

Pentimento Study Guide

Pentimento by Lillian Hellman

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



Contents

[Pentimento Study Guide.....1](#)

[Contents.....2](#)

[Plot Summary.....3](#)

[Bethe.....5](#)

[Willy.....7](#)

[Julia.....10](#)

[Theater.....13](#)

[Arthur W. A. Cowan.....17](#)

[Turtle.....20](#)

[Pentimento.....22](#)

[Characters.....23](#)

[Objects/Places.....26](#)

[Themes.....28](#)

[Style.....32](#)

[Quotes.....34](#)

[Topics for Discussion.....36](#)



Plot Summary

"Pentimento" by Lillian Hellman is a collection of the author's recollections of people who impacted her life and who left lasting marks on her memory. Before delving into the past, Hellman explains what she was attempting to accomplish with her book and why she named it "Pentimento." The author describes what the process known as "Pentimento" is. An artist may decide that he does not like a painting he is working on and choose to paint over it. This "paint-over" is known as "pentimento."

Hellman takes the idea of this process to another level when she describes what sunlight and the environment can do to an oil painting. Over the years, the aging process can fade the top layer of a painting and cause it to lift and flake. When this happens, observers are allowed to see the original paintings beneath the top paintings in those cases when the pentimento process was used. Looking back on her long life, Hellman applied the term "pentimento" to describe what she intended to achieve with her book. She wanted to look back at her life and see it with some of the veneer removed and from the perspective of a mature woman who had gained wisdom and experience in her full life and career.

From some of her earliest memories and from anecdotal accounts she heard from relatives or gained from old forgotten letters, Lillian first tells the story of Bethe who was a distant cousin who emigrated from Germany. She was described as robust and handsome and was brought to America by her family for an arranged marriage to another distant cousin. After Bethe married Styrie, the couple moved from New York City to New Orleans. The marriage didn't last long and Styrie went missing. Bethe became involved with some Mafia types and when Styrie showed up again, these nefarious individuals beat him and amputated one of his hands. After her mobster lover's body was found in pieces in his backyard, Bethe disappeared again. The police never tied Bethe to the murder or mutilation but there were a lot of suspicions about her involvement.

As an impressionable teen, Lillian became infatuated with her Uncle Willy. He was handsome and charming and quite an adventurer. Lillian had a big crush on him and nearly got involved with him. Fortunately, her life went in a different way. When she encountered Willy again when she was older, he wanted her to go away with him to South America. She was tempted to go with the rogue adventurer but at the last minute turned the offer down. It was a good move on Lillian's part because his life eventually took a decided and tragic downturn. "Julia" is about a childhood friend who became a socialist and activist in Europe during the lead up to World War II. The section about "Julia" is the only one in which fictitious names are used for real people. When Lillian wrote the book, relatives of this person were still living and she wanted to protect their privacy. Julia was a strong person who Lillian always admired. Her life ended in tragedy but Lillian paid tribute to her courageous life.

Lillian wrote about her career and the hits and flops she had and what she learned from both. She described her encounters with colorful and famous people that her career led



her to that included a wide range of people from President Roosevelt to actress Tallulah Bankhead and studio head Samuel Goldwyn. After she was established as a successful and famous writer, Lillian became friends with a strange millionaire named Arthur Cowan. Even though the man had all the accoutrements of wealth and was a jet-setter before jet-setting was in vogue, Lillian found him to be a sympathetic and somewhat pathetic figure that at times she found almost unbearable. She wrote about a snapping turtle she encountered towards the latter part of her life and career that literally defied death. She compared his tenacity to that of her long-time companion and fellow writer, Dashiell Hammett.



Bethe

Bethe Summary and Analysis

In the preface, the author describes what pentimento is. When an oil painting ages, the top layer can become transparent revealing another painting beneath. This "painting over" process is called pentimento which is done when an artist changes his mind. Lillian Hellman wrote this book in hopes of looking back to see what once was there.

In *Bethe*, Bethe lived in a modest home on Prytania Street. She slept in the dining room on a cot. She was the first one up to make coffee and German breakfast rolls that no one liked. To save carfare, she walked to her job on Canal Street where she carried shoe boxes back and forth all day for a German merchant who ran a store that catered to sailors. Several months after she arrived, she visited with various members of the Bowman clan. Finally, she was introduced to Styrie Bowman, the man who was to be her husband.

According to some accounts, Styrie had a way with women even though he was only 5'6" and half his face was covered with an ugly brown birthmark. But like many ugly men, the women apparently were drawn to him. Bethe was a third cousin and the Bowmans arranged the marriage so that Styrie could be cleaned up and kept away from gambling. A job was found for Styrie in the Bowman warehouse in Monroe, Louisiana. Six months after the marriage, Styrie disappeared and Bethe wound up in New Orleans where she became a nanny for some of the Bowman children. Lillian Hellman was a distant relative of the Bowmans so she heard some of this story first-hand. In fact, when she sixteen she was given a treasure trove of letters by her aunts in New Orleans.

In trying to piece together the Bethe/Styrie story, Lillian recalled hearing that Aunt Jenny in New Orleans called Lillian's father in New York to report that Bethe had disappeared from her nanny job. Her father laughed it off saying perhaps she was employed by a whorehouse. Styrie reappeared looking for Bethe. Two days later he was found beaten up. The Mafia was mentioned but the word didn't mean anything to Lillian at the time. While in the hospital he was attacked again and was found on the fire escape with one hand amputated. Bethe was forced to visit him after which he went missing again, gone from the hospital. A dozen years later, there was mention of Styrie again in a letter from Mrs. Finch to Ernest Bowman, family patriarch, that he had died.

On a visit to New Orleans a few years later, Lillian saw Bethe with two men on the street - one old and one a teenager. She called to her but Bethe didn't hear her and went on. The next day, Lillian - who spent half a school year in New York and the other half in New Orleans - skipped school to track Bethe down. She was able to find her in an Italian corner market that she apparently was associated with. At first Bethe was suspicious that the Bowmans had sent her but she convinced them that she just wanted to say hello. They went for a long walk. Over the next several years they met infrequently before Bethe disappeared again. After seeing her in a Catholic Church with



a dark-skinned man, Lillian went to lunch with Bethe. It was an Italian restaurant and the strange dark-skinned man was sitting at a table alone. When Bethe excused herself to talk to the man, Lillian ran out. Bethe called her house in New York asking for her several times.

Lillian's family spent their last summer in New Orleans. It was decided that she would no longer split up her school year between the two cities. Her marks were beginning to show that it wasn't working. During that visit, Lillian's father got into a heated discussion with Julia, Lillian's mother, Aunt Hannah and Aunt Jenny. Max made references to killers and for the women to stay away from "her." Lillian was just a teenager but caught on that they were talking about Bethe and her common-law husband. Julia took offense—there weren't killers in her family. Max corrected his statement by saying that they didn't kill whites only blacks who couldn't make their interest payments on the cotton crop.

That night Lillian sneaked downstairs and read the article in the newspaper that everyone was so upset about. Some people with Italian names were running bootleg liquor and were involved in gang warfare. She recognized the name, "Arneggio" as the name on the Italian market where she found Bethe. A cop saw her leave a note on the door and demanded to know who she was. But Lillian was wily and got away from him, running off to church.

The police figured out who she was and had come by her aunts' house looking for her. Lillian and her aunts immediately took a cab to police headquarters where the police interrogated Lillian about Al Arneggio. She only saw him once at a distance, she told them. They wanted to know why she went to the store. She had read the newspaper article and was just curious. She didn't know where Arneggio and Bethe lived. As it turned out, pieces of Arneggio's body were found in the backyard of the store. The cops told Lillian's aunts to keep the kid away from there. The press speculated about Bethe being involved in Arneggio's murder. As for Lillian, Bethe faded from her memory and barely had a thought about her for years.

After Lillian's divorce and her affair with Dashiell Hammet began, Lillian visited her aunts. She taunted them for not helping Bethe just because they didn't approve of her lifestyle in the same way they disapproved of Lillian's divorce and co-habitation with Hammet. They surprised her by explaining that they had paid a thousand dollars to get Bethe out of her police problems. Bethe later paid the money back. Lillian told them they were wonderful women to have helped Bethe. The next morning, Jenny and Hannah took her on a trolley ride to a poor part of the city where Bethe lived. Lillian visited Bethe again one night by herself. She brought up Arneggio but Bethe wouldn't talk about him. She lived with a man who was a plumber. Lillian never saw Bethe again. A few years later she heard that Bethe died of pneumonia. Without realizing it, Beth had made her own relationship with Hammet more acceptable to her family.



Willy

Willy Summary and Analysis

Willy was married to Lillian's eccentric great-aunt Lily who Lillian was named after. Lily was much younger than her siblings and only about ten years older than Lillian's mother. Lillian was about ten years old when Aunt Lily and Uncle Willy lived in a big house on St. Charles Street in New Orleans. Uncle Willy was a well-known citizen in New Orleans and famous throughout the state. He held an important position in a large corporation where he had an up and down career. He borrowed money and gambled it away. He'd borrowed from Lily's inheritance and lost it, paid it back, borrowed again but eventually was not allowed to borrow any more.

Willy's behavior led to a long silence between him and Lily. Their son, only known by the nickname, Honey, who was a few years younger than Lillian, sat in between them at dinner to interpret. Lillian was drawn to Aunt Lily and thought her to be the most interesting person in the family. She would stop by after school or come for lunch on the weekends. Aunt Lily was affectionate toward Lillian, perhaps she was thinking of the daughter she lost.

Lillian was looking out the window and saw Aunt Lily and her light-skinned chauffeur Peters share a moment of intimacy. She ran from the room not wanting to be confronted with them as they entered the house. Honey was running right up the stairs behind her trying to get his penis out of his pants and yelling that, "He does it to her." (61) He tried to assault Lillian but she knocked him back. Caroline Ducky, one of the household maids, knew what was going on and warned Honey about his behavior. A few years after this incident, he raped a girl and assaulted another. He wound up in a loony bin after he attacked another woman. Caroline told Lillian that neither parent had wanted him.

Caroline told Lillian that Willy wasn't a man of God. He had been a poor boy in Mobile, Alabama. He worked the docks then rose to the rank of freight boss for a giant corporation in South America. He married Lily when she was twenty-four and he was thirty. The family suspected he was marrying her for her money. But Willy did well on his own. He became a vice-president of the company. He had a fast car, one of the first, and a yacht. He had the large house in New Orleans and an apartment at the Waldorf in New York. But he was generous and even helped Max in some bad years.

There were always a lot of guests at the St. Charles house - robust looking men who talked of high tales of adventure. There was a mercenary who worked for Willy who was named Christmas. Several of Willy's men had been murdered. To avenge the murders, Mr. Christmas strung up twenty-two men in a Guatemalan village, cut out their tongues and burned their village. Although the tales would frighten Lillian, she was also fascinated by them.



Julia and Lillian were staying with Jenny and Hannah. One evening Aunt Lily called and insisted that Julia come right over. Lillian went along with her. Aunt Lily was upset about Uncle Willy and the whole town knew about it. Lillian was sent out of the room and went to see Caroline who told her that there was a rumor about Willy and a Cajun girl. There was a commotion downstairs and Caroline listened closely. She said it was time for Aunt Lily's morphine shot. Just then the door flew open and Willy was standing there wanting to know what was going on. Caroline said that Aunt Lily was going to take the securities out of the bank the next day. Willy said he'd have to hurry and borrow three-thousand dollars before Aunt Lily wiped out the account.

Several weeks later, Lillian came by the house and ran into Uncle Willy who was loading his car to go fishing. He invited Lillian along and they bumped along an old country road for quite a distance. They stopped at a small store where he called Julia to tell her that Lillian was with him. He bought her a toothbrush, comb and boots at the store. Lillian felt she had fallen in love with Willy. They exited the car and walked through the woods, the whole time Lillian was afraid of stepping on a snake. They both sunk into the soft swampy mud. Willy pulled himself out by holding onto a tree trunk. Once he was free, he pulled Lillian out.

They wound up in a hunting cabin which was teeming with people. Willy was in his glory, greeting and talking with all the visitors who came in and out. The house was filthy and had moss growing on the floor. Despite the conditions, the Cajun dinner was one of the best Lillian ever had. At one point Willy left with a man who came by. Lillian got drunk on wine and later lying in one of the bedrooms, she could hear Willy arguing with the man. He was warning Willy that he had to do something. Willy sounded reluctant stating that if it went wrong again, he would get all the blame. The next day, Lillian went duck hunting with Willy. She liked crouching down in the duck blind close to Willy more than she liked shooting at the ducks.

Willy bought a bunch of items at a nearby store. He didn't pay for anything but told the shop owner that his office would send the money. He owed the man for the month before, too. Later, Lillian heard Willy on the phone telling Hatchey to call it off. Willy was bad-tempered and drank a lot. He strode off from the cabin and Lillian didn't see him until much later. Lillian and Willy were sitting on the porch that night. Willy was drinking quite heavily. He whistled a few times and a Cajun girl emerged from the bushes. She steadied the intoxicated Willy and they walked up the road to another small house. Lillian felt humiliated and jealous. When the sun came up, she left the cabin and headed for the road. She hitchhiked back home. She didn't see Willy again for five years. He never mentioned anything about those days at the cabin and what had happened to her.

Lillian learned from her parents that Willy was involved in a scandal when a shipload of guns that he was sending to Mr. Christmas was stopped by the authorities who confiscated the weapons. Willy got fired from the company. Max felt sorry for him. He was dead broke. Some years later, Lillian visited Caroline who told her that Willy started a fruit import company but was struggling. He only came around the house maybe once a month. Peters was still Julia's lover and he was the one that got her morphine which she was addicted to.



Years later after Lillian's play "Toys in the Attic" was published and produced, Lillian heard from Honey. He asked if the character, Mrs. Prine, was based on his mother. Hammet told her not to respond. It was best not to have anything to do with Honey. Aunt Lily and Honey visited Lillian a few times in New York. Honey was still nutty and Aunt Lily told him to "shut his face" more than once. Aunt Lily revealed that Willy had syphilis. After Aunt Lily took a rest in one of the bedrooms, her car called for them. Hammet told Aunt Lily that it was time to go. She got upset and grabbed her bag that he had picked up to carry for her. After they left, Lillian explained that her morphine was probably in the bag and she needed a fix. Lillian and Hammet debated about whether Willy was the "fine man" that Lillian thought he was. He may have been behind some of the murders, she said, but he didn't personally murder anyone.

A year later, Lillian and Hammet were in Hollywood to write screenplays. She took a break and went to visit her aunts in New Orleans. She bought them winter coats and fine gourmet delicacies that they'd never buy themselves. When she and the taxi cab driver were loading up the groceries, she spotted Willy a short distance away staring at her. He was impressed with her writing career and insisted on taking her to lunch. He said he owned the Guacosta Fruit Import Company and was rich again. He took her to his office where there was a large dining room and a chef for every kind of food imaginable. Lillian drank a lot of wine and didn't return to her aunts' house until that evening. The next morning Willy was knocking on the bathroom door while Lillian was taking a shower, telling her they were going to the country.

Willy took her to his beautiful country home. She told him there was nothing like southern land. He told her he wanted to leave the place to her. On the way back, she took over driving because he was so drunk. He slept for a while and when he woke he told her to pull over to the side of the road. He told her that he was faking it. He was broke and was going to head to Central America. Willy wanted Lillian to go with him. He wanted to finish what they almost started. The next morning, Willy had sent flowers with a message to pick up two pair of boots that he had ordered for her. She told her aunts that she was going to Central America for a few months.

The aunts were upset with Lillian and wouldn't let her continue to stay with them. Lillian called Hammet and told him where she was going. Hammet told her he didn't like women who slept with murderers and not to call him. She changed her mind about going and went back to Los Angeles that night. She never saw Willy again. She heard from her aunts that Willy had gone bankrupt and almost wound up in jail. During the last years of his life, he lived in a one-room cockroach-infested apartment on Bourbon Street. He was drunk and driving his car with a car-full of people when he had an accident that killed everyone in the car.



Julia

Julia Summary and Analysis

Lillian changed the names of the characters in this section. The "Julia" in this story is not Lillian's mother. In 1937, after Lillian had written "The Children's Hour" and "Days to Come," she was invited to attend a theater festival in Moscow. Lillian traveled with Dorothy Parker and her husband, Alan Campbell, to Europe. Once Lillian got to Paris she still hadn't completely decided whether she would go on to Moscow. She enjoyed getting together in Paris with the likes of Sara and Gerald Murphy, Ernest Hemingway and Ring Lardner's son, James. There were many other celebrities and lots of parties and tennis games.

When Lillian decided to head to Moscow, she called a childhood friend, Julia, who was studying medicine in Vienna. She would stop and visit with her before going on to Russia. Julia called later and asked Lillian to stay in Paris a few more days. A friend of hers would come by to see her before she left for Russia via Berlin. Julia would meet her on the way back. A few mornings later, a man was waiting for her in the lobby of her hotel. He had come with her tickets and to talk with her.

What they wanted Lillian to do was carry \$50,000 across the border to use as bribes to get people out of prison. Julia and the man were both members of an anti-Hitler group. The mission could be dangerous. Julia was from a wealthy family and had quit her American college and gone to Oxford and then on to medical school in Vienna. She had become a Socialist and lived in a small, rundown apartment. Lillian told the man she needed a few hours to think it over. He would be at the train station. If the answer was "yes" she was to say hello to him there. If it was "no," she was to pass him by without speaking. Lillian decided to help her friend Julia and take the money across the border. On the train later, a young man brought Lillian a hat box and a candy box. A note was attached that instructed her to wear the hat and when they reached the border to leave the candy box on the seat.

Lillian recalled spending a lot of time in her grandparent's Fifth Avenue house. When they were both twelve, they celebrated New Year's Eve there. That night, they lay in twin beds in Julia's room where Julia recited poetry for hours. Her knowledge of poetry was endless and her memorization perfect. It was twenty years between that night and the day Lillian found herself on the train moving toward Berlin. Some years later Julia died. Lillian recalled seeing her battered face that had been pushed back together for the funeral.

The two remained friends while they were young. They went to her grandparents' Adirondacks lodge one Easter and went camping and fishing together several times. They would talk about many things, actually Julia did most of the talking because she knew so much about everything - Freud, Karl Marx, Engels. They didn't see each other as much when Julia started traveling a lot. She became involved with helping the sick



and poor of the world. Lillian visited once when Julia was at Oxford. Later, she wrote that she was going to Vienna with the hope that Freud would take her on as a student.

Freud did take Julia on as a student. She invited Lillian to visit her but she had moved in with Hammet and didn't want to leave him just yet. Maybe the next year she would visit. They corresponded a great deal between 1933 and 1934. Julia's letters were filled with talk of Hitler, Jews and Mussolini. In 1934, Lillian and Hammet rented a house on Long Island and had lots of money to throw around from Hammet's earnings for his screenplay for the movie, "The Thin Man." They were drinking a lot and Lillian was stalled in writing her play, "The Children's Hour." She needed to get away and Hammet gave Lillian enough money to cover a trip to Europe. She stayed in an out-of-the-way hotel where she could just write and not have to socialize.

Lillian called Julia wanting to visit her in Vienna. It wasn't good timing. Julia would send a message as to where and when they could meet. Weeks went by and Lillian heard nothing. Lillian was disturbed to read that 200 Socialist workers were killed in a bomb blast in a Vienna hotel. Julia had been at the hotel and the next day Lillian got a call from a man named John von Zimmer telling her that Julia was in the hospital.

Lillian went to see Julia in the hospital. The right side of Julia's face was bandaged. Her condition was too bad for Lillian to stay. When she tried seeing her over the next few days, she was denied admittance. Finally, she was allowed to see her on the third day. Julia still couldn't talk. She got a note the next night from Julia that they were going to move her and that she should return to Paris at once. She lost track of Julia over the next month and couldn't find out where she had been taken. Lillian returned to New York and finished "The Children's Hour." About a year later, she got a letter from Julia about the deteriorating conditions in Europe. She had had a baby girl who she named Lilly. She heard from another friend, Anne-Marie, that Julia was doing very dangerous anti-Fascist work and throwing her money away. Anne-Marie wanted Julia to meet her new husband. His name was John von Zimmer. She only ran into Anne-Marie and von Zimmer one time years later. She did not bring up the incident with Julia to him.

But back in 1937 when Lillian was on the train, she sat staring at the hatbox. As it turned out a thin girl riding in the same compartment was in on the mission and reminded Lillian to wear her hat. In Berlin, Lillian left the train with the thin girl right behind her. A woman who she didn't know greeted her. The thin girl took the candy box and gave it to the woman. She told Lillian to go to Albert's Restaurant across from the station. As she entered the restaurant she was shocked to see Julia sitting there.

Lillian teared up seeing that Julia's leg had been amputated as a result of the bombing incident. Julia told her not to cry. She was fine and was going to New York to be fitted with a good prosthetic leg. She told her to take her hat off and set it on the chair between them. Julia stuck the hat in her coat and went to the ladies room and made a switch. When she returned, Julia said she'd bring the baby when she came to New York so Lillian could see her. Julia told Lillian that she had to leave. A car was waiting for her and a man would make sure she got on the train and someone would stay with her until

she got to Warsaw. Lillian hated to leave her friend but she had no choice. Lillian made it safely to Moscow.

In May 1938, Lillian received a cable that Julia had been killed by Nazis. Her body was in a funeral home in London and Hammet encouraged Lillian to go. Since there as no disposition from the family, Lillian had the body cremated. She wrote to the grandparents to tell them about the baby. They didn't believe Julia had a baby and weren't interested in pursuing it. Lillian hired a lawyer to try to find the baby. But the war broke out and she was never able to find her.



Theater

Theater Summary and Analysis

To produce a play, many people come together and bring their talents to the project. After the production they go their separate ways and may never see each other again although they intend to. At the core of any production is the manuscript. Lillian liked to teach English literature but never liked teaching drama which was the study of stage plays. There was an instinct about writing a play that many good writers did not have. This instinct was something that a person had or didn't have. Lillian never wrote much about writing plays because she had issues and struggles in writing a play but were felt they were unique to her and probably weren't relevant to anyone else.

"The Children's Hour" was Lillian's first play. Lillian was so nervous before opening night that she started drinking two days before. Her parents were proud of her but didn't vocalize it because the family didn't boast about their own. All her mother could say when they ate dinner a few nights before the play was that people would say that Lillian was the sweetest smelling baby in all of New Orleans. Oddly, Max became enraged. Everyone said that he was the sweetest smelling baby in all of New Orleans. They actually got into an argument over it and Max was ready to call his sisters in New Orleans to prove he was right. It was all a nervous distraction from Lillian's opening night.

Lillian was standing at the back of the theater on opening night. When the curtain came down and there were shouts of "Author! Author!" it wasn't only modesty that kept Lillian from coming forward. She was too tipsy to make it down the aisle without falling. She celebrated that night but much of it was a blur. There were people she didn't even know in her hotel room drinking and celebrating. She called Hammet to tell him the play was a hit. A woman answered who claimed to be his secretary. The next morning when her head cleared that since it was 3 am Los Angeles time when she called and that Hammet didn't have a secretary, that Hammet was cheating on her. She flew out to Los Angeles that afternoon, smashed a soda fountain that was built into the house, left and took a late flight back to New York.

Having her second play, "Days to Come" be a failure was worse than having a flop on the first try. She second-guessed herself as to whether she was a one-hit wonder. Had she become over-confident from all the praise - some of which was from people who knew nothing about stage plays. The failure of the play is one of the most public displays of failure there is. Lillian wrote "Days to Come" in Princeton, New Jersey, where Hammet had rented a house. The house was always jammed with students and probably served as a distraction to Lillian's writing.

Lillian was once again standing at the rear of the theatre. Even early in the play, it was obvious that it was a flop. Lillian threw up and had to rush to her hotel room to change. She wanted to crawl in bed and hide. She returned just in time to see William Randolph



Hearst escort the six people he was with out of the theatre half-way through the second act. The guilt and shame of that failure stayed with Lillian for her whole career. She didn't write her next play, "The Little Foxes" until two years later. She was so scared that she re-wrote it nine times. But "Days to Come" was one of her plays and didn't disown it and included it in her book of plays.

After her success with "The Children's Hour," Samuel Goldwyn offered her the opportunity to write screenplays. She was hired to rewrite a film starring Norma Shearer. Lillian and her co-writer, Mordaunt Shairp would arrive at Director Sidney Franklin's house early in the morning. They met for weeks to discuss the movie before they wrote a word. The process was called breaking the back of a story. After seven weeks of this, Lillian couldn't take any more. She left for New York. Goldwyn called her and told her if she came back, she could be in a room by herself and begin writing the screenplay. Her independence evidently impressed Goldwyn and he gave her a long-term contract.

Ten of the twelve plays that Lillian wrote were connected to Hammet. He was in the Army in the Aleutian Islands during World War II when she wrote one of them and he was dead when she wrote the last one. But when she wrote "The Little Foxes" she realized that he was protective of her because of her failure with "Days to Come." They had been through some rough personal times. His dalliances with other women early in their relationship lingered in her mind. She had been involved with another man and even had plans to marry him. But Hammet told her he would have never let that happen.

"The Little Foxes" was the most difficult play Lillian wrote. The first drafts were terrible. She kept creating characters - putting them in and then taking them out. She threw out scenes and acts and three whole versions of the play. Part of the problem was much of it was based on family incidents and the details and time line of the events were a jumble in her mind. She realized that some of the real incidents worked and some did not so she made constant adjustments and edits.

Casting was difficult because so many actresses feared taking on a role that was unsympathetic. Ina Claire and Judith Anderson both turned it down. Tallulah Bankhead's name was mentioned. Lillian had never seen her on Broadway or in London. The idea was presented to Tallulah and she was wildly enthusiastic about the part. Tallulah had been the rage in the twenties but by then she had become shrill and tiring. Tallulah was fine during the first months of the play but then her performance devolved into on-stage high-jinks designed to thrill the male fans who came to see her.

One evening during rehearsals, Lillian was having dinner with Tallulah and Director Herman Shumlin. Tallulah got two small bottles out of her purse and set them on the table. Just as they were ready to leave, she took one of the small bottles, leaned back and put a few drops in one eye. She started screaming. She had grabbed the wrong bottle. Shumlin immediately went to call a doctor. Tallulah appealed to Lillian to stop him from calling the doctor. She had accidentally dropped cocaine in her eye and she didn't want it exposed that she was a user. If he insisted on calling a doctor, she wouldn't go back to the theatre. Lillian told Shumlin who was enraged. He told her to put down her



whiskey and come outside. He scolded her about her drinking and the cocaine. She warned him to never talk like that again to her.

Cocaine was not mentioned again until opening night. At an after party, Tallulah did her monologue which she thought was conversation. She taunted a waiter and got into a discussion with Hammet about the addictive nature of cocaine. She claimed it wasn't. The play was a success. It got generally good reviews although Lillian was learning to not put her complete trust in critics some of whom were biased or incompetent. She was aware of the play's shortcomings. Lillian went on a drinking jag for two months after the play opened trying to figure out what she had wanted to say and why it got lost. She had based much of the play on her mother's side of the family, a family with roots in the south.

During the Spanish Civil War, Shulman and Lillian asked the cast to put on a charity show for Spanish refugees. Tallulah and the other actors refused - which was within their rights to do. Nothing more was mentioned about doing benefits until Russia invaded Finland. The day after Tallulah met with Finland's handsome Ambassador, she announced that they would be putting on a charity show for the Finnish refugees. Lillian and Shulman immediately said that they would not. Lillian and Shulman were accused of being pro-Hitler and anti-Finnish refugee. The three got into a nasty shouting match. Lillian and Tallulah didn't speak for thirty years.

Many Europeans had immigrated from Europe in the lead up to World War II - some to save their wealth and some to just save themselves. Lillian was inspired to write a play about liberal Americans whose lives were changed by Europeans and by a world that the Fascists had conquered. She set the story in a small Ohio town. After much angst, she decided to change the venue to Washington, D. C. where rich liberals welcomed their new son-in-law who was German but an anti-Fascist who had fought in Spain. The story was somewhat based on Julia's life. Lillian's, "Watch on the Rhine," was a pleasant experience and had come along at just the right time. The Baltimore opening of "Watch on the Rhine" went fine and it gave Lillian a chance to see one of the heroes of her life, medical historian Dr. Henry Sigerist who came to the opening. He later invited her to Europe when McCarthy's Sub-Committee on Un-American Activities was gaining strength.

"Watch on the Rhine" was the only play Lillian wrote in one piece. All the others were fragmented pieces that were later joined together. Everything about the play went smoothly - the rehearsals, actors, crew. The play was a success and many of Lillian's memories about the play were connected with those who came to see the play including President Roosevelt. The play was chosen for a command performance to be given before the President for the benefit of the Infantile Paralysis Fund. After the play, she talked with President Roosevelt who was surprised to hear that she had written the play a year before the war started. Attorney Morris Ernst had told him that Lillian was against the war and had paid Communists to picket in front of the White House. He laughed it all off but the "picketing" accusation stuck with her.



The main thing that Lillian remembered about "The Searching Win" was how the young actor Montgomery Clift practiced reciting Shakespeare or Ibsen every night before the play started. Lillian wrote "Another Part of the Forest" as a sort of prequel to "The Little Foxes." However, her intended humor was taken as serious and melodramatic. It was the first play she directed and she enjoyed that aspect of the play. She also directed "Montserrat" but was intimidated by English actor, Emyln Williams, who was was playing the lead. A successful play maintains a delicate balance between actor, director and writer.

"The Autumn Garden" was written during a happy of her life. She was at a good age, lived on a farm with Hammet and had lots of money from their writing successes. They had been together twenty years and had a committed and sober relationship. Hammet loved the play. By 1955, money was running low so Lillian decided to adapt Jean Anouilh's "The Lark" for the stage. At first the British investors thought she was wrong for the task. They needed a poet, they told her. What they needed, she responded, was George Bernard Shaw but he was dead. Eventually, they came to terms and she wrote the play. She didn't like the fake doves they sent out over the audience at the end of the play but Julie Harris play Joan of Arc made it a success.

Lillian decided to retire from writing plays with "Candide," except she did two more plays after that. Lillian deferred to the musical theatre people and made changes she didn't believe in. She knew they were in trouble at the first reading of the play despite the talent, like Leonard Bernstein, that was involved. Lillian was so depressed after Candide that she stopped writing until she was encouraged by several close friends to resume her work. Two years after Candide, she began work on "Toys in the Attic." The last trip Hammet made to Boston was for the opening of "Toys." While in Boston, they hit some of the tourist spots during the day and had late dinners in their room after the play. Hammet was sick and left Boston early. Back at home, Lillian would set the alarm for every two hours so she could set up with him.

In 1962, Lillian adapted the novel, "How Much," for the stage renaming it "My Father and Me." The play was not a success and like Candide, Lillian made changes she didn't believe in. The bottom line, when a stage play fails, it is always the writer's fault.



Arthur W. A. Cowan

Arthur W. A. Cowan Summary and Analysis

Lillian was attending a poetry reading with Ted Roetchke when he had the idea of writing a play together. Babette Deutsch was the first reader, followed by John Lowell. After John finished his part of the reading, Ted took off for the backstage but Lillian didn't want to follow him and walked home. By the time she arrived, Ted was standing in front of her house with Babette and John and three other people. She vaguely remembered a man asking her where she kept her books. She didn't know who the man was that night but would come to know his face as well as her own.

After sending Lillian several baskets of flowers, she found out that the man who asked about her books was Arthur W. A. Cowan and that he was a big contributor to "Poetry" magazine. She couldn't remember how it all came about but they began having dinners together and soon were best friends. Arthur traveled a lot so there were gaps of time when she didn't see him. When she did see him, he talked in such a disjointed way that it was difficult to understand much about him. He had gone to Harvard Law School and was quite wealthy owning, among other things, three homes. He had come far in life. His family was poor when he was a child and he was in and out of the orphanage.

After returning from a trip to London, Arthur somehow sneaked into a small elevator in Lillian's house, scaring her maid and the tenants upstairs. Finally, Lillian realized it was Arthur. They went to dinner where she told him she was too old for him and his high-jinks. She was forty-eight and he was forty-two. There were other differences. Politically, he was a staunch conservative while she was a liberal who had been accused by the US House of being a Communist. Although she told him about the Communist witch hunt before, he acted like he didn't remember. She told him the tale of being falsely accused of being anti-American. He defended McCarthy's actions and made some remarks that she took offense to, even joking about the ordeal in which she had been hunted and Hammet had been jailed.

After that evening she didn't want anything to do with him. He was planning a party in her honor but she decided to cancel. She called all over and finally got him in London. She blurted out that she wanted to cancel the party. He acted like he couldn't hear her one night and another night a voice - that was his - said he wasn't there.

Later Lillian would learn that Arthur had a big heart. He even paid the legal fees of a real Communist who needed defending. Molly Howe wrote a letter in which she tried to explain Arthur. As Lillian already knew, he traveled all over and always had a new car. Molly had a close almost fraternal relationship with him. His father had committed suicide and Arthur earned money for college by boxing. He was married briefly but it broke up. He had a girl in every port. He was terrible as a house guest. He insisted on steak three times a day and went around the house half-naked. He had mysterious ailments that he would never explain. He talked of having a number of operations. He



was a great friend to Molly's husband, Mark. When Mark was very ill, Arthur took over teaching his law classes. He was a poet and wrote a book of poems. There was something James Bond about his character.

Lillian went to the party. The night didn't start off well. He showed her into his library where she opened the dark drapes. He scolded her -he never opened the drapes because the sunlight would fade the bindings on his books. She was quiet at dinner and told him she was worried about a friend who was fighting in the Spanish Civil War. He said the guy must be a Commie but then wrote out a check for a thousand dollars for him.

The day after the party when they were driving back to New York, Arthur told Lillian that his friends all told him she was too old for him. Too old for what, she asked. Too old for him to marry. She told him she had never even thought of marrying him which he didn't believe. She got out of the car and walked home. She called him the next day but he took over the conversation convincing himself that he didn't want her. She gave up. They remained friends but his life was still a jumble. She did discern that he didn't practice law any longer but he was constantly suing someone. He made lots of money from wise investments. He was outraged that Lillian had gone through most of her money. He had no sympathy for her days on the blacklist when she couldn't work. He decided to get her finances in order for her. He would leave her an inheritance in his will, he promised her.

They went to London where a production of *Candide* was showing. He told her he would only allow her to have half of her earnings; he would invest the rest. In a restaurant, Arthur was saying some unkind words about the British. A tall Englishman, Sir Francis, came over and asked Arthur to hold down the insults. After a few sharp exchanges, Lillian went to the ladies room. When she returned, the two men were buddies. Some months later, he told Lillian that he might marry Lady Sarah, Sir Francis' niece. He was going to get a vasectomy and get his teeth fixed.

He wanted Lillian to be jealous in the worse way but she wasn't. Hammet was with her now. He was very sick and she was caring for him. Arthur told her he would take care of her financially even if he married someone else. After he left, she ran down the street after him. She told him to quit trying to buy her and to never mention money or his will again. In anger she told him to get his vasectomy, fix his teeth and get another operation on his face. That hurt him terribly. His face was irregular and he had several botched attempts to fix it. The two friends were on a kind of moratorium after that for a while.

In the spring, Lillian and Hammet and her long-time maid, Helen, moved to Martha's Vineyard. Lillian got a note from Arthur that he would be visiting her on her birthday in June. He came a few days earlier than she thought. His Rolls Royce was sitting in front of their house when she returned from the market. She hadn't told Hammet that Arthur was coming and Hammet didn't like surprise visitors. She went inside and found Hammet sitting in the living room and the police chief on the terrace. Arthur had rushed in with a toy gun and told Hammet to give him all their jewelry. Hammet knew it was a



toy gun but apparently he pulled the gun on a shop owner who didn't know. Arthur was down on the beach doing sit-ups while the chief looked at the gun and talked with Hammet who joined him on the terrace.

Arthur wasn't charged with any criminal charges. He stayed for three days and on the last day he gave Lillian a check for \$10,000 because he claimed she gave him good advice on one of his lawsuits. Arthur took a job with the government that he couldn't talk about. It wasn't with the CIA, he told her. A year later they met in Paris where a production of "The Little Foxes" was set to open. Simone Signoret was a marvelous actress on screen but lost on stage. At a dinner party with a Harvard faculty member friend of Arthur's, he imploded. Someone brought up Goethe and Arthur became enraged and called him a German ass. Then someone mentioned Bach and Beethoven and his anger deepened. He started talking of Karl Marx and told everyone that Lillian was a German and by the time he was done, he practically accused her of being a Nazi. He left the table. He was not going to sit by anyone with even a drop of German blood in them.

Lillian knew that Arthur had passed a boundary that night - never to return. Perhaps past issues like the orphanage and his poor beginnings had caught up with him. His life was like a tangled fishing reel line. Lillian knew it was time for her to cut her line from his. They saw each other less and he stopped by once or twice but it was different. He increased her inheritance he told her. He was still trying to buy her. She realized that the surgeries and dental work and fancy cars and houses were all things to disguise the hurt he felt that he inflicted others. The last time Lillian saw Arthur was when he stopped by Martha's Vineyard before he was to fly off to Paris. In November of 1964 Lillian was in Mexico and got a call in her hotel room. Arthur had been killed when his Rolls-Royce was involved in an accident in Spain. No will was ever found. Lady Sarah had letters that he wrote to her about his intention to leave her his money. She apparently collected a large sum from his estate. After his death, Lillian found out that Arthur wasn't six years younger than Lillian, he was two years older. He was with a nineteen-year-old German girl when he died in the accident. The girl was unharmed.



Turtle

Turtle Summary and Analysis

One early morning, Lillian took a small boat out off the pier to fish for flounders. At one point she got in the water and suddenly a strong tide came and began to take her out to sea. She didn't panic and was eventually able to return to the pier. It made her recall the conversation she had with Hammet four days after the turtle died. She told Hammet he was a survivor like the turtle but wasn't sure about herself. Holding onto the piling, she realized she was recalling a conversation with a man who had been dead five years about a turtle that had been dead for twenty-six years.

In 1940, Lillian bought a house in Westchester County with royalties from "The Little Foxes" even though she wouldn't have enough to buy food for the rest of the week. She immediately closed two guest houses on the estate and when Hammet got some money for a couple short stories, they painted the house. With the money she got for "The Little Foxes" screenplay, she bought cattle and three-thousand asparagus plants along with other crops and animals. One day Lillian was walking with her dog in the woods and he suddenly stopped on the road and refused to follow her. He was barking at something that she thought was a snake. She came back to him and saw that it was a large turtle with a shell about three-foot round. The turtle clamped down on the dog's leg. The dog had to be taken to the vet.

Hammet was in California and when he returned wasn't happy that his favorite dog had been bitten by a snapper. Lillian kept looking for the large turtle everyday but couldn't find him. One day Hammet decided to try to trap him and caught a different turtle, even larger than the one that bit the dog. Hammet and Lillian pulled the large animal out of the water and he grabbed it by its tail and threw it on its back. He had Lillian get the car. They drug the turtle back to the house where Hammet tried to chop its head off but the turtle kept pulling his head inside his shell. He told Lillian to go inside, he was going to shoot the thing. Hammet shot the turtle in the head when he stuck his head out to go for a piece of meat Hammet laid in front of it. He then came down with his ax on the turtle's neck.

They carried it inside and decided to make turtle soup. They left it on top of an old stove. Helen was off that day so Lillian left a note about the turtle so it wouldn't scare her. The next morning Lillian asked Helen about the turtle. She had seen the note but there was no turtle. Lillian rushed out to the stove and sure enough the turtle was gone! She ran and told Hammet. They followed a trail of blood outside to the garden. Someone took it, Hammet said, because it was definitely dead. Lillian and Hammet rushed to something that the dogs had surrounded. It was the turtle sidling along with his head literally hanging by a piece of skin.

Hammet picked it up and took it back to the kitchen where he butchered it. Lillian felt uneasy about cooking the turtle because of how it had survived and there was



something ethereal about the animal. It was the first turtle they caught and she'd feel okay about making soup out of another one if they caught one. She wanted to bury it but Hammet wouldn't help her. She managed to bury the turtle near the lake and Hammet made a tombstone for the grave that read, "My first turtle is buried here. Miss Religious L.H." (283)

Pentimento

Pentimento Summary and Analysis

In 1961, a few weeks after Hammet died, Lillian moved to Cambridge to teach a seminar at Harvard. She and Helen took an apartment on the top floor of the student building. She had arranged for Hammet to stay in a nearby nursing home before he died. She had trouble sleeping and would walk at night usually winding up in front of the nursing home. Helen came and found her one night. The next day she told her that she couldn't bring him back by standing in front of the nursery home in the snow. Helen had hired a young boy, Jimsie, to help her with chores. On another night, Helen sent Jimsie to find Lillian. As he coaxed her to come home, she said, "Pentimento" on her breath.

Jimsie was beaten by the cops one night and Helen moved him in the apartment because his roommates couldn't take care of him right. Jimsie started out as a chemistry major but then switched to astrophysics. Helen died shortly afterward and Lillian always associated her death with Jimsie's change in majors. Jimsie did well and won a Marshall Scholarship and went off to study in Cambridge, England. She saw him again in 1968 when she returned to teach at Harvard and he happened to be there. He gave up astrophysics and tried writing for a while but eventually returned to his family home in Oregon where his father had given him 40 acres where he tended to a garden and raised chickens.

At dinner one night, they talked about Jimsie's time with Lillian and Helen. Helen was great to him. The coat that he still wore was a present from Helen. He said he loved her. Lillian said it was too bad he never told her. Jimsie said he did tell Helen he loved her on the night Lillian had whispered the word, "Pentimento" and he went home and looked it up.



Characters

Lillian Hellman

Lillian Hellman was the only child of Max and Julia Hellman. She was born in New Orleans but moved to New York City as a young girl. Lillian maintained a strong connection to New Orleans for much of her young life through her teenage years. Lillian spent half her school year in New York City and the other half in New Orleans where she stayed with her two maiden aunts, Jenny and Hannah. Lillian developed a strong allegiance for New Orleans and the south where her mother, who was from a wealthy family, also hailed from.

Lillian had a penchant for becoming involved and developing close relationships with some of the outcasts of the family. This tendency spilled over to her adult life as evidenced by some of the unusual characters she became involved with as she matured. Lillian befriended her distant cousin Bethe who no one liked or trusted. She also greatly admired the much maligned Uncle Willy and even developed a crush on him. Perhaps it was Lillian's independence and off-beat nature that helped to develop inquisitive skills and the magnanimity that ultimately led her to a highly successful career as a playwright and screenwriter.

Lillian was quite young when she had a huge success with her first play, "The Children's Hour." There were rave reviews about the play and she was considered the "it" girl in the theatre until she wrote her next play, "Days to Come" which was a big flop. She quickly learned the fickle nature of the theatre and eventually developed a thick skin about biased and incompetent critics and learned to trust the reaction of the audience. She commented that a playwright is the most exposed and vulnerable of all artists. Since a play is live and the reaction is immediate and in the face of the writer, there is no place to run and no place to hide.

Lillian married and divorced at a young age and developed a long-term relationship with fellow writer Dashiell Hammett. Both Hellman and Hammett were blacklisted by the infamous House Committee on Un-American Activities. Lillian was accused of being a Communist but later cleared.

Dashiell Hammett

Dashiell Hammett was an author and a screenwriter. He became involved with Lillian Hellman when she was a young divorcee. Although they never married, they were in a committed relationship for thirty years. Lillian's two aunts who lived in New Orleans were very much against their niece's live-in relationship with Hammett but were not able to convince her to end it. Hammett and Lillian spent time together in Hollywood when they were both hired as screenwriters. Hammett earned a nice fee for writing the screenplay for "The Thin Man."



There was a celebration in Lillian's hotel room following the smash opening of her first play, "The Children's Hour." Lillian drank a lot and didn't know most of the people who were there. She missed Hammet who was in Hollywood working on screenplays. She called him in the middle of the night and she knew something was up with a woman answered the phone at 3 am Los Angeles time and said she was his secretary. Lillian, never the shrinking violet, hopped on a plane, burst into their rented house and destroyed a built-in soda fountain that came with the house. She left on a red-eye back to New York. Hammett got the message! He had a wondering eye early in their relationship but as their relationship endured, he became devoted to Lillian.

Hammett was always very protective of Lillian and her career. He knew she suffered terribly after her second play was a failure. He suspended a lot of his work so he could focus on supporting and helping her in any way he could. He knew she was fragile after her experience and wanted to make sure she didn't give up on her talent.

When Hammett became seriously ill, Lillian stayed at his side. When he was near the end, Lillian set her alarm for every two hours each night so she could sit with him.

Bethe

Bethe was a distant cousin of Lillian's. She emigrated from Germany and was brought to New York for an arranged marriage to another distant cousin. She eventually moved to New Orleans where she became involved with the Mafia.

Willy

Willy was Lillian's uncle by marriage. He was a dashing and wealthy man who ran a company's South American operations. It was assumed that he was behind some criminal activities including gun-running and murder.

Aunt Lily

Lillian admired her great-aunt Lily. She thought Lily was one of the most interesting people in her family. In her later years, Lily became romantically involved with her black chauffeur who apparently kept her supplied with morphine.

Aunts Hannah and Jenny

Lillian lived half the school year in New York City with her parents and the other half of the year with her two Aunts, Hannah and Jenny, in New Orleans. They were very protective of Lillian and gave her a cache of old letters which enabled her to learn more about her family.



Arthur Cowan

Arthur W. A. Cowan was an eccentric and mysterious millionaire who befriended Lillian after she was an established writer. He often gave Lillian checks for thousands of dollars which compelled her to tell him not to try to buy her.

Jimsie

Jimsie was a black student at Harvard where Lillian taught a seminar in her later years. He was a brilliant student who helped Lillian and Helen, her maid, with chores. He went on to study in England and become an astrophysicist.

Tallulah Bankhead

Tallulah Bankhead was a fading actress when she agreed to star in Lillian's play, "The Little Foxes." She did a great job in the first few months of the play after which her performance devolved into on-stage high-jinks designed to thrill the male fans who came to see her.

Samuel Goldwyn

Samuel Goldwyn hired Lillian to rewrite a screenplay for actress Norma Shearer. The director of the movie required weeks of meetings to talk about the story before she could begin writing the screenplay. She tired of the meetings and quit. Goldwyn asked her to come back. He promised her that she could be in a room by herself and begin writing immediately.



Objects/Places

New York City

As a child, Lillian Hellman lived in New York City with her parents. She attended school in New York City half of each school year.

New Orleans, LA

Lillian Hellman was born in New Orleans, LA. As a young child, she moved to New York with her parents but maintained a strong connection with New Orleans throughout her life.

Broadway

Lillian Hellman became a renowned and successful playwright. Many of her plays were premiered on Broadway in New York City.

The Children's Hour

"The Children's Hour" was Lillian Hellman's first play. It was a huge success and she became the "it" girl of the theatre after it premiered.

Hollywood

Lillian Hellman was a successful screenwriter and was personally hired by studio head Samuel Goldwyn to write and rewrite many of the screenplays for his productions.

Paris

Lillian spent a good deal of time in Paris. She socialized with famous writers such as Ernest Hemingway there. She also spent time in seclusion in Paris to write one of her plays.

Berlin

Lillian was asked by her good friend, Julia, to smuggle some money from Paris to Berlin. The money was to be used by political activists to free people from the grasp of the Nazi Party that was gaining power in the lead up to World War II.



Russia

After Lillian had written "The Children's Hour" and "Days to Come," she was invited to attend a theater festival in Moscow.

Martha's Vineyard

Lillian and Hammet bought a house in Martha's Vineyard towards the end of their careers.

Harvard

Lillian moved temporarily to the Harvard Campus in Cambridge, MA, to teach a seminar after she was an established writer.



Themes

Strength of Character

Although "Pentimento" written by Lillian Hellman focuses on people and events that impacted her life, much of the author's own character and strengths shine through. Lillian emerged as a very opinionated and independent person which probably helped to develop her unique writing style and enabled her to become a huge success in a era and in a field in which women were the rarity. As is usually the case, her upbringing had a lot to do in forming her personality and character.

Lillian was an only child and was shuttled between New York and New Orleans, spending a half a school year in each locale. While this arrangement would seem to be detrimental to a young student, it seemed to have toughened the young Lillian and exposed her to two cultures which broadened her perspective at a very tender age. By being part of the diverse cultures of New York City and New Orleans, Lillian learned to view people and events in more than one point of view. The depth and richness of her writing is testament to her unique background and experiences as a youngster.

Since Lillian was required to split her education between two venues, she learned early on that life wasn't easy. She learned to stick with things and people even under adverse conditions. Where there are challenges, strength emerges. Lillian developed an ability to look past the ostensible and into the deeper meaning of events and the actions and behaviors of people. She learned not to give up on the relatives she interacted with as a child even though they were criticized and derided by other relatives. She learned to stick with people no matter what they did.

Lillian was able to transfer this ability over to her work. As a writer, she learned the obstacles and barriers that were placed before her. She learned, the hard way, what a fickle friend live theater was. While her very first play was a huge success, her second one was a flop. Even though it was a blow to her ego and confidence, Lillian did not give up on herself and her talent. She had learned as a child that getting an education wasn't easy but she hadn't given up. Lillian drew from her childhood relationships and the admiration that she had for those who were considered misfits in the family to stay loyal to that person no matter where they took their lives. In her adult life, many would have ended relationships with some of her friends and associates but she stayed with them. Hammett was unfaithful to her early in their relationship. She stood up to him and drew a line in the sand but she didn't give up on him and was able to trust him again. Their relationship matured and they enjoyed a life-long committed relationship. The strange Arthur Cowan who was ever fascinated by Lillian would have driven most people away. But Lillian saw something deep within him that was decent and good. His eccentricities and uncontrollable rage did not drive her away; instead, they evoked a sympathy within her that stopped her from casting him off.



Lillian Hellman wrote "Pentimento" through the filter of her own strength of character. It would not be surprising to learn that the subjects she wrote about were not as interesting and captivating as she saw them because she remembered them in the backdrop of her own unique character and uncommon fortitude.

Pentimento

Lillian Hellman used the term "pentimento" to describe her intentions and what she wanted to achieve in writing her book entitled, "Pentimento, A Book of Portraits." While pentimento describes a process in which an artist chooses to paint over a work with another painting, Lillian Hellman applied the term in looking back over her life and some of the people with whom she had relationships - some brief and some long-lasting but all impactful. Oil paintings lose their life and fade and peel from sunlight and the environment which lifts the top layer of a painting that had undergone the process of pentimento. As Lillian looked back on her life and career, she lifted the veneer and took a good look at some of her important relationships from the perspective of a more seasoned and wiser woman.

With each account that Lillian shared and with each life she revealed, she provided two perspectives. She first wrote of her initial impressions of her subjects and then described later encounters with them, when the first layer of oil paint had lifted and flaked away. Bethe was an intriguing mystery woman who ran with dangerous people. There were murders and mutilation in her wake - but she was never officially tied to any of the crimes although suspicions never died. Much later, when Lillian was able to track Bethe down, she lived in a modest house with an ordinary man who was a plumber. Her exciting and dangerous life had disappeared and devolved into mundanity.

When Lillian was a teen, she saw her Uncle Willy as charming, handsome and exciting. He had a lot of money and ran a company in South America. Even at the dinner table at Willy's big New Orleans mansion, there was talk of Willy's men stringing up some Guatemalans, cutting their tongues out and then burning their village. Lillian found such tales at once thrilling and frightening. When Lillian encountered him years later, he presented quite a different picture. When the veneer was removed from the courageous adventurer, he was a broken man and his life was in decline. Willy's wife, Lillian's great-aunt Lily, was also a favorite of Lillian when she was a teenager. She thought her refined and perfect but in possession of a quirkiness that Lillian so admired. The last time she saw Aunt Lily, she was unsteady on her feet and grappling for her purse. She was a morphine addict who needed to get to the contents of her purse because she needed a fix.

Lillian's childhood friend, Julia, had the most beautiful face she had ever seen. She recalled so many nights when they were together and the bright youngster recited hours of classic poetry. Years later when Julia had become a Socialist and political activist in Europe during the lead up to World War II, Lillian discovered a very different person. She was driven and tense and the caprice and vitality had gone out of her eyes. Eventually, she was injured in a bombing in which she lost a leg. The Nazis ultimately



hunted her down and killed her. At the funeral parlor, Lillian was distraught as she looked down on the beaten and battered woman who was barely recognizable as the once perfect and beautiful girl that Lillian so adored.

The heroes of Lillian's younger days crumbled and decayed over the decades. Lillian had two memories of each of them - the one she admired in her youth and the one she had sympathy for as an adult.

Loyalty and Devotion

Lillian Hellman was a renowned and successful playwright and screenwriter and became known for her liberal political views and as a woman of achievement in a field where there was a dearth of females. Although that description would not especially summon up an image of a dedicated family member, but despite her exciting and glamorous life, Hellman was surprisingly loyal to her family and to the memories of her relatives throughout her life.

Even though she may have had dim views of some of her relatives as she looked back on their lives, Hellman wrote about them with respect and love. She captured the awe and naivete she possessed when she interacted with them as a youngster and as a teen. The sections she wrote when she had matured and was more experienced reflect her growing wisdom and understanding about the people with whom she had strong and lasting relationships.

As a young child, Lillian's memories of Bethe, her "handsome" distant cousin from Germany were sketchy at best. When Lillian was a teenager, and Bethe had taken off to parts unknown, Lillian became intrigued with her. Bethe was much derided by other members of the family because of her thick German accent, her foreignness and, understandably, her disappearing act. Against the wishes of her maiden aunts, Lillian felt compelled to find Bethe and solve the mystery surrounding her and discover what happened to her. Lillian was able to track her down and developed a friendship with her much older cousin. They shared long walks together and attended mass together. Lillian was eager to learn some of the secrets about Bethe but she kept many of the dark elements of her life private and Lillian was unable to learn much but had fond recollections of her none the less.

Another not so popular member of the family was Uncle Willy. He was a charming adventurer and some family members were quite critical and judgmental about his behavior and character. But Lillian was always independent even as a teenager and became intrigued with him. She fantasized about his exciting life and developed a serious crush on him. Luckily, she didn't get involved with him but remained loyal to him and to his memory even when his life took a very bad turn.

As a successful writer and woman in her forties, Lillian became good friends with an eccentric and mysterious millionaire named Arthur Cowan. Although he challenged her patience again and again, she maintained a long-term relationship with him. Cowan was



sometimes overcome with an uncontrolled rage and anger that was sometimes focused on Lillian. Although she was not a shrinking violet and would defend herself, she realized that Cowan was a good person deep down but had an understanding that he was suffering from had some long-term emotional issues which he had never dealt with.

Perhaps it was Lillian's liberal nature that prevented her from being overly critical of those she loved and enabled her to understand them even though they were broken and imperfect. She may have seen a bit of herself in them.



Style

Perspective

"Pentimento" by Lillian Hellman is a memoir of the writer's life and is written in the first-person narrative. No person could be more qualified to write this book than the person who lived through the events and knew the people who were written about than Hellman herself. Combining her intimate knowledge of the subject matter with her world-class writing skills created a rich and engaging collection of portraits of the people who impacted her life.

As a child, Lillian lived with her parents in New York City but also spent almost half of the year in New Orleans where she became close to her aunts and other relatives in the south. She therefore had roots and connections with the sophisticated northeast and the slower-paced lifestyle of the south which provided a unique richness and diversity to her writing. In writing about the early relationships she had in life, she relied on her memory, anecdotal accounts from other relatives and on a cache of letters that her aunts allowed her read which led her to attaining a deeper understanding of her family.

Lillian Hellman became a famous playwright and screenwriter. Her very first play, "The Children's Hour" was a huge success. She went on to become a legend in her own time. She wrote such plays as "Toys in the Attic" and "The Little Foxes" which are plays that have transcended time and remain popular and relevant. Lillian was also a screenwriter and was hired directly by movie mogul Samuel Goldwyn to write movies for his studio. Hellman brought her writing talent and her sharp wit to "Pentimento" and created a work that is a treat for any serious reader.

Tone

"Pentimento" by Lillian Hellman was written with both sobriety and lightness. Lillian Hellman wrote about people who were important in her life. She gave them due respect and even when she revealed the darker side of those who she had close relationships with her, there was never a sign of a judgmental tone. There are incidents that are naturally funny - some were the type of stories that make people say, "you couldn't make this up." A great natural writer, Hellman has a magical ability with words and a mastery of storytelling.

As successful as Hellman became she never seemed to lose her humbleness. She was very young when she had a huge success. Something that never happens - happened to her. Her first play was a hit and she became an overnight sensation. She, of course, relished the rave reviews and her status as the "it" girl in the theatre but she learned that life on Broadway was fickle and so were the critics. Her second play was a huge flop. She came down off of cloud nine with a thud.



But just like all bright people, Hellman learned more from her failure than from her success. In her writing she conveys the angst and fear she had after having a huge and high-profile failure. She was terrified that she was a one-hit wonder and that her career was over. It took her two years to write her next play. But she didn't give up. Many readers will be able to relate to her gut-wrenching experience in dealing with failure and climbing back out of the darkness.

Hellman presented her portraits in an interesting and thoughtful manner - sometimes poignant and sometimes brutal - but always with honesty.

Structure

"Pentimento" by Lillian Hellman is structured into seven main sections. Prior to the first section is a brief preface in which the author explains the premise of the book.

"Pentimento" is the process which an artist uses when he decides that he doesn't like a picture he painted and wants to paint over it. Overtime an oil painting begins to fade and the top layer can begin to lift and flake which allows a view of the picture that was painted underneath the top picture if the artist chose to use the "pentimento" process. Lillian Hellman wrote this book towards the end of her career and life. She used the term, "pentimento" to represent what she intended to achieve with her book: a look-back on her life, seeing it again from the perspective of time and experience and with some of its veneer removed.

The seven sections include : "Bethe", the story of a distant cousin from Germany who came to America and became involved in with some nefarious people and events; "Willy," the story of Lillian's great-aunt Lily who was married to Willy, a charming rogue who had a wild, adventurous life and who Lillian had a crush on as teenager; "Julia," the story of Lillian's childhood friend who became a socialist and involved in the danger and intrigue in Europe in the run up to World War II; "Theatre," Lillian's account of her long career as a playwright and screenwriter in which she details the struggle she had in writing and the highs of having a smash hit play and the lows of writing a "bomb"; "Arthur W. A. Cowan," the story of an eccentric millionaire with whom Lillian became friends with after she was an established and successful writer; "Turtle," the story of the survival of a snapping turtle that seemed to defy death, which she compared to her life-long companion; and "Pentimento," Hellman's struggle with the loss of her lover of over twenty years.



Quotes

"This puzzled my aunts, who like all sensitive older people were convinced that youth had no interest in what it sprang from and so were careful not to bore the young with their own fancies or regrets" (Bethe, p. 11).

"I have gone through my life sure that the people I love will recover, and if, in three cases, I have been wrong, at least I did them no harm and maybe curtailed from them the front face of death" (Bethe, p. 15).

"It was true that her family were all thin people, and all good-looking, but Lily was a wispy, romantic specimen unlike her brothers and sisters, who were high-spirited and laughed too much over their own vigor and fancy money deals" (Willy, p. 54).

"I believe what I felt that night was what I was to feel about myself and other people years later: the humiliation of vanity, the irrational feeling of rejection from a man who, of course, paid me no mind, and had no reason to do so" (Willy, p. 82).

"She had become, maybe always was, a Socialist, and lived by it, in a one-room apartment in a slum district of Vienna, sharing her great fortune with whoever needed it" (Julia, p. 107).

"Stop crying about my leg. It was amputated and the false leg is clumsily made so I am coming to New York in the next few months, as soon as I can, and get a good one. Lilly, don't cry for me. Stop the tears. We must finish the work now" (Julia, p. 137).

"The need of theatre instinct may be why so many good writers have been such inferior playwrights - the light that a natural dramatist can see on a dark road is simply not there" (Theatre, p. 152).

"But failure in the theatre is more public, more brilliant, more unreal than in any other field" (Theatre, p. 161).

"He [Arthur] is the only person I have ever known who had no sense of time: he did not know whether he had met people last week or many years before, and once he told me he had been divorced for three years when, in fact, he had been divorced for fourteen" (Arthur, p. 219).

"Arthur was in a gay, charming good humor that night - he liked lawyer academics, respected them - until a man sitting next to him spoke of Goethe. Then one of the storms that came across the ocean of his years broke with tornado force, more out of control than I had ever seen before, without sense or reason, from depths so unknown and frightening that even these strangers turned aside in pity or embarrassment" (Arthur, p. 257).



"I have a jungle of memories about those days: things learned and forgotten, or half remembered, which is worse than forgetting" (Turtle, p. 269).

"He [Jimsie] said, 'I loved Helen.' Lillian said 'Too bad you never told her so. Too late now.' Jimsie responded, 'I told it to her the night I looked up your word, pentimento'" (Pentimento, p. 297).

Topics for Discussion

When Beth went missing in New Orleans, who was she involved with? Who was responsible for Styrie's amputation? Who was responsible for Al's death? Could Beth have been involved with either incident?

Why did Lillian find Willy charming? Why did she think her Aunt Lily was the most interesting person in the family? What was wrong with Honey?

What does "pentimento" mean? How does the term apply to this book? What did it mean to Jimsie?

What is the one story in which Lillian Hellman changes the names of the main people? Why? Describe the main character on this story.

What was Lillian's favorite play? Why did the failure of her second play stay with her for her entire career? How did it impact the writing of her other plays?

What problems did Lillian have with the actress, Tallulah Bankhead? What was Tallulah addicted to?

What was strange about Arthur A. W. Cowan? What was his profession? How did he earn so much money and what did he promise Lillian?