

The style of A Clearing in the Woods, like its form, is "so unusual that it fits into no usual theatrical plan."¹ The play is neither a "magical adventure" made through "wondrous illusion" and "lyric distortion,"² nor is it a facsimile of "reality," which Alexander Dean defined as that which is "most real to us today."³ The author has located his play between realistic drama and the musical or operetta medium.

It is interesting to note that A Clearing in the Woods' location on Arthur Laurents' style continuum appears to correspond directly with its occurrence in Mr. Laurents' writing career. He began with realistic plays: Home of the Brave (1946) and The Time of the Cuckoo (1954). He then tried to break away from this medium and through the free form of A Clearing in the Woods sought a heightened theatricality. Right after his involvement with A Clearing in the Woods, he entered the musical field by writing the book for West Side Story. Since then, Mr. Laurents has written the books for the musicals, Gypsy and Do I Hear a Waltz?. A musical play is an obvious departure from reality. In real life, people do not burst into song with a full orchestra in

¹Samter Winslow, "Theatre in Gotham," Gotham Guide, January, 1957, p. 11.

²Laurents, "Preface," p. vii.

³Alexander Dean, Fundamentals of Play Directing (New York: Rinehart & Co., Inc., 1953), p. 321.

accompaniment. A Clearing in the Woods also has elements of fantasy, which provided Laurents with a freer form. In real life, a person cannot relate to three persons who are herself at different stages of her development. However, A Clearing in the Woods also has elements of realism in that each character is an individual who is accurately represented.

In addition, the play has elements of formalism. According to Henning Nelms, "formalism" is the dramatic style that employs "the methods of classicism [the three unities] but uses them as practical conveniences." It "ignores any of the inconvenient demands of realism."¹ To use Mr. Laurents' own words, the action progresses "at the author's whim, like a kaleidoscope; turn it one way and it's one thing, turn it another and it's something else."² The action of A Clearing in the Woods is to a great extent as arbitrary as Mr. Laurents' kaleidoscope. Once the protagonist, Virginia, enters the clearing she is literally at the mercy of Mr. Laurents' whim, for soon she is followed by three girls, strange men, her father and her ex-fiancé. All of these people enter her clearing at intervals arranged by the author.

C.W.E. Bigsby, in his book, Confrontation and Commitment,³ termed A Clearing in the Woods "expressionistic."

¹Henning Nelms, Play Production (New York: Dramatists Play Service, Inc., 1957), p. 37.

²Laurents, interview of January 2, 1970.

³C.W.E. Bigsby, Confrontation and Commitment (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1957), p. 43.

For my purposes, this term is not sufficiently specific, because on the one hand expressionism covers a vast number of plays and means so many things to so many people that the term tends to cloud rather than clarify.

Thus, a fresh, accurate category is needed if one is to label A Clearing in the Woods for easy communication and understanding. Eugene Vakhtangov used the term "fantastic realism" in describing his work on the stage in the early 1920's. Vakhtangov's understanding of "realism" was the removing from life of everything but that which is absolutely necessary for the reproduction of a given scene. When the minutia of life are included as well, we have "naturalism."¹ For "fantastic realism" to work, he thought, one must be convinced by his fantasy that the non-real is real. And such is the case of A Clearing in the Woods.

As Mr. Laurents suggested, "the trick, the difficulty in performing [A Clearing in the Woods] may be the same as it was in the writing: to equate the unreal with the real: to accept that it is perfectly natural for three girls and a woman to be the same person at different ages and still to accept that all four live their own, separate existences, blending into a single whole only at the end."²

¹Eugene Vakhtangov, "Fantastic Realism," in Directors on Directing, ed. by Toby Cole and Helen Krich Chinoy (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1963), p. 190.

²Laurents, "Preface," pp. xi-xii.

It remains to be determined how to deal with "fantastic realism" in order to help the audience accept that what is usually not real is real in this case. If the audience is forewarned to be prepared to accept non-familiar conventions, it may be able to do so almost immediately. However, the pleasure derived from being absorbed in the action, form, and style of a play could be diminished by forewarning. Part of the pleasure of artistic effort is derived from being able to comprehend the action without outside help or interference.

Another approach, which I felt was the most logical one, is to present the play as it was originally conceived. This approach assumes that the audience will accept or, at worst, will try to accept any conventions which are honestly and firmly established in the production. It seemed to follow that, in the case of A Clearing in the Woods, all characters could be represented as realistic and the situation in which they are involved could be established as entirely possible, although not based on normal or usual phenomena. With this premise in mind, any further suggestion of fantasy in the production is to be avoided.

CHAPTER III

THE THEME AND MOOD OF A CLEARING IN THE WOODS

In the previous chapter, I called A Clearing in the Woods "averted tragedy," because of the structure of the plot. The joy expressed in its last scene seems contagious and capable of captivating an audience. In this act, Virginia decides that she wants to live. She feels she will finally attain happiness.

In Act I, Virginia enters the stage alone. Initially, she seems glad to be in the clearing but, almost immediately thereafter, she expresses some reservations:

Virginia: Hello -- who? Hello, me. How are You?
Fine! Oh, so very fine now! I'm back,
back where I always ran to catch my
breath. And I can breathe now! I'm
now, I'm -- But it isn't pretty as it
was. It isn't very pretty at all.¹

As a child she thought her clearing, which she used as a haven, was very pretty. Now, seeing it through adult eyes, it is a disappointment. Although she is only able to remember the security her clearing had once supplied, Virginia has returned to it not merely to renew this memory, but to revive her feeling of security.

¹Laurents, A Clearing in the Woods, I. 3-4.

She later lets it be known that she is lonely ("I am in bad need of a friend"¹) and that she has come to the clearing to escape her loneliness. A Clearing in the Woods tells what must be done to make this escape -- not how to do it. Mr. Laurents expressed it:

I think the man who is lonely is the man who is lonely with himself because he has not accepted himself for the imperfect human being he is. Until he makes that difficult acceptance (and so many of us are startlingly unaware that we have not), he cannot feel very much, he cannot give very much, he cannot have very much. This is the theme of A Clearing in the Woods.²

Self-acceptance entails something personal and is different for each of us. For Virginia, it means suffering induced by a painful look at her past. It also means the startling revelation that she was not as miserable a person as she had believed herself to have been.

In the beginning of the play, the struggle within Virginia is fomented by her unwillingness to accept her past or the people who were part of her past. She includes them in her own feelings of worthlessness and attributes to them negative qualities which are not always based on fact.

She rejects her father and his life style:

Virginia: Don't you really want more of a part in living? I do!

Barney: You'll never get it either! We're the ordinary same as everyone else!

¹Ibid., 18.

²Laurents, "Preface," p. vii.

Virginia: I'm not! Nor will I be!¹

She wants the best, though she never actually defines what that is. She tears down the accomplishments of others while flaunting her own like a spoiled child. Her idea of "best" is an influential position in life through marriage to a prominent man who can set up his own hours and job requirements. This is seen in her discussion with Andy:

Andy: I'm the same old work-horse.

Virginia: No.

Andy: And I still have to get back to the hospital.

Virginia: They can wait.

Andy: For me?

Virginia: You're a man. Yes, that's it. You're a very, very important man now! You got the new appointment!²

Despite pressure from Andy to accept him as he is, she rejects him in a way which causes Andy to make his most accurate analysis of her:

Andy: For you the man who knows you and still loves you can only be ordinary. And an ordinary human being isn't worth your love, so you're protected! You're safe from the pain of ever loving! How neat and -- clean -- and -- disgusting!... You know how long you loved me? Exactly as long as you loved that ex-husband I was fool enough to be jealous of: NOT ONE MINUTE! You loved a dream he never was, and a dream I never was! But a real person -- that you've never loved,

¹Laurents, A Clearing in the Woods, I. 34.

²Ibid., II. 118.

have you? A real, live human being with four heads and black thoughts and weaknesses and flaws and failures -- have you? Can you? There's a point: can you love? Can you even feel! Right now, right this instant, standing right here -- do you feel anything?¹

It is at this point that Virginia takes her first step towards self-acceptance. She is taken aback by the realization that she is exactly as Andy has described her. She wrestles with a logical study of her lack of emotional breadth in her embittered and terrified answer to Andy's question: "I cannot love you because I cannot -- love -- anyone!...I cannot love!...How can you be when you don't have even the hope of loving!"²

Virginia goes through a difficult struggle to deny and disown her past, and she loses. She finally realizes she cannot be perfect, and in so doing, she realizes that neither can anyone else be perfect. This realization leads Virginia to accept not only her past with all its failures but also to accept those strengths which she had hitherto chosen to overlook. These strengths include her desire for family attachments, her reaching out for affection, and her need to be loved.

Her understanding and comprehension at the end of the play is particularly stunning for it shows that Virginia has made a complete turnabout in her thinking.

¹Ibid., 133.

²Ibid., 133-134.

Virginia: An end to dreams isn't an end to hope.

.....
It is pretty here! (Exit -- Curtain)¹

Once again she is able to enjoy her haven in the clearing. Arthur Laurents tied the end of the play to the beginning. There is a positive progression from infantile attitudes to mature thinking.

The play is fast paced. Frequent staccato dialogues match verbally dexterous characters in heated and emotionally-punctuated debates.

Virginia: You want me to take care of you.

Jigee: Yes.

Virginia: To like you.

Nora: Yes.

Virginia: Why?!

Ginna: Because we belong to you as you belong to us.

Virginia: I belong to no one! I will be held down by no one! I don't like you. You're weak, defiant, destructive, unloved. You have settled for the second rate because that's what you are!

Ginna: We're willing to settle for you.

Virginia: I will not be settled for! Nor will I settle! I have never accepted what is less than I want and I will not accept you!

Nora: Then fight us but watch out.²

¹Ibid., 170.

²Ibid., 106-107.

This type of high emotional conflict is repeated throughout the play. It results, for the audience, in an overall mood of emotional excitement that is reversed by the finale into one of relief and optimistic expectation.

CHAPTER IV

THE DEVELOPMENT AND STRUCTURE OF THE ACTION

AND PLOT OF A CLEARING IN THE WOODS

A Clearing in the Woods was written along well-defined guidelines: [the play]

has no off-stage life. With the single exception of one sexual moment, everything that happens, happens or is said on stage. The characters are aware only of the events that happen as they happen, or the words that are said as they are said; they know only of themselves what the audience will know. (Less, in one instance: the audience will know the identity of the three girls long before the woman, [Virginia], does.)¹

As a consequence, there are no expository scenes as such: the expository material is not merely integrated with the dramatic action; it is the dramatic action. For example, we learn about Virginia's attitude towards men by watching her and listening to her in confrontation with George:

Virginia: Please stay.

George: Why?

Virginia: We could be friends.

¹Laurents, "Preface," p. ix.

George: That's harder than being lovers.
(He slings up his knapsack.)

Virginia: (Smiles) Well, in that case...?¹

Realizing that her seductive smile is not enough to keep George with her, Virginia follows him into the woods for the "single exception" to the "no off-stage life" rule cited by Mr. Laurents.²

Virginia's actions and emotional fluctuations are the action and plot, respectively, of A Clearing in the Woods. After she enters the clearing, the basic conflict begins when the three girls, representing herself, want Virginia to take care of them and she refuses to. When she enters the clearing she is happy to be where she can "breathe." She is neither confused, irritated, nor annoyed at first. In each scene thereafter Virginia becomes progressively confused, irritated and annoyed as the images of her life are reenacted before her.

The inciting action comes at the beginning of the play when Virginia does not recognize the girls as true images of herself. However, this inciting action is only identifiable in retrospect, at the end of Act I, when the fact that the girls are Virginia is stated for the first time. By not revealing this information earlier, Laurents establishes a "dramatic tension" but does not permit the play to "get going" until late in the act. As a result, the play does

¹Laurents, A Clearing in the Woods, I, 60.

²Laurents, "Preface," p. ix.

not command audience attention as well as it might were the inciting action clarified sooner. This problem of the script is unavoidable. The device Laurents has employed to maintain audience attention in Act I tends to confuse and thereby alienate some of the audience.

As Act I ends, the basic conflict becomes clear: Virginia's inner struggle to either accept or reject her past. Until then, Virginia and the audience witness what could be deemed, according to our Puritan ethic or Christian morality, events which are wayward, evil and sinful. Her experience with George is very sad. She wiles and beguiles and maneuvers him into willing and beguiling and maneuvering her into a sexual encounter that she knows is based on nothing more than physical lust. Her excuse for doing what she knows she will not enjoy is "I thought I would...I wanted to,"¹ and the reason she gives George for her not enjoying their "experience" is her preoccupation with noises in the woods. The audience is aware that these noises are her preoccupation with another seduction: Nora's.

Nearby, Nora (Virginia at age sixteen or so) is giving herself sexually for the first time to a Boy who will only abuse her, she thinks. Thus, each incident we see in Act I contains life's ugliness, man's inhumanity to himself

¹Laurents, A Clearing in the Woods, I. 89.

and to others. It is only at the end of the act that Virginia realizes that these indiscretions are self-imposed and fulfill a need within herself.

Jigee, a young girl of eight or ten years, is maligned by her own father and denied the love and affection she wants and needs.

Barney: You must enjoy making me angry, you do it so well.

Jigee: (Near tears) I didn't mean to hurt you.

Virginia: Barney, she's a child.

Barney: A bad child.

Jigee: (Crying) I'm not. I didn't mean it, I love you!

Barney: So I see.

Jigee: I do! Better than the world.

Virginia: Answer her!

Jigee: (Clinging to him) Spank me. Do something!¹

Ginna's treatment of her husband, Pete, is more cruel than foolish. By accepting him and encouraging him she might have dispelled his feelings of inferiority, but she does neither.

Ginna: You were the biggest man on campus: letter man, honor student, council president. -- (Proudly) Remember the school voted you man of the year before you could vote.

Pete: Too bad you can't retire at twenty.

Ginna: (Unhearing, lost in happy reminiscence) I still remember what it felt like to walk into a dance with you, wearing your pin.

¹Ibid., 39-40.

Pete: Ginna . . . tell me what it feels like to walk into a dance with me now, wearing my ring.

Ginna: You look for wrong meanings.¹

If she had simply answered "great" or "the same way I did when we were in school," Pete might have been satisfied and might have felt secure and worthy. But Ginna does not permit him to feel this way. Pete is practically defenseless against Ginna, who is his wife and knows him intimately. She uses his faults and limitations to embarrass and disturb him.

The concluding unsettling incident that Virginia sees is one of self-degradation. Nora, as mentioned earlier, gives herself sexually to a young stranger. In doing this she tries to impress her girl friend, Hazelmae, and, perhaps, herself as well.

Nora: What makes you old enough? House parties? What they say? No, it's everything that's bothering you inside and saying: Do! You're a woman when you have to be!²

She then gets involved more deeply than she hoped and goes off into the woods with the Boy.

This progression of upsetting happenings is preparation for an emotional crisis for Virginia. The crisis is precipitated when she is forced to realize that the girls,

¹Ibid., 65.

²Ibid., 84.

Ginna, Jigee, and Nora, are really herself. Her resistance is purposeless and futile.

Virginia: I do not know who you are, but I know you are evil. I will not let anything more happen. You are getting out of here at once, immediately! I'm not asking you now, I'm telling you, ordering you: go away and stay away.¹

The girls, however, block her every exit. To escape, she faints.

Act I reaches a peak when Virginia sees that she and the girls all spring from the same background and in essence are stepping stones in responsibility for each other. Virginia's personality mirrors the collage of previous experiences from childhood to the present.

As Virginia regains consciousness in the beginning of Act II, she tries to calm herself by testing herself on her multiplication tables. The girls, however, continue the conflict by taunting her. She tries to ignore them by erasing them completely from her mind, despite the fact that they finally invite her to join them.

Virginia: (Laughs) Misery loves company. -- but thank you, no. Thank you for the offer, dear ladies; thank you for the enlightenment, dear fools! But no! We are going to part company -- now!²

¹Ibid., 92.

²Ibid., II. 108.

Through this resolution of her problem Virginia hopes to have what she wants out of life:

order and neatness -- and pleasure from the familiar . . . Expectation and delight -- and the excitement of caring. And -- yes! I can be right! . . . And descending into the world again, I can like what I wear, and where I live. I have changed so I can change things as they were -- into things as they will be! No more aloneness. I can even have -- ANDY!¹

Her excitement is equalled by her surprise when Andy, her ex-fiancé, enters the clearing. His presence serves to complicate Virginia's resolution.

She builds a fanciful world where all is as she wishes it to be. This fantasy falls apart in short order, for she soon sees that Andy is just as human and ordinary as he always was. He explains that "loving is knowing someone and still loving,"² and proceeds to reject her magic circle of safety, one of her childhood games, leaving Virginia alone again with her dilemma.

The encounter with her ex-fiancé makes her painfully aware that she cannot have anyone else because she cannot love herself. "How can you be when you don't have the hope of loving?"³ This is the first time she admits having this deficiency and is the first step in her total acceptance of herself. It is the climax of Act II.

¹Ibid., 110.

²Ibid., 132.

³Ibid., 133-134.

From this point on through actions and words, Virginia concedes that she does have a problem and that it needs solving. She then comprehends that there is someone who cares whether she lives or dies. Virginia makes this clear when she protests the girls' suggestion that she commit suicide as a possible alternative to living. "No! There is someone! There's me!" I care! I care!"¹

Her new resolution is to test whether the girls are worthy of acceptance by her. She weighs the incidents of "evil" in Act I against testimony brought to her by the people with whom the girls had been involved. Each incident in Act I comes before Virginia's scrutiny in Act II. In each one, she sees that she (or the girls involved) was not completely guilty of sin and each realization is an emotional climax for Virginia. Each revelation surprises her happily. First, the Boy with whom she had her first sexual experience did not "merely use her."

The Boy: Listen, I came back because -- for Pete's sake, all that jabber and she's just a dumb, pretty, scared kid!

 Listen, if she turns up, give her this for me. (Tosses up a wrapped homemade bunch of blue asters and white cosmos)²

The next witness who testifies to Virginia's worth as a human being is Pete. Virginia thinks he hates her for having

¹Ibid., 143-144.

²Ibid., 152.

ruined his life. However, according to Pete, she is mistaken.

Pete: A few have something inside them. I don't know what it is. But somehow they make the same things everyone else does, they make the ordinary, -- exciting. They give life color. You did that for me.¹

Then, in Barney's case, Virginia sees that she is not guilty of maintaining the strife between them.

Virginia: (Holding out her hands to him) Offer me yours!

Barney: They're touched with whisky, Virginia.

Virginia: I don't care.

Barney: (A longer start, then stops) I'm too old to change.

Virginia: I'm not, Daddy!

Barney: I meant . . . I'm too accustomed to you as a stranger. (Embarrassed, defeated, he goes quickly into the trees)²

It is evident to her that there is a point when one can no longer change his ways.

Alexander Dean might have called this a "Drop Scene."³ The high intensity, building from one witness to the next, is due to our concern over whether or not Virginia will choose to live. The focus switches from that question to a narrower one. Will Barney testify favorably or not? How much does

¹Ibid., 157.

²Ibid., 167.

³Dean, p. 291.

he love his daughter if he does at all? This change of focus suspends or drops intensity, though it does not suspend involvement. This narrower question is of interest and is pertinent to Virginia's problem.

The concluding scene is augmented and intensified by its juxtaposition to the scene of lesser intensity. In this final scene, the major dramatic question of A Clearing in the Woods is answered: Will Virginia accept the three girls and her past? She does, and thereby has all that she needs and unconsciously wants. She giggles "almost as if she were high."¹ But she is not "high," simply happy, and that is ultimately what she was looking for -- happiness.

A Clearing in the Woods has normal dramatic structure, action, and plot development. There is a conflict between the girls and Virginia which is intensified throughout Act I. The incidents described in this act unnerve Virginia and prevent the clearing from being the haven she sought. The second act demonstrates Virginia's anguish and despair, when she is made to face her flaws, limitations, and weaknesses. She is able to assuage these feelings when she finally recognizes her inner strengths.

Mr. Laurents has chosen this as his subject matter and to illustrate it, as explained in Chapter II, has used the style of "fantastic realism" and the form of "averted tragedy."

¹Laurents, interview of January 2, 1970.

CHAPTER V

THE CHARACTERS IN A CLEARING IN THE WOODS

Since Virginia is Nora, Ginna, and Jigee, it might appear that Virginia's character is a sum total of the three girls. But this is not true. Though each girl contributes to Virginia's character, she is different from each one.

To use Mr. Laurents' words in his Preface to A Clearing in the Woods:

It is perfectly natural for three girls and a woman to be the same person at different ages and still to accept that all four live their own, separate existences, blending into a single whole only at the end. Difficult? Impossible? Not if we think of ourselves now and in the past. How separate and yet how together.¹

Let us look at each one of the girls and at Virginia, to see "how separate and yet how together" they are.

Jigee is about nine or ten years old and seems to be a normal little girl. She has usual problems of childhood such as not wanting to wear her "corrective" lenses,² and

¹Laurents, "Preface," p. xii.

²Laurents, A Clearing in the Woods, I. 9.

not wanting to be told what to do or what not to do by her elders without a reasonable explanation. As she says, "Nobody ever explains, not a single thing. 'Do as I tell you,' that's all. Well, when I grow up, I'm going to do what I tell me!"¹ Her strength lies in her ability to protect herself from her father's neglect. Mr. Laurents said that "kids adore torturing grownups and that's what she does in the whole play."² She taunts her father and Virginia, and almost anyone whom she thinks is persecuting her.

Barney: (With a grin, to Jigee) I never could be winner around here, Baby.

Jigee: You should only say baby to infants or lady friends.³

She yearns to be loved and protected by her father. She craves his attention. This is apparent, when she begs him to even spank her, to "do something."⁴

The search for attention motivates her behavior. For instance, she cuts her father's tie in order to spur him to deal with her. She settles for negative attention here. However, Barney ignores her and this is a crushing disappointment to her.

¹Laurents, interview of January 2, 1970.

²Laurents, A Clearing in the Woods, I. 6.

³Ibid., 6.

⁴Ibid., 40.

Nora, the next oldest of the three young "Virginias," is sixteen years old and shows her lack of respect for her father differently. Her defense against him is more sophisticated than Jigee's. She treats Barney as an equal by calling him by his first name. However, her most effective defense against his biting sarcasm is a quiet one. She simply ignores him. Thus, we never see Nora in a confrontation with Barney. She torments him from a distance.

Nora finds her security in her declared freedom and by maintaining at least a sense of superiority over her girlfriends. We see this in her picnic with Hazelmae.

Hazelmae: I don't know why we didn't go with the rest of the girls, in the first place.

Nora: Because they're children. God, they're so young!
.....
He's cute.

Hazelmae: Oh, Yeeeeeeees.

Nora: I saw him first.

Hazelmae: All we'll do anyway is talk about him. Simmer down, lamby pie.

Nora: Simmer yourself down, pie-face. One summer in Nashville three years ago is no excuse for that accent.
.....

Nora: Cretin! What I do and say is me! I am Me, I am a person!¹

She mistreats her friend, Hazelmae, who also wants freedom.

Hazelmae says, "Outside, I save my energy and do as they

¹Ibid., 76-80.

want. But inside -- I know exactly what I want and I will do it and have it the day I am on my own."¹ The two girls need and use each other. Hazelmae shares in Nora's emancipation by merely associating with her. Nora always tries to make herself pretty and attractive by associating with "plain" girls. Like Jigee, Nora craves for attention. She tries to accomplish this through her experience with the Boy but basically she is aware of her self-deception. As Virginia suggests in Act II, "She was ashamed!...She cried."² But the Boy defends Nora by pointing out that she did not cry in front of him and that she may have been ashamed but not of him.³ The Boy seems to be concerned only with his own personal pleasure when we see him with Nora in Act I. However, his involvement is more than casual as indicated by his gift to her of a bouquet of blue asters and white cosmos in Act II. His function in A Clearing in the Woods is to demonstrate to Virginia that her opinion of herself, as Nora, is a wrong one.

Ginna is a sophisticated, hardworking social butterfly who volunteers her services to social agencies. She uses all her successful endeavors to support her claim to being better

¹Ibid., 80.

²Ibid., II. 152.

³Ibid.

than Barney. Her defense against her father is to attack him before he attacks her. Barney dismisses her work as a waste of time and their natural resentment of each other becomes more entrenched. So habitual has this "unloving" feeling become that both father and daughter toss it off as second nature.

Ginna: I understand you.

Barney: As you do your husband.

Ginna: No, Pete is not quite as simple.

.....
Barney, spare a moment from your athletics.
Surprise her [Virginia]. Be nice for once.
I have to attack that very large mountain
on my very small desk.

Barney: Another day, another cause.

Ginna: Same Barney, same joke.

Barney: Now, Ginna, I don't mean to run down these do-good organizations --

Ginna: Then don't reduce people who are trying to a snide little country club phrase!¹

Ginna is twenty-six years old and her character has become one of contradictions. She says she loves her husband, but she knows he is not what she wants in a husband. Pete was all she says he was, "letter man, honor student, council president";² but his college career did not train him to cope with a wife like her. He is accustomed to being "top man." He finds it difficult to adjust to a life away from

¹Ibid., 22-24.

²Ibid., 65.

the "glamour" of his college. He is oppressed by Ginna's faultfinding. In addition, there is no need for him to bring in any income, as she has enough financial resources for the both of them. He has settled into a complacent existence with one drawback; he cannot endure Ginna's patronizing. He finally suggests divorce, which she accepts. Pete needs to be in a situation that flatters his masculinity. Divorcing Ginna is probably the first positive thing he did since he married her.

Mr. Laurents used Pete to impress upon Virginia that the "good" and "bad" co-exist and this co-existence must be accepted. Pete is an example of a person who failed, but who was able to revitalize his strengths and build a new and better life for himself. Virginia must do this too, if she is to continue living.

Ginna's objective is to gain acceptance from Virginia. This acceptance would free her from her belief that she could not make her marriage work and that she ruined Pete's life. However, when she finds out that Pete is happy in spite of what happened in the past, Virginia and Ginna are both relieved.

Jigee, Nora, and Ginna lack self-confidence and self-esteem. When Virginia finally does accept them, they can co-exist, forming a total character. The function of the girls is the same: to encourage and to motivate Virginia to stop procrastinating. She must decide to live or to die.

Barney's opinion of Virginia is that she is "one of the strong ones" who never needs anyone else's help.¹ However, Virginia reports, "I am not strong! I am exhausted from pretending to be! I am human; I am vulnerable, I hurt!"² Pain is personal. There is no way of knowing if someone is or is not in pain unless they indicate this. Since there is no apparent reason for Virginia to deceive her father, we may assume she is as distraught as she claims. She also says she wants "more of a part of living."

Let us investigate Virginia's life from the information available to us. Her mother died when Virginia was a young girl, Jigee's age. The relationship between Barney and Virginia's mother was one which excluded her. Virginia says about her mother:

She was always out with you or away with you. You were both away on one of those trips when she died. When you returned you told me she was still away. It was only long after, after I had accepted her absence, that I learned the truth from a school teacher.³

The note Virginia writes her father before she tried to run away from home sums up not only what she thought he felt about her but also how she felt about him. "Dearest Daddy. You never want me around because I am not pretty. Therefore, I am a stepchild and so I am running away. Your loving

¹Ibid., 29.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., 27

Daughter, Virginia."¹

Except for her years in college, she seems to have been living in her father's home, unable to separate from him. Even while married, she lived with Pete in Barney's house. Barney says it was "after the divorce that she moved out and she did not visit 'home' since."²

Her talents and drive for recognition led her to a job as a private secretary. Financially, she seems to have done well: a new car, a fine apartment are mentioned to Andy. For a while she expected to marry Andy, but they broke their engagement on the very day they had planned to apply for their marriage license. She tries to dismiss her feelings for Andy by telling the girls, "You make too much of him. He's only another I don't want to remember." From her activities with George, it is apparent that there must have been several meaningless men in Virginia's life. Her plea to George is "help me forget everything before this minute."³ So it is obvious she is trying to escape something, but she does not know what it is.

Virginia has not seen Andy in two years,⁴ and yet has him on her mind. She calls for him by accident, almost

¹Ibid., 42.

²Ibid., 27.

³Ibid., 54.

⁴Ibid., 32.

automatically. "Who was I calling? Andy? Andy? Andy? No Andy. Which fact she knew, but knowing never killed hope."¹ It is apparent that she wants Andy to marry her.

To escape the annoying truth of their separation, Virginia has been keeping busy. However, she says, "overworking, hard work....Well not really. Parties have become the hardest, whether giving or going."² She is depressed and she returns to the clearing because she is frightened by suicidal thoughts.³

It is apparent that Virginia, now in her mid-thirties, is still attractive. George who is clearly a debonaire playboy type is attracted to her and as he says, "the woods are full of girls."⁴

Her ultimate objective is to attain happiness through a warm relationship. The search has been fruitless and it remains so until she realizes that she must love herself -- accept herself -- before she can love anyone else and, in turn, receive love.

Barney describes himself as "the old block of ice" and Virginia as the proverbial "chip" off of it.⁵ Virginia observes that her "ice is melting";⁶ but, as Barney's last

¹Ibid., 4.

²Ibid., 15.

³Ibid., 30.

⁴Ibid., 60.

⁵Ibid., 159.

⁶Ibid.

speech indicates, he is never going to be a warm loving person. He rejects Virginia, saying, "I'm too accustomed to you as a stranger."¹

Barney and Virginia are alike. As he describes it, "Just one more birdie, I'd say, then no more drink. I never made the birdie -- so I always took the drink. Until I realized I was never going to make it."² His function in the play is to show the tragedy that could result if Virginia keeps pretending she is perfect. Barney claims he is not old yet, when, in fact, he is not a young man anymore. He continues living a dream at the end of A Clearing in the Woods, Virginia does not.

Andy is, as the girls often say about him, an "ordinary" man. He has a job, is slightly above average in intelligence and ability. He realizes this and accepts it. He loves Virginia and says so,³ but he will not pretend to be better than he is. For this reason he would not marry her two years ago. His function in A Clearing in the Woods is as a stabilizer for Virginia. He helps her realize her problem by offering his analysis of her.

The important aspect of each character in A Clearing in the Woods is summed up stunningly by Mr. Laurents in his Preface:

¹Ibid., 167.

²Ibid., I. 33.

³Ibid., II, 134.

They are all individual human beings, even the three girls. Even the character called George who openly remarks that he is several people. Although he does represent several men the heroine dallied with, and although as such he might be termed symbolic, he is written as a distinct individual and it is as such that he must be played. The woman must accept him as such and take his remarks as a joke: its double meaning is for the audience, not for her.¹

¹Laurents, "Preface," p. ix.