CHAPTER IV

EXISTENTIALISM
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1 The Human Situation

We have so far discussed the humanism of Miss Hellman. As a modern writer, reflecting on life, it is not surprising that, rejecting all conventional systems, she should be an existentialist in her attitudes. This aspect of her thinking is reflected in the themes of her plays.

As an existentialist, Miss Hellman lays "emphasis on the limitations of reason and the incredulity of experience to any system." She gives a philosophical analysis of human existence, especially of the most extreme experiences, and tries to show in her dramas that reason cannot reduce experience to a system. "Thrust into life, armed with our senses, will and reason, we feel ourselves to be potent beings; yet our senses give the lie to our thought and our thought defies our senses," says Bogard. Miss Hellman's characters suffer from this same sad predicament. In Autumn Garden the War veteran General Griggs, the hero of the liberation of France is such a sad case. He takes himself to be the master of the situation; he thinks that he is on the right path to attain that long-cherished desire of separation from his unwanted wife. But the next moment he finds that all his efforts in
that direction have simply turned into nothingness. He comes to realize that his assessment of the whole situation, himself included, was wrong. Thus Miss Hellman believes that we never perceive anything completely. At a time, we are permitted to see only one perspective of any object, fact or situation. We labour to achieve distinction and happiness only to find that our assessments are incomplete and therefore ineffective.

Miss Hellman expresses her sense of senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach. According to her, to borrow the words of Joseph Wood Krutch, "all attempts to achieve a rational harmony are doomed to failure because the central human reality on the psychological parlance is not a community of interests but a conflict." Thus she depicts a world which is torn apart, illogical and incoherent. It is a familiar world but which cannot be explained by reasoning.

Miss Hellman holds that there is no universally binding moral law and that there are no absolute moral values. Thus the hallmark of her attitude is its sense that certitudes and basic, unshakeable assumptions of former ages have been swept away, that they have been tested and found wanting, discredited as cheap and somewhat childish illusions. Religious faith has declined and so has its substitute faith in material progress, nationalism and various totalitarian fallacies. Man has lost faith in all traditionally accepted values. "Having
lost its centre, the absolute, human life has become peripheral and relative. Thus alienation from God and society are the dominant themes of modern plays," says V. Rama Murthy. And this alienation is one of the major themes of Miss Hellman's plays too. Her characters, as the present study will show, are alienated from God, from society and even from themselves. They have outgrown all systems and certainties, all values and convictions. They stand baffled and bewildered.

Miss Hellman particularly stresses the personal freedom of man and his consequent responsibility for what he does. Besides being free, man is a finite and contingent being existing in a world that is devoid of purpose. She depicts man as cut off from his religious, metaphysical and transcendental roots. He is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd and useless. To be a man at all is to be neurotic, self-destructive and unhappy. She agrees with Alberto Moravia that "to be a man is automatically not to be happy. That is the human situation." She denies that man as he exists is capable of solving his problems. According to her, man finds himself entangled in a maze of illusions that forever hide ultimate reality. He tries to establish his position, tries to find himself a modest place in the cold and dark world that envelops him, but all in vain. He becomes conscious of his helplessness before the overpowering force of circumstances; he becomes aware of his littleness, his insignificance in a gigantic and impersonal universe. All
his efforts to grasp the moral law go in vain because he realizes it beyond his comprehension. In her Days to Come, Andrew Rodman faces the same crisis:

Andrew (Sharply). I don't care who wins. If it were that simple, it would be fine. But it isn't that simple. (Leans forward, slowly) I can't fit the pieces together. That's what's happening to me. I suddenly don't know where my place in the whole thing is... (with feeling)... I don't know where I stand.

(DC, p.99)

According to the existentialists, man finds himself suddenly deprived of ways and means to be what he aspires to be. He finds himself a stranger. His existence in the world looks like an irremediable exile because he is "deprived of memories of a lost homeland as much as he lacks hope of a promised land to come." Here the 'memories of a lost homeland' and the 'hope of a promised land to come' refer to past and future on the temporal plane. When once all the possibilities of trusting them are lost—existentially speaking, they are not there—one's presence in the spatio-temporal here and now becomes the most perilous phenomenon. Man comes to realize that he is surrounded by areas of impenetrable darkness, that he can never know his true nature and purpose and that no one will provide him with ready made rules of conduct. This dark, vast ignorance coupled with his sense of helplessness and impotence, results in anxiety and despair. In her plays Miss Hellman is mainly concerned with conveying this sense of mystery, bewilderment and anxiety of her characters when they are confronted with
the human condition and the ensuing despair at being unable to find a meaning in existence. It is this metaphysical anguish that forms the basis of her plays. This anguish also results from the position arising from the clash between human hopes and desires and the hostile universe into which man has been thrown. "This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting truly constitutes the feeling of absurdity", says Camus. And it is this feeling, the consciousness of this existential loneliness and estrangement, that constitutes the general feeling in most of her plays.

In reply to a question, whether any of her plays was easy to write, Miss Hellman replied that The Autumn Garden was easier than any other. It is because here she excelled in depicting the human predicament, in projecting the vision of the world dredged up from the depths of the sub-conscious. Primarily she is concerned with the fundamental problems, human hopes and aspirations, man's isolation and lack of communication. She makes her audience aware of man's precarious and mysterious position in the universe. She presents with an individual human being's intuitive knowledge of the ultimate realities as he experiences life; the fruits of one man's descent into the depths of his personality, his dreams, his fantasies and nightmares.
2 Void ab initio—The Empty Existence

In *The Autumn Garden* she depicts such a world and writes of characters who suffer from spiritual crises. Unlike the Hubbards who stalked through *Another Part of the Forest* and *The Little Foxes*, these people are not notable for their violence. They are not bad people. They haven't done anything to the world or even to themselves. The tragedy about them is that nothing ever happens to them, that life has passed them by; in a word, their existence is without any drama. It is an empty existence. They are frustrated and defeated people and though they are serious in their approach to life and its problems, they are rather silly, inactive and unadventurous. The cause of their unhappiness is not that some external hostile force has deprived them of that chance of happiness, they are unhappy because of their own inertia and ignorance. Harold Clurman has correctly assessed their character thus: "They are idealists whose ideals are chimeras rather than goals. They will wither and disappear like autumn leaves in a mist of empty sighs; and it is so because of one simple defect in their personalities: They haven't been able to face the truth about themselves."¹⁰

In this play, Miss Hellman has given a broader and deeper view of the society than hithertofore. The few characters clustered here in a summer resort are representative of the world at large. And they have been studied very deeply and minutely by the author. This summer guesthouse is
something like 'hotel universe' which for the mistress of
the house is the only source to lay her hands on for a
but, for the other visitors, to quote Downer, "it
is the past, elegant in its outlines and worn shabby with
the passing years. These characters have reached the sere
and yellow of autumn but behave like mere babes in the wood."¹¹
And the author creates such a dramatic situation that each
character becomes aware of his true self; though this
wisdom—this self-awareness dawns on them for a short while
but it does dawn and they do have a glimpse of truth about
themselves.

Among the distinguished guests at the boarding house is
the amiable drunkard-turned-philosopher who, in such a moment
of perception, sums up his wasteful life thus:

Crossman (stares at Constance; then slowly, carefully).
I live in a room and I go to work and I play a game
called getting through the day while you wait for
night. The night's for me—just me—and I can do
anything with it I want. There used to be a lot of
things to do with it, good things, but now there is a
bar and another bar and the same people in each bar.
When I've had enough I go back to my room—or some
body else's room—and that never means much one way
or the other. A few years ago I'd have weeks of
reading—night after night—just me. But I don't do
that much any more. Just read, all night long. You
can feel good that way.

(AG, p. 544)

It is not difficult to see that Crossman is speaking from
the stance of a consciousness of void ab initio.

Thus the occasion may be merely an abrupt detachment on
the part of his consciousness apropos of the daily routine,
but we do not miss the sense of anxiety at the root of his
life; or one may view it also as the sudden perception by consciousness of a void or nothingness in his existence. And then there is General Griggs, again a man of major proportions, visualizing and expressing his momentary perception thus:

Crossman. What's the matter?
Griggs. Worst disease of all. I'm all gone.
I've just looked and there's no Benjamin Griggs.
Crossman (after a second). Oh, that. And you've just found that out?
Griggs. Just today, just now.

(AG, p. 541)

Griggs' search for himself ends up in a bland realization that he is nothing and does not exist at all.

3 Rational Vs Real

Crossman in this play symbolizes the modern man who busies himself in the effort to make this world more and more beautiful; but the next moment he destroys it by indulging in devastating world wars. Maybe, as Kaufmann writes, it is because he is instinctively afraid of attaining his object and completing the edifice. Perhaps he only loves that edifice from a distance and is by no means in love with it at close quarters. Perhaps the only goal on earth to which mankind is striving, lies in this incessant process of attaining, in other words, in life itself and not in the thing to be attained.
Crossman comes to the boarding house every summer, stays for a few weeks and goes back to his book business, repeating the same process every year. Even to a most indifferent spectator, it would appear that he intended to marry the mistress of the house and would propose at the first opportune moment. But the fact remains that when she proposes to him, he politely refuses, thus at once desiring and not desiring. This contrast between wish and hope—this irrational and absurd behaviour—constitutes the theme of this play.

Bogard remarks that it is impossible for man to act with complete efficiency, to perceive with complete accuracy, to create any thing definite and lasting that expresses his intentions, yet he also remembers that it is also impossible for him to cease acting as long as he lives and that is absurd. Like a typical modern man, Crossman, a sensitive soul, is torn between irreconcilable impulses and he finds himself on the horns of a dilemma. Thus Miss Hellman agrees with Krutch that the essence of man's tragic dilemma is that there is no rational, only an irrational solution of this dilemma. She denies the possibility of reconciling the conflicting impulses and suggests in this play that man is the victim of conflicting desires, the strongest of them, like his desire for a member of the opposite sex, are irrational and yet stronger than reason. He almost despises himself for not being able to cease desiring what he also
hates. Thus the play deals with the awful, often unspoken, sufferings of those who cannot admit to what they love and what they live for.

Miss Hellman's existentialism is born not only of our inability to reason about life and trace some relation between cause and effect but also of the contrast between human aspirations and the grave-yard silence of the universe. It is born of the brutal contradictions in our society. The instinct to possess gives birth to further urge to amass, to possess, rendering us hollow and empty from within though we are full without. Mrs. Halpern's (My Mother, My Father and Me), craze for buying and the emptiness within resulting in her reckless life explain the situation. Industry and the activity of construction give the illusion of permanence which may melt into thin air any moment in the devastation caused by these same industries. This also explains the conduct of Crossman (The Autumn Garden). He comes to have a glimpse of his sweetheart but refuses her when she proposes to him. The suggestion is that had she not proposed, he would have continued coming. In this connection the worldly-wise Dr. Martin sounds more sensible in giving his findings of the world. He says:

As much good as there is evil. In a world where men march across continent to kill each other without ever asking why. Where the scientist strives to prolong life and at the same minute invents weapons to wipe it out. Where children are taught the rules of charity and kindness until they grow to the age where they would be punished if they put the rules into practice. Where half the world starves and the other half diats. (Candide, p.663)
4 Flight from the Self

Now in *The Autumn Garden* also the characters suffer from self-deception. They lie to themselves. Miss Hellman has tried to show in this play that each of our lives constitutes a decisive act and that when the chain of these acts reaches a certain point around the middle years, no sudden movement of our will is likely to alter the shape and meaning of what we have made. To hope, says Harold Clurman, as most of us do that though we dream one thing and do another, it will come out alright in the end, come out satisfactorily according to some abstract conception we have fuzzily projected in our imagination, is to make a big waste of life and indulge in a lie. It is this lie that characters in *The Autumn Garden* indulge in. This is the essence of Griggs' life-long experience.

Griggs. . . . (Slowly, carefully) So at any given moment you're only the sum of your life upto then. 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.

(AG, p.541)

And again:

Griggs. Most people like us haven't done anything to themselves, they've let it be done to them. I had no right to let it be done to me but I let
it be done. What consolation can I find in not having made myself any more useless than an Ellis, a Denory, a Tuckerman, a— . . .


Griggs. The difference is you've meant to fritter yourself away.

(The, p. 542)

The main characters in Toys in the Attic too suffer from the same sad predicament. Julian comes home dripping with money. The trip to Europe is indefinitely postponed without any apparent reason. Life is led from day to day with great unpleasantness though obviously unperceived and unspoken. Even after Julian's return the characters fight self-realization. When Anna tries to find out from Julian what his circumstances are and why he has behaved as he has, Julian tries to evade the question. Unsavoury situation as it is, he does not want to face it. Carrie too tries to postpone the questioning. When Anna is driven to telling Carrie a very bitter truth (about her incestuous love for Julian), Carrie reacts with "you never said those words. Tell me I never heard those words" (TA, p. 732). But all the three must face the unpalatable truth about themselves and each other. "The daily round of. large duties and tiny pleasures can no longer act as a blind," Adler rightly says.

The characters do have the moments of complete insight and revelation but the light that lights on them is most mutable—most short-lived. Carrie is already on the road back to deception in the last few speeches, as she proposes to
cook food and to find herself another job "so much to do" (TA, p.751), she says and she almost purrs it.

"Tomorrow's another day" (TA, p.751) Julian may see that for his type of person to be beaten once is to be beaten for ever, but he isn't going to remember it very long. He almost discovers the true nature of Carrie's love for him but then deliberately suppresses this knowledge into defeat and ignorance as if his own inner self didn't want the insecurity and trouble that would result from facing the true nature of his predicament. Even Anna will have to soothe her hurts and try to go on as though nothing had happened, which sooner or later will mean that she will go on as though nothing had happened.

The Rodmans too take shelter behind this self-delusion. It is more so with Julie Rodman. She is not in a position to face the reality of her empty existence. When Andrew Rodman expresses his sense of loneliness, Julie remarks:

Julie. That is a late discovery, you are lucky.
Andrew (Laughs). Why do people always think it lucky to find out the simple things long after one should have known them?
Julie. Because each year you can put off knowing about them, gives you one more year of peace.
Andrew. I don't think so.

(DC, pp.98-99)

It is this desire for flight and the inevitability of inertia that has been a prominent theme of Lillian Hellman's plays, and it is this self-delusion on the part of her
characters that makes her an existentialist. They know that
ey are falling into self-delusion. But at the same time
in their own situation there is no better alternative available
to them. This puts them into an inner crisis, where life
itself forms into a big 'either/or' dilemma.

5 The Mist of Self-Ignorance

Miss Hellman shows a world peopled with men who are
earnest, who yearn but who cannot really afford to be serious.
They have no clear purpose. They have no binding commitment
to themselves and to others. They are attached to nothing.
They allow themselves to deviate because they do not know
exactly what they want and where they want to go. Due to
this incomprehensibility of motives and the often unexplained
and mysterious nature of these characters, her plays look
like the comic theatre in spite of the fact that their
subject-matter is sombre, violent and bitter. The protagonist
in The Autumn Garden does not know his motive. His periodical
visits, he pays like a somnabulist out of sheer force of some
inexplicable inner desire about which he could neither be
clear nor capable of taking an authentic decision. The War
veteran, General Griggs—the hero of the Liberation of France
is no better. On the surface he is bent upon getting a
divorce from his trying and troublesome wife but all along
he has been unaware of his own inner desire that he does not actually want it. Rose breaks the news that she has some heart trouble and requests postponement of the divorce. And this comes as a welcome news to our General. This lifts some unknown mysterious burden off his mind:

Griggs (Very slowly). I am not any too sure I didn't partly welcome the medical opinion that made it easier for me to give up. (Then in a low voice as if to himself) and I don't like Rose. And I'll live to like her less.

(AG, p.542)

Thus, there are hardly any protagonists in her plays who are convincingly motivated. They just grope in darkness.

Constance suffers from the same predicament:

Constance. . . . I feel so lost, Ned. As if I distrusted myself, did not have any thing to stand on, I mean, right now, if you asked me, I just wouldn't know what I thought or believed . . .

(AG, p.543)

Thus most of the characters suffer from ignorance.

Cassie-Cassandra, fully justifying the name of Cassandra of Troy, rightly sums up our age thus:

Cassie. We are an ignorant generation. We see so much and know so little. Maybe because we think about ourselves so much. I just told Emily that . . . (As if to herself) we don't really agree. And most of the time we don't know what we're disagreeing about.

(Sw, p.289)
Sophie and Fred are engaged to be married, and then the engagement is broken off without much ado. These decisions taken thoughtlessly in ignorance are typical of our age. To this, Constance reacts thus:

Constance (Wearily). Whole thing sounds like the sale of a shore-front property. I don't know. Seems to me I've been so mixed up about so much. Well, maybe you all know what you're doing.

Carrie. I don't know what I'm doing.

Constance. Why did you want the marriage, Carrie?

Carrie. I mean a month ago when you spoke to me—

Constance. You always seem so clear about everything. And so strong. Even when we were girls. I envied you that, Carrie, and wanted to be like you.

Carrie (Laughs). Clear and strong? don't envy me Con.

(AG, p.515)

And her laughter is more than a laughter. It speaks volumes. Carrie laughs because she does not believe that she has been so clear and so strong. That is the implication. Thus these characters act in sheer ignorance. They are not in clear contact with humanly important realities or they are not in a position to assert themselves with conviction.

There is the ambassador, Alex Hazen, in The Searching Mind, who is supposed to keep an eye on the events of the whole world but who does not know his own heart and mind. There are two women in his life: the one whom he loves, but could not marry because of some strange and inexplicable cause, and the other—his wife, with whom he maintains no
great passionate love and bondage. This worthy ambassador has also underestimated the contemporary world events. The two ladies are the unfortunate victims of the same sad predicament. All of them have refused to face the realities of their situation, have evaded the final issue, knowing all the while the disastrous implications, the slow wreckage of themselves, the ruin and torture of their lives. It is this unawareness on the part of these characters that makes them crisis-stricken and tragic.

6 The Problem of Alienation

The existentialist in Miss Hellman believes that the personal life of man can never be at harmony; it must always remain a discord. Mrs. Rodman (Days to Come) is another such casualty. She is self-alienated in the sense that there has emerged an awareness or feeling of the 'otherness' in her. She has alienated herself from her inner nature and has reached the extremity of discord with herself. "Universality at the interpersonal level" says Hegel, "is attained through unity with social substance." 17 In ceasing to be one with the social substance, therefore, the individual loses his universality; and when this happens, he is no longer in possession of his essence. He thus alienates himself from his inner nature or becomes self-alienated. Mrs. Rodman has not had a happy sense of being, or of belonging. As a
result, she has developed her particular nature and character, and to assert her independence as completely as possible at the expense of unity with the substance, she has closed her eyes to her essential universality and is proud and complacent in her self-alienation—in her empty existence and reckless life. She admits this to Whalen:

Julie. But it is really my fault. I've been busy. Busy, like you, finding out. I was finding out about myself. That took all my time.
Whalen. What were you finding out?
Julie. I don't know. When I was young, I guess I was looking for something I could be (Smiles) Finally, just for something to want, or to think, or to believe in. I always wanted somebody to show me the way.

(Deep Content, p. 108)

This is not a solitary example. Miss Hellman's dramatic world is crowded with such self-alienated people who suffer from a sense of separateness or disparity between actual conditions and essential nature.

In the play Days to Come, it is not Mrs. Rodman alone who suffers from this mental torture of self-alienation and loneliness. Her husband suffers more from this. Unloved by his wife, tolerated by his friend and partner, looked down upon contemptuously by his arrogant sister, and now hated by his own life-long associates and co-workers, he lays bare his own sufferings:


(Deep Content, p. 98)
The broken utterance 'Yes, I, lonely.' sufficiently reveals his shocked and confused condition. Loneliness, according to the existentialists, is not a matter of man getting imaginatively cut off from the mental togetherness with fellowmen. It is a state of mind where there figures nothing, a void on the screen of mind; and the incumbent faces a tortuous experience of having been mercilessly alienated from everybody. This emerges as a philosophical onset on the mind and obliterates all hopes of surviving like one in the many.

More than the Rodmans, Lily suffers in *Toys in the Attic*. She suffers from a loneliness which springs from a painful sense of separation from those with whom she has a right to feel a sense of kinship. She starts with normal chances of attaining her goal in life, fails clumsily through inadvertency. She indulges in self-recrimination. She also starts blaming outside forces. She tries to find compensation somewhere else. Julia Rodman had indulged in reckless promiscuity, unfortunate Crossman had taken to liquor in order to make up for a lonely existence, and Lily takes to drugs.

Then there are the Hubbards of the 'Foxes' fame. Their rugged individualism makes each character maintain a hostile, defensive attitude. They are always at each other's throat. This aggressive individualism, characteristic of jungle existence, is a direct result of their acute sense of isolation.
Miss Hellman depicts modern man suffering from a sense of loneliness—a sense of isolation from the outside world. This is the tragic situation in which he finds himself. From whatever point he starts, whatever path he follows, modern man comes to the same conclusion. Her characters find themselves alone in a world with which they have no communication. Good old Jenny has correctly understood that our is the age of snow (MP, p.787), having no compassion for one another. As a result Berney, like Arnold’s Scholar Gipsy, flies from the modern world to an Indian colony (MP, p.813).

7 Thus the Life – So the Art

In writing The Autumn Garden, or Toys in the Attic, or My Mother, My Father and Me, or even the earlier ones, Days to Come and The Searching Wind, Miss Hellman like a typical absurdist, does not intend to tell a story, she does not want the audience to go home satisfied that they know the solution to the problem posed in the play. One thing she does; she tries to express her vision of the world as best as she can. She tries to capture existence as reality.18 She believes that life is full of superfluous palaver, ineffective gestures, conversations that come to nothing, and it is exactly this that she depicts in these plays. Her Berney and more so her Rose Griggs only palaver. Then there are no plots. Life, unlike the stories told about it, has no
beginning and no end. It contains no adventures. It is only
'frittered away'. It is made of only disconnected events;
consequently her plays end abruptly, not because of the
exhaustion of subject matter, but because of the sheer meaning­
lessness and incoherence of what would follow. Though they
have movement, suspense and dramatic tension, these are plays
in which literally nothing ever happens, plays designed to
show that nothing can ever happen in human life. Her later
plays, particularly The Autumn Garden and My Mother, My Father
and me are as disjointed as life itself. She does not trouble
herself to provide us with events in their proper order, with
certain details necessary to a complete understanding of what
is taking place. It is, says Esslin about absurd drama, when
the last lines have been spoken and the curtain has fallen
that we are in a position to grasp the total pattern of the
complex life we have been confronted with.¹⁹ The one signi-
ficant image in The Autumn Garden is the oft-repeated
movement of Crossman with a bottle in hand, heading sometimes
for the porch and sometimes for the living room. Thus we
realize at the end of the play that its theme is the explora-
tion of a complex image of the waste of life.

Miss Hellman has no faith in the existence of a rational
and a well-ordered universe. To her, as to all the existen-
tialists,'the real is not rational, and the rational is not
real.' Crossman voices these sentiments:

'Griggs, there are so many things I want to do
that I don't know which to do first. Have
you thought about starting a new life?'
Crosman (smiles). I've often thought that if I started all over again, I'd go right back to where I started all over again, I'd go right back to where I started and start from there. Otherwise it wouldn't prove anything.

Griggs. Where'd you start from?
Crosman. Nowhere. That's the trouble.

(AG, p.477)

Miss Hellman expresses her characters' sense of shock at the absence, the loss, of any such clear, comforting and well defined system of beliefs or values. There is nothing solid or secure. All is vague and unclear. For them the world has lost its meaning and has ceased to make sense. It is a deaf and impersonal world in which man constantly searches for a reason to explain his existence and justify his struggle but can find none.

"I do regret", Miss Hellman records in the last chapter of her autobiography, "that I have spent too much of my life trying to find what I called truth, trying to find what I called sense: I never knew what I meant by truth, never made the sense I hoped for. All I mean is that I left too much of me unfinished." (UW, p.280). This is her self-realization and in her plays too she depicts the same. Julie Jordan expresses the same sentiments as cited in another context earlier:

But it's really my fault. I've been busy. Busy, like you, finding out. I was finding out about myself. That took all my time.

(DX, p.108)
In Miss Hellman's universe man is aware of the fact that the very condition of life dooms him to failure and there is nothing anyone can do about it. He has realized the utter impossibility of finding an answer to the question 'What can I do?'

She depicts man as a being who thinks or contemplates, who is free and who, because he is free, suffers; and since his future depends in part upon his free choice, it is not altogether predictable. Miss Hellman further shows that a man who merely contemplates the world fails to make the acts of choice which his situation demands. Running through all this is the idea that each person exists and chooses in time and has only a limited amount of it at his disposal, in which to make the decisions which matter so much to him. Time is short; there are urgent decisions to take; we are free to take them, but the thought of how much depends on our decision makes our freedom a source of anguish, for we cannot know with certainty what will become of us. It is this tragedy—this calamity that befalls the characters of Miss Hellman, be it Crossman or Griggs or Rodman.

Miss Hellman describes man as cast into an unsympathetic world in which he tries to achieve purposes all of which will inevitably come to naught. Her characters see themselves faced with a universe that is both frightening and illogical, in a word, absurd, in which certainties have dissolved, the firmest foundations for hope and optimism have collapsed. All assumptions of hope, all explanations of ultimate meaning,
have suddenly been unmasked as non-sensical illusion, empty chatter, whistling in the dark. This sense of ruin following misguided efforts and misplaced hopes is the emotion central to most of Miss Hellman's plays. Crossman feels this type of existential situation. How to probe its meaning is his problem.

Eric Bentley correctly assessed the situation of such a victim. According to him all that such a sufferer has at his disposal for such a task is words and thoughts. They go round and round in his brain only to produce another terror, another 'vertigo'. So it becomes a more exasperating source of misery. Thought has assigned to itself the task of finding the reality beneath the appearance. It has failed; he has only the appearance and must trail it as reality.

The conversations of her plays are suddenly revealed as exchanges of mere meaningless banalities and gibberish some times. Mrs. Griggs (The Autumn Garden), talking about teas and luncheons has no intention whatsoever of really exchanging any meaningful information. She is merely using language with others to fill the emptiness between them. The hero of My Mother, My Father and Me is also given to this empty chatter.

"Existentialism is preeminently the philosophy of crisis", says Frank Thilly. According to him, the whole of our human and even cosmic existence is a succession of critical situations. It is something like Tennyson's 'ever-
climbing wave' where each critical situation is fraught with danger and demands for its resolution all the power and prowess of the individual. Each crisis gives rise to a new crisis requiring similar resolutions, and the entire series leads ultimately to shipwreck. The broken General Griggs is such a typical case of shipwreck. The absurdity in his situation is born of his recognition of the disparity between what he hopes for and what seems in fact to be. He yearns for some measure of happiness in an orderly rational and reasonably predictable world. When he finds misery in a disorderly irrational and unpredictable world, he is oppressed by the absurdity of the disparity between the universe as he wishes it to be and the universe as he sees it. Not only General Griggs but most of her characters, for example, Crossman (The Autumn Garden), Andrew and Julie (Days to Come), Berney (My Mother, My Father and Me), Hazen and Cassie (The Searching Wind), have been wrecked too. There is no continuity upon which they can depend. Every thing seems ludicrous and absurd, painful and hopeless. They cannot extricate themselves from the morass of their lassitude, they hardly succeed in finding love in life, no one achieves his goal, and even efforts for a relative happiness fail, for, despite man's best efforts, a mocking fate will destroy him even before he begins.

Among Hellman's characters Berney's is an extreme case of disparity between aspirations and achievements. His aims are high-sounding. Here the poet in him has sung out his ambitions:
You find Jerusalem where you find her
Many a lonely night
Considered I the crossing of the water
To join my people
In the building of Israel,
But then, decided I, in Jerusalem, Israel,
There is muscle and strength,
Here the muscle and strength have gone.
Here I am needed
Here they are weak
And I must teach them to rise again,
Rise again.

(MFM, p. 315)

What an irony of fate that this self-appointed liberator
of his people, this self-declared Messiah finds himself, as
he himself puts it, making trinkets! This absurdity, which
Camus affirms to be the "divorce between the mind that
desires and the world that disappoints" constitutes the
major theme of Miss Hellman's Plays.

8 The Feeling of Dread

Man desperately seeks a meaning in the world— a
satisfying relationship between himself and the rest of
nature but what he finds is a non-rational indifferent
environment which renders the very quest absurd. As a
result, he develops a strange emotion of dread. This dread,
says John Wild, is not the same as fear. It has no shape,
no form. It cannot be ascribed to any physical entity. It
is an inexplicable phenomenon. But all the same it is there.
It is all engrossing—all absorbing. There is no cover—no
shield from it. Rather it draws a curtain between the individual and the warm friendly world without. There is nothing to which he can cling. He finds himself surrounded by alien things. This is what Mrs. Griggs (The Autumn Garden) feels; this is what Lily (Toys in the Attic) feels; this is what Whalen has felt in his early youth:

Whalen. Once in a while I'd work. But not when I could help it. Then one day or one month or one year I began to get worried. I couldn't understand about things and it scared hell out of me (Laughs, pours himself out a drink, pours her one) when you don't feel yourself anything, I mean any part of anything, that's when you get scared. I was that way for a long.

(DD, p.107)

With Whalen this is a matter of a past, like a bad dream. He is on the right path now fulfilling his mission, but Julie Rodman is still groping in the dark leading an empty aimless life. When Whalen asks her what she was trying to find out, she replies:

Julie. I don't know. When I was young, I guess I was looking for something I could do. Then for something I could be (Smiles). Finally just for something to want, or to think, or to believe in. I always wanted somebody to show me the way.

(DD, p.108)

Kierkegaard calls it 'nothing'. But then this 'nothing' is not really nothing. This 'nothing' is not really soothing. It is precisely the object of dread—this meaninglessness—this feeling of boredom with one's ownself. A great cloud gathers everything into a confused indifference. The world
sinks into this and the man is left alone with a nameless emptiness. Mrs. Rodman (*Days to Come*) is the victim of such an empty existence. She leads an empty existence within, but the Bernier sisters (*Toys in the Attic*) lead an existence which is empty within and eventless without. The Bernier sisters, more so Carrie among them, are the victims of this emptiness—this feeling of ennui. There is no change—no life—in their lives. It is of particular interest to note that even the house furniture and surroundings have been portrayed in dreary colours. "The furniture is often painted." (*TA*, p.689), perhaps to hide the ugly outlines, the colourless contours and its dreary distortions. Besides this, the "Berniers live in a house lived in by poor people who don't like where they live." (*TA*, p.689). Their wistful thinking of a trip to Europe is symbolic of their desire for flight from this humdrum life. In this connection even the title of the play *Toys in the Attic* is highly suggestive. The Bernier house is worse than an attic, and the inmates of this house no better than toys, used up, colourless, maimed and mutilated.

The characters in Miss Hellman's world feel that their normal everyday existence is not healthy and good. It is really a fallen-ness which they conceal from themselves by soothing anodynes. This is what sends Lily to that shady drug-dealer while Crossman tries to drown this very dread and anguish in wine but, sane soul as he is, he does not forget his true condition for long.
Even the source of dissent in average American youth, Miss Hellman traces to this dread. According to her, the loss of certain traditional American virtues, the breakdown of American family life, the inadequate parents, the undisciplined homes result in the violent dissent of modern youth and they direct their frustration against the older generation, against all authority and all established institutions. Berney in *My Mother, My Father and Me* is such a typical case. He has lost faith in "a structured universe" in the notion that man and nature are governed by the same kind of regular human laws. Thus cut off from religion and other established convictions and certainties, he has been thrown into a state of bewilderment and apathy. He is cut adrift from all values venerated by tradition. He is intimate with none. He suffers from a delusion that attachment to a group entails loss of individuality. Thus he has not been able to establish his identity. He is alienated. From middle adolescence he has become increasingly aware of the darkness, isolation and meaninglessness around him and they have added to his anxiety.
9 Dread the Redeemer

But then John Wild enumerates many advantages of this dread—this despair and anguish caused by the emptiness and isolation. According to him, it tears the veil from the eyes of the protagonists and they see themselves as they really are in a drab and ordinary state, not doing what they might do, only half alive and half awake. This experience of dread shocks them out of all their normal habits and relations. It awakens them from their thoughtlessness and arouses them to what they might be. This dread secures them the possibility of freedom and becomes the gateway to authentic existence. In their great moments—in their moments of awareness—they come to realize this dread and it becomes the source of existential courage and strength. Thus this dread prepares man for authentic action. It enters a man and searches his soul thoroughly, straining out of him all the futile and the petty, and leading him to his allotted destination. It is this dread that stares Whalen in the face and prepares him for a career of selfless service. It is this dread that provides Rodman with authentic existence. He experiences such a dread but he lives an authentic existence in that he is aware of his plight and has not shirked facing the reality of his existence. Julie has asserted that a year of postponement of realization of one’s absurd condition promises one more year of peace. At this her husband protests:
Andrew. I don't think so. Unless you can put it off for ever. (Smiles) I think that is what I was trying to do. But I am at a bad age to start looking at the world, to start looking at myself.

(DC, p.99)

And when this reality dawns, there emerges a rare passion for responsibility. Thus her characters become kind, considerate and forgiving. They develop stoic qualities of forbearance and fortitude. They recreate themselves. Even the unreasonable Emily undergoes a miraculous metamorphosis. She forgives Cassie (her rival for the affections of her husband Alex) and vice versa. They no more want to talk about who failed whom. They want to make the best of this worst possible world (SW, p.321).

0 Existentialism Humanized

An existentialist may appear to have no great respect for man, and it is true that Miss Hellman has been unkind to his pretensions. But, to her as to Sartre, "Existentialism is humanism".27 It is because, in her sense of the word, existentialism is a doctrine that renders human life possible. She believes that "humanity is not a state we suffer, it is a dignity we must strive to win—a dignity full of pain and sorrow won no doubt at the price of tears."28 It is due to this that we may call her a humanistic existentialist who never attempts to escape from the human condition. For her,
man faces an absurd situation in that he makes demands upon himself and on the world which would make sense only when there is a perceptible meaning in existence.

Miss Hellman makes a very disconcerting, at times terrifying reading when we see the contempt in which her heroes like Berney (My Mother, My Father and Me), Andrew Rodman (Days to Come) and even Crossman and Griggs (The Autumn Garden) hold their own and other's lives. But this is not to say that life is worthless. The awareness that there may be a meaning but that it will never be found is tragic. But it is out of this tragic that man learns the first lesson of being human. Had life been a story of unfulfilled hopes and desires, then perhaps the only answer to her characters would have been suicide, "the leap over the precipice". Very often with the possible exception of a few like Martha Dobie of The Children's Hour, her characters learn the necessity of adjusting with the absurdity of the world. Martha is a case of not being able to exist because of her misplaced notions of purity and character. That she was having homosexual leanings should not have been a matter of suicidal concern for her. Since she could not stand the sudden exposure of the fact to the world, we can say that she lacks existential courage.

In the world of Miss Hellman's plays, man recognizes that the world has no importance, that the truth of the world is that it has no truth and he comes to be aware of the knowledge of his failure. Yet it is her belief that man's
grandeur and possible happiness lie in his refusal to give up his fundamental freedom of choice and action. If man is to save himself, he must never cease to revolt against the limits of his condition. Miss Hellman's protagonists, in spite of their realization that man is alone and doomed to failure in all his attempts to find meaningful relationships and meaningful actions, never abdicate their sense of responsibility to human life; even though they know there are no solutions, all their life they seek to find answers and her plays are records of that quest. Alex, Emily and Cas are such a trio in The Searching Wind (p.321).

Though man does not know whether or not this world has a meaning which transcends it, he is aware that he does not know this meaning and that it is impossible for him to know it. Even the knowledge of this meaning is not significant to him because it is outside his condition. He can understand only in human terms. And then he wants to know whether he can live with what he knows and with that alone.

Miss Hellman shows that life has no meaning, but it is not equivalent to saying that life is not worth living. Actually she shows that the idea of meaning and worthwhileness are quite separate. Candide (Candide) does not attach any great meaning to his life but he still loves it. The fact that the universe does not reveal itself as permeated with objective meaning does not mean that we will find our lives of no value. Life may have no meaning in relation to the
universe, but it may have meaning for the one who lives it. That is always a matter of personal concern. It is this logic that Miss Hellman upholds in her dramas.

As has been said, she believes that life didn’t have to have a meaning in order to be worth living. But it will be all the better lived if it does not have a meaning. She believes that the only salvation for man is a kind of accepted damnation that life is good because it is painful and we are aware of its inherent pain. She presumes that to live an experience is to accept it fully. She shows that awareness of the absurdity of life causes us to know that life is without meaning; therefore to accept life fully man must live with constant awareness of the fact that life has no meaning. This awareness, this fortitude and this stoic element are very strong in Miss Hellman. Kurt (Watch on the Rhine), Crossman and Griggs (Autumn Garden), are the very incarnation of these virtues. According to her courage and resignation are the only virtues—the only means of asserting manhood. The despair caused by the meaninglessness of the universe is only to be overcome by having the courage to acknowledge it as the inescapable fact of our existence. Miss Hellman shows her characters "recreating themselves by self-analysis and urging themselves to live by what they know." 30

Miss Hellman continues to believe that this world has no higher meaning, but she knows that something in it has meaning and that in man "Existence precedes essence". 31
If God does not exist, there is at least a being with whom existence precedes essence and this being is man. It is this point that Joan (The Lark) keeps on asserting in her trial, for man is a being who insists on having a meaning. When Cauchon decries man as "naught but sin and error, impotent against his own wickedness," Joan asserts that "man is also strength and courage and splendor in his most desperate minutes" and also "he is a miracle." True miracles are created by men when they use their courage and intelligence. (The Lark, p. 583).

Thus with Miss Hellman, the humanistic existentialist, the question of man's destiny becomes most important for nothing is predetermined and everything is a result of his own deeds. What men collectively and what men individually will make of themselves is left completely open. She makes everybody responsible for everything. She believes that not only do our individual actions determine the outcome of worldly events but that we are personally and individually responsible for the condition of the world in which we are living.

Here she shifts from general to particular, from the abstract to the concrete. As a result she shifts from observation to involvement and holds that a person can discover some truth not by cultivating objectivity but by entering into the intensity of personal experience. The greater is absorption in action, the greater his realization of man's state which is to be and to know something beyond his action,
something beyond the here and the now. "Involvement rather than detachment may be the key to insight."

"Man", says Sartre, "is indeed a project. He possesses a subjective life. Before that projection of the self nothing exists. Man will attain existence when he is what he purposes to be, not, however, what he may wish to be." Thus Miss Hellman puts every man in possession of himself as he is and places the entire responsibility for his existence squarely upon his shoulders. She shows her characters to be active physically, mentally or spiritually and shows them to be projecting their personality in deeds even though their deeds are mere thoughts.

Miss Hellman's characters do persevere to fulfill their mission. They are determined to find in the universe something besides themselves to which they can belong. In constantly relating themselves to this unknown something they continually pursue the task of becoming. They live and die in their quests; their mission may be successful or not. "The search for the finding of that thing outside himself to which man belongs is the theme of all traditional tragedies" says Krutch. And this has been the theme of Miss Hellman's plays too—man's persistent desire to be what he is, this has been the mission of her characters. Joan (The Lark) and
Montserrat go to the extent of laying down their lives in the quest of their mission. Kurt (Watch on the Rhine) leaves his family and home and moves on the path of duty duly prompted by his conscience. Even that tender, young girl Alexandra, not at all conversant with the ways of the world, asserts herself and earns the right to be called a heroine when she throws the yoke of natural attachment towards her mother and does what she herself believes to be right. It is too late to prevent the evils which the wrongdoers had created. Therefore, as is so often the case in tragedy, she achieves only a triumphant understanding of the situation—a clarification, though she can no longer undo the harm already done and cannot save the situation. Her speech is not a sad confession of defeat but a tragic affirmation or rather, a courageous declaration of carrying on the crusade:

Alexandra... Addie said there were people who ate the earth and other people who stood around and watched them do it. And just now Uncle Ben said the same thing. Really, he said the same thing. (Tensely) Well, tell him for me, Mama, I'm not going to stand around and watch you do it. I'll be fighting as hard as he'll be fighting (rises) some place else.

(LF, p.199)

Thus Miss Hellman wants to counter the reality of life which is absurd, with the powerful weapon of one's own being, and asks us to meet our problems with honesty, reserve, integrity, simplicity and an abiding respect for the dignity of human life. She asks us to develop the capacity to observe and cherish life, not as an abstraction or as an ideal but as a doomed phenomenon of which man is the part.
But she adds that life is doomed because our irrational desires are at variance with our conscious aims. And even this doomed life does not reflect despair or a return to dark irrational forces, but expresses modern man's endeavour to come to terms with the world he lives in. She attempts to make him face the human condition as it really is, to free him from illusions that are bound to cause constant disappointments. For, the dignity of man, as Martin Esslin writes, lies in his ability to face reality in all its senselessness, to accept it freely without fear, without illusion and to laugh at it. 35

Miss Hellman further believes that every human act, even that of being one's self, has always been threatened with non-being, with nothingness, it has never been easy to be true to oneself. Few men have been capable of taking the first step—that of accepting the meaninglessness and of losing their life in order to find it—of gaining victory through accepting their defeat. Crossman and Griggs, the Rodmans and Julian recognize it and this courageous recognition on their part redeems them from damnation. Tragic characters are a set apart by virtue of a few qualities particular to their type. In all of them, to apply the fitting phrases of Rama Murthy, "there is a poetic striving to state the ineffable and each one of them creates a mystique of his own. Their language is full of fresh poetry and profound insight."36 Their persistence in the face of
the absurd is the noblest gesture on their part. It is not their pain and suffering but the dignity with which they endure—their noble reaction to these sufferings—that wins them this tragic stature. Miss Hellman's dramatic world is peopled with such characters.

The Rodmans, *(Days to Come)*, lost souls though they seem, are such a gratifying example of redemption. The couple journey from loneliness to complete isolation and back to a sense of loneliness modified by a feeling of belonging to each other because of the suffering each has undergone. Neither has a heroic figure; both are failures, but, in a sense, they radiate a kind of optimism at the end because they have broken through the wall of separation, and a medium of companionship is generated by their thoughtfulness for each other. Their loneliness is less acute than at the beginning, because they have attained an appreciation, through the suffering of being separated, of the values of companionship. Neither the husband nor the wife has the self-sustaining qualities which might make spiritual success out of material failure. Yet the good will of both is ethically sound and both tend to be cheerful rather than morose *(Days to Come*, p. 128). It is a matter of some great critical interest to probe into the probability of Miss Hellman influencing T.S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party*. The similarity between the themes is so prominent that it could not have been a sheer coincidence.
Such is Miss Hellman as an existentialist. In her existentialistic approach she sees the human situation as absurd and tragic but this does not rule out integrity or valour or the utmost effort. In its limitations to this one life her image of the human situation is thus: there are situations in which whatever choice we make there is a possibility of failure, but even in failure man can retain his integrity and defy the world. In this connection the sentiments expressed by Candide are apparently the author's own convictions:

Pangloss... Now you must say after me "Love between men and women is the highest order of love between men and women. Thus we promise to think noble and do noble..."

To this Candide reacts thus:

Candide(with force). No. We will not think noble because we are not noble. We will not live in beautiful harmony because there is no such thing in this world, nor should there be. We promise only to do our best and live out our lives. Dear God, that's all we can promise in truth.

(Candide, p.678)

What makes Miss Hellman more of a humanist in her existentialism is that she is absorbed by the practicability of how to make the most of the absurdity of her characters, how to account for their conduct to their advantage. She shows infinite compassion for them, though she is aware of the shades of darkness and misery of this irrational absurd world. She is neither very bitter nor very aggressively nihilist, though she serves as an introduction to the mood of romantic despair.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


19 Ibid., p.10.


22 Ibid.


29 Ibid., p. 156.

30 Ibid., p. 378.


