CHAPTER II

THE SENSE OF ALIENATION
There are occasions in the lives of human beings when they feel altogether alone — cut off from the other human beings, unrelated to nature around them, abandoned by God. Yet it does seem from all accounts that in general, people in the past, did feel themselves to be part of a family and community of mankind and even of the all creative nature. Considering the immediate past, we can recall a number of nineteenth century statements which suggest that such a sense of belonging, of being part of a scheme of things, was quite clearly felt. Wordsworth tells us not only of the bonds of sympathy that hold people together but more emphatically of the way in which one Spirit runs through and binds the round ocean and the living air and the deep heart of man.¹ The relatedness of men among themselves and not only with visible nature but even the invisible seems more or less to have been generally accepted. Later in the nineteenth century, we do begin to have more pessimistic statements like those of Matthew Arnold. The confusion and loneliness of people who have lost their faith in religion is clearly indicated in such a poem as Dover Beach. The indifference of nature to human concerns was felt by Coleridge himself

¹ William Wordsworth, Tintern Abbey.
in *Dejection Ode*. Late nineteenth century statements in American literature on this indifference can be found in such stories as Stephen Crane's *The Open Boat*. To this one may add the loss of faith in a well-ordered universe governed by a benevolent Providence. The famous words of Henry Adams, "Chaos is the law of nature, order the dream of man," indicate this fearful realization. Historians of modern literature generally trace this phenomenon to Darwin's *Origin of Species*, to nineteenth century astronomy, and to new recognitions in human psychology. The sense of human community too has clearly been reduced by the circumstances of modern living in large, complex societies in contrast, for example, to tribal and rural and small-town life. The idea of the indifference of society to the individual is also well documented in literature. This painful view of life as a lonely struggle without established *ground rules*, governed by chance and not by God's moral laws, as something *absurd* instead of *rational* or *dignified* is bound to find expression in literature. Modern literature to a considerable extent exhibits this consciousness.

Like her Southern contemporaries, Faulkner and Robert Penn Warren, Miss Porter thinks that modern life has brought spiritual impoverishment, and
like them, she has turned a hostile gaze upon modern times. The Southern orientation brought them to react against modern industrial society and against the modern ethos. They regard civilization as dehumanized, impersonal, non-productive and unprincipled. Miss Porter once said that her stories represent what she was "able to achieve in the way of order and form and statement in a period of grotesque dislocation in a whole society, when the world was heaving in the sickness of millenial change".¹

This is quite a fair statement of her intention as a writer. In fact, her attitudes point toward the pervasive world situation of the post-war period. Her works primarily reflect the sense of alienation which was dominant in the third and fourth decades of this century. The feeling of alienation is the central impulse in the thematic pattern of her works. This may be seen in a general way in her artistic practice and, more particularly, in the formal characteristics of her fiction.

As a dominant feature of modern literature,

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¹ Katherine Anne Porter, *The Days Before*, p. 29.
according to Barksdale:

"Alienation is the subject of frantic sociological theorizing as well as of febrile chatter of innumerable cocktail parties. The distinguishing marks of alienation are apathy, non-involvement, neutralism and the overt and covert rejection of society."  

Alienation is a major aspect of "existentialism" which is the name given to a contemporary school of thinking that emphasizes human existence and the quality of being that are peculiar to it, rather than the nature of the physical world. "Emphasis on human existence" is the beginning of a definition of existentialism. However, it is too vague in reference to the modern movement. As Robert N. Beck observes:

"Existentialism's concern about man grows out of specifically modern conditions and concludes in a unique position. Among the conditions are the loss of individual in mass culture and technology, the consequent alienation of the human person from himself as well as from his

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productions, and the loss of meaning in life through divisions within the human spirit."

The result of these conditions is frequently called the existential experience. Recorded by artists and writers as an experience of the decomposition of our phenomenal world — decomposition, first, of all rational concepts, next of objects, then of time and history, until all coherence is gone to the point when one faces only nothing and experiences only despair.

Existentialism encompasses a variety of themes. Among them is the doctrine that individual existence determines essence, that man has absolute freedom of choice, but there are no rational criteria serving as a basis for choice and the general claim that the universe is absurd with an emphasis on the phenomena of anxiety and alienation. It is also called an experience of crises because it has arisen in times of social and personal catastrophe in our century.

The desire to know the meaning of the individual

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2 Ibid. loc. cit.

3 Ibid.
man in a more radical way than other philosophies have sought, leads the existentialists to hold that the starting point of philosophy in the "concrete situation of man in the world." "An existentialist doubts that science or reason can interpret the whole universe, and he is suspicious of the 'disintegratedness' of modern objective thought." All this means that he gives more importance to subjectivity.

It is apparent that existentialism in all its forms is a philosophy of crises. Today it pervades the relationship of persons as well as groups, of classes, races, rather than of nation and religion. Hence a growing sense of frustration, anxiety and despair arises, which pervades the Western hemisphere. At the back of it is man's growing sense of loneliness and alienation, which has now become a recurrent theme from Kierkegaard, Sartre, and Camus to Hemingway, Dos Passos, Paul Bowels, Faulkner, Alfred Wright, Ralph Ellison, Saul Bellow and several other writers of the age.

1 Ibid., p. 42.
The study of the American novelists reveals that, like Sartre and Camus, the Americans are also preoccupied with the problem of identity, and, as Krieger observes:

"most modern writings are concerned with the search of self, the nature of good and evil, the possibility of fulfilment in the contemporary society, the source of value in a world without God and the possibility of and meaning of action in an ethical vacuum."¹

Hence the dominant theme of the present day writing is the result of the sense of alienation. As Eisienger remarks:

"Disillusioned with the Marxist ideology of the previous decade, shaken from any kind of firm belief in life's rationality by the rise of fascism, writers turned to subjectivism and individualism."²

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This psychology of alienation has naturally had a profound influence on the art of fiction. Murray Krieger has made a study of the alienated protagonist of today for the purpose of defining what he calls "the modern tragic vision":

"Such a vision stems from the interaction between a protagonist and a disordered and chaotic world. Aristotle's definition of tragedy is really inapplicable because the Greeks took for granted an ordered world. As a result the fearsome chaotic necessities were surrendered to the unity which contained them."¹

Further, Krieger also astutely observes:

"the focus of present-day writing has shifted from the universal and generic to the particular and individual. The protagonist of today does not reaffirm his identity through a tragic fall; he does not allow any noble form of self-destruction, the fate of the hero is really consistent with the theories of absurdity."²

¹ Murray Krieger, "The Kenyan Review, p. 286
² ibid., p. 287
All of Miss Porter's stories and her novel Ship of Fools in general fall into the characteristic pattern of the theme of alienation. Most conspicuously in Ship of Fools, which is a commentary on the crises of that period, Miss Porter has projected a sense of loneliness against the political terror of the Hitler-period. In general, all the stories, in some way or the other, deal with a deficiency which manifests itself in the failure to engage with others in a vital relationship. In this connection Wiesenfarth remarks:

"Katherine Anne Porter projects a disordered world in which conflict is generated in lives where self-knowledge and love have failed. Her stories are strongly negative in hope that a man in recognizing himself in them will learn how to became positive."

To emphasize this point, he further observes:

"The Downward Path to Wisdom, The Jilting of Granny Weatherall, Noon Wine, Magic, Theft, He, A Day's Work and Ship of Fools show persons of different ages, social status, intellectual and emotional developments

afflicted and affected by the same problems—
sexual frustration that leads to hatred,
external forms of order (family ideals,
social recognition, law and order, humanity,
religion) that are enforced self-righteously,
trivia that become pretexts for recrimination"...¹

It is obvious that despite diversity of setting,
material, style and structure, there is a close
affinity in the thematic contents of her stories,
even though some of them do not deal specifically with
the sense of alienation.

¹ Ibid., ibid. p. 88.