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INSIGHT INTO TRUTH
 BASED ON LILLIAN HELLMAN'S PLAY THE AUTUMN GARDEN**

(A VERDADE ESCONDIDA)

(BASEADO EM THE AUTUMN GARDEN, PEÇA DE LILLIAN HELLMAN)

(DIE VERBORGENE WARHEIT)

(IN THE AUTUMN GARDEN, VON LILLIAN HELLMAN)

SUMMARY

This work consists of a summary of *The autumn garden*, followed by some considerations on the title, which then lead to an analysis of the theme "Truth," pointing out that the cataclysm which emerges has its origin not in the main character, but in a minor one; the dénouement of the play has some relation to truth: either by its presence or by its absence.

RESUMO

Este trabalho consta de um resumo de *The autumn garden*, seguido de considerações sobre esse título; a seguir analisa o tema "Verdade", salientando que o cataclisma final resulta de ação não do personagem principal, mas de um personagem secundário; o desfecho da peça relaciona-se com a presença ou ausência da verdade.

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** O presente artigo é baseado num dos capítulos da Dissertação de Mestrado intitulada "Truth and Not Truth: An Analysis of Some Plays of Lillian Hellman," apresentada ao Departamento de Letras Germânicas da Faculdade de Letras da UFMG, e aprovada em agosto de 1982.

The autumn garden, Lillian Hellman's seventh play, was first produced in New York City, in 1951. She wrote it under the influence of one of many circumstances in her life: the environment of the South. The intention of this study is to analyse an aspect of the truth in the above mentioned play.

The action of the play takes place in 1949, in a summer resort – a town on the Gulf of Mexico, about a hundred miles from New Orleans, Louisiana. Constance is the unmarried owner of a summer guest house. This summer she has among her paying guests Ned, Mrs. Ellis, Carrie (Mrs. Ellis's daughter-in-law), Frederick (Carrie's son), General Griggs and his wife Rose, and Nick and his wife Nina. Most of them are middle-aged, and have known each other since they were young. They frequently meet at Constance's in summer, except for Nick, who has not seen them for twenty-three years, and whose wife has just been introduced to the group. Sophie is Constance's French niece, who has been living with her for five years, brought over from Europe after her father died there, during the war, when she was thirteen. Their stories are all enmeshed within the play. Ned is also unmarried. He had once loved Constance, who thinks she has been in love with Nick, who has not loved anyone. Nick is a failure as a portrait painter; he likes to flirt, to drink, and to travel in his country and around the world with his rich wife. They have had several misunderstandings, but are once more reconciliated, she can not live without him, or without his promises, and he can not live without her money. Ned has perceived that Constance has been thinking of Nick all these years, and he has never told her he loved her. He also drinks a lot, obsessed with his lack of success in life. He is tired of life, and too discouraged to

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try to change it. He decides that he will not come to Constance's again. She realizes that she has been wrong about Nick and about her feelings toward Ned - and asks him to marry her. But Ned's feelings have changed toward her. Frederick likes to write poetry. He is engaged to Sophie. Although they do not love each other, Sophie believes that their life will be nice after they are married. Frederick is interested in a writer who does not appear in the play. There are quarrels among the family because of Payson, this writer, and we presume that he and Frederick are homosexuals. Carrie and Mrs. Ellis have a different point of view concerning the way in which they have brought Frederick up. Carrie is an overpossessive and overprotective mother. Mrs. Ellis knows both mother and son, and tries to understand them. She also controls them because the money is hers. General Griggs has fought in World War I and in World War II. He is tired of life and of his childish wife, wants a divorce, and wishes to start life again. Rose does not accept the idea of divorce. In the meantime, she finds out that she has a serious heart disease. Her husband agrees not to leave her for the next year. Sophie is an obedient and quiet girl, but at the end of the play she blackmails Nina because the night before Nick was drunk and slept in her room. With that money she will be able to go back to France.

It is the end of summer, it is almost the beginning of autumn, the autumn of life. The garden is still warmed by the heat of summer, shortly to be dissipated by the winter. This

illusionary warmth is reflected in the feelings of the people there, most of whom are in the autumn of life. The flowers have passed, but the fruits are there to be gathered. Illuded by the warmth, they wish to ignore the fruit, and reach toward a future which, in reality, does not exist.

In Lillian Hellman's own words, "(...) *almost everything in the theatre contradicts something else.*"¹ In 1942, she had written, "*Within this form (the realistic form of the theatre) there must be tricks - the theatre is a trick - and they are, I think, only bad when they are used trickily and stop you short. But if they are there, simple, and come to hand, they are justified.*"² She adds, "*The playwright, unlike the novelist, must (...) trick up the scene.*"³ And what is a trick but the concealing of truth?

In an interview in 1965, Lillian Hellman said, "*I used to say that I saw a play only in terms of the people in it. (...) I have come now to think that is it (sic) people and ideas.*"⁴ This statement combines with the words of the reviewer for *Time*, "*Miss Hellman's real emphasis is on separate frustrations and intimate crises (...).*"⁵ Confronting Lillian Hellman with Chekhov, he says, "*(...) being a realist rather than a moralist, he very seldom grants his characters the ability to face the truth about themselves.*"⁶

Miss Hellman is a moralist. She does not 'grant' her characters this ability; she assumes they have it. She then sets up a situation which makes her characters

come to a realization. In addition, if her comments in the introduction to her edition of Chekhov's letters are to be taken literally, she holds no grief for those who do not 'face the truth about themselves' no matter how charmingly she may have portrayed them in The autumn garden.

In *The autumn garden*, Sophie is a trick. She contradicts herself; her personality is muffled from the beginning by the metaphor of an apron, "She is a plain-looking, shy girl of about seventeen. She has a hesitant, overpolite manner and speaks with a slight accent. She has on a party dress, covered by a kitchen apron " (p. 467). Sophie is a stratagem Lillian Hellman uses to reaffirm one of her solid points of view, "Truth made you a traitor as it often does in a time of scoundrels. But there were very few who stood up to say so and there are almost none even now(...)." ⁸

We are aware of the contradictions that involve Sophie, from the beginning of the play; she is very courteous, "no, sir," "thank you, sir," "most sorry," "yes, ma'am," "not at all, sir," "I do not mind, really." Ned comments, "Sophie doesn't mind anything. All she has said all summer is thank you " (p. 470). In a prevision of her attitude at the end of the play, Sophie answers, "No. Well." (p. 470) to the question that Frederick asks her, "Don't you mind begin pulled about?" (p. 470), although he is referring to Rose's holding Sophie's hair. But Sophie is passive only until she considers herself forced to action. Her character is constructed not just through her lines, but also through what others say to or about her. Nick tells her, "You are by way of being a rather sharp little girl underneath all that shyness, aren't you?" (p. 512), and later he adds, "No

European would be as innocent of the world as you pretend " (p. 521). Ned tells her, *"You've been busy cultivating a pseudostupidity. Another five years and you won't be pseudostupid "* (p. 490).

The way Sophie has been brought up, the favors she owes her aunt for bringing her to a new and generous world, and for the education and money she has spent on her, make her not only polite, but also almost cautions to express her opinions, and afraid of hurting others. For her, life is a compromise with reality. Ned feels lonely, and it is comfortable for him to share his thoughts with her; but considering her evasive answers, he suggests, *"Sophie, have an opinion about something. Try it, and see what comes out "* (p. 490). She believes in herself and therefore she is honest with herself. She has the capacity of facing truth and of being realistic. Because she perceives truth, Sophie's life has led her to a total and clear-eyed acceptance of the truth. The subjective importance the other characters give to their truths has, in each case, led to distortion and illusion – and the real truth has been lost to them, *"You take many words to say simple things. All of you "* (p. 491), *"All of you face out too much. Every act of life should not be of such importance – "* (p. 501). But at the end of the play an important time comes for her to confront reality, *"No. It would be most mistaken of me to come now. My leaving here would seem as if I must be ashamed and you ashamed for me. I must not come with you today. I must stay here. It must be faced "* (p. 534).

Because Sophie is the most authentic personality in the play, a contrast is aroused between her and the other characters

who surround her: they have let time pass, they have let things be done to them, and they feel useless. Sophie perceives all that, and tries to avoid that kind of life. Most revive their past, their youth, their hopes, and their mistakes. Sophie is preparing herself for a new life and for her future with Frederick.

Although Frederick is about twenty-five years old, he is dominated by his mother. He complains to her: *"I've never had much fun. Never seen the things I wished to see, never met the people I wanted to meet or been the places where I could. There are wonderful things to see and learn about "* (p. 502). Sophie complains to her aunt, *"Aunt Constance, I do not wish to go on with my life as it has been. 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 "* (p. 513). Because Sophie understands Frederick's distress, she tries to protect his privacy from Carrie, and from Nick's intrigues. Their *"marriage business "* (p. 490), as Ned calls it, will bring peace for both of them. Sophie accepts all that has been arranged to her, seems resigned and almost happy, and wants Frederick to do and feel the same. They want to unite their insatisfactions, and lead a "nice" life. He recognizes his condition: *"It isn't any deal for you. You are a girl who should love, and will one day, of course "* (p. 501).

Although younger in age, Sophie is older in spirit, and she symbolizes the European society that has gone through wars, who has undergone injurious treatment, and whose experience of life is deepened by a long-suffering existence. Only now the ones around Sophie are becoming aware of their pains and

distress, unconscious have they been of the peaceful life they have led – both personally and in their country. It is the opposite with Sophie: she has already gone through doubts and sorrows: she sees ahead; she is not capable of sentimentalism. Even her speech throughout the play shows her dryness. She does not dream: she discerns truth from appearances. The morning after Nick falls asleep in her room, Rose comments, *"Why, look at Sophie. Just as calm as can be. Making the bed. Like it happened to her every night "* (p. 527). And Rose's sarcasm goes on, *"But you know very well that a nice girl would have screamed "* (p. 527). Sophie tells her aunt, *"I came from another world and in that world thirteen is not young "* (p. 513). And she tells Nina, *"In my class, in my town, it is not so. In a poor house if a man falls asleep drunk – and it happens with us each Saturday night – he is not alone with an innocent young girl because the young girl, at my age, is not so innocent and because her family is in the same room, not having any other place to go "* (p. 537). Before writing this play, Lillian Hellman herself had experienced war in Europe, and had had contact with the kind of population Sophie represents. Sophie hardly ever speaks, but she sometimes lets out her hidden feelings or thoughts. She confides in Ned, and he is very surprised at her speech about her aunt's feelings toward Nick, *"Oh. Such a long, long time to stay nervous. Great love in tender natures. And things of such kind. It always happens that way with ladies. For them it is once and not again: it is their good breeding that makes it so "* (p. 480). Moreover, Sophie's experience in war and poverty makes her know Frederick's problem better than his mother does; she understands it and surprises Mrs. Ellis, too:

Mrs. Ellis: (...) Like Frederick, Sophie. Life can be hard for such people and they seldom understand why and end bitter and confused.

Sophie: I know.

Mrs. Ellis: Do you? Frederick is a nice boy, Sophie - and that is all. But that's more than most, and good to have in a small way.

Sophie: Yes, I think so. (p. 509)

Sophie does not admit pretense. She is straight about circumstances and about herself. When Rose tries to change Sophie's hair style, Frederick says, "I like Sophie her own way " (p. 469). But she responds, "I have no way " (p. 469). Sophie is positive that truth is the best path for life. In her correctness toward facts, she makes a point of accurate information; and one of these moments occurs when Constance tells Ned that Sophie's mother is a modiste, and she contests her aunt, "Oh, she is not. She is what you call here a home seamstress, or sometimes a factory worker " (p. 479). Sophie's words recall part of Lillian Hellman's letter to the Un-American Activities Committee, "I was raised in an old-fashioned American tradition and there were certain homely things that were taught to me: to try to tell the truth, not to bear false witness, not to harm my neighbor, to be loyal to my country, and so on. I respected these ideals of Christian honor and did as well with them as I knew how."⁹

An interesting aspect to notice in the author's plays is her preoccupation with words, or with the way her characters express themselves. There is a relation between their manner of speaking and their way of being and behaving, which reinforces the different aspects of truth in each character. Sophie has a persistent accent, and sometimes it is also hard for her to

follow conversations, "You know it is most difficult in another language. Everything in English sounds important. I get a headache from the strain of listening" (p. 473) – these are indications of her hope to go back home; another indication appears when she begins to blackmail Nina, "her accent from now on grows more pronounced" (p. 536). Lily Mortar, in *The children's hour*, gives voice and elocution lessons to the girls at school; she is concerned about their mispronouncing the words and misreading them; because she "is" an actress, she gives emphasis to good diction, articulation and enunciation of words. She herself does it the way she thinks is the best possible one, mainly to impress those around her, calling attention to the "feeling" that must accompany words. Lily Mortar is so much concerned with speaking and acting as an actress, that she "forgets" to act as a person who might have saved the two teachers. Her "acting" does not permit her to act. A perfect, theatrical way of speaking is the only truth she aims at. Lily Berniers, in *Foys in the attic*, does not speak properly, she is aware of it, and she suffers because of it, "I don't know what makes me speak so wrong. All I want is to tell you(...)" (p. 715), "If I could only speak in order, then I wouldn't –" (p. 715), "Do I talk different?" (p. 741), "I think that's the way Mama would say it" (p. 743); Albertine says critically, "Try to make yourself clear, Lily" (p. 737). Italics mine. Lily Berniers's hesitation in her use of words is an evidence of her own hesitation in life. The same way she looks for words, she looks for truth. (Regarding these three characters, it is also interesting to notice that all three are "strangers" in the houses they inhabit, which contributes to the conflict that

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they confront). Not only Sophie's speech, or her difficulty in understanding, but also her concern for words is peculiar, "I do not use the correct word?" (p. 512) , "I try very hard to sound nice. I try too hard, perhaps?" (p. 480) , "Sometimes it is better not to say things " (p. 474) , "And I think we should not try so hard to talk. Sometimes it is wise to let things grow more roots before one blows them away with words -" (p. 474). On account of these last statements, we wonder whether Sophie really believes what she says, when, at the end of the play, she blackmails Nina.

Little by little, Sophie's individualism emerges to reveal another side of her personality, "I will speak whichever way you think most fits the drama, Aunt Constance " (p. 526). She begins to be tired of doing the best she can for others, and decides to do the best she can for herself. Foresights of her decision appear in her sentences, "I do the best I can. I do the best I can " (p. 490), which she repeats, "Go home. Did I ever want to come? I have no place here and I am lost and homesick. I like mother, I - Every night I plan to go. But it is five years now and there is no plan and no chance to find one. Therefore I will do the best I can " (p. 491). And when Ned asks her, "The best you can?"(p.491),she answers,"Maybe you've never tried to do that, Mr. Ned. Maybe none of you have tried" (p. 491) - she presupposes their acceptance of a wasted life, from which she wants to escape. She tells her aunt, "Please allow me to do what I wish to do, and know is best for me " (p. 513). And when she can afford to go, she shows that romantic illusions are unknown to her. Truth is latent in Sophie's essence: when she goes back to her mother, or to her village,

things will not be better there, but it is where she belongs, *"I think it is more good than it is not good"* (p. 539).

Sophie's affirmative behavior contrasts with the attitudes of the self-deluded and idyllic people around her; they are worried about truth, but it is hard for them to apprehend it. Nevertheless, Sophie apprehends it without being worried about it, because truth is inherent in her, it is part of her. Lillian Hellman does not grant Sophie the ability to face truth about herself. She assumes that Sophie has this ability.¹⁰ Ned tells Sophie, *"(...) I see the truth (...) so listen to me, Sophie"* (p. 491), Mrs. Ellis tells Sophie, *"I'm telling you the truth, Sophie,"* (p. 512) Nick says to Sophie, *"I'm sick of angry women. All men are sick of angry women, if angry women knew the truth"* (p. 521), Frederick says to Sophie, *"I'm not being kind. I told you the truth"* (p. 533), Rose tells her husband, *"(...) believe me I'm telling the truth(...)"* (p. 541). But when Sophie mentions the truth, we can detect the difference between her position and the others', *"You know what I say is true"* (p. 534) – her truth is definitive: there are no doubts about it. She is sure of what she is saying.

More than one indication along the play, especially in the dialogues concerning Nick, suggest the precipitation of a crisis. Nina tells Nick, *"You're on a rampage of good will. Makes me nervous for even the trees outside"* (p. 496), *"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. Down through the years it runs ahead of us – I smell it – and I want to leave"* (p. 499-500), and Nick tells and asks Sophie,

"*I'm sick of trouble. Aren't you?*" (p. 520). Nevertheless, he is the one who seeks trouble when he sleeps in Sophie's provisional bed in the living-room. Everyone thinks Sophie is ruined, except herself, who laughs at it – but nobody laughs with her; and that makes Sophie detect that time has come for her to act; she blackmails Nina in what she calls a loan,¹¹ not a favor or largesse, but a blackmail bargain – and her truth becomes manifest. Her realism and courage help Sophie to be strong and unsentimental, and to reach out for what is best for her.

Lillian Hellman's hostility for passiveness reminds us of a sentence in one of her books,¹² "*I believe that I am telling the truth, not the survivor's consolation (...)*" – which Ned endorses at the end of the play, in another one of her doctrines, "*And I've never liked liars – least of all those who lie to themselves* " (p. 545).

Notes

- 1 HELLMAN, 1973: 151.
- 2 HELLMAN, 1942: XI.
- 3 HELLMAN, 1942:XI
- 4 PHILLIPS & HOLLANDER, 1965: 64-95.
- 5 ACKLEY, 1969: 134.
- 6 ACKLEY, 1969: 134.
- 7 ACKLEY, 1969: 134.
- 8 HELLMAN, 1976: 85.
- 9 HELLMAN, 1976: 85.
- 10 See note no. 7.
- 11 Cf. Hellman, 1974: 55, as a possible source for this incident.
- 12 HELLMAN, 1979: 726.

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