CHAPTER VIII

BEING STATIC WITHOUT MOTIVATION:
THE AUTUMN GARDEN
BEING STATIC WITHOUT MOTIVATION : *THE AUTUMN GARDEN*

An autumn garden is one which by winter time will fade and not be a garden any more.

Lillian Hellman

*The Autumn Garden* (1951) is, perhaps, the most original play of Hellman. In many ways it marks a new stage in her writing. For the first time she renounces the presentation of her favourite topic - social criticism, in one form or another, and concerns herself with a human problem that is not bound to social conditions. Her old anger against evil and injustice in the early plays seems now to have become a general imitability and petulance towards human inadequacy. Money, while still prominent as in her earlier plays, is no longer such a dominant force and motivation. Considered an unusually introspective work in Hellman’s canon, *The Autumn Garden* is the first of Hellman’s specifically Southern studies which takes place in the present. The play also offers a broader and deeper view of her society and generation than any other play Hellman has written so far.

*The Autumn Garden* is, perhaps, the most maturely thought and the most scrupulously written play. Showing the definite influence of Anton Chekhov, the play concerns itself with a society that has become static without motivation. 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.
Written in the years of the Sartre-Camus debates, *The Autumn Garden* seems to be an existential assertion of the need to acknowledge one’s responsibility for creating one’s own essence. Hellman seems to introduce a theme of nostalgia for a no-longer existent past and the individual’s frustrating search for love and the meaning of life. Hellman’s view is that a reasoned life without a definite outlook is not a life, but a burden and a horror. Hellman believes in decency, intelligence and will as opposed to moral inertia and irresponsibility. She believes that we must do our best, our human best. We must not fool ourselves or other people. We must strive to grow and we must be committed in the essential sense of the term.

The main theme of the play is the problem of facing old age, the summing up at the middle of one’s life. *The Autumn Garden* studies the dangers of ageing and living upto one’s reputation and, what is more, the awful unspoken suffering of those who cannot admit to what they love. The play relates itself to a group of middle-aged individuals vacationing on the gulf of Mexico, who discover the ramifications of the decisions and compromises they have made. Here are individuals, who are stalemated and unable to take positive action, waste their lives and wither away and come by various means to a realization of their plight.

*The Autumn Garden* is set in the Tuckerman house in a small town on the Gulf of Mexico, a hundred miles from New Orleans, in September 1949. In this boarding house, Hellman gathers a group of people who lack purpose, joy and love. 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 a sense of moral responsibility.

The assembled characters have little dynamic connection with each other, except that each is in search of some kind of meaning for his empty life. They come to the summer home, where most of them have grown up, and reach the end of a summer season, and in their lives too. They bring with them the real past and that past coloured by memory and in the real present they lose their romantic futures. They are children playing at being grown-ups.

As the curtain rises, representatives of all the major clusters - Mrs. Mary Ellis, her daughter-in-law, Carrie and Frederick, her grandson; Benjman Griggs, and his wife Rose Griggs; Edward Crossman an alcoholic bank clerk; and Constance Tuckerman, the owner of the summer house and her niece Sophie Tuckerman - are on stage. One set - Nick Denery and Nina Denery are not present on the stage, and of course, others are waiting for the missing set to arrive. Constance Tuckerman, the owner, a plucky but romantic Southern lady who was left impoverished by her supposedly wealthy parents, has converted the family summer home into the boarding house. One of her most faithful summer boarders is Edward Crossman, a middle-aged intellectual who was once in love with Constance, and who now finds his chief solace
in alcohol. Constance has a young niece, Sophie, daughter of her brother and his French wife. Sophie’s father died during the war and Constance thought it her duty to rescue Sophie from poverty in a French village. Now Sophie helps her aunt with the work at the boarding house.

Sophie is engaged to Frederick Fillis, a young man who is staying at the Tuckerman house with his grandmother and his mother. The grandmother Mrs. Mary Ellis holds the family purse strings and knows the power of her wealth. She dominates her daughter-in-law, 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 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-despondent’ mother’s boy, who is latently homosexual. But nobody in the play, except possibly his mother, considers the inclination to be latent.

The Ellises - Grandmother, Mother and Frederick - are planning a trip to Europe, without Sophie. Frederick is determined to invite Payson to go as his guest.

The other regular summer boarders are General Benjman Griggs and his wife Rose. Rose is a comic character, pathetic but childish and silly. Her husband wants a divorce, and plans to leave her whether she divorces him or not. Griggs has his own
Oedipal hang-ups. He had always wanted love from a serious woman like his mother. To get even, Rose boasts of love affair she had when the general was away during the war. But Griggs is beyond caring. He just walks out.

Into this garden comes the serpent, Nick - the old Nick Denery and his wife Nina. The first act ends with a conversation between Sophie and Crossman, which establishes the moral and artistic principle upon which the play is based - people must do the best they can; to do less is immoral.

Nick meddles with everybody's life and 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. His wife who sees through it, is sick of his meddling and philandering, but cannot make up her mind to leave him.

Nick's first victim is Constance. She was once in love with Nick, that she rejected Crossman. Twenty-three years before, Nick, an artist of sorts, had painted Constance's portrait. Now he cruelly persuades her to let him paint her again. His plan is to retrieve from her the original portrait and exhibit the two together. Nick dresses Constance in rags, and in the portrait, paints her as a sad, poverty-stricken old woman. All the time he keeps up a lie to Constance that he, Nick, really loved her.
when he married Nina, and still does but that 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 then turns his beneficent attention to the Ellises. He informs Carrie that he had seen Fred in the travel agency, booking passage to Europe for Payson. Nick warns Carrie that Payson was involved in a 'filthy little scandal in Rome.' Carrie thanks him for the information and faces Frederick with it. He 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.' The threat works; Payson 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 odor right before it becomes faded and heavy. It travels ahead of you, Nick, whenever you get most helpful, most loving and most lovable.¹

And she threatens to leave him as she has done before.

Nick has tampered also with Griggs’ marriage. He comforts Rose by flirting with her. For his trouble he gains her confidence and the promise of a $5000 commission to paint a portrait of her homely niece. Rose is ill, is beginning to feel amorous toward 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.

It is Nick’s philandering and alcohol that brings the plot to a climax, and the characters to their senses. Nick has been drinking throughout act two. He makes advances to Sophie, who is trying to get to sleep on the living - room sofa, then passes out on the couch before anything can happen. Sophie simply leaves him there and spends the night in a chair across the room. There is an uproar when the two are discovered by Mrs.Ellis and others in the morning. 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 returns all the others to the reality of their situations.

Nick, himself, is out of the action. Now that he is in disgrace, Nina comes back to him and the truth about her is revealed. She needs to punish and be punished. Nick tells her:

You needed to look down on me, darling... You like to - demean yourself. (557)
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 the word that Nick seduced her. With the money she will be free to go back to Europe to help her mother.

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 takes care of her. For Ben, escape is not possible, it is too late. His speech of self-insight, written by Dashiell Hammet, which Hellman said that it summarised the philosophy of the play. Ben says:

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'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.

(568-69)

Now it is Ned's and Constance's turn for self-knowledge. Ned faces the fact that he has wasted himself, has become a drunk, living in a room and passing the day until night when the bars are opened. This is not because Constance turned him down, as he once persuaded himself, but because he 'wanted it that way.'
Constance has decided that she wasted herself, too, waiting for Nick when she really wanted Ned Crossman all the time. She asks him to marry her but it is too late. He felt sorry that he had deluded her and himself into thinking that 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.


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. Mary Ellis. Sophie is building her future by taking action in the present; the old lady built a triumphant past in the same way.

The resolution in *The Autumn Garden* is as inconclusive as the lives of the characters have been. Nick and Nina are reunited, Griggs cannot leave his wife and even Crossman realises that he is not wishing to marry Constance anymore. If the curtain opens on a grouping, it comes down on a house empty, visually, except for Constance and Crossman, who will soon be gone, and we are left reflectively looking at an empty house, to which summer will come no more. A searching wind has blown through it, scattering the characters before it.
Harold Clurman says that much more ‘happens’ in *The Autumn Garden* than in *The Little Foxes*; but that ‘Heilman took care to make it seem less.’ He says that "she not only wants a greater semblance to the casual flow of life, but is trying to say something about the norm of things…"2

As regards the plot structure of *The Autumn Garden*, Hellman is said to sacrifice it, since she lays emphasis on characters over plot in Chekhovian tradition. Critics generally feel that it is "loose in structure, bends easily but without breaking is fluid and far from being meagre, overflows with characters and situations."3 Although Freudian interpretation can help to explain it, it cannot give the play the dynamic plot development which it lacks. Even Hellman’s most perceptive critic Leaderer Katherine opines that "What Hellman gives us is not really plot, but pattern."4

Nevertheless, there are also some critics like John Gassner who defend the plot structure saying, "if a loss of dramatic voltage was apparent in *The Autumn Garden*, at the beginning of the decade it could be attributed to her experimentation with a

---


relatively loose form of dramaturgy for the purpose of securing amplitude of characterization and giving a rueful account of enervation and failure in society.\(^5\)

In all Heilman's first six plays, the initial situation is presented in terms of some kind of problem and in some plays the first actors whom the audience sees and hears are servants behaving in the traditional opening scene fashion. But in *The Autumn Garden* the opening is quite different. At the rise of curtain, there are six of the main persons of the play. They do not direct their conversation or their actions toward any one situation. Each is concerned with his or her own problems.

As in *Watch on the Rhine* and *Toys in the Attic*, Heilman uses the leisurely first act to establish atmosphere and the attitude she wishes the audience to take toward the characters and situation. Heilman uses sub-groupings, duets between characters to advance the action, that is to strip the characters of their illusions. Act II gives us Nick in action meddling in everyone's life. This meddling apparently gives rise to many sub-plots each contributing to the organic unity of the play. The structure of the play is anticlimactic. No one marries, no one dies and no one is moved to some horrendously final act. The use of a pattern of multiple characters demonstrating the same theme, leads once again to a play without a protagonist.

Hellman's artistry, however, appears more in character development. Her characterization shows a notable advance in subtlety as she views her people with more sympathy and less simple judgement. She sees her crisp characters "with a certain smiling asperity, an astringent, almost cruel clarity."6

Most of the characters in The Autumn Garden are 'deluded romantics.' They look backwards to find the mistakes of the past. They wander aimlessly following their inclinations rather than Hellman's seeking in their October years to fathom the mysteries of their past lives to discover solace in the present. However, for all their wavering in purpose and lack of self-knowledge, they have no blurred edges. They weigh so much, measure so much, the whole is the neat sum of the perceptible parts. This is the reason why Hellman is justly praised for her characterization.

The characters - Constance, Ned Crossman, Benjman Griggs, Rose Griggs, Carrie Ellis, Frederick Ellis, Nick Denery and Nina Denery - are ordinary, nice people, average to their class but in this sense, they are representative of far more of us than we care to believe. Hellman finds none of them bad, but in the light of their own sweet earnestness, rather silly. They are unwittingly self-condemned, even

before they are socially condemned, because they are not intelligent in relation to any total human objective. They are idealists whose ideals are conventions and chimeras rather than goals. They will wither and disappear in a mist of empty sighs.

To examine the characters individually, Constance Tuckerman, the owner of the summer boarding house, is a plucky romantic Southern lady. She is presented as a victim of her own illusions. She is left impoverished by her parents and gets disillusioned with her love-affair. She indulges in self-deception. When Nick, her lover who drew her portrait when she was young, requests her again to allow him to portray her at her present age, she has taken an objection to it. She says:

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.(509)

Finally she realizes that her romantic notions about Nick are false, that her dreams for Sophie are false and that her old beauty is a beauty no longer. Some critics tend to make Constance a central character whose ‘discoveries’ have no resolution. But The Autumn Garden is a multiple character drama and no one can be the protagonist of the play.

Ned Crossman, is a middle-aged intellectual. He is an alcoholic bank clerk who supposedly has been in love with Constance for years. Crossman is an ironist and sees through Nick’s nature immediately. When Nick says:

We loved each other, so very much, Remember, Ned? (506).
Crossman replies that he doesn’t "remember that much love."(506)

But Crossman, with all his irony, "satisfies himself with ‘understanding’ everything except that he is wasting his life and that his ‘honesty’ has no object except to hide his own futility from himself."7

Benjman Griggs is a retired army general who allows himself to fall into domestic fetters in his destructive, stagnating relationship with his wife, Rose. Griggs knows what has come to be and will be. He even knows that there is no one person or outside force to blame. In the end when it becomes inevitable for him to keep his wife with him, he comes to recognise, with anguish and disappointment, that they can never break away to shape their lives in a constructive, fulfilling way.

Rose Griggs, is a flirtatious, pathetically silly wife. She 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. She flirts with Nick and seeks his advice to show a doctor certificate to her husband about her illness so that Ben will not force her for divorce. In the end she too is unveiled of illusions when her presentation of illness comes out to be true.

Carrie Ellis, the mother of Frederick Ellis, is presented as a woman who is hasty in taking decision without any thinking. She is dominated by her mother-in-law, and in turn, she dominates her son, Frederick. With her mother-in-law's prompting she even confronts her son with the threat of cutting the regular pocket-money. On the other hand, Frederick has no self-will and he always depends on his mother and grand-mother. He is so fond of Payson, a homosexual, that some critics find him to be a passive dependent.

Hellman, with her deep insight into human psychology, probes the motivations of a charming villain, Nick Denery. Nick too, like Rose Griggs, lives off other people's emotions, although he is more active than her. He is an ironic catalyst. The play turns on Nick's awaited arrival and its consequences. Nick meddles with everybody's life and troubles them group by group. He deliberately manipulates other human beings for his own amusement. Nick's feeding off other's lives is revealed in the action of the play through his interaction with each sub-group of characters.

But, there are critics who do not see Nick as a villain and harmful person. For instance, Harold Clurman feels that "the dilettante painter, an intellectual lightweight and universal flirt is actually less damaged than the intelligent Crossman, who has no object except to hide his own futility from himself." Bigsby also defends Nick saying that "they are briefly shaken out of their protective illusions by the arrival of

---

8 Harold Clurman, Ibid., pp.47-49.
Nick, a failed artist who acts as a catalyst.9 The arrival of Nick moves the action forward and activates reminiscences. Lederer observes, "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."10

Nick is undoubtedly the most dominating character in the play. He meddles with the lives of others and shakes the other characters 'from their magnolias.' Nick tells Carrie that Fred is involved with a known homosexual. Her reaction causes Fred to learn that Payson has cared nothing for him. Nick tells Constance that Crossman has always loved her. Acting on this misinformation, Constance causes Crossman to face his own self-deception. Nick counsels Mrs. Griggs to see a heart specialist. Her visit forces her to face what she has suspected but has refused to acknowledge. The knowledge of her heart condition forces Griggs, in turn, to face the possibility that he never really wanted freedom, that he is all used up. 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. Sophie, in fact, benefits. Except Sophie, who is directly benefited by Nick's behaviour, all the other characters are profited indirectly by Nick.

---


10 Lederer Katherine, Lillian Hellman, pp.78-79.
Nick's wife, Nina Denery, is a rich woman and, although she sees through Nick's behaviour, she is compassionate enough to forgive him everytime. She threatens to leave him everytime when he makes mess of other's lives, but soon gets reconciled with him and even goes to the extent of repairing the damage he does. But, at last, when she tries to set right Sophie's life, Sophie teaches her a lesson, by boomeranging on her and demanding money. For the first time, Nina sees Nick's behaviour for what it is.

Mrs.Mary Ellis, the grandmother of Frederick, unlike other characters in the play, does not live in illusions. Bored with this passel of self-deceivers, Mrs.Ellis has a strong grasp of real issues of life-power, sensuality and money. She says:

I say to myself, one should have power, or give it over. But if one keeps it, it might as well be used, with as little mealymouthness as possible. (528)

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 razor-sharp tongue who has built a solid financial empire for herself. She uses her power and her over-heard words to create the situation that saves Sophie. Walter Kerr rightly compares her to "the goddess Athena in a snapbrim fedora delivering her haymakers with aplomb."¹¹ She knows that it is easy to afford the luxury of morality when somebody else 'clips the

coupons.' 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 bear hugs, friendly pats, and tiny bursts of passion:

One should have sensuality whole or not at all. (534)

Mocking him as one of the 'touchers and leaners,' she asks if he doesn't find 'pecking at it ungratifying.' When Fredrick discovers that his writer-friend Payson's real attraction to him is money, Mrs. Ellis orders him:

Take next week to be sad. A week's long enough to be sad in. (540)

She knows well the system of patronage in which people like Fred, a professional proof reader and simp, must pay for the interest of people like Payson with their literary coteries. Like Lily Mortar's words, Mrs. Ellis's non-sequiturs describe candidly the parasitic relationships that surround her—Frederick and Carrie, Nick and Nina, Constance and Nick, Payson and Fred, Rose and the General.

Against these people, Heilman pits the half-European Sophie, a normal girl who wants only to do an honest job back in the grim environment of her native land, where things are not pretty or 'good,' but concrete, unromanticized, real. Heilman does not make a heroine of this girl. In fact, she makes her rather sharp, shrewd, decently matter-of-fact and not above taking advantage - with a certain humour-and-pride. Heilman, through the character of Sophie, contrasts American values with those of Europe.
Sophie, whose name means wisdom, is Constance’s niece. She is a clear-eyed realist. She loses no illusions during the course of the play because she has no illusions to lose. When she comes to America, her values are already formed. 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. (538)

When Constance says that she was only thirteen when she came to America, Sophie replies:

I came from another world and in that world thirteen is not young. (538)

Sophie has a central dramatic role. 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. Perpetually, 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 wry words for, and rare understanding of the others’ pretences. She knows that decisions are made only in order to speak about changing them. 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.

And to Constance, she says:

I think perhaps you worry sometimes in order that you should not 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. (502-503)

Sophie admits the bargain she is striking with Frederick about marriage and knows the prevalent social code for women and knows also that:

Somehow sex and money are simpler in French (563)
than in the indirect metaphors and oblique rhetoric employed by the Ellises and Denerys.

Sophie is shrewed about the female ploys she uses to threaten Nina Denery with exposure of her husband's seduction. Her word is ominous, but held in reserve, carries the power of Lavinia's in *Another Part of The Forest*, clutched Bible. 'We will call it a loan come by through blackmail' (564), she says of the five thousand dollars she extorts as escape money with which she will return to Europe.

Sophie's refusal to take money from Nina unless it is called blackmail, not a charitable gift, is an important fact. Sophie does not suddenly change the character. She is not a blackmailer like the Count in *Watch on the Rhine*. 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. 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 Griggs's homely niece. Most significantly,
the trade value of her bargain, that is, her role as marriage counsellor, is not lost on
Sophie, when she says to Nina:

    You wish to be the kind lady who most honourably 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.
    (564)

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

Sophie, in an inversion of Henry James, is a European who has learned to
survive and adapt by facing realities as the Americans are unable to do. Walter Kerr,
who understood Sophie well summed up her character:

    The niece is, after all, a girl of spirit and considerable independence.
    She wants no favours, will accept nothing like charity....... The girl
    is both serious and wry.12

Thus, 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 another without realizing it. 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
will be different if their separate dreams come true. Griggs would have been a
scholar. Constance, Nick's beloved and the inspiration for his painting and Crossman
would have been happily married to Constance.

12 Walter Kerr, Ibid.
In an introduction to her *Six Plays*, Hellman says:

If I did not hope to grow, I would not hope to live.13

The characters in *The Autumn Garden* have stopped growing. Nick is the perpetual amateur artist, the professional 'young man,' the eternally 'promising youth.' Rose Griggs still employs the flirtatiousness appropriate to a Southern debutante. They are all caught in repetitive patterns, although Nick and Rose refuse to recognise the repetition. They are what they have always been, what they will always be. The differences are in degree.

Like Chekhov’s characters, Hellman’s characters are also not changed permanently by the events of the play. Griggs and Rose will go on as before, so will the Ellises. Crossman will go on drinking. Nick will continue to make messes which Nina will clear up. Their reliving their past experiences does not change their future. The end of the play leaves one with the feeling that their past and their future are contained in their present and their present is ongoing. "They will do, do, do what they’ve done, done, done, before."14 John Mason Brown, says that:

---


209
Heilman’s characters in *The Autumn Garden* may be more numerous than necessary, but they are shrewdly observed by a wise woman.\(^\text{15}\)

The superb characterization of Heilman allows her play *The Autumn Garden* to be far more realistic. The characters are based on real middle-class people whom we see around us in our daily life. And the setting of the boarding house, where these characters assemble is reminiscent of the boarding house run by her aunts, Hannah and Jenny. Marvin Flhiem finds "the realism of *The Autumn Garden* to be the essence of human existence, not to the representation of life."\(^\text{16}\) Heilman makes her point in the play that most people have insufficient will and here she does succeed in getting beyond her specific people to a more general and universal validity of her theme. Heilman has captured the universal human experience of the middle years. Sometimes in the middle years, everyman is awakened to what might have been and struggles to give his dreams a last choice.

The problems of the characters in *The Autumn Garden* are individual and personal. There is no cosmic background of war or politics, no ethical decisions to make as in *The Searching Wind*. "The context is supplied by Heilman’s own text. As in the two plays about the Hubbards, she has drawn from her family memory book,


but from later pages.17 The concerns of these people are all of the kind of 'frivolous.' Harold Clurman thinks that Hellman, while writing the play *The Autumn Garden*, has in mind "feelings about most of us of the educated near-upper class. We are earnest, we yearn, but we are not serious, we have no clear purpose. We have no binding commitments to ourselves or to others. We are attached to nothing. The blunderers in Chekhov are brothers in our nobility even as in our objectness. The characters in *The Autumn Garden* are our equals only in what we do not respect about ourselves."18 Hellman's attitude on her characters in *The Autumn Garden*, and in turn on people who lack any purpose and are stalemated, is without any sympathy and almost cruel. The characters themselves perform the choral function of moral judgement on the action and the characters move from the world of realism into the world of art. For they are then not merely human beings but also become human symbols.

Although Hellman is a realist, she makes use of irony in order to drive home her theme effectively. And *The Autumn Garden* is not an exception. In this play, the number of people involved in repetitions of the central pattern further distances the audience, adding to the ironic effect. In ironic demonstration we do not empathize, we understand. As these individuals and groups move before us, we look for what

they have in common, and we discover, as always in a Hellman play, that these people are defeated by their own 'life-lies' not by life.

Hellman uses dramatic irony in The Autumn Garden. There is an incongruity between things as the audience knows them really to be and things as they are believed to be by the characters. As G.C. Sedgewick says, "The ironic control that a spectator has over a play before him is a matter both of his superior knowledge and of his attitude of mind as evoked by this knowledge or by some other source of suggestion."19 The audience's understanding of the dramatic action in The Autumn Garden is more involved than that of the characters. Although particular characters may report the results of offstage actions, the characters most affected by this information learn of it after the audience does. Fred, for example, learns after the audience of Nick's conversation with his mother about Payson. The audience learns, before Griggs, of his wife's visit to the heart-specialist. Not only does the audience have superior knowledge in this direct sense, but the spectators understand the import of the characters' speeches better than the characters themselves do. When people in The Autumn Garden talk, the truth is in what they don't say or in what they don't hear themselves and others say 'they talk past each other.'

The contrast between the reality of a situation and the illusions of the characters produces comic incongruity and 'irony of the incident.' All the characters in *The Autumn Garden*, except Mrs. Ellis and Sophie, survive on illusion. Hellman makes Sophie, Mrs. Ellis and Crossman, to some extent, to control the audience's attitudes toward the other characters and their situations. In *The Autumn Garden* Nick is the ironic catalyst and the play turns on Nick's awaited arrival and its consequences. The ironists Crossman and Gradma Ellis see through him immediately. Crossman, an observer whose detachment is shown not only in the tone and content of his dialogue, but in his usual physical isolation on the side porch, drink in hand.

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 gardinia bush. (504).

Crossman finally says of Nick ironically:

> You're just exactly the way I remember you. And that I wouldn't have believed of any man. (505)

Mrs. Ellis, set apart by her age and wealth and an intelligent old lady who 'is broken and senile when she wishes to be broken and senile.' When Nick, bored and restless, asks Mrs. Ellis whether he will enjoy reading at her age, trying fruitlessly to divert Sophie from reading to Mrs. Ellis, she says ironically, "No Mr. Denery, if you haven't learned to read at your age, you won't learn at mine." (534) When Nick puts his hand on her shoulder, shrugging it off she mocks at him and says ironically:

> One should have sensuality whole or not at all. (534)
And Sophie, finally through her ironic way of meddling with Denerys, blackmails Nina Denery for $5000, the same money, which Nick demanded for a painting. And she teaches a lesson to Nina that she cannot always clean the rubbish which her husband created.

To enhance the dramatic effect, Heilman, along with irony, also employs symbolism in *The Autumn Garden*. Prose can take on certain qualities of poetry, and certain poetic devices are available to the prose writer, particularly to the dramatists. Perhaps, the most significant of these is symbolism. In *The Autumn Garden*, the title adds a necessary symbolic note to the whole play. Heilman herself asserted in an interview:

> An autumn garden is one which by winter time will fade and not be a garden any more. It's a chrysanthemum garden. The people in the play are coming into the winter of life.\(^{20}\)

So in *The Autumn Garden*, the symbolism inherent in title adds a poetic dimension to the play and thus the play becomes interesting.

The setting of the play also serves a symbolic purpose. The setting of *The Autumn Garden* contributes to the variety of the play. The setting is just as much a part of the structure as the character, the action and the purpose. 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. The evil of the South, as she had hinted in the early plays, had lain precisely in its denial of the real and hence of the moral responsibility which it spawned.

The house of Constance Tuckerman serves a symbolic function, just as the houses of Madame Ranevsky do in *The Cherry Orchard*, of Sorin in *The Seagull* and of the Proservos in *The Three Sisters*. It is the old home to which cling many memories but which has grown somewhat shabby with the passage of time. It is the autumn garden where flashes of brightness only emphasize the proximity of wintry sterility. As Bigsby observes, "It becomes an image of a hermiticism which stifles aspirations, an apt setting for those who have accepted their cultural and historical irrelevance."\(^{21}\)

Like any other Hellman's play, *The Autumn Garden*, too once again revealed the controversy in the critics' opinion as to the generic category of this work. Many were intent on calling the play a Chekhovian comedy, some a Chekhovian tragedy. And even some others as a near tragedy derailed by too many central characters. For instance, Harold Clurman called the play "a Southern Comedy of Manners."\(^{22}\)


Lederer Katherine observed that "*The Autumn Garden* is a comedy, although Marvin Felheim wrote an essay about the Chekhovian elements in the play, treating it as a tragedy." Continuing her opinion that *The Autumn Garden* is a comedy, Katherine wrote that "*The Autumn Garden*” is a comedy of anticlimax of denial of expectations. No one marries, no one dies, no one is moved to some horrendously final act. Audiences might have been happier had Constance and Ned agreed to marry but that would have violated the pattern."²³ And even Hellman herself agreed in an interview that "*The Autumn Garden* started as a sharp comedy."²⁴

Although some more critics, described the play as a comedy and spoke of the laughter and the wit in the dialogue, they also found the play pessimistic and depressing, an effect Hellman had not intended. Chekhov, too, has been called a pessimist. Hellman says of this charge, "I do not understand the pessimist theory. I know of no writer who even made it more clear that he believed in the future. There is every difference between sadness and despair."²⁵

Summing up Hellman's view, Harry Gilory wrote, "it (middle age) is a time of life when one has had a chance to try all one's capacities, felt the emotions of life, known love. One has the powers to enjoy life in any way that is preferred. At the

²³ Lederer Katherine, *Lillian Hellman*, pp.82-86.


same time, one can always have the additional pleasure of being reflective about experiences."

Agreeing with Hellman and Harry Gilory, there are few critics, especially among literary scholars, who have seen optimism and compassion in the 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" that is, if one can start soon enough in their lives. The emphasis is on the view that at middle age, it is too late to do much about the life that has been wasted. So one can be optimistic about life if one is not like the people in the play. One should take hold of some clear commitment and should work towards it.

The play has 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, the tragedy of life. The truth is that the play is not Shakespearean, it is Chekhovian, a social drama, not a classical tragedy. As such, it has two necessary dialectical principles. First of all, it is a ‘sharp comedy.’ The world these people made for themselves would have to end in a whimper. The second

---


significant point is that the dramatist foresees the end of this world, the artist - scientist hopes for a better one. The pity and terror are present but they are not for the single, noble individual like Hamlet or Lear, but it is spread out for all. Pity and terror have been democratized and made the proper subjects for prose.

So, in The Autumn Garden, as Marvin Felheim argues, "We have a kind of drama which makes for modern tragedy."28 It is not merely psychological, nor sociological, but it is artistic and moral - and all in the Chekhovian sense. And so Hellman's movement in this direction is movement toward seriousness.

Although The Autumn Garden is an attempt at 'serious modern tragedy' looking at the number of characters and situations in it, many critics describe the play as having the density of a novel. If we pursue the analogy, we discover that Hellman's treatment of the action in The Autumn Garden differs from that of her earlier plays. Although she had in the past employed the 'messenger element' on occasion, in The Autumn Garden she employs this device often to tell us about events that novel or a 'plotty' play would show us. On stage we see the inner life of the characters, the emotional results of the offstage events.

We never meet Payson offstage; Frederick reads proof with him, buys him a ticket to Europe. Carrie confronts him offstage. He dismisses Frederick offstage.

Sophie learns from Frederick that Payson is through with him, in an exchange we
don't see. Ned and Nick have a drinking bout together offstage. The Ellises and Rose
attend a party where Rose has a 'sinking spell.' Crossman, Griggs and Nina spend a
whole Sunday together on a picnic at Pass Christian. Rose visits her brother and a
heart-specialist.

Harold Clurman observes that "The Autumn Garden has the density of a big
novel. The play is dense because Hellman has tried to construct it not along the usual
lines of a cumulatively progressive single story, but as a compact tissue of life
unravelled with the apparent casualness of ordinary behaviour."29

By her own testimony, Hellman has always been more interested in novels
than in plays and has always, with the exception of The Children's Hour, a typical
play, taken a novelistic view of her characters. The Autumn Garden is the
culmination of earlier attempts at the novelistic technique, differing from them in the
degree to which she perfected the technique of walking away from the big scene and
giving us only the emotional effects of it.

It is interesting to note some similarities between Hellman's play, The Autumn
Garden and Chekhov's The Cherry Orchard. "Probably no play of the American
theatre is more Chekhovian than Miss Hellman's recent and most charming original

29 Harold Clurman, Lies Like Truth, pp.47-49.
drama - *The Autumn Garden.*"  

The Autumn Garden marks Chekhov's influence on Hellman in the very title of the play at its closest which is reminiscent of Chekhov's title, *The Cherry Orchard.* *The Autumn Garden* is in many ways Chekhovian, though the resemblance lies in the ironic treatment.

The way in which characters, action and purpose are woven together in the play brings out the comparison between Chekhov's technique and of Hellman. The characters behave in a Chekhovian manner because Hellman lets them alone to act out their destinies regarding them only with love and understanding. The characters in both plays are involved in 'choral' action which becomes a comment upon the scene. As the voices of the characters rise and fall in *The Autumn Garden*, they give the impression that they are, themselves, comments upon the scene. David Sievers says, "*The Autumn Garden* is a muted, obscure play with the characters moving through decadence, sterility and emptiness as in Chekhov's world, but without the Russians' warmth and affection for his characters."  

Even for Moody "the play is rich in Chekhovian qualities, yet she had missed a Chekhov essential... Chekhov loved them. In her play the glow of love was missing."  

*The Autumn Garden* is a muted, obscure play with the characters moving through decadence, sterility and emptiness as in Chekhov's world, but without the Russians' warmth and affection for his characters. Even for Moody "the play is rich in Chekhovian qualities, yet she had missed a Chekhov essential... Chekhov loved them. In her play the glow of love was missing."  

Hellman, unlike Chekhov, has more scorn than pity for these passive characters of *The Autumn Garden.*

---


It is customary for critics of Heilman’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.

Critics call Heilman’s later plays Chekhovian though any direct influence of Chekhov is hard to ascertain. Heilman published edition of Chekhov’s letters only after *The Autumn Garden*. As Bigsby observes, "For some critics, the play was Chekhovian rather than Ibsenesque to the degree that it presented the past as less a repository of concealed truths generating present tensions than a world of lost opportunities and betrayed vision... Instead if Heilman is Chekhovian on the surface, beneath that she sees herself a moralist, as a voice calling people to the real world of pain."33

Thus, *The Autumn Garden* 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.

Also, numerous technical similarities are visible - the de-emphasis of plot, the subtle personality clashes, the use of arrivals and departures, as is usual with Hellman, for emotional tensions. But the big difference is that she continues to stick to realism. According to John Mason Brown:

*The Autumn Garden* is unlike any of Lillian Hellman's previous works... The mood, tone, the flavour, the point of view and hence the means employed are so different from those of *The Children's Hour, The Little Foxes, Watch on the Rhine, Another Part of The Forest,* that it is no overstatement to say a new Hellman has emerged. For the first time in her distinguished career, she has, so to speak turned her back on Ibsen, and moved into the camp of Chekhov.34

*The Autumn Garden* is thus, a lucid, witty and incisive play. It is unquestionably the subtlest and most probing of Hellman's plays. It contains some half-dozen excellently drawn characters as well as some of the most incisive and revealing dialogue of which Hellman is capable. The play also includes a measure of human sympathy. But at the same time, Hellman presents the hard doctrine that the little weaknesses we allow ourselves over the years pile up like calcium in the body.

*The Autumn Garden* is also a poignant, reflective drama as well as an ineffectual baffling and most psychoanalytic play. It is a sad play of the discovery of the lies on rationalization by which a group of people have lived only to learn in the autumn of life that their ego-defenses were only excuses for not doing what they could not or would not will. With profound psychoanalytic perception, Hellman has laid

---

bare the dependency of humans upon each other and upon various rationalizations. The material of the play somehow alludes Hellman's customarily tight dramaturgy, and even though there is no single character with whom we can fully empathize, nevertheless *The Autumn Garden* is a masterful attempt to look deep into tragic, empty lives which lacked only self-awareness.

*The Autumn Garden* marks a step forward in psychology for Hellman, enlarging her grasp of unconscious motivation beyond the sado-masochism which permeated the Hubbard plays. The theme of latent inversion, too, is suggested in a number of her plays. But as Sievers observes, "the task of bringing together in one play the complex and deeply perceived motives of *The Autumn Garden* and the superbly structured theatrical tension of *The Little Foxes* remains the task which Hellman's talents give promise of fulfilling."  

*The Autumn Garden* is certainly Hellman's most original, most probing, most mature play. To quote Alan Downer:

In a number of ways this is Hellman's most original play. Structurally it escapes from the technical slickness which has been by turns the wonder and despair of her critics. Thematically it avoids the black and white values that have controlled the action of her earlier plays. Humanely it reveals the nature of our life, of our means of grace.

---

35 David Sievers, *Freud on Broadway*, p.289.

It is original in the sense that Hellman finds a way of relieving the sour taste of a stage prosecution with variety of characterization and some leavening of humour and pathos.

*The Autumn Garden* is most deftly constructed, the most scrupulously written play produced after a long time in the American theatre. And in Kerr's final judgement on *The Autumn Garden*, "the play itself emerges, at long last, as one of Hellman's very best." So, as a playwright searching for a new means to express herself, Hellman is also sponsoring the need to re-evaluate the visual elements of the theatre in order to meet the demands of the increasing numbers of experimental styles.

---