more uncomfortable with individuals that are part of the LGBT community. Per the Harris Poll, “In 2014, 30% of those surveyed said they were “very” or “somewhat” uncomfortable having their child placed in a class...
with an LGBT teacher. (…) 2016, 28%. In 2017, it jumped to 31%” (Miller). As a result, the assumption that modern day society has surpassed the times of prejudice against homosexuals because of the TV industry’s increase in LGBT content is false. Sadly, American citizens continue to be harmed because of their differences.

In addition to facing discrimination from the public, Martha Dobie experiences a struggle to accept herself as a lesbian living in the 1930s. Towards the end of the play, Martha experiences a personal revelation about who she truly is. However, rather than accepting her identity, she begins to express self-hatred. Martha states, “I’ve been telling myself that since the night we heard the child say it; I’ve been praying I could convince myself, I can’t any longer. It’s there. (…) I’ve ruined your life. I’ve ruined my own” (Hellman 71-72). This inability to accept herself causes Martha to end her life in frustration and sadness: “Martha looks around the room, slowly, carefully. (…) [She] stands at the door for a second looking at Karen, then slowly shuts the door behind her. (…) A shot is heard” (Hellman 72). Martha’s self-hatred is what causes her to commit suicide. Obviously, this is not the correct way to deal with such a revelation, and I want the audience to understand this because this still continues today. Today, suicide amongst the LGBT community is not an uncommon ordeal. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Nearly one-third (29%) of LGB youth had attempted suicide at least once in the prior year compared to 6% of heterosexual youth” (“Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Health”). A lack of self-acceptance still exists within the LGBT community, and people continue to find it difficult to be themselves. This complex subject should be elaborated on in the after show discussion to provide further awareness.

Due to society’s continuous inability to fully accept or tolerate the LGBT community, a discussion should be held after every performance to encourage the audience to take action. The after show discussion could begin with the actors and audience examining the themes present in the play and how they connect to the present day. By allowing students to compare and contrast the 1930s with today, they will notice how these topics continue to resonate. In addition, the discussion should include a brief speech from the advisor and president of Pride Alliance, which is an organization at College of DuPage that supports and accepts the LGBT community. These advocates could elaborate on how being tolerant impacts the LGBT community and how the audience can begin taking action to create a world where the United States becomes more accepting. Moreover, the purpose of the after show discussion will be to provoke the audience to take action and remember that the themes present in The Children’s Hour are more than just the building blocks that form the plot of the play.

By creating a production of The Children’s Hour by Lillian Hellman, students will become aware of the importance of tolerating and accepting the LGBT community. This performance will highlight the false portrayal of acceptance displayed by series, such as The 100. However, the unfortunate truth is that a play created almost 80 years ago continues to exemplify the country’s struggles. People continue to have a delusional mindset, which is something this play will change in the College of DuPage community. As a result, I would like for the committee to truly consider staging The Children’s Hour and hosting a group discussion after each performance to improve the tolerance and acceptance that exists on our campus.

Work Cited