CHAPTER III

The Dialectics of Incongruity in Man - Woman Relationship: Barefoot in the Park, The Prisoner of Second Avenue, Chapter Two, Last of the Red-Hot Lovers
Neil Simon's second play, *Barefoot in the Park* (1963), is a highly entertaining comedy marked by farcical situations and extravagant sentiment. It centres on the attempts of a newly-wed young woman, Curie Bratter, to infuse the honeymoon mood into their marital life and romance into her widowed mother's life. Having just moved into an apartment in New York after honeymooning for a week Corie tries to impress on her husband, Paul, a lawyer, the need to shed all thoughts about his job the moment he returns from his office, which is unthinkable for him as he is keen on making his mark in his profession. Corie is obviously of romantic nature which explains her going into raptures over her drab little room and her bringing a bunch of flowers with her, "the first bit of color in the room" as also her becoming ecstatic when the telephone is installed: "Eldorado five, eight, one, nine, one... It has a nice sound, hasn't it?" Indeed, entering the barren apartment and looking around, she finds it as enchanting as Miranda in Shakespeare's play, *The Tempest*, does 'the bare Island'
and sighs as any prelapsarian character would have done:

She enters the apartment, looks around, and sighs as though the world were just beginning. For her, it is.³

Corie's excitement on moving into her apartment is all the more remarkable as it has to be reached by six flights of steps which, makes every visitor pant for breath. The first of those to experience it is the telephone installer and the second is the delivery boy of about sixty years who is so affected as not to be able to speak at all and Paul who follows is surprised at the number of steps he has to climb—having seen only a Third floor one like it before renting it. Corie's mother, Ethel Banks, who drops in on her way home in New Jersey from a luncheon in Westghester finds her energy drained off by the climb although she does not complain about it. However, the six
flights of steps to be negotiated to reach the apartment bring out such responses as are revealing of the traits of the characters concerned. While Corie's reaction spells exuberance and good humour, Paul's underlines his peevishness and her mother's seems to be sporting enough not to mind it calling it "a charming apartment"¹⁴, though it is so cramped that one has to climb over the bed to get to the closet. Paul goes down to fetch scotch for his mother-in-law who tells her daughter:

I worry about you two. You're so impulsive. You jump into life. Paul is like me. He looks first.⁵

Ethel's assessment of their characters seems uncanny in that what follows bears it out. Ethel herself appears to be an attractive widow living all alone and having no other interest than her daughter.

But Corie tells her that having "found love...spiritual, emotional, and physical love,"⁶ she feels that
no one "on earth should be without it"\(^7\), and suggests her starting to live for herself again.

Paul is excited at having a case (his first one) in the court the next morning and proposes to work all night over it which disappoints Corie who finds her romantic plans for the evening ruined. Ethel leaves when Aunt Harriet rings the bell to call for her telling them that she would return on Friday "for the world Premiere"\(^8\) as she considers her present visit "just a sneak preview"\(^9\).

Ethel's remark is prompted by her finding the apartment empty of furniture and other fixtures which have yet to be received. She is also confident that her daughter would make it attractive. But as things stand Paul has to go into the bedroom to work standing so as to escape the cold blast from a hole in the skylight that aggravates their discomfort without dampening their spirits, which
is characteristic of newlyweds. Left alone, Corie is startled to find Victor Velasco, one of the 'Weirdons' living in their building of whom Paul has come to know from the man in the liquor shop, asking her permission to crawl through their window to reach his apartment as he has been locked out for non-payment of rent for four months. Fifty-eight years' old but flippant, Velasco, who is impoverished, invites himself to dinner on Friday and Corie plans to have her mother have dinner with him on Friday night. Paul is astonished not only at seeing him exit through the window but also at her telephoning her mother about Friday's party.

Act II opens on Friday evening disclosing the marvellous change in the apartment wrought by Corie's decorating talent supplemented by Velasco's. Paul returns home tired and dejected that, though he has won his first case, his client
has been awarded only six cents for the protection
of his goodname and he remarks wryly:

From now on I get all the cases
that come in for a dime or under.\textsuperscript{10}

Paul is sceptical about the outcome of Corie's
effort to arrange a blind date with Velasco and
expects it to be a fiasco:

\textbf{Corie}: Why should it be a fiasco? It's just
conceivable they may have something in
common.

\textbf{Paul}: Your mother? That quiet, dainty little
woman... and the Count of Monte Cristo?
You must be kidding.\textsuperscript{11}

Ethel comes in exhausted by the climb after a
series of mishaps on the way and is revived by
the pink pills she carries as also by the drink
given to her and is startled by Corie's fixing
up a blind date with Velasco as she has been looking
forward to meeting Paul's parents. Velasco enters
without any wine as his credit has been stopped
but with a delicacy known as 'knichi' which needs to be popped into the mouth to be fully enjoyed and Corie alone is able to do it. The two couples go out to dine at an Albanian restaurant on Staten Island at the instance of Velasco and Paul is irritated at the gaiety of the others. Corie and Velasco return full of spirits followed by Paul carrying the virtually unconscious Ethel who decides to leave as she has a Ten 'O' clock dentist appointment the next morning. Velasco gallantly offers to drive her home in her car without caring for the trouble he would have to get back home. Paul feels sorry for Ethel as she has not been able to stand the strain although she has been sporting enough not to complain about it. Paul blames Corie for it, saying:

She's too good a sport. She went the whole cockeyed way ... Boy, oh boy... dragging a woman like that all the way out to the middle of the harbor for a bowl of sheep dip.
They enter into an argument and Corie considers his attitude to be that of one who is devoid of sense of adventure. Corie says:

Do you know what you are? You're a watcher. There are watchers in this world and there are Doers. And the watchers sit around watching the Do-ers do. Well, tonight you watched and I did.\(^1\)

Their conversation soon develops into an altercation with Paul accusing her of being unconcerned about her mother and her answering him:

Unconcerned.... I'm plenty concerned. Do you think I'm going to get one wink of sleep until the phone rings tomorrow? I'm scared to death for my mother. But I'm grateful there's finally the opportunity for something to be scared about... What I'm really concerned about is you!
I'm beginning to wonder if you're capable of having a good time.  

Controlling his temper Paul tries to go to sleep which angers Corie all the more and when she reminds him that he refused to walk with her in the park the other night, he replies that it was 17 degrees. Paul is forced into engaging himself in verbal exchanges with her which end finally in her asking for a divorce. After an amusing tussle as to who should sleep in the bed-room, Paul settles down to sleep on the couch leaving the bed-room to Corie who cries loudly to keep him awake. Soon the telephone rings and Paul furious at the disturbance, rips it off the wall and tries to get some sleep when the snow from the hole in the skylight falls on him thereby adding to his discomfiture.

Act-III starts with the continuation of the exchanges between Paul and Corie who carry on ignoring the
presence of the telephone man who has come to fix the telephone. Paul refusing the goulash offered by Corie prefers to have meal of grapes from his attachecase and amusingly enough, tries to snatch at the hot food on Corie's plate when she goes behind the kitchen screen. Unreconciled Paul and Corie keep up their quarrel with Corie's terming an advertisement for dancing lessons a personal call and Paul's saying his not having had time to look for his own place. They are startled by a call from Aunt Harriet that Ethel's bed has not been slept in and that she is missing. Corie agitatedly runs out to find Velasco while Paul is packing up his belongings and soon Corie returns panic-stricken and is comforted by Paul who imagines that her mother has had an accident. They are surprised to see Ethel entering in a dishevelled condition and wearing a man's bathrobe and slippers, which makes them think the worst of her. Paul leaves and Corie admits that he
has been right all along. To convince them that nothing objectionable has happened, Ethel tells her:

When I got outside I suddenly felt dizzy... Well, I passed out. In the slush. Then Victor picked me up and carried me inside. I couldn't walk because my shoes fell down the sewer. He started to carry me up here but his beret fell over his eyes and he fell down the stairs... He fell into apartment three-C. I fell on his foot... They had to carry us up. Mr. Gonzales, Mr. Armandariz, and Mr. Calhoun... They carried us up... And then they put us down. On the rugs... Oh, he doesn't have beds... just thick rugs, and then I fell asleep... And then when I woke up, Victor was gone. But I was there... in his bathrobe. I swear that's the truth, Corie.
Although things could have happened as Ethel described them, Corie is sceptical as she cannot believe that her mother does not know what has happened to her clothes. The seeming mystery of the missing clothes is resolved when Velasco tells them that they are with the cleaners. He then reveals that his toe is broken and that he has ulcers, which necessitates his taking the same pink pills as Ethel uses, as also that he dyes his hair. He then invites Ethel to a 'plain' dinner that evening to which she agrees remembering that for the first time in years she slept without the board needed for her aching back. Ethel is so happy that she pops a grape into her mouth by way of celebration and is surprised to find Corie in tears who informs her of her quarrel with Paul. Ethel advises her saying:

That's the first time you've asked my advice since you were ten...
You've just got to give up a little of you for him. But take care of him. And make him feel important. And if you can do that, you'll have a happy and wonderful marriage.\textsuperscript{16}

Ethel's advice may sound old-fashioned and commonplace in that it seems to pander to male chauvinism, but it does make sense in that a happy marriage is possible if the husband and wife act according to the principle of 'give-and-take' that demands the giving up of a bit of oneself for the other. However, it is rendered acceptable to those rejecting the old values when she adds:

Like two out of every ten couples.\textsuperscript{17}

After the departure of her mother who is obviously happy at the prospect of beginning a new life with Velasco who seems to have mellowed, Corie wanting to go out searching for Paul is stunned to see Paul standing in the doorway, disheveled and drunk
but still carrying the suitcase. Paul, shivering without his overcoat, asks her to get out as the lease is in his name and Corie refusing to go out and concerned about him rushes to him only to be repulsed. Corie holding him says:

Paul, you're ice cold ...
You're freezing! ...
What have you been doing?¹⁸

Pulling away from her Paul replies:

I've been walking barefoot
in the God-damn park.¹⁸ᵃ

Corie's efforts to make him rest end in his becoming wild in his behaviour which scares her so much as to make her shut herself up in the bathroom. Pounding on the door Paul is startled to hear that she is scared of him as he has changed and that she wants the old Paul back. In answer to his query:
That fuddy duddy? Corie says:

He's not a fuddy duddy. He's dependable and he's strong and he takes care of me and tells me how much I can spend and protects me from people like you... And I just want him to know how much I love him ... And that I'm going to make everything here exactly the way he wants it ... and if he wants I'll even carry him up the stairs every night ...

Receiving no response Corie comes out of the bedroom and is shocked to find Paul on the skylight who makes her say that she loves him though he "is a lousy stinkin drunk". When asked to come down Paul says that he cannot come down as he is going to be sick, which makes Corie rush to his rescue telling him to keep on singing so as
to avoid feeling sick, although the only song he remembers is the detested one, "Shama, Shama" heard at the Albanian restaurant on that fateful day.

The play ends with Paul's singing as it were for his life, which gives a funny turn to a potentially tragic happening. Paul's effort to disprove Corie's contention that he lacks a sense of adventure ends in a fiasco, which, however, shows that he cares for her opinion as much as she does for his, demonstrated through his foolish, though daring, act of walking barefoot in the snow and climbing onto the roof of the building. Indeed Ethel had assessed them with an amazing insight when she said in response to Corie's announcement that she and Paul had split up:

I don't believe it ...because in my entire life I've never seen
two people more in love than you
and Paul. 22

Indeed, Corie's declaration that she wants the old Paul back and Paul's admission that even when he didn't like her he loved her express their mutual recognition of the worth of their individual traits, which helps resolve the crisis caused by the momentary blackout of their love for each other because of their temperamentinal incongruity. Interestingly, a happy ending becomes possible only when each of the main characters gives up his or her rigid posture which helps clear his or her perception of the other concerned.

This is evidenced by Ethel's acknowledgement of the loneliness of her widow's existence and Velasco's decision to allow his beard to go gray as much as by Corie's wanting her old Paul back and Paul's attempt to pander to his wife's romantic whims.
The Prisoner of Second Avenue (1975) offers a different perspective on the marital discord from that of Bare foot in the Park, as it centres on Mel's alienation from his wife, Edna, because of his exasperation at finding things going wrong which results in his becoming paranoiac. Mel and Edna Edison in a way represent the grown-up versions of Paul and Corie in Barefoot in the Park, whose estrangement from each other stems from their having different perceptions of their engagement with life. It, however, differs from the earlier play in respect of its being more overtly concerned with the disturbing aspects of the contemporary world than the latter. Referring to its genesis Neil Simon said in an interview:

I was very down on New York at that point, which is about when the taxi drivers started putting up those barriers between themselves and the passengers. It seemed
to me symptomatic of what was going on in all our cities. People were so alienated and so fearful that they were separating themselves from contact. And not without cause... I decided to make a statement about those Urban ills and to do it in the form I write best: a comedy. 23

Set in urban areas Simon's plays present an image of urban life characterised by the break down of amenities and fear of alienation experienced by the inhabitants of cities. However, they do not imply the difficulties encountered by the characters in establishing contacts as being due to their having an 'undeveloped heart' as E.M. Forster does in accounting for his characters shrinking from contact with others. Further the structure of urban society and life is such that personal contact only brings to the fore the characters' latent selfish propensities and weaknesses which create tensions in their relations.
The 'urban ills' referred to in the statement quoted above are shown to be afflicting Mel who sits up awake in his fourteenth floor apartment in Second Avenue because of the noise of the city even at that late hour (2.30 a.m.), the loud noise of the air-conditioner, the merry-making of the stewardesses next door, the barking of a dog, and the stench from the garbage which has not been removed on account of a strike as also stomach upset. He is so depressed that he tells his worried wife, Edna:

This country is being buried by its own garbage. It keeps piling up higher and higher. In three years this apartment is going to be the second floor.

Mel's depression is aggravated by his feeling that something alarming is happening to him. He tells his wife:

I'm losing control. I can't handle things any more. The telephone on my desk rings seven, eight times before I answer it.
When Edna attributes his condition to tension, Mel says:

Tension? If I could just feel tension, I'd give a thousand dollars to charity... When you're tense, you're tight, you're holding on to something. I don't know where to grab. Edna, I'm slipping, and I'm scared.

Further, Mel is worried because at forty seven he is on the verge of losing his job which he has held for twenty-two years in the same company, although Edna assures him that it would not make much difference to them, since they are living like caged animals and that she would go anywhere and find a job to help him. The situation takes a comic turn when the stewardesses next door complain over the phone about Mel's loud voice resulting in the banging on the wall separating their apartments as also a news report by Roger Keating about an alarming rise in apartment house burglaries.

As ill-luck would have it, Mel loses his job and his apartment is burgled when Edna not finding
the key has left the door unlocked to go to the store 'for just five minutes'. As Mel and Edna discuss the items they have to do without, Mel bursts out:

The garbage that we buy every year. Useless, meaningless garbage that fills up the house until you throw it out there and it becomes garbage again and stinks up the house... Look at this! Eight and a half dollars for a musical whiskey pourer ... God forbid we should get a little bored while we're pouring our whiskey! Toys, toys novelties, gimmicks, trivia, garbage, crap, HORSESHIT!!!

Unable to control himself at the injustice done to him, Mel rushes out onto the terrace screaming which makes a neighbour upstairs drench him with a bucket of water thrown from his terrace. Thoroughly shaken Mel sobs and is consoled by Edna.

Significantly, while the first scene shows Mel's response to his worsening situation, which is typically urbanite and Edna's wifely devotion to him, the second one brings out their reactions
to a specific event affecting their lives - the ransacking of their apartment by thieves and Mel's dismissal from service. While Mel's reaction smacks of self-pity ("what did I give them twenty-two years of my life for? A musical whiskey pourer?") Edna reveals her love for him and fortitude, which helps her to face up to the challenge posed by the disastrous turn of events. She tells him:

And if you don't get another job right away, I can always be a secretary again. I can work, I'm strong, Mel ... You mustn't get sick and die because I don't want to live in this world without you... We'll show them, Mel. We'll show them all.

Six weeks later, Mel remains jobless and increasingly ruminative which only makes him paranoid. He speaks of "the social-economical-and-political-plot-to-undermine-the-working-classes-in-this-country." when Edna comes home from her job to have lunch with him. Impatient to get back to work in time Edna asks him to name the plotters and is told:
Two weeks later, Mel's elder brother, Harry and his three sisters - Pauline, Pearl and Jessie - arrive uninvited (for nine years) to Mel's house when Mel has gone out for a walk. Their conversation reveals that Mel has always been 'the baby of the family' and that Harry has been secretly envious of him. They discuss his nervous break-down and express their willingness to help him financially. When Harry suggests their contributing each "X" number of dollars, without specifying what 'X' stands for, the scene turns comic and at the same time shows that they are not prepared to make any sacrifices for him.

Harry's suggestion that they should see his illness through even if it takes weeks, months or years does not find favour with his sisters whose response to it Pauline articulates:
No one's disagreeing. We're all in agreement. Except when you mention things like five years. I don't see any sense in curing Mel and ending up in the poorhouse. If, God forbid, that happened, would he be in any position to help us?  

Saying that they cannot afford to let Mel be sick forever, they agree to put a time-limit to it, which sounds absurd. Overjoyed at their generosity, Edna tells them that while she would be able to meet the current expenses, she would like them to lend $25,000/- for starting a summer camp for children as a measure to ensure his future. Angered by their refusal, Edna leaves the room as Mel comes in without noticing his visitors, but soon greets them warmly although his sisters react as though he was mentally deranged. Exasperated at his sisters' attitude Harry exclaims:

I don't care what it's going to cost. The three of you can contribute whatever you think you can afford, I'll make up the deficit...
In the final scene, Harry returns with a cheque for the summer camp which Mel and Edna have planned only to be told that Mel is no longer interested in it, which startles Harry. What is more startling is Mel's remarkable mental recovery after two months of psychiatric treatment and Edna's being exasperated with urban life. Losing her job because of her firm's bankruptcy she seems to have become so frustrated that she finds even a slight inconvenience annoying. Edna complains about lack of running water for her bath only to find their neighbour drenching Mel a second time with water, which infuriates them so much that they plan to teach him a lesson by dumping snow on his head. The play ends with their waiting for enough snow to fall and a news forecast of a record snowfall.

The play is made up of scenes featuring situations which bring out the ironies inherent in the characters' attempts to cope with them. While at the beginning it is Mel who raves against the urban ills, at the
end it is Edna who is exasperated by them, which offers an illuminating comment on the frustration that the urbanites experience as a result of their being cooped up in apartments as in prisons from which there seems to be no escape, since their condition will not change wherever they may settle as Mel perceptively observes when Edna suggests their moving out of New York. Again, Harry does not believe that Mel has recovered from his nervous breakdown because after refusing Harry's loan he talks of kissing him, which brotherly gesture is misinterpreted by Harry.

The play thus dramatizes not only the effects of urban ills on the characters concerned but also their efforts to bring about reconciliation between the estranged ones which are frustrated by the play of factors traceable to their innate propensities. It ends on a comic note with Edna expressing her admiration for the way Mel has stood up to the crisis:

I think you're behaving very well, Mel. I think you're taking it beautifully this time ...
That shows real progress, Mel. I think you've grown through this experience ... I'm so proud of you, Mel, so proud ... Because you're better than them ... Better than all of them, Mel.  

Chapter-Two (1977) traces the relations between George Schneider, a writer, and Jennie Malone, a divorcee, whom he marries, which get complexified because of his feeling guilty at having married to so soon after the death of his first wife, Barbara. The play ends on a happy note with his realization of the need to live in the present rather than in the past, which signifies his opening a new chapter in his life that significantly coincides with the completion of the first chapter of his book.

The play has a sub-plot as in Shakespearean comedies which offers a perceptive comment on the main plot and which helps widen the significance of the theme so as to make it imply what is of universal interest. The sub-plot concerns the relationship of the protagonist's brother, Leo Schneider, who strives to extricate his brother, George, from his tangled feelings of guilt and remorse, with Jennie's friend,
Faye Medwick, who like Leo considers it her mission to arrange other people's lives in which respect she resembles Emma in Jane Austen's novel titled after the heroine. The play is said to be most autobiographical in that it reveals the grief experienced by Neil Simon at the death of his wife, Joan, and his feeling of guilt resulting from his marrying Marsha Mason.

The play opens with George's return from his trip to Europe undertaken to alleviate his grief after his wife's death - a trip that only accentuates it, as George admits, since visiting the places he has been to with Barbara, he has been foolishly expecting to meet her at every turn: George tells Leo:

It was very spooky in London... I kept walking around the streets looking for Barbara... I know it's crazy, Leo, but I really thought to myself, It's a joke. She's not dead. She's in London waiting for me. She's just playing out this romantic fantasy; The whole world
thinks she's gone, but we meet clandestinely in London, move into a flat, disappear from everyone and live out our lives in secret! George is so heart-broken that he is on the point of cursing her for having deserted him, but persuaded by his brother, he agrees to begin a new chapter in his life. Leo suggests such common diversions as poker, a knicks game and dinner and the scene ends with George telling Leo:

Okay, let's take it one night at a time, folks.

Two months later, the scene opens with Jennie's return from having secured her divorce in Mexico, from Gus Hendricks, a professional football player, after six years of married life, accompanied by her friend, Faye, who also has problems with her marriage to Sidney. Jennie, like George, has made up her mind to start a new chapter in her life, which points to the parallel situations underlying the structure of the play.

In the next scene George at work on his typewriter is startled to receive a phone call from Leona Zorn,
the divorced wife of his chiropractor, asking him for a date, which he politely refuses to give, saying:

Well, yes, in a manner of speaking, we are in the same boat ... But we don't necessarily have to paddle together ... I think we have to go up our own streams. 37

Just then Leo comes in and engages him in light-hearted banter on learning how George is being pestered by phone calls from widowed or divorced women asking him for dates, which he considers sad. Disapproving his brother's conduct, Leo says:

Now, if you want to feel sorry for yourself and everyone else in the world who's suffered a loss, that's your concern... I am God's interior decorator, and he has sent me to paint you two coats of happiness. 38

Refusing to agree to his brother's request to date Bambi, George tells Leo:

My life is full. There are no more Barbaras left in the world. If you meet them once in your life, God has been more than good to you... I love you for what you're doing... but don't do it anymore. 39
Likewise, Faye's efforts to make Jennie have a date with George fail and Jennie wants to work in the theatre. However, Leo's and Faye's efforts to bring George and Jennie together succeed when George attempting to ring the number of Sevene Jurgens, an elderly lady, whom he wants to engage as a research assistant, mistakenly dials Jennie's number noted down along with Jurgens's number on a slip of paper by his brother, Leo. The resultant confusion is happily resolved with their agreeing to a five-minute meeting: George tells Jennie:

Just hear me out. What if we were to meet for just five minutes? We could say hello, look each other over, part company and tell Leo and Faye that they have fulfilled their noble mission in life.

Meeting in Jennie's apartment they like each other so much that they agree to have an evening hour together. In answer to her query George tells her that he writes two kinds of novels, spy novels under a pseudonym, Kenneth Blakely - Hill, for a living, and good novels under his own name. They soon fall
in love which makes George feel guilty about his seeking happiness with another woman so soon after his wife's death. Trying to prevent him from marrying Jennie, Leo describes vividly George's grief at Barbara's death, which though disturbing, does not deter her from accepting George's marriage proposal. Significantly, as Jennie has doubts about finding happiness in marriage after all that she has had to endure in her marriage to Gus, George also is hesitant to enter into another marriage because of his sense of guilt as also because of his fear that he may once again be deprived of such happiness.

George frankly admits:

I keep trying to push Barbara out of my mind... I can't do it. I've tried, Jennie .... I don't really want to. I'm so afraid of losing her forever.... I know I'll never stop loving Barbara, but I feel so good about you... and I can't get the two things together in my mind.

Jennie assures him:

I just want you to be happy. I want you to have room for all your feelings. I'll share
whatever you want to share with me... I'm very strong, George. I have enough for both of us. Use it George. Please use me.42 (Italics mine)

With their doubts and fears stilled they decide to get married the following Monday despite Leo's advice that he should take time over it by living in together for a month to ascertain their true feelings. George, however, rejects his advice and when he tries to tell him about their marriage, he is surprised to learn that Leo and his wife, Marilyn, are splitting because of their temperamental incompatibility. Being anxious to achieve financial security, Leo devotes his time so much to his business that he is away most of the time from his home which infuriates Marilyn. Further, he is too immature to realize that the past cannot be relived, and Marilyn is too inflexible to pander to his fantasies. As they drift apart, Leo comes closer to Faye who because of the indifference of her husband is willing enough to have an affair with him but soon realizes that Faye is a "romantic unhappy woman"43 and that he is an "indifferent frustrated man"44.
Returning from their honeymoon, George finds that he is still "stuck" as he confesses to Jennie:

I'm just stuck someplace in my mind and it's driving me crazy.... I'm fighting to hold on to self-pity, and just my luck I run into the most understanding girl in the world.45

Sensing the danger that their marriage is in, Jennie wants to tackle it unflinchingly by stoutly refusing to become a Barbara for him; She tells him bluntly:

I'm not Barbara. And I'll be damned if I'm going to re-create her life, just to make my life work with you.46

Jennie's frank talk angers George so much that he talks hurtlingly to her, telling her:

I resent everything you want out of marriage that I've already had. And for making me reach so deep inside to give it to you again. .... And most of all, I resent not being able to say in front of you .... that I miss Barbara so much.47

Two days later, George's announcement of his intention to go to Los Angeles while refusing to allow her to accompany him makes her tell him bluntly:

You mean so much to me that I am willing to
take all your abuse and insults and insensitivity - because that's what you need to do to prove I'm not going to leave you. I'm not going to promise. I'm not going to die, George, that's asking too much. But if you want to test me, go ahead and test me. You want to leave leave; But I'm not the one who's going to walk away. 48

She points out to him that his fear of expecting much is wrong and that he has to confront their marital problems courageously, which advice startles George into scrutinizing his true situation resulting in his becoming unstuck, though only after he recalls what he used to do when he and Barbara had a fight. He manages to fight his way through his fears and announces to Jennie that he has finished the last chapter of his new book which signifies his accepting that life spells not the beginning and ending but many beginnings and endings. The play ends with George telling Jennie that he has spent his time in the Los Angeles airport's lounge trying to get 'unstuck' and that he has finished the last few pages of his book on the plane, which he dedicates to her.
Last of the Red-Hot Lovers centres on the attempts of a middle-aged, forty-seven year old owner of a fish restaurant, Barney Cashman, who has never been unfaithful to his wife, Thelma, in their twenty-three years of marriage, to have 'one romantic extramarital experience' before reaching old age in a ten-month period during which he seeks it with three women in turn, in his mother's apartment. The first one, Elaine Navazio, interested only in sex, walks out, being unprepared to make it a part of a romantic interlude, while the second, Bobbi Michele, finding him uninterested in her paying back the money lent to her for hiring an accompanist for her theatre audition or in sexual favours, coaxes him into smoking marijuana with her before leaving him. The third, Jeanette Fisher, wife of his friend Mel, agreeing to Barney's proposal is too depressed at Mel's having an extramarital affair to have sex and instead engages him in a debate about finding decent people in the world. The play spells the play of forces of incongruity in man-woman relations which is of universal concern.
Barney decides to take advantage of his mother's absence twice a week when she is away doing charity work at Mt. Sinai Hospital, and use her apartment for his romantic escapade. To avoid detection by his mother, he takes his own liquor and glasses to the apartment, a modern one with a convertible sofa, thin walls and an inquisitive neighbour, and such other precautions as not making loud sounds as also to leave before his mother's scheduled return at five O' clock in the afternoon. Essentially, a decent man with a wife and three children, and a prosperous business man, Barney has been leading a staid life and suddenly starts wondering whether his life will be singularly uneventful. He decides to have one memorable affair which is what makes him invite Elaine. Their encounter is comic in that while he wants romance she is interested only in sex and that while he is a non-smoker, she is one addicted to smoking. Their conversation turns into a verbal battle during which
he calls her flippant, cold, and pitiful which makes her retort:

I don't know your problems and I don't care....
No one really cares about anything or anyone in this world except himself, and there's only one way to get through with your sanity.
If you can't taste it, touch it, or smell it, forget it! 49

Referring to his statement that he wants to 'live' before he is dead, to "just once give in to my fantasies, my secret dreams, experiencing things, emotions, stimulants I've never experienced before ... to know what it was like with another woman," 50

Elaine remarks:

... no one gives a good crap about you dying because a lot of people discovered it ahead of you. We're all dying, Mr. Cashman. As a matter of fact, I myself passed away about six months ago. 51

Barney is so upset by her remarks that he vows not to attempt such a thing again, but significantly enough, eight months later he attempts a similar act with Bobbi Michele who comes to his mother's
apartment without even being sure that Barney is the one who has lent her money to pay an accompanist for her audition. Without paying the least attention to what he is saying she narrates various experiences of hers - a cab driver's attempt to seduce her under the Manhattan Bridge, the Chinese man 'feeling her up' during a movie on the flight from California, her living with a Nazi lesbian music teacher having a leather bed-spread and such other tales - which he laps up. Bobbi tells him that she has come to return his loan of twenty dollars, but when he hesitantly agrees to accept it, she tells him that she does not have the money but that she is "good for it, though". adding

If I don't get a show in New York I may go do a series of one-night concerts in New Zealand...

Finally, when she asks his permission to smoke, Barney is shocked to learn that it is not tobacco but marijuana that she wants to smoke. However, he pretends that having smoked it he is trying to cut down on it, which makes her ask him to join
her. Coaxed by Bobbi who tells him that her marijuana is a blend prescribed by her doctor in Beverly Hills which she takes it instead of a tranquillizer Barney tries it out and feels that he is dying: He ruefully remarks:

So many things I wanted to do ... but I'll never do 'em. So many places I wanted to see ... I'll never see 'em. Trapped ... We're all trapped ... Help! Help!

A month later, for his third 'encounter' which is with Jeanette Fisher, wife of his friend Mel, Barney wears a sports jacket and 'a joyful tie' to give an impression of youthfulness. But he is made aware immediately after her arrival that she is unhappy with her husband with 'the happiness factor' being only 8.2%, that she takes pills for depression and that when she and Dr. Margolies consider her being ready, she will drive off the Verrazano Bridge. Their conversation takes a funny turn when in response to her challenge he names Jesus, J.F. Kennedy and Thelma as three decent, gentle, loving people and soon afterwards when Jeanette hesitates to include
Thelma in her list, Barney vehemently asserts:

Thelma Cashman is **beyond** reproach. She is as totally incapable of an act of deception as you would be or I would be or — Oh, my God!  

Suddenly, he becomes aware of the doubt cast on his wife which makes him ask her:

For God's sakes, Jeanette, why are you doing this? Is there something about Thelma you know that I don't? Is there something about her I should know that you're not telling me?... I demand to know about Thelma!  

Jeanette assures him that "she is the epitome of decency" and that they — Barney for doubting her, she for being with him and Mel for driving her to it — are not decent people. She tells him that while forbidding her to continue her friendship with Charlotte Korman Mel has admitted his having an affair with her which he justifies by saying:

We're living in a guiltless society. You can do anything you want as long as you're honest about it. Aren't we lucky to be living in
such a civilized age? In the old days I would have gone to my grave ignorant of the wonderful and beautiful knowledge that my husband was spending his afternoons humping Charlotte Korman. 58

As Jeanette prepares to leave, Barney suddenly realizes that he has not had their affair and recalls his encounters with Elaine and Bobbi which have resulted in his not having an affair with either of them as he has been seeking 'something beautiful, something decent', adding:

...I'm through looking for something beautiful and decent because it doesn't exist. You're right, Jeanette, we're no damned good, all of us. There are no decent, gentle, loving people left in the world... If we're indecent, then let's see a couple of terrific indecencies! COME HERE, JEANETTE! 59

So saying he moves towards her like a rapist overturning the furniture, which frightens Jeanette who tells him that he is kind, good, intelligent, loving and decent, which is what Barney wants her to say. Barney forces her to admit that he, Thelma and Mel
are three decent, loving and gentle people. Barney puts his arm around the sobbing Jeanette to comfort her and making her say that she does not hate him and asks her to see him Thursday night for dinner. After her departure, he tries to tidy up the place when suddenly an idea strikes him which makes him telephone Thelma to meet him in his mother's apartment to her amazement. Significantly, the play ends with Barney's seeking to realize his romantic fancies with his wife as his attempts with others prove abortive, which underlines the fact that like the odour of the fish on his hands which he cannot get rid off, he will not be able to cease being a nice guy he is as he tells Elaine. Ironically, the affair Barney could have had easily with the sensuous Elaine he attempts to have with the unsensuous Jeanette who has a pronounced moral awareness that induces a nagging sense of guilt, which helps clinch the argument of the play that despite the world being depraved decent people can still be found.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


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3 Ibid., p. 105.

4 Ibid., p. 126.

5 Ibid., p. 131.

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9 Ibid.

10 Ibid., p. 147.

11 Ibid., p. 148.

12 Ibid., p. 173.

13 Ibid., p. 175.

14 Ibid. pp. 174-175.
15 Ibid., pp. 199-200.
16 Ibid., p. 207.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid., 209.
18a Ibid.
19 Ibid., p. 212.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid., p. 213.
22 Ibid., p. 206.
25 Ibid., pp. 238-239.
26 Ibid., p. 239.
27 Ibid., p. 256.
28 Ibid., p. 256.
29 Ibid., p. 258.
30 Ibid., p. 267.
31 Ibid., p. 270.
32 Ibid., p. 283.
33 Ibid., pp. 280-281.
34 Ibid., p. 298.
36 Ibid., p. 640.
37 Ibid., p. 646.
38 Ibid., pp. 647-648.
39 Ibid., pp. 649-650.
40 Ibid., p. 661.
41 Ibid., pp. 677-678.
42 Ibid., p. 678.
43 Ibid., p. 721.
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Ibid., p. 729.

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58 Ibid., pp. 651-652.

59 Ibid., p. 653.