CHAPTER V

THE AUTUMN GARDEN: INTERPLAY OF DECEPTION AND SELF-DECEPTION
Probably no play of the American theatre is more completely Chekhovian than Lillian Hellman's *The Autumn Garden*. To quote Alan Downer, it is "Miss Hellman's most original play."¹ 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."² *The Autumn Garden* 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 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."³

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 who was left impoverished by her wealthy parents. She has converted the family summer home into the boarding house. One of her most faithful summer boarders is Edward Crossman, a middle-aged alcoholic bank clerk who supposedly 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 comes 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," and Sophie replies, "I came from another world and in that world thirteen is not young." 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 his mother. Although the Ellises 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 Ellises - Grandmother, mother, and Frederick - plan a trip to Europe, without Sophie. Frederick is determined to invite Payson to go as his guest.

Also spending the summer are retired army general Benjamin Griggs and his flirtatious, pathetically silly wife, Rose. Katherine 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 the Denerys. Nick Denery, dilettante artist and Constance's old beau jilted Constance 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 meddling and 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. In The Autumn Garden he is the ironic catalyst. The play turns on Nick's awaited arrival and its consequences. More actively than similar Chekhov 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 ironists, Crossman and Grandma Ellis, see through him immediately. When Nick says that Constance sacrificed her life for her brother, Crossman says "Nick is still a Southerner. With us every well-born lady sacrifices her life for something: a man, a house, sometimes a gardenia bush" (215). Nick says, "We loved each other so very much. Remember, Ned?" Crossman replies that he doesn't "remember that much love" (216). When Nick says that he has heard that Crossman drinks too much. Crossman says, "Not a bit. I want to know about you, too. Ever had syphilis, Nick? Kind of thing one has to know right off, if you understand me" (216). Crossman finally tells him, "you are just exactly the way I remember you. And that I wouldn't have believed of any man" (235).

When Nick, bored and restless, asks Mrs. Ellis whether she will enjoy reading at her age, Mrs. Ellis says, "No, Mr. Denery. If you have not learned to read at your age, you won't learn at mine" (230). Nick puts his hand on her shoulder. Shrugging it off, she says, "And you are a toucher: you constantly touch people or lean on them. Little moments of sensuality. One should
have sensuality whole or not at all ... There are many of you: the touchers and the learners" (230). The plot does not turn on the Nick - Sophie safe incident, but on Nick's meddling. He deliberately manipulates other human beings for his own amusement.6

Nick's first victim is Constance Tuckerman, who was once so much in love with him that she rejected Ned Crossman. Twenty-three years before, Nick, an artist of sorts, had painted Constance's portrait. Now he persuade her to let him paint her again. His plan is to retrieve from her the original portrait and exhibit the two together.7 In the portrait Nick dresses Constance in rags. He paints her as a sad poverty-stricken old woman. In this depiction one can notice the parallel between this situation and the situation described in Henry James' short story "The Liar." Nick says:

I want to borrow it first, I'm having a retrospective show this winter, in London. I've done a lot of fancy people in Europe, you know that, but I'll be more proud of this - And I want to do another portrait of you as you are now, (moves towards the window, excited) you standing there. As before. Wonderful idea; young girl, woman at - Be a sensation.
Constance, it's fascinating how faces change, mold firm or loose, have lines that start in youth and —

Constance: (amazed) Oh! Nick, I don't want to see myself now. I don't want to see all the changes. And I don't want other people to stand and talk about them. I don't want people to laugh at me or pity me. (218)

Katherine Lederer observes that "The visual symbol of his (Nick's) manipulation in The Autumn Garden is his new painting of Constance, dressed in a cheap dress he bought at a Negro store, which make her look much older and less attractive than she is. This painting shows not the real Constance, but the real Nick, as Constance finally realizes when she sees it. The youthful painting Constance has kept all these years as the 'only important thing' she has, as a symbol of their 'romantic love,' is as false as the new one in a different sense."8

All the time he keeps up a lie to Constance that he, Nick, really loved her when he married Nina, and still does. But Ned Crossman still loves her too and wants to marry her. Nick will not allow Constance to look at the new portrait of herself. Now he encourages her to fantasize about Crossman.
Nick: Haven't you yet figured out that Ned is jealous?

Constance: Jealous of what?

Nick: He's in love with you, girl. As much as he was when we were kids. You're all he talked about last night... how much he's wanted you, how often he asked you to marry him. (223)

Nick tells Constance that Crossman has always loved her. Acting on this misinformation, Constance causes Crossman to face his own self-deception, a self-deception he takes hard because he has seen through that of others.

Nick then turns his attention to the Ellises. He informs Carrie that he had seen Fred in the travel agency, booking passage to Europe for Payson. He tells Carrie Ellis that Payson, a man with whom Frederick spends all his time, is homosexual. Her reaction causes Fred to learn that Payson has cared nothing for him.

Nick: He'd just come back from a filthy little scandal in Rome. It was all over the papers......

Carrie: What kind of scandal? Please help me I don't understand.

Nick: Look, Carrie there's nothing to understand. The guy is just no good. That's all you need to know. He's nobody to travel around Europe with. (225)
But Frederick still insists on taking Payson with him. But his grandmother forces Carrie to tell Frederick that he can leave on the trip with Payson, but must "make clear to his guest that his ten thousand a year ends today and will not begin again." (227) Payson then backs out of the trip if he has to pay his own way. Frederick is heart-broken.

Nick's wife, Nina, has been through this type of thing often before. He can never leave things alone. She says to him, "I can smell it: it's all around us. The flower like odour right before it becomes troublesome and heavy. It travels ahead of you. Nick, whenever you get most helpful, most loving, and most lovable" (225). And she threatens to leave him as she had done before. Nick has tampered also with the Griggs' marriage. He comforts Rose by flirting with her. For his trouble he gains her confidence and the promise of $5000 commission to paint a portrait of her homely niece. Rose is ill, is beginning to feel amorous towards Nick, and asks for his advice. He suggests that she go to a doctor — not to be cured, but to be certified that she is truly ill so that her husband will not leave her. "Her visit to the Doctor," comments Katherine Lederer,
"forces her to face what she has suspected but has refused to acknowledge. She then has a moment of self-knowledge." But we know her well enough by this time to know that her promise to Griggs to give him a divorce in a year will be forgotten and life will go on as before for her. The knowledge of her heart condition forces Griggs in turn to face the possibility that he never really wanted freedom.

It is Nick's philandering plus alcohol that brings the plot to a climax and the characters to their senses. Nick drinks throughout Act II. He makes advances to Sophie who is trying to get to sleep on the living room sofa. Sophie simply leaves him there and spends the night in a chair across the room (236, 237). There is an uproar when the two are discovered by Mrs. Ellis and others in the morning. Hellman works hard to convince us that this is a catastrophe. Everyone in that little town will hear the gossip and think that Nick has seduced Sophie. Sophie makes use of her advantage, and in so doing indirectly allows all the others to recognize the reality of their situations:

Nick's drunken behaviour with Sophie precipitates another revelation for Constance, who not only sees Nick for the first time for what he truly is, but learns that Sophie, has always wanted to go home.
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 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 - within 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.¹¹

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. (And it does sound like what John Mason Brown called the "spiritual cross-ventilation" of Chekhov's characters)¹²

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 some day you've counted on when you'd suddenly wipe out 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)
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.

Constance: Never mind. Most of us lie to ourselves...

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.
Harold Clurman says that much more "happens" in *The Autumn Garden* than in *The Little Foxes*, but that Hellman took "care to make it seem less." He says, "She not only wants a greater semblance to the casual flow of life, but is trying to say something about the norm of things ... Miss. Hellman's play is anti-sentimental. In Miss. Hellman's terms, most of us are earnest without being serious."³

Katherine Lederer states that "the disparity between earnestness and seriousness is evidently important to Hellman."⁴ The contrast occurs more than once in her work and interviews. She elaborates on this to Harry Gilroy. "You can be frivolous .......... and still be serious. I mean serious emotionally and intellectually. Many people who pretend to be really serious aren't at all. It is not a matter of being interested in serious problems ... It is not a matter of what you have accomplished, either yet an artist who isn't serious shows it in any work he does, and conversely nothing really good can be done by some one who isn't serious."⁵

A Chekhovian dramatic mode is noticed in *The Autumn Garden*. Chekhov's characters typically are not changed by the events of the play; neither are Hellman's characters. Griggs and Rose will go on as before. So
will the Ellises. Crossman will go on drinking. Nick will continue to make a mess of things which Nina will clean up. Their re-living their past experiences does not change their futures. The end of the play leaves one with the feeling that their pasts and their futures are contained in their present, and their present is an on-going process.

The tone of the day 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, and 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 in to their middle age together, they become an ironic demonstration of the Chekhov's belief that "a reasoned life without a definite outlook is not a life, but a burden and a horror."16

We learn from the first act that the characters come from similar backgrounds; they thus 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, class. In a sense, they are all middle class or upper middle class. Yet Rose is "new rich," hence 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 gives 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, patterns of human thought and motivation are unravelled in the play. The use of a pattern of multiple characters demonstrating the same theme leads once again, to a play without a protagonist. *In The Autumn Garden*, Hellman gives us an attitude rather than a central character.  

Alan Downer describes *The Autumn Garden* as Hellman's most original play, for it presents a Chekhovian image of society which never denies the chaos through which we move but creates "an order within the chaos" which lends meaning to experience.  

*The Autumn Garden* is neither merely psychological nor merely sociological but it is a kind of drama which reveals an artistry in its multiple character revelations. The play may be an example of modern serious comedy. One of the unique qualities of the play is that the problems of the characters depicted here are individual and personal. The play does not project a cosmic background of war and politics as in *The Searching Wind* or *Watch on the Rhine*. But as Harold Clurman observes, Hellman's attitudes towards
her characters is almost cruel compared to Chekhov's feeling for his characters:

The blunderers in Chekhov are brothers in our mobility even as in our abjectness. The characters in *The Autumn Garden* are our equals only in what we do not respect about ourselves.¹⁹

Further, an important parallelism to be noticed in characters in Chekhov and those in Hellman is that in both cases the characters who are victims of themselves and who live in a state of spiritual cross-ventilation, invite themselves to be self-revealing. But Hellman has more scorn than pity for her characters.
REFERENCES:


6. Ibid., pp. 78-79.


9. Ibid., p.80.

10. Ibid., p.80.

11. Ibid., pp. 80-81.


17. Ibid., pp. 85, 86.
