CHAPTER - V

THE AUTUMN GARDEN:
A Chekhovian Exercise
Lillian Hellman says "An autumn garden is one which by winter time will fade and not be a garden any more ... the people in the play are coming into the winter of life".¹ The Autumn Garden (1951) is usually cited as Hellman's most mature play. To quote Alan Downer, it is "Miss Hellman's most original play".² The universal day dream theme may be found in The Autumn Garden. The play was called "a poignant, baffling, and most psychoanalytic play, a Chekhovian comedy or a Chekhovian tragedy or a near tragedy derailed by too many central characters."³ Many praised the multiple character technique, again citing Chekhov as Hellman's "new" source. In fact, the reflective, rueful voice of the play has its structural roots in the discursive elements within Watch on the Rhine, The Searching Wind and Another Part of the Forest.⁴ Thus the plays together reveal a thematic and structural unity. The Autumn Garden examines the irresolute lives of a group of middle-aged individuals. The play displays Hellman's desire to break with the tight-knit formula with which she had achieved prominence in the past by emphasizing both the sad and funny frailties of human beings.⁵
Probably no play of the American theatre is more completely Chekhovian than Lillian Hellman's *The Autumn Garden*. The play concerns itself with individual persons who try to come to terms with what they have made, or failed to make, of their own private lives. It is customary for critics of Hellman's later plays to call them Chekhovian and to distinguish between the realism of Ibsen and that of Chekhov. Ibsen's realistic plays are strongly plotted around an idea or a social problem. His characters oppose or react to each other in a series of confrontations towards a climax. "Chekhov on the other hand emphasizes mood, not plot."

Hellman, unlike Chekhov, has more scorn than pity for the passive characters of *The Autumn Garden* who cluster together for protection in a boarding house — a summer resort. Six people are paying summer guests at the home of Constance Tuckerman. Most of them grew up together. Constance Tuckerman is a plucky but romantic Southern lady left impoverished by her wealthy parents. She has converted the family summer home into a boarding house. One of her most faithful summer boarders is Edward Crossman, a middle-aged alcoholic bank clerk, who has been in love with Constance for years. Constance has a young niece, Sophie, the daughter of Constance's late brother Sam and a French woman he married before World War II. Sophie's father died during the war and Constance brought Sophie to America. Sophie helps her aunt with the work
at the boarding house. Sophie too is an outsider, with her values already
formed when she came to America. She tells Constance, "I have not been
happy, and I cannot continue here. I cannot be what you have wished me to
be, and I do not want the world you want for me. it is too late". Constance
says, "Too late? you were thirteen years old when you came here" (232),
and Sophie replies, "I came from another world and in that world thirteen
is not young"(232). When asked if she had been happy at home, Sophie
says that she does not "think in such words"(232), adding that she was
comfortable with herself there.

Sophie is engaged to Frederick Ellis, a young man who is staying at
the Tuckerman house with his grandmother and mother. Although the
Elises are rich, Frederick's grandmother, Mrs. Mary Ellis, controls the
money and knows the power of her wealth. She dominates her daughter,
Carrie, who in turn dominates her son, Frederick. The engagement of
Frederick and Sophie is acknowledged between them to be a matter of
convenience. Frederick will give Sophie financial security and she will
give him a home and respectability. Carrie approves this since she feels
instinctively that Sophie is no rival. Frederick's real emotional interest,
however, is in Payson, a male writer whose work he is editing and who has
a dubious reputation. Some critics have called Frederick a "passive,
dependent" mother's boy who is latently homosexual. But nobody in the
play, except possibly his mother, considers the inclinations to be latent.
The grandmother, mother, and Frederick plan a trip to Europe, without Sophie. Frederick is determined to invite Payson as his guest.

Also spending the summer are retired army general Benjamin Griggs and his flirtatious, pathetically silly wife, Rose. Katherene Lederer observes, “Mrs. Griggs exists on social gabble and gossip. Gregariousness keeps her ‘young’ and ‘gay’, two words she uses more than once in the play. Having no inner life, she lives off the lives of others”. Griggs wants a divorce, but Rose ignores his demand. Griggs has his own oedipal instincts. He had always wanted love from a serious woman like his mother. To get even, Rose boasts of a love affair she had when the general was away during the war. But Griggs is beyond caring. They expectantly await the arrival of Nick Denery, an artist and Constance’s old beau who jilted her to marry a rich woman and has never returned since he went to Europe to study art.

When Nick arrives he meddles in everyone’s life. He goes from group to group making trouble. His only motive is to display his charm and use his power to manipulate others. He flirts with all the women, but when they begin to respond, protects himself against any commitment. He has been doing this for years and his wife has seen through it. She is sick of his philandering but she cannot make up her mind to leave him. Nick lives off other people’s emotions although he is more active than Rose Griggs. He is the ironic catalyst. The play turns on Nick’s awaited arrival and its
consequences. More actively than similar Chekhovian characters, Nick 
provokes the decisions and revelations that force the other characters into 
at least a momentary recognition of the waste in their lives.

The Autumn Garden presents the universal day dream theme. The 
characters believe that the setbacks and compromises of ordinary living 
will be some how resolved, and that once present frustrations can be 
eliminated, they will experience serenity and happiness. But their dreams 
are revealed as delusions preventing them from living in the present. By 
presenting this notion as the expression of each of the characters, Heilman 
indicates their failure to recognize the present moment as the absolute 
condition of life. She presents this self-deception as the source which 
drains her characters of their energy and mental stability. And their 
dilemma is complicated by the fact that in spite of their middle age, their 
daydreams still persist.

Hellman presents an unsentimental view of her characters as she 
reveals them caught up in the malaise of their day dreams. Walter Kerr 
commented that Hellman drew together this group of people “rather 
arbitrarily”, forcing each one of them to confront the futile and devitalizing 
myth of a personal millennium. Because she remains objective towards 
her characters, Hellman imposes on them the painful recognition that their 
lives of compromise and substitutions are their ultimate reality and the full 
lives for which they have been waiting are the dream. The play ends, as
Kerr concludes, in a kind of “Checkhovian stalemate,” because when wished for opportunities come, such as Constance’s tardy realization of Crossman’s love for her which has now dissipated into indifference, the characters are neither able nor willing to accept them.\(^{10}\)

Hellman handles deftly this diffuse plot in multiple situations and parallel constructions in which all the relationships come to similar results: emotional paralysis. This is particularly evident in the three major women characters. Rose Griggs uses her flirtatious, fun-loving image to show her awareness of her husband’s restless desire to be free from their marriage. Approaching middle-age and losing her once youthful feminine graces, she plays the fool when faced with the reality of her loveless marriage. Refusing to understand her husband’s unhappiness, she rationalizes, then dismisses the real issues and attempts a ludicrous flirtation which reinforces Grigg’s desire to leave her. When she is told that she has serious health problems, she begins to realize how trivial her life has been, but her established pattern of behaviour will not allow her to seek inner strength or courage. As usual, she pleads for help, from Griggs. Regretfully, Griggs agrees to stay with her until her health improves, knowing that Rose will never change, that her promise to give him a divorce means nothing, and that he will live in her mind less than he does now.

In the same manner, Nina Denery, the world-weary wife of the incorrigible painter, Nick, hides behind the image of the all-suffering, ail-
understanding, and forgiving wife. But her true motivation is based on her own self-contempt. As Nick points out to her, she seeks to demean herself and so choose to love him. Sophie also perceives this. By rejecting her charitable offer to send her back to her homeland, Sophie refuses to become the object of Nina’s false benevolence. Instead, she demands that the money be considered as blackmail in compensation for Nick’s irresponsible advances toward her. In this way Sophie will not have to be grateful to her. From these revelations of herself, Nina comes to the realization that like Rose she can never change. Having made compensations, she is now dependent upon them.

Likewise, the compensations made in Constance’s life have resulted in a wasted existence in which she has carried on her prolonged infatuation with the unobtainable Nick. Having spent over twenty years waiting for him to return and staunchly clinging to the gentility of her well-born Southern background, she has become fussy and prim. Crossman, who has long since given up any hopes of marrying her, wryly describes her as the typical Southern lady who must sacrifice her life for something.

Constance is appalled by Sophie’s practical attitude toward her prearranged marriage to the son of a fanatically possessive woman. Her romantic ideals, which she herself has never acted upon, are offended because neither Sophie nor her fiancé thinks love in their marriage is of great importance. Listening to Constance’s views on what a perfect
marriage should be, Crossman points out the sad but funny irony of her life. Her wisdom comes, he supposes, from not thinking. When Nick paints her portrait, deliberately emphasizing her aging and shabby appearance, Constance begins to realize the vanity of her fantasies. In a final desperate attempt to salvage her dream of being loved and taken care of by a good man, ironically she turns to Crossman, the now aimless, alcoholic bachelor. But he has learned to live with his unrequited love through the compensations of drink and is now powerless to accept her. When he refuses her offer of marriage, the irony of her life is complete. Like Crossman, she accepts two sad but truthful conclusions that we lie to ourselves and that we choose to (249). These three women suffer from the same futile illusions about their dreams of a fuller life. They cannot avail themselves of reality because they have depended too much on the unattainable past to accept the possible present.11

Judith Olauson observed that in *The Autumn Garden*, Sophie, the realistic German refugee, is intolerant of Nina’s largesse when Nina offers her money to return to Europe. She recognizes Nina’s need to reinforce the false image she has of herself. Because she does not want to be a contributor to the artifices and strategems of the Denery marriage, she forces Nina to realize that as Nick’s wife she has accepted the role of the honourable lady who stays behind to discharge her obligations and then goes off to forgive her disobedient husband.
The spent and wasted lives of Hellman's women in *The Autumn Garden* contrast with the full and hopeful life of Lena Younger, the matriarch of Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*. Hellman's women have based their lives either on dreams which will never be fulfilled because of their inherent inability to make them materialize or upon lies which hide true motives. After having lived with their deprivations and sacrifices for long, they have come to prefer them to the things they thought they wanted. Constance realizes that being alone is no way to live. But her effort to give Crossman the opportunity to propose marriage to her is self-effacing and half-hearted. The wants of Carrie and Anna have been self-deceiving devices. When Julian provides them, they are appalled and embarrassed by his extravagance. Gertrude unwittingly destroys the source which feeds her delusion, her relationship with Molly. As she recounts her losses, she deceives herself again by remembering her life with Molly as happy and productive. With the death of Vivian, Mrs. Constable has been released from the last devitalizing relationship, but she loses herself through the effects of alcohol because she is incapable of coping with her new freedom.

The women playwrights of the 1950s were neither, pro- nor anti-feminist in their examination of the lives of women. Their work reflected the persistence of the personal struggles in which American women were involved during this time. They continued to write of domestic situations
and experimented with material which probed deeper into the inner lives of their women characters. They revealed many of the feminine neuroses brought about by the changing times. They disclosed various feminine conditions ranging from neurosis, alcoholic release, mental derangement, incest, and marital unrest to moral strength, stability, compassion, and courage. Although the characters studied were aimless women with weak domestic roots and few family ties, the solutions to their problems were sought through their individual consciousnesses rather than from the conventionality of their social roles. Perhaps the most important development in women playwrights during this decade was their response to the uneasy position of women in American society. By experimenting with new themes and forms as well as revitalizing traditional ones, these dramatists broadened the base for a dramatic study of the feminine. Seeing women in alternate life styles and exploring the inherent problems which grew from those situations seemed important to playwrights such as Bowles and Hellman.

Bigsby observed about The Autumn Garden that it is autumn not only in terms of the season but more crucially in the lives of many of those gathered in the modest guest house. They live in a world of illusion, of memories reconstructed to afford a convenient absolution for wasted lives. It is a world drained of truth and hence of the sense of moral responsibility. The theme is a familiar one. Hellman is insisting that people are indeed
responsible for their actions and that they are the sum of their choices. The
South becomes what it had been in her earlier work, a symbol of a world in
which a supposed concern with history is in fact a profound desire to deny
its force. Written in the years of the Sartre-Camus debates, the play is
offered as an existential assertion of the need to acknowledge one's
responsibility for creating one's own essence.

The characters do indeed seem to have lived provisional lives, and
being Hellman's creations, are apt to tell us so. They are briefly shaken out
of their protective illusions by the arrival of Nick, a failed artist who acts as
a catalyst. But the play ends with ripples almost stilled, with an assertion of
the need for illusions which must now be ironic: "Most of us lie to
ourselves. Never mind" (249).

For some critics The Autumn Garden is Chekhovian rather than
Ibsenesque to the degree that it presents the past as less a repository of
concealed truths generating present tensions than a world of lost
opportunities and betrayed visions. To this extent it sees character less as
an agent of moral debate than an expression of cultural reality. The
spiritual and moral limbo which the characters inhabit is not simply
Southern. This form of provincialism now seems a shared fate which
equally involves Europe which in a vague way is invoked on a linguistic
and factual basis. This vagueness, however, dissipates the force of the play
which is clearly offered as something more than a psychopathology of the
South. Heilman wishes to transcend the Southern setting. For Chekhov his characters' obsession with the past is a consequence of an excitable nature which quickly gives way to exhaustion. That exhaustion is clearly felt by Hellman's characters too, but it is not rooted in a clear sense of cultural identity.

This is precisely the mood of The Autumn Garden. For Chekhov the tone and a generalised sense of guilt were specifically Russian. For Hellman it is seen at its most acute in the South, a culture whose roots have manifestly shrivelled. Beyond that she sees it as a destructive exhaustion, a failure to act which makes the individual an accomplice after cruelty on a private level. But she is less convincing in establishing this dimension of the play which is at its best in creating the moralised landscape of the South.

Indeed if Hellman is Chekhovian on the surface, beneath that she sees herself as a moralist, as a voice calling people to the real world of pain, of difficult moral choices, and of action whose consequences must be accepted if the individual is not to follow the South into a dangerous romanticism, a contemplation of the past which effectively destroys the present.12

In both the political and literary establishments, Hellman is one of the foremost authorities on decisive action and pure forcefulness.
According to one critic, "Miss Hellman dreams of living successfully by masculine standards: honor, courage, aggression". Passivity is not a foreign concept to female authors and characters of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Lillian Hellman employs passivity in the autobiographies and major plays as a vehicle for powerful action, compassion, and finally, moral authority. Any revaluation of her drama requires our acknowledgement of her use of passivity in its variegated forms as a catalyst for truth-telling, deception, and most importantly, self-deception, all recurrent themes in her plays.

A dramatic situation develops when Nick Denery, artist manque with cosmopolitan pretensions, returns to the "summer mansion" of the childhood in order to graft on to those "sturdy old vines" just as they were twenty years before. His memories have never matured. They have only inflated his enormous capacity for myth, philandering, flirting, and meddling. One night, on a drunken, "rampage of good-will", he compromises the maid Sophie who is Frederick's affianced. Servants and friends in the provincial town quickly learn about the scandal of the boarding house. Ironically the publication of the news combined with Sophie’s ingenuity serves to rescue this indentured Cinderella from a miserable future life with Frederick Ellis and his mother. The outcome of the dilemma depends upon a few pungent perceptions of an old dismissible
grandmother, Mrs. Ellis, who warns Sophie about the consequences of the gossip and saves her from a disastrous marriage of convenience.

By virtue of their outcast status or age, both Sophie and old Mrs. Ellis are late examples of Hellman's artistically tooled "passives" who reclaim a social label as a dramatic strength. Both Sophie and Mrs. Ellis join the gallery of Lavinias, Lily Mortars and Birdies, catalysts for action who capitalize on a formerly narrow social quality. Like the faded Rose or Ned Crossman, who makes his valedictories to a bottle of brandy, most of the other characters beg reality never to correct the "indefinite pronouns" of their Southern gentility.

Like Granny in Albee's American Dream who debunks myths by turning them back on the family, Mrs. Ellis is a straight shooter with a sharp tongue who has built a solid financial empire for herself. She uses her power to create the situation that saves Sophie. Walter Kerr has compared her to "the goddess Athena in a snapbrim fedora".14

She readily admits that the happiest years of her life are those she has spent in solitude since her husband's death. She chides Nick for inflicting his bare hugs, friendly pats, and tiny bursts of passion: "One should have sensuality whole or not at all". Mocking at him as one of the "touchers and leaners", she asks if she doesn't find "pecking at it ungratifying". When Frederick discovers that his writer-friend Payson's
real attraction to him is money, Mrs. Ellis orders him to "take next week to be sad. A week's long enough to be sad in"(233). She knows well the system of patronage in which people like Fred, a professional proof-reader must pay for the interest of people like Payson with their literary coteries. Like Lily Mortar's words, Mrs. Ellis's words such as "nobody in the South has tapeworm any more" describe candidly the parasitic relationships that surround her: Frederick and Carie, Nick and Nina, Constance and Nick, Payson and Fred, Rose and the General.

Sophie has a central dramatic role in the play. She is the impoverished European niece "indentured" to the family for her cultural and social status. Like Mrs. Ellis, she is far too pragmatic to be arrested in self-deceptions. In the words of General Griggs at the end of the play, Sophie spends her life "in training" for the big moment of her escape. Perceptually, verbally and morally, she piles up a lot of little moments to stand on. Seemingly tongue-tied and retiring when she first appears in the course of the play, Sophie manages rare understanding of the others' pretenses. She knows that decisions are made "only in order to speak about changing them". In a matter of fact manner she says:

*You know it is most difficult in another language. Everything in English sounds important. I get a headache from the strain of listening* (211). *And to Constance: "I think*
Sophie sees the social facade of Constance’s romantic malingering: “Such a long, long time to stay nervous. Great love in tender natures... It always happens that way with ladies. For them it is once and not again: it is their good breeding that makes it so” (214-215).

Sophie admits the bargain she is striking with Frederick (the exchange of social position for sexual cover. She knows the prevalent social code for women (“little is made into very much here”) and knows also that “some how sex and money are simpler in French” than in the indirect metaphors and oblique rhetoric employed by the Ellises and Denerys.

Sophie is shrewd about the female ploys she uses to threaten Nina Denery with the exposure of her husband’s seduction: her word is ominous, but held in reserve. It carries the power of Lavinia’s clutched Bible. “We will call it a loan, come by through blackmail”, she says of the five thousand dollars she exhorts as escape money with which she will return to Europe. She realistically turns Nick’s playful charm - seduction - disposal game back on him by demanding the exact commission he was to receive for doing a portrait of Rose Grigg’s homely niece. Most significantly, the trade value of her bargain, that is, her role as marriage counsellor, is not lost on Sophie:
How would you and Mr. Denery go on living without such incidents as me? I have been able to give you a second, or twentieth honeymoon.

(246)

Linked in a socially negligible partnership, Sophie and old Mrs. Ellis support one another both in dramatic action and verbal power. Now we see the collaboration of the passive, dismissible characters. With realistic savvy about money as power, they use the meta-theatrics of their social roles not for moral disguise, as do Regina and Mary Tilford, but as a means to physical escape or greater self-awareness. Through their final camaraderie, we realize that The Autumn Garden issues a stern warning reminiscent of Scott Fitzgerald's early stories: life is a valuable and precious trust whose capital must be invested early and wisely, set in a committed direction and tended energetically, before midlife or its returns will never be reaped. If it is squandered, the Sophies of the world will deceive themselves into becoming Rose Griggses.  

Hellman (in her Introduction to Four Plays) lists two faults most enumerated by her critics: that her plays are "too well-made" and that they are "melodramas." These two limitations are absent from The Autumn Garden. As a matter of fact the play successfully contradicts Hellman's own statements about the nature of the drama. In her introduction she states: "The theatre has limitations: it is a tight, unbending, unfluid, meager form in which to write". But The Autumn Garden is just the
opposite kind of drama. It is loose in structure, bends easily but without
breaking, is fluid, and far from being meagre, overflows with characters
and situations. Indeed, so diffuse is the play that a first reading presents the
same difficulties as does The Cherry Orchard.

In all of Hellman's first six plays the initial situation is presented in
terms of some kind of problem. In three of these pieces (Days to Come,
The Little Foxes and Watch on the Rhine) the first actors the audience
see and hear are servants behaving in the traditional opening scene fashion.
The Negro servants, Addie and Cal, who are on stage in the first scene of
The Little Foxes are there to give us a feeling of elegance and richness and
a sense of power, all of which help establish the character of Regina
Giddens before her delayed entrance allows her really to dominate the
stage. In The Autumn Garden, the opening is quite different. "On stage at
the rise of curtain" are six of the main persons of the play. They do not
direct their conversation or their actions toward any one situation, but
indeed are behaving in a manner which we have come to call Chekhovian.
Each is concerned with himself, his own problems. The audience seem to
have interrupted a series of activities which have been going on for
sometime: the marital problems of Rose and Benjamin Griggs; the
complex emotional and financial relationships between old Mrs. Ellis, her
daughter-in-law and her grandson; the grandson's involvements with a
novelist friend and with his fiancée, the refugee, Sophie Tuckerman;
Edward Crossman's peculiar and lonely position. Finally, there is the setting itself, "the Tuckerman house in a summer resort on the gulf of Mexico, about one hundred miles from New Orleans". The house serves a symbolic function, just as do the houses of Madame Ranevsky in The Cherry Orchard, of Sorin in The Seagull and the Proxorovs in The Three Sisters. It is the old home to which cling many memories. It is The Autumn Garden where flashes of brightness only emphasize the proximity of wintry sterility.

In both The Children's Hour and The Little Foxes, widely regarded as Hellman's best plays, once the initial situation has been established, the whole movement of the play is direct. Both are "well-made" plays in the narrow sense that in neither are there any characters or any actions which do not contribute directly to the unfolding of the central incident. Here we might consult Hellman's definition: "by the well made play" ... "I think is meant the play whose effects are contrived, whose threads are knit tighter than the threads in life and so do not convince".\textsuperscript{17} But all art is contrived and better organized than life. The trouble in The Children's Hour and The Little Foxes is that the contrivances are too obvious. They are theatrically convincing, but they do not have the high artistry which makes them consistent with themselves. They are true not to life but to dramatic art. The contrivances in these pieces render them merely realistic, good enough for exciting (even meaningful) theatre, but
not for great art. Again, Miss Hellman’s words are that the dramatist “must represent”. These plays do merely that.

The Autumn Garden does all this and more. There are many threads of action and of thought playing through The Autumn Garden. By the end of Act I, we have established the moral and artistic principle upon which the play is based: people must do the best they can, to do less is immoral. Hellman hastens to admit that she is “a moral writer”. But the difference in The Autumn Garden is that the moral is within the situation and within the characters, not superimposed upon them by a skilful playwright. Nick Denery and Rose Griggs are both immoral and selfish people. But their immorality is a matter of degree in as much as all the characters are to some extent tainted. In this play Lillian Hellman lets her characters act out their destinies, regarding them however with love and understanding. In her earlier play, she took sides. One can list the characters she admires and those whose behaviour and beliefs she dislikes. In Days to Come for example, she admits that she even tried to balance characteristics: good against bad, well against sick, complex against simple. In The Autumn Garden, she does not make this kind of distinction. The result is true complexity, both in dialectics and mechanics.

The Autumn Garden has in certain respects a Chekhovian grace. The characters all have a legitimate reason for being at the Tuckerman house at this particular moment in history. Each is searching for the
meaning of life and for love. In Act 1, Rose and Benjamin Griggs are involved in analysing their marriage. They have never understood one another, nor do they now. Mrs. Ellis is an aged matriarch using her money for her own selfish pleasures and her tongue to criticize. Her dependent daughter-in-law and her grandson are unhappily caught in their emotional mother-son relationship. The grandson is further involved with an unsuccessful (and evidently homosexual) novelist and finally with his fiancée, the refugee Sophie, half-European and wise beyond her years. In both relationships young Frederick Ellis is an innocent. Then there is Constance Tuckerman who runs this genteel boarding house. She is a sentimentalist living on dreams and good works, understanding neither.

Into this charged atmosphere come the Denerys, Nick and Nina, cosmopolites and sophisticates. They amuse each other by their little cruelties at the expense of other people. Finally, there is Ned Crossman, observer of life, lonely and drunken.

These people arrive and depart constantly. The superficial stage action consists of noise and bustle. The director is provided with inexhaustible opportunities for stage effects of the most varied sort. This movement supplies the external tension, a tension partly produced by confusion and stir. It is a tension which accurately mirrors the inner stages of mind and emotions of the characters.
This is a Chekhovian cast, appropriately set in the American South. They are upper middle-class people with their roots in money and traditions but caught in the essential tragedy of life. It is social drama, not classical tragedy. As such it has two necessary dialectical principles. First of all, as Miss Hellman reminds us, it is "Sharp Comedy..... The world these people (she is discussing Cherry Orchard) made for themselves would have to end in a whimper". But, here is the second significant point. Pity and terror are present, but they are not for the single, noble (however representative) individual, the Hamlet or the Lear. The pity and the terror are spread out, they are for all. Pity and terror have been democratized and made the proper subject for prose.

The Autumn Garden is written in prose. By the very nature of the medium, the tragic intensity, and to a lesser degree, the tragic nobility of the characters and their situations are rendered less magnificent than if the play were phrased in poetry. In one sense, this is a purely mechanical problem. But prose can take on certain of the qualities of poetry, or it can be said, certain poetic devices are available to the prose writer. Particularly to the dramatist perhaps the most significant of these is symbolism. In Days to Come one of the characters says: "I don't like autumn any more, the river is full of leaves and it was too cold to walk very far". This speech, as any clever sophomore could tell us, has symbolic overtones. In The Autumn Garden, aside from a few incidental references to roots and
trees, there is no mention of a garden, but the little garden adds a necessary symbolic note to the whole play. Hellman has used a number of such titles, particularly those which emphasize the organic, natural aspects of human existence. In both The Searching Wind and Another Part of the Forest, she has used the significant relationship between man and nature to extend the meaning of her dramas. So in The Autumn Garden, the symbolism inherent in the title adds a poetic dimension to the play.

The Autumn Garden has the elements of a modern tragedy. It is not merely psychological (as in Tennessee Williams) or sociological (as in Arthur Miller) but it is artistic (poetic) and moral — and all in the Chekhovian sense. In her various editorial notes, Hellman pays tribute to Chekhov’s "common sense", to his workmanship, and to his "deep social ideals". Of all his plays she thinks The Three Sisters is the greatest. These views throw some light on The Autumn Garden for they support our idea of its careful design. For the central themes of the two plays are similar: nostalgia for a no-longer existent past and the individuals’ frustrating search for love and the meaning of life. The central “message” of both The Autumn Garden and The Three Sisters is also the same: the inevitability of disaster in the kind of world presented. Hellman has quoted this pertinent remark from one of the letters: “A reasoned life without a definite outlook is not a life, but a burden and a horror”.
In \textit{The Autumn Garden} a seventeen year old girl insists upon blackmailing a wealthy woman for money (by threatening to exaggerate a very minor scandal about the woman's husband) when the woman would be quite willing to aid her financially simply as an act of generosity. The blackmail seems almost wholly gratuitous, as though Hellman could scarcely let go of a play without it. True, she wants to show Nick's wife paying cash to extricate herself and wants to get Sophie the money to return to France where she belongs. Blackmail increases Nina's humiliation and emphasizes Sophies sense of independence. It throws light on the characters of both, though the light is merely additional, not new. But in real life Sophie would either ask for and accept the money as a gift - at some cost to her self-respect - or refuse it and stay. Blackmail is surely not so obvious an option. Indeed, by using it Sophie saves her self-respect at the cost of a rather acrobatic rationalization.\textsuperscript{19}

The Ellises try to persuade Sophie to go to Europe with them, but she refuses. Frederick has stopped moping about Payson, but Sophie knows, as does old Mrs. Ellis, that Frederick will always be his mother's boy. Sophie also knows that she must have another source of income now. From Nina she demands $5000. Otherwise she will spread word that Nick seduced her. With the money she will be free to go back to Europe to help her mother.
Sophie's refusal to take money from Nina unless it is called blackmail, not a charitable gift, is an important fact misunderstood by many reviewers. Sophie does not suddenly change her character. Her conversations with Crossman, brief as they are, let us know her true character. She is not a blackmailer like the Count in *Watch on the Rhine*, as some critics have understood her to be. She wants Nina and Nick, who have too many words for simple things, to face Nick's behaviour for what it is: not cute, boyish, and charming but ugly. Sophie tells Nina:

> You wish to be the kind lady who most honorably stays to discharge — with in reason — her obligations. And who goes off as she has gone off many other times, to make the reconciliation with her husband. How would you and Mr. Denery go on living without such incidents as me? I have been able to give you a second, or a twentieth honeymoon. (246)

To Sophie the word "blackmail" represents more than a way of calling something.

As a result of Nick's meddling, all the characters are confronted with the truth about themselves. But their life-long patterns cannot be broken. Nick was right about Rose and Ben Griggs. When Ben knows that she is ill, he gives in to Rose's appeal that he take care of her. For Ben escape is not possible, it is too late. His speech of insight was written by
Dashell Hammet and Hellman says that it summarizes the philosophy of the play. Griggs sums up the play's theme of missed opportunities. Hellman said she worked and reworked the speech but could not get it right. Then one morning she came downstairs at the pleasant farm to discover that during the night Hammet had written the speech for her and had succeeded in saying what she wanted to say.

The speech which examines the notion of everyone's life heading toward "a big moment" is perhaps less Chekhovian than it is a description of Hammett's own state of mind in 1950. Griggs says:

So at any given moment you're only the sum of your life up to then. There are no big moments you can reach unless you've a pile of smaller moments to stand on. That big hour of decision, the turning point in your life, the someday you have counted on when you'd suddenly wipe away your past mistakes, do the work you'd never done, think the way you'd never thought, have what you'd never had - it just doesn't come suddenly. You've trained yourself for it while you waited - or you've let it all run past you and frittered yourself away. I've frittered myself away, Crossman. (247-248)

The speech is prophetic. In an interview when Hellman was asked about the Griggs' rare "philosophic" speech, she said "Dash wrote that speech. I
worked on it over and over again, but it never came right. One night he said,

"Go to bed and let me try"...... She insists that, "the basic idea was his. Dash was hipped on the subject. I think I believe that speech..... I know I do... Dash worked at it far harder than I ever have, as his death proved. He wasn't prepared for death, but he has prepared for the trouble and the sickness he had, and was able to bear it - I think, because of this belief - with enormous courage, and quiteness."  

Now it is Ned Crossman's and Constance's turn for self-knowledge. Ned faces the fact that he has wasted himself and has become a drunk, living in a room and passing the day until night when the bars open. This is not because Constance turned him down, as he once persuaded himself to believe, but because he wanted it that way.

Constance has decided that she wasted herself waiting for Nick, when she really wanted Ned Crossman all the time. She asks him to marry her but it is too late. He is sorry that he had deluded her and himself into thinking he was in love with her. The curtain falls on his declaration.

"Crossman ... Sorry I fooled you and sorry I fooled myself and I've never liked liars — least of all those who lie to themselves." (249)
The only two characters in the play who have not lied to themselves are the young and old realists who have acknowledged the value of money, Sophie and Mrs. Ellis. Sophie is building her future by taking action in the present. The old lady built a triumphant past in the same way.

The tone of the play and the attitude of the playwright have made many critics describe *The Autumn Garden* as a comedy, although Marvin Felheim wrote an essay about the Chekhovian element in the play treating it as a tragedy. All the characters in *The Autumn Garden*, except Frederick, Sophie and Mrs. Ellis, are middle class Americans in the middle of the journeys of their lives. They start out to be one thing and end up as another without realizing it or they delude themselves that some day they will be what they dream of being. They cling to a vanished youth and charm, like Nick and Mrs. Griggs, or they tell themselves that life would be different. Had their separate dreams come true, Griggs would have been a scholar; Constance would have been Nick’s beloved and the inspiration for his painting, and Crossman happily married to Constance.

These characters all come to the summer home where they have grown up and reach the end of a summer season in the year 1949 and in their lives. They bring with them the real past and the past coloured by memory. In the real present they lose their romantic futures. They are children playing at being grown-ups. And in that summer house where most of them have gathered for the past seven summers, moving into their
middle age together, they become an ironic demonstration of Checkhov’s belief that “a reasoned life without a definite outlook is not a life, but a burden and a horror”.

We learn from the first Act that the characters come from similar backgrounds. They share a code of manners, a way of life. Yet each character is an individual. The groupings and regroupings allow us to see the differences caused by age, wealth, sex and class. In a sense, they are all middle class or upper middle class. Yet Rose is “new rich”. Hence, she is different from others. Sophie is a European who has learned to survive and adapt herself by facing realities as the Americans are unable to do. Nick, though he spent his childhood with these people, has been “Europeanized”.

Act II shows us Nick in action, meddling in everyone’s life. This meddling apparently gives rise to many subplots, and critics speak of the many plots in The Autumn Garden. Yet, what Hellman gives us, is not really plot, but a pattern. Each character lives out a situation similar to the others in a different way. Thus multiple revelations of human behaviour and patterns of human thought and motivation are unravelled in the play.

The reviews of The Autumn Garden registered a few complaints. Brooks Atkinson of The New York Times complained that the play was “boneless and torpid”. The distinguished critic John Gassner said he found the play unsatisfying, elaborating that Hellman had failed “to absorb us
completely in the world she had created”. Gassner offered a summation of *The Autumn Gardens*’ point, which, although tongue-in-check, was none the less apt: “... our little weaknesses pile up like calcium in the body and end in a bursitis of character.” With all his reservations, Gassner still preferred *The Autumn Garden* to anything else on Broadway and voted for it to win the Drama Critics Circle Award of 1951.

Harold Clurman, the play’s director remarked on an interesting distinction between the Hellman of *The Autumn Garden* and Chekhov. Writing in his *New Republic* column, he said that Chekhov loved his characters whereas Hellman did not. “She will not embrace her people”, he wrote, “she does not believe they deserve her (or our) love. Love is present only through the ache of its absence. Miss Hellman is a fine artist; she will be a finer one when she melts”. When an interviewer asked Hellman about which of her plays she likes best, she said:

*I don’t like that question. You always like best the last thing you did. You like to think that you got better with time. But you know it isn’t always true. I very seldom reread the plays. The few times I have, I have been pleasantly surprised by things that were better than I had remembered and horrified by other things I had thought were good. But I suppose *Autumn Garden*. I suppose I think it is the best play, if that is what you mean by “like”.22*
A few critics, especially among literary scholars, have seen optimism and compassion in this play. As for the optimism, Hellman said in a Newspaper interview that the characters in the play led empty lives, but that "the play isn’t meant to say that people can’t do anything about such emptiness. It is meant to say the opposite: they can do a great deal with their lives."23 That is, if they start soon enough. But she emphasized that at middle age if you have wasted what you had in you, it is too late to do much about it."24

John Gassner in Theatre at the Crossroads repeated his puzzlement about what Hellman was for, blaming some of the difficulty on her "tough-fibred resolution". He concluded, however, "comprehensiveness did not lessen her power and a compassionate viewpoint would not blunt the edge of her writing. The Autumn Garden, in 1951, spoke better for her than for the decade. The power and edge of her writing remained generally intact, this time without the possibility of provoking the charge of melodrama".25 Alan Downer said, "structurally it escapes from the technical slickness which has been by turns the wonder and despair of her critics ... Humanely, it reveals the nature of our life, of our means of grace... Thus the play presents an almost Chekhovian image of society, never denying the chaos, through which we move, but by the subtlest shaping and selection creating an order within the chaos and lending meaning to experience".26
REFERENCES

1. Katherine Lederer Lillian Hellman (Boston: Twayne, 1979), 75.


