

Scoundrel Time Study Guide

Scoundrel Time by Lillian Hellman

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Plot Summary

"Scoundrel Time" by Lillian Hellman is the true story of the famous playwright's experience with the House Committee on Un-American Activities during the early-1950s. Hellman's name was listed on the infamous blacklist compiled during the latter days of the Truman administration. The majority of those included on the blacklist were people the FBI identified as either Communists or Communist leaning—also known as "fellow travelers." These private citizens were targeted by the government as potential threats to the United States. In other words, these individuals could ultimately be found guilty of treason. In most cases, the people were innocent or in the least non-threatening. Some writers, directors and actors were called into the hearings in the late-forties when the drumbeat against radicals and progressives began.

The government created one of the most egregious eras of civil rights violations ever seen before or since. The majority of the "Hollywood people" called to testified had no idea why they were being scrutinized or what they were expected to say or indeed what they were being accused of. For example, when asked at his hearing if the scripts he read contained propaganda, actor Gary Cooper replied that he did not believe so but that he read them at night. Of course, his response made no sense; but not much was making sense at the time. Those called felt compelled to defend themselves but for the most part they were puzzled as to what they were defending. Actor Charles Laughton received a cable from eastern Europe about the death of an old friend. Panicked, he called the FBI to explain why he was receiving a cable from a Communist country—knowing that FBI had probably intercepted the message.

Even the powerful studio executives lived in fear of the government. Many of these men were originally from foreign countries where government abuse was a given. They were afraid of losing their power and wealth and applied pressure upon their actors, directors and writers to cooperate and be "friendly witnesses." The translation for "friendly witnesses" were those testifying at hearings who would agree to name names.

Dashiell Hammett, Hellman's man friend of many years and a fellow writer, was an avowed member of the Communist Party. Hellman, however, never joined the party. Her "sin" was that she associated with him and others and attended a few party meetings. At these meetings, she usually paid no attention to what the speakers were saying, preferring to people watch instead. Hellman did not even consider herself a radical or progressive. She was basically a non-political artist who admired the passion of the radicals but did not share it. The feds had their eyes on Hammett and he was ultimately called in to testify. Since he refused to cooperate in revealing the names of the financial contributors to a left-leaning organization of which he was a trustee, he was found guilty of un-American activities and given jail time. After he served his time, the IRS attached all his funds. Hammett's career was over. Hammett did not make another dime for the rest of his life.

Lillian Hellman was required to testify at a Committee hearing in May of 1952. Although she naturally felt fearful and did not want to go to jail—she heard about rats in the cells



—she had done nothing wrong. She let the Committee know that she would answer any and all questions about herself but would refuse to answer anything about anyone else. Hellman was wise to send a letter stating her position prior to the hearing. The letter was introduced into evidence and her lawyer distributed it to the press. Since the committee could not portray Hellman as uncooperative based on the stance in her letter, the panel realized its tactical error and released her without punishment. She was one of the first to stand up to the committee.

Hellman's reputation and career suffered for years after that. She was broke and even had to take a job at a department store for a while. In 1960 she wrote the play "Toys in the Attic," which was a huge success. She rebounded financially after that and money would not be a problem again. However, the shock and hurt of her experience stayed with her for her entire life. She saw people ruined and lied about. Even when evidence was provided that people were wrongly accused, there was never an apology or acknowledgment of wrong doing. One of the "stars" of the House Committee stars and a hero of the anti-radicals, Richard Nixon, rose to the presidency.

Although Hellman had no respect for the dangerous and unfair men—McCarthy and Nixon and others—she had no real bitterness. She knew her progressive friends had not harmed America but that those unscrupulous men had. Lillian Hellman recovered from her experience—to a degree. Even though she was damaged, she was a firm believer that a person is a blend of all the good and bad encountered in a lifetime.

Introduction

Introduction Summary and Analysis

The introduction was written by author Garry Wills. The House Committee on Un-American Activities had its roots in actions taken by President Harry S. Truman. Although most people associate the Blacklist and the House Committee with Senator Joseph McCarthy, he did not bring his first charges until 1950. Earlier in 1947 after World War II, President Truman launched the Cold War and introduced a program to test the loyalty of Federal workers. His actions spawned a decade of distrust and civil rights violations never seen before or since. Initially, workers were given a litmus test about their loyalty to country causing an environment of distrust that encouraged the judgment by one person of another person's patriotism.

Soon after the President's program began, J. Edgar Hoover was on board. Soon investigations expanded from a simple questionnaire to a deep look into what organization someone might have contributed funds to, what meeting he may have attended and who he may have associated with, even on a casual basis. It was the beginning of the age of "guilt by association." Being found "guilty" on any trumped up violation could mean loss of job in the private or public sector. Far worse, however, the blacklist of alleged disloyal people or those deemed to be loyalty risks was published for all to see.

Three factors drove even liberal Democrats to support the President and the House blacklisting. First, there was a strong desire to bring war-like propaganda to a time of peace. It was felt that since the Cold War was a war of ideas, that ideas would be used as weapons. Secondly, Russia was defined as the enemy. Thirdly, an association was made between Russia with Communism and Germany with Nazism. At the time, Russia had no nuclear weapons and was still healing from the scourges of war. The aggressive Cold War offensive launched by the President did not seem to match the threat of the weak country it had defined as the enemy.

The environment in the late forties was fertile ground for battle, even an ideological one. America had fallen in love with war in the early-1940s. World War II had done the job that the New Deal hadn't—it had rescued America from the depression. Americans had justified any means to win WW II for America was not fighting men or countries—America was fighting evil. After the war, therefore, it was difficult for America to come back down from the euphoria and self-righteousness the war had created. The FBI did not want to give up the expanded powers granted during the war; the draft stayed in effect; research on atomic weaponry was in full swing. The country was not at war but mobilizing and needed a viable enemy.

The blacklist and the Committee on Un-American Activities was a way to find out if the enemy lurked within. Judged even to be thinking in an un-American way was cause for concern. The test of patriotism was an ideological one. Hundreds of citizens who were



otherwise law-abiding were suspected to be un-American and therefore it was appropriate to spy on them, investigate them, exclude them from employment and even jail them. Truman used the environment to his benefit in his reelection run in 1948. Enemies of Truman's third-party challenger, Henry Wallace, testified to the Congress that Wallace had Communists working on his campaign.

Lillian Hellman, who was not a Communist but was considered radical was a big supporter of Wallace. Hellman who was a famous playwright and screenwriter, had missed the first Hollywood investigations a few years before, but by 1948 probably because of her open support of Wallace, her patriotism and Americanism came under scrutiny. The symbolic turning point in the government's view of Lillian Hellman came from her sponsorship of the Cultural and Scientific Conference for World Peace held at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in 1949. Some Russian artists and scholars invited to the meeting were not allowed to enter the country. Questionable people from other countries were also denied entry. A group was hastily organized to counter the ideology of the World Peace Conference. The State Department asked Norman Cousins to speak at the World Peace Conference—telling the attendees how wrong they were. When Lillian Hellman spoke afterward, she advised Cousins to wait until he got home to talk about them.

By 1949, fear and hatred solidified with Mao's conquest of China and Russia's testing of an atomic bomb. The Rosenbergs were condemned to death. Senator McCarthy brought charges and Alger Hiss was convicted and jailed. McCarthyism was strengthening. The committee that sent Hiss to jail would catapult Nixon to the Vice-Presidency. With all that accomplished, there were few targets to focus upon. A new round of Hollywood subjects came under scrutiny. To sweeten their own positions, some Hollywoodites like Elia Kazan and Jose Ferrer fingered innocent people. A common view in Washington was that the difference between liberals and Communists was one of degree. Garry Wills' makes the distinction that radicals are personally responsible for their individual beliefs and ideologies as those who want their views confirmed by others. Lillian Hellman was so distant to ideology that it was invisible to her. After writing the committee telling them she would not be naming names and would take the fifth amendment if pressed, Lillian Hellman came to testify before the Committee on May 21, 1952. Many artists appearing after Hellman followed her lead and stood up to the unfair, demeaning and un-American questioning.



Pages 37 through 50

Pages 37 through 50 Summary and Analysis

Lillian Hellman always found it difficult to write about her experiences in the McCarthy era. She is a person who does not hold a grudge. She looks at McCarthy, McCarran, Nixon and the others as opportunists. She doubts they believed much of what they said. They were men who invented and maligned. Hellman attributes the beginning of McCarthyism to the 1917 Russian Revolution. America felt compelled to worry about them ever since. Although an ally during World War II, afterward Russia reappeared as the menace and looked all the scarier since they were giving aggressive signals toward Western Europe. To top it off, the China revolution enhanced the Red threat.

What is vivid in Hellman's memory is that McCarthy was drunk during all of the hearings. Nixon was eager to believe that one of the witnesses, Whittaker Chambers, hid state secrets in a carved out pumpkin. He allegedly received the top-secret information from Alger Hiss. When the documents were found years later, there was nothing confidential in the material—it was all unimportant, non-classified information.

At last, Lillian is determined finally to write about what happened to her. As a young college student, Lillian had traveled to Bonn, Germany to enroll in the university there. After she was able to understand some German, Lillian, a Jew, realized that the young people she was with were anti-Semitic and making boastful sounds of war. Lillian returned to America when it was in deep depression. She was briefly married during that time to a writer who was fortunate to have a job. Lillian divorced and soon moved in with Dashiell Hammett, another writer. She and millions others felt hopeful after Franklin Roosevelt was elected President. She tired of living off of Hammett's money, and began writing in earnest herself. Hellman wrote her first play, *The Children's Hour*, in 1934. It was a great success.

The social unrest due to the depression led some disheartened people to join the Communist Party, Hammett among them. Although Hellman attended a few meetings, she never became a Communist Party member. Hellman paid little attention at the meetings she did attend. She had been raised to believe that everyone had a right to his or her own feelings and opinions. By the late-'30's and early-'40's, Lillian had no party affiliation at all—although she admired radicals and progressives for their passion, she knew she wasn't one of them. Her sin was living too high and drinking too much after the success of *The Children's Hour*. Hammett and Hellman did not often discuss his political views. Hammett eventually received a jail sentence for refusing to divulge the names of the contributors to a group called The Civil Rights Congress of which he was trustee.

Unlike Hammett, Lillian did not realize it was somehow dangerous to speak your mind. She had always been taught to be an independent thinker at home and at school and in her work. She did not realize the dangerous time America was in following World War II.

Hammett likened his jail time to a tough boarding school. Later, when Lillian is faced with jail time, she would look at it in an entirely different light.



Pages 51 through 82

Pages 51 through 82 Summary and Analysis

Lillian Hellman is served with a subpoena to appear before the House Un-American Activities Committee. At first she is only slightly annoyed. However, her nerves take over and she calls several friends, including Hammett, for support. She contacted another acquaintance, Stanley Isaacs, who had been through the process already. He had lost a low level assistant who was reputed to be a Communist and was removed from his job. Finally, she got help when she contacted lawyer Abe Fortas who told her the timing was right for someone to take a moral stand against the disgraceful Congressional committee and not cop out by taking the fifth. Fortas proposes that Lillian answer any and all questions about herself but not about anyone else. She is in a good position to take such a stand because she really does not know much about any Communist ties her acquaintances may or may not have had. Lillian agrees with Fortas but he tells her to take a few days to think it over.

When she tells Hammett her decision about testifying, he is upset. He tells her the Committee, the press, the friends she thinks she has—no one will be impressed with her high morals. She will wind up in jail with a longer sentence than if she just stayed silent. Hellman sticks to her guns and contacts Fortas telling him she will testify as he suggested. Since Fortas has a current client who could hurt her stance, he gets her in contact with a D.C. lawyer, Joseph Rauh.

The IRS has frozen Hammett's money and Lillian will run out of hers in a few years. She will have to sell her farm and let her dear friends who help run it know that she can no longer keep it. The staff on the farm had been good friends and stuck by her when Hammett was first sent to jail and the FBI and media were making frequent visits to the farm. Joseph Rauh uncovered some published articles by Communist sources criticizing Lillian's work, especially her play *Watch on the Rhine*. Rauh feels this material will be helpful in her appearance before the committee. Lillian does not want to use this material feeling she will be reducing herself to the committee's tactics.

Clifford Odets, a famous playwright and acquaintance of Hellman's, calls her to have dinner. He is irked that she has no real plan about her testimony before the Committee. He is adamant that he will stand up to them and tell the bastards where to go. Unfortunately, when Odets testifies a day before Hellman, he does an about face and identifies many of his old friends as Communists. Hellman assumes that since Odets is in Hollywood that he received a lot of studio pressure and threats that his career would be over if he didn't cooperate. Hellman meets with movie director Elia Kazan who plans to be a "friendly witness." Kazan had been warned he would never make another movie again unless he cooperated. The onslaught on the movie industry had begun in 1947 when the studio executives came together and agreed not to allow political dissent to hurt their business. At one point, all studio employees had to sign an oath vowing their allegiance to America and disavowing in past "mistakes" they had made in support of



any person or organization suspected of being anti-American. The studio heads at the time were mostly from foreign countries where government abuse was common. These men had grown weak with age and were not about to mount a stand against the US government. These timid tycoons put pressure on everyone else to cooperate; that is, to act out the drama for which the government committee was salivating.

In 1947, studio executive Harry Cohn offered Lillian a million-dollar contract to write and produce four movies over an extended period of time. When it came time to sign the contract, there was an additional requirement that she write, in her own words, that she disavowed anything perceived to be un-American activities or work. Lillian thought the requirement was ridiculous and refused to write such a letter. She walked out on the deal.

Hollywood is in mass confusion over what to say and how to react to the accusations many of them are facing from their own government. There are big stars like Gary Cooper and Humphrey Bogart involved in the committee hearings. Gary Cooper was asked if he ever read a script that contained Communist propaganda. He replied that he didn't think so but that he usually read at night. Of course, that made no sense but nothing was making much sense at the time. Everyone was rattled and unsure and most were innocent but yet felt compelled to defend themselves. The actor Charles Laughton received a cable from East Germany informing him that an old friend had died. Laughton contacted J. Edgar Hoover, FBI Director, to explain the wire assuming that the cable had been intercepted and could be viewed with suspicion. The phrase "premature anti-Fascist" was a popular phrase at the time. No one could really explain what it meant or why it was popular to use it. Everyone was puzzled; what were they expected to say? What were they accused of?

Lillian has to go to London for consultation on a script. She must receive approval from the State Department in order to travel abroad. On her lawyer's advise, she sees a Mrs. Shipley who retrieves her file. When Shipley opens the fat file, Lillian sees three large pictures of Charlie Chaplin on top. Lillian had only been in Chaplin's company a very few times and in fact had openly disapproved of a rambling speech he gave on one occasion. She cannot fathom why his pictures are in her file. Mrs. Shipley asks Lillian if she thinks the "friendly witnesses" before the committee had been truthful. Lillian responds that most of them probably had not been truthful, that they felt compelled to lie in order to keep their jobs.



Pages 83 through 94

Pages 83 through 94 Summary and Analysis

While writing this book in her home in Martha's Vineyard, a neighbor suggests she read a piece in the New York Review of Books about Whitaker Chambers. The column relates that the material "proving" Alger Hiss was a Communist was all trumped up. She recalls Nixon holding the documents up to the camera indicating it was evidence of the most treasonable activities ever launched against America. "Nixon is a villainous liar." The material had been supplied by Whitaker Chambers who is viewed by most people who know him as psychotic.

Lillian feels that the intellectuals are perceived by the government to be the enemies of America because their reasons are suspect and their convictions would deprive the rest of the people of the world they want. Therefore, to enhance their theory, the government must illuminate the progressive man as immortal. By so doing, murder, imprisonment and torture can all be justified. Sometimes the liberal man is immoral and sometimes not. However, the anti-radical camp shares the same division: some are honest and fair men others are going down a very dark path for very dark reasons.

McCarthy, Nixon et al are ruining lives! Is justice only for those that agree with them? Two publications that in the past protested about dissidents in other countries fail to come to the aid of people in America who are being jailed and ruined. Lillian theorizes that Cold War anti-Communism ultimately led to both America's involvement in the Vietnam War and the election to President of the anti-radicals' hero, Richard M. Nixon.

It is a rough spring in 1952 for Lillian. All of Hammett's money had been attached by the IRS. The IRS is claiming that Lillian owes them \$175,000. Hammett is ill and Lillian has no idea how much his illness may cost. Their earning potential is being taken away by the government who is demanding payment from them. Although Lillian had no memory of the meeting at the time, she later read a memo Joe Rauh had written in March of 1952. He had met with a member of the house committee, Mr. Travener. He revealed to Rauh that others had testified that Lillian was a Communist. The committee was particularly interested in interrogating writers to understand how the Communists control thinking. Rauh had explained to Travener that while Lillian was more than happy to testify about her own activities, she would not testify against anyone else. Her dilemma was that if she did not use the fifth amendment on questions about herself she could not later invoke it for questions about others. Travener understood her position but there would be no way she could avoid naming other people.

Lillian writes a letter to the chairman of the House Committee on Un-American Activities. She explains that she will testify on May 21, 1952, but only about herself. If she cannot invoke the fifth amendment when asked about others, she will invoke the fifth amendment privilege for all her questions. She is waiting for a reply.



Pages 95 through 130

Pages 95 through 130 Summary and Analysis

Lillian travels to Washington, D.C., several days before her appearance is scheduled. She is very nervous and finds it hard to sleep. She shops one day but is afraid to spend money. She shops another day and buys an expensive dress for the hearing. Her taxi driver will pick her up in the morning, several hours before his wife is operated on for throat cancer. Lillian gives him a \$100 check to get his wife a gift. Lillian thinks back to a recent dinner at Leonard Bernstein's apartment in New York. A friend, who Lillian called Harry, who appeared before the Committee several weeks before tells Lillian that he memorized his answers before the hearing. Joe Rauh tells her not to be concerned—there were no answers she had to memorize.

The request she made to the House Committee is refused which answers her question as to how she will respond—she will be invoking the Fifth Amendment privilege. Lillian and her lawyer figure much of the hearing will focus on her extended trip to Russia during the Roosevelt administration. She was invited as a cultural representative and stayed at the US Embassy the entire time. The morning of the hearing, Lillian stops by her lawyer's office so they can arrive together. He had just gotten a call from a Committee member warning him that Lillian needed to back off on the letter she sent. Failing to do so will result in Lillian going straight to jail. Lillian remains steadfast. She feels sick and feels sorry that Rauh is feeling bad. She tells him not to feel guilty. She tells herself that the most important thing she can do is not feel ashamed of herself.

After the gavel came down, Hellman is first asked about Martin Berkeley who had testified that she was at the meeting when the domestic Communist party was first organized. She responds that she was not there and doesn't know Martin Berkeley. The panel members try their best to twist her words but she is saved when the letter she sent is introduced into evidence. Because the letter was part of the record, her attorney is able to distribute copies to the press. The letter is proof that she is more than willing to be cooperative in answering questions about her own activities. The panel will not be able to present her as uncooperative. Realizing their tactical mistake, the Committee dismisses her and she escapes jail time.

But her scrape with the committee leaves its damage—her earning capacity is greatly diminished, at least for a few years, and to some her reputation will remain tainted forever. Hellman has to sell her beloved farm and sell or give away all her animals and equipment. Before she moved she had a dinner at Henry Wallace's nearby farm. She had supported him for President in 1948. Ironically, she recalls when the new third party formed and ran Wallace as its candidate, she met privately with several Communists who were joining the party. She told them they had their own party and they should not meddle in this new one.



Prior her appearance before the House, she contacts Marc Blitzstein who had written an opera "Regina" based on Hellman's play, "The Little Foxes." She is scheduled to do the narration for "Regina" before a concert audience in early June. She fears she will be hissed and booed and tries to beg off but Blitzstein won't hear of it. Fortunately, she goes through with the engagement and is met with a standing ovation—including the orchestra. Not all of America saw her as an enemy!



Pages 131 through 155

Pages 131 through 155 Summary and Analysis

After the hearings and the sale of the farm, Hammett rents a small house from friends in Katonah. After he moves in all his books and "inventions" there was hardly room to walk around. Lillian has several polyp operations around the time of her play's revival. "The Children's Hour" is once again received with acclaim by the critics. The IRS takes the money Lillian earned from the revival. Lillian has a disastrous affair with an old flame but soon ends it. Money is running out. Lillian dreams about clothes she wants to buy but holds off actually buying them. Hammett hasn't made a dime since the IRS took all his money. Lillian cuts costs as much as she can and gets nervous when she sees Hammett continually taking money out of the safe. Finally in 1960, Lillian has another great success in her new play, "Toys in the Attic." In a money sense, the hard times were over. Hammett died the next year but at least he had one year without money worries.

Using her temporary passport, Lillian moves to Rome, Italy, while doing consulting work on a film. She reads in the Italian paper one morning that she had been subpoenaed by Senator McCarthy. An attorney in Italy advises her to travel to London in an attempt to get her temporary visa extended since London does not listen to American like Italy does. Strangely, Lillian is paged at the airport even though no one should know she was there. The call was from the assistant to a Contessa she knows inviting her to a dinner. Lillian finds out later that the call was bogus. Lillian flies to London but is told by the consulate that the American government will have to approve the extension. If she does not receive an extension she will lose her job. Lillian's passport is extended for three months.

She calls Hammett on a secure line and updates him on all the goings-on. He tells her to bribe the hotel people to find out who followed her that day to the airport. The bribes pay off and Lillian finds out that a "blond American man" is keeping tabs on her at the hotel. She later finds out that the man who is a casual acquaintance of hers is a CIA agent. She never hears from McCarthy again and figures the agent planted the story to see if he could stimulate some action. The filmmaker she is working with in Italy cannot pay her because he is bankrupt. Lillian returns to the United States. They are so broke that she takes a job in a department store under an assumed name. An aunt who dies leaves her a generous inheritance and she is able to return to writing. That summer she and Hammett rented a house in Martha's Vineyard and had a pleasant stay. That same summer the Army-McCarthy Hearings were held which was the beginning of McCarthy's fall from grace. America had grown tired of McCarthy and his minions. There were many broken lives along the path bulldozed by McCarthy. Incredibly, Richard Nixon is elected to the presidency only a few years later. America had forgotten his role in the McCarthy years.



Hammett suffered from lung cancer for several years before succumbing. Lillian was able to recoup her career and earning capacity. Still she remains shocked at what happened to her and her colleagues in America. Almost more shocking than the blacklist and the House Committee is the shock that so few voices spoke out about the injustice. Even now when she reads the comments of the few who did, the words seem weak and ineffective. Those radicals, liberals at the time did not do harm to America but McCarthy and his kind did. None of those unfair, unscrupulous men ever admitted any wrong doing.

Lillian has recovered to some extent. However, she does not full ascribe to the concept of recovery. "The past, with its pleasures, its rewards, its foolishness, its punishments, is there for each of us forever as it should be." The past, the in between and the present all blend together.

Characters

Lillian Hellman

Lillian Hellman was a renowned playwright and screenwriter. Her first play, "The Children's Hour" was a huge success. It was followed by a series of hit plays and movies including "Watch on the Rhine" and "The Little Foxes." Hellman was under scrutiny by the House Committee on Un-American Activities during the late-1940s and early 1950's for perceived Communist-leaning views. She was accused of associating with Communists and for contributing to Communist causes. Hellman's love interest over the years was another writer, Dashell Hammett, who was an avowed Communist. Records were kept on Hellman and many others during this time. Her official file contained information about meetings she attended and comments she made—all seen through the lens of paranoia and suspicion. Hellman's name was on the infamous "blacklist" which contained the names of domestic Communists and those expected of having ties to the Communist Party.

Although Hellman had admiration for the passion displayed by her radical and liberal friends, she never considered herself to be one. However, neither was she an ideologue like those on the right of the political spectrum. Hellman saw herself somewhere in the middle, a vantage point she felt that gave her the ability to see that both sides could produce good and bad people. She recognized that during the McCarthy years, the anti-radical men who were persecuting her and many of her colleagues were doing so for very dark reasons and leading the country down a very dark path.

Hellman was the Hollywood luminary to at least in some fashion stand up to the House Committee. Hellman was called before the committee in May of 1952. Before her appearance at the hearing, she wrote the chairman of the committee letting him know that she would gladly answer any and all questions about herself but under no circumstances would she testify against any of her friends or acquaintances. Unlike most Hollywood people testifying before her she would not be a "friendly witness" and would not "name names." If pressured to do so, she told the committee, she would invoke her Fifth Amendment privileges.

Unlike many of her friends, Hellman did not receive any jail time. However, the damage of being called before the committee and being blacklisted by them as a Communist and anti-American followed her the rest of her life. She suffered both from a personal and professional standpoint. Lillian recovered her career with her play "Toys in the Attic" in 1960. It was a huge success and money would no longer be a problem. However, the shock and hurt that the hearings caused her haunted her for the rest of her life.



Dashiell Hammett

After a brief marriage, Lillian met and began seeing Dashiell Hammett who was also a writer. Before long, they moved in together and stayed close for a lifetime. When she first moved in with Hammett, Lillian was not working. She soon tired of living off of Hammett's money, and began writing in earnest herself. Hammett was a little more in tune to the real world than the young Lillian. Unlike Hammett, Lillian did not realize it had somehow become dangerous to speak one's mind in the late thirties and early forties. He realized that America was falling into a dangerous time following World War II. The social unrest due to the depression led some disheartened people to join the Communist Party, Hammett among them. He was called to appear before the House Un-American Activities Committee. In 1951, Hammett was sentenced to jail time for refusing to identify the names of the contributors to the bail bond fund of the Civil Rights Congress, of which he was a trustee.

Hammett likened his jail time to a tough boarding school. Later, when Lillian is faced with jail time, she would look at it in an entirely different light. In 1952, Lillian Hellman was served with a subpoena to appear before the House Un-American Activities Committee. When she informed Hammett about it, he advised her to say nothing. However, she decided to answer questions about herself but not about anyone else. Hammett was worried about the punishment she could receive. He told her that the Committee, the press, the friends she thinks she has—no one would be impressed with her high morals. She would wind up in jail with a longer sentence than had she just remained silent.

The IRS froze Hammett's money after his release from jail. From that point on, Lillian basically supported him. However, she was seeing very lean times herself. She had to sell her farm and let her dear friends who helped run it know that she could no longer keep it. The staff on the farm had been good friends and stuck by her when Hammett was first sent to jail and the FBI and media were making frequent visits to the farm. After the IRS took all of Hammett's money, he never made another dime in again in his life. He became gravely ill and suffered for several years. Lillian took care of him and supported him until his death from cancer in the early-1960s.

Senator Joseph McCarthy

Senator Joseph McCarthy was the Senator who brought charges resulting from the investigation of alleged un-American activities by private citizens. Many writers and actors were targeted by these investigations.

Robert Taylor

Robert Taylor was a Hollywood actor who testified before the House Committee on Un-American Activities. He was apparently intimidated by the proceedings making sure he



agreed that movies could be used as propaganda. He even offered names of other Hollywood people who might be Communists.

Richard Nixon

Richard Nixon was a young representative on the House Committee on Un-American Activities. He saw his participation as an opportunity to gain national attention.

President Harry S. Truman

After World War II ended, President Truman launched the Cold War and introduced a new loyalty program which created more in-depth investigations of all Federal employees.

Joseph Rauh

Joseph Rauh was Lillian's D.C. lawyer during the House Committee hearings. After her letter promising her cooperation in speaking about her activities, Rauh made sure the press got copies of the document. The Committee dismissed Lillian with no punishment after they realized their tactical mistake.

Clifford Odets

Clifford Odets was a fellow playwright and screenwriter. While he was adamant that he would never name names at the hearings, when he testified he fingered a number of his associates as un-American.

Elia Kazan

Elia Kazan told Lillian he planned on being a "friendly witness"—translation he would name names. He had been warned by a studio head that if he didn't cooperate he would never make another movie.

Gary Cooper

Gary Cooper testified before the House Committee on Un-American Activities. When asked if he thought some scripts contained Communist propaganda, he responded he didn't think so but he read scripts at night. The answer made no sense but not much was making sense at the hearings.



Objects/Places

Washington, D.C.

The House Committee on Un-American Activities was held in the U.S. Capitol. Lillian Hellman was one of the artists who was summoned to testify there.

The Blacklist

The infamous blacklist contained the names of people who were suspected of being a Communist or Fascist or associating with them. The list backfired on its creators as it was a grave violation of civil rights and came to be held as a black mark on the government for many years.

Hollywood, California

Many stars and Hollywood producers and directors were under intense scrutiny by the House Committee on Un-American Activities. Many of their names were placed on the infamous blacklist of people with questionable patriotism.

Waldorf-Astoria

Lillian Hellman's patriotism came under suspicion after her sponsorship of the Cultural and Scientific Conference for World Peace held at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in 1949.

Bonn, Germany

Prior to World War II, Lillian Hellman attended a university in Bonn, Germany, for a short while until she realized that most of her peers were anti-Semitic and talking war.

Moscow, Russia

In 1944, Lillian had been invited as a cultural representative by the USSR. She stayed in the US Embassy in Moscow while she consulted on a film. She and her attorney thought the Congressional Committee would focus on this trip during her hearing.

Pleasantville, NY

Lillian had a farm in Pleasantville, NY. She had to sell the farm when her earning power was reduced by the anti-American accusations being made about her.



Rome, Italy

Lillian lived in Rome, Italy, in 1953 while consulting on a movie. She was still suffering financial repercussions from the Committee hearings and chose to live in Rome because it was cheap.

London, England

Lillian left Rome for London when she read in the paper that McCarthy had issued another subpoena for her. An Italian lawyer told her she'd have better luck extending her temporary visa in London.

Martha's Vineyard

Lillian and Hammett rented a house on Martha's Vineyard the summer prior to Hammett's death.

Themes

Roots of McCarthyism

Garry Wills, author of several books including "Nixon Agonistes" wrote the introduction to "Scoundrel Time" by Lillian Hellman. In his introduction, Wills explains that the environment of distrust was put in motion by President Harry S. Truman in 1947, several years before the House began their investigations of private citizens perceived to be un-American. After the House began its inquiries, Joseph McCarthy got on the bandwagon in the Senate and propelled further investigations and ultimately began bringing charges. He went after these targeted people, while gaining publicity for himself, in an aggressive, unrelenting manner. This dark chapter in American government culminated during his involvement and thus the era has been connected to his name.

McCarthyism has become synonymous with "overreach" and "witch hunting." "McCarthyism" is now a word in the dictionary with the following definition: "the practice of making accusations of disloyalty, esp. of pro-Communist activity, in many instances unsupported by proof or based on slight, doubtful, or irrelevant evidence." Again, the period of targeting private citizens with accusations of un-American activities did not start with McCarthy—he just took it to new heights.

Lillian Hellman felt that the mentality of the investigations—one of distrust and paranoia—actually started long before even Truman's tenure; that is, with the Russian Revolution in 1917. Since that point in time, America had a fear that Russia could become a superpower and a threat to American life. Even though the US and Russia were allies in World War II, immediately following the conflict Truman launched the Cold War and named Russia as the enemy, even though it was still recovering from the conflicts fought on its soil and had no nuclear weapons. With the supercharged energy in the US to fight another war—the Cold War—it looked inward. Perhaps Russia was recruiting Americans to help defeat it from within.

Atmosphere of Fear

During the late-'40's and early-'50's, the US government began targeting for investigation private citizens whom they considered Communists or Communist-leaning. Since many Hollywood actors, directors and writers were liberal or progressive in their political beliefs, it was thought by government officials that they could be vulnerable to recruitment efforts by the Russians. These internal, domestic operatives could destroy America from within.

Reportedly most of those in Hollywood accused of Communist activities were innocent. However, the fear that ran rampant in the movie capital caused people to wrongly accuse their peers of un-American activities. Anti-radicals in the government were all too eager to have their suspicions confirmed by those testifying. What drove these



people to cast aspersions upon their colleagues was a fear of jail time and worse, the fear that their careers and celebrity would be cut short.

When asked if scripts he read were pro-Communist, actor Gary Cooper responded that he didn't think so but that he read scripts only at night. It made no sense, but not much was making sense at the time. Charles Laughton received a cable about the death of a friend in Eastern Europe. He made a frantic call to the FBI explaining why he had received the wire assuming that FBI had intercepted it. Famed director Elia Kazan and actor Jose Ferrer both "named names." Threatened with losing their power and wealth, even the powerful studio heads were driven by fear and ordered their actors and directors to cooperate and be "friendly witnesses." The studios even made their employees sign statements avowing their loyalty to America and apologizing if they had ever done anything that appeared to be un-American. Lillian Hellman lost out on a million dollar contract for refusing to sign such a statement.

Political Expediency

Even the most casual observer of the political scene in America can readily see that the major concern of politicians is not necessarily taxes and building roads; rather, it is their own career and future. The years leading up to and succeeding the dark time of McCarthyism is no exception. A relatively short time after peace was declared in World War II, President Harry S. Truman launched the Cold War. America's enemy in the Cold War was identified as Russia and Communism setting the stage for the years of distrust culminating in the McCarthy years. One of Truman's political advisers told Truman point blank that if he meant to get his massive foreign program through the Congress, he must "scare the hell out of the country" which is precisely what he did. Truman used the environment to his benefit in his reelection run in 1948. Enemies of Truman's third-party challenger, Henry Wallace, testified to the House Committee that Wallace had Communists working on his campaign.

Lillian Hellman's viewed McCarthy, McCarran, Nixon and the others as opportunists. She had doubts that they believed much of what they said. They were men who invented and maligned and ruined lives in exchange for the attention gained from the high-minded position of chasing evil. Nixon was eager to believe that one of the witnesses before the Committee, Whittaker Chambers, hid state secrets inside a carved out pumpkin. He allegedly received the top-secret information from Alger Hiss. Hiss, who worked under the Franklin Roosevelt administration, was convicted and jailed for his actions. When the documents were found years later, there was nothing confidential in the material—it was all unimportant, non-classified information. Hellman recalled Nixon holding those same documents up to the camera indicating that it was evidence of the most treasonable activities ever launched against America. Hellman had a strong view of the future President: "Nixon is a villainous liar."

The material had been supplied by Whitaker Chambers who was viewed by most people who knew him as psychotic. Yet Nixon used the documents to his benefit and made no apology later when the material was proven to be bogus. The issue didn't

seem to be finding the truth; rather, it was using anything, now matter how questionable, that helped the anti-radicals prove their position.

Lillian theorized that Cold War anti-Communism ultimately led to both America's involvement in the Vietnam War and the election to President of the anti-radicals' hero, Richard M. Nixon. America had too easily forgotten his role in the McCarthy years.



Style

Perspective

No one could have better perspective to tell her story than Lillian Hellman herself. She lived through the anger, anguish and fear that was rife in the environment during the blacklist and McCarthy years. Being a renowned, professional writer Hellman, of course, is able to provide her account of those years in a logical, thoughtful and interesting way. Hellman provides the emotion and perspective of one of the principal targets of the anti-radical movement. Looking back to her college years, she admits to a measure of naivete.

in the ways of the world. As a young Jewish girl, she made the strange choice of attending a university in Bonn, Germany, just prior to World War II. Had she been more aware of current events, she would not have been surprised when her German improved to learn that her peers were anti-Semitic and boastfully talking about war.

Later, when the winds of change had already gathered in America, her naivete.

led her to believe that her country would never allow a time when private citizens could be targeted for not only their words but their thoughts. She was always taught to speak her mind which undoubtedly was beneficial in her chosen career as a writer. Signs of her altruism are apparent when trouble began to bubble up. Her reluctance to believe that the government would treat her unfairly stood in the way of her recognizing the danger that lurked for her, many of her friends and indeed the country. However, even though she was somewhat slow on the uptake, her ability to have strong convictions and to stick to them, allowed her to stand up to the unfair, illegal actions of the US government. In the end, she admits that Russia was a danger to the US and that she like many others should have realized it sooner. Again, however, she did nothing ever to help Russia.

Tone

Lillian Hellman who wrote "Scoundrel Time" and who lived it writes with the clarity and sophistication of a great writer. When the dark times began, Hellman was a non-political young writer. Current events did not interest her. Though the man she lived with Dashiell Hammett was a registered Communist, they never talked politics. She attended a few meetings with him, but she didn't pay attention to speakers preferring to people watch. Though not political, she greatly admired the seeming passion of the liberals and progressives she associated with. Hellman, however, never takes on a tone of "victim"—she never claims she was an innocent by-stander caught up in an unfair situation. Her description of the beginning of the dark period of distrust is descriptive not self-indulgent.



Even though the consequences of the situation she was in were grave—possible jail time, ruined career and reputation—Hellman is able to interject humorous comments and events throughout the account. When a speaker is sent by the anti-radicals to excoriate the "Commies," at a World Peace Meeting, Lillian is the next speaker and tells the man he should have waited until he got home to talk about them. In another instance, she visits an off-beat neighbor before her upcoming move. When she decides not to eat the "egg on shredded wheat" prepared for her farewell dinner, he must have been insulted. He loads a gift on the top of her car. Later she finds out it's a 50-pound bag of manure.

But of course most of the account is very serious and Hellman employs the appropriate serious tone. Surprisingly, Hellman shows no signs of bitterness. She took the years of oppression and personal damage in her stride. As she indicates near the end, life's pleasures as well as pains are the things that one's character is made of.

Structure

The book "Scoundrel Time" by Lillian Hellman consists of a 34-page introduction by Garry Wills who is the author of several books including "Nixon Agonistes" and "Bare Ruined Choirs." The introduction by Wills is written in a straight-forward, chronological style and explains the history and atmosphere leading up to the dark years of the blacklist and McCarthyism. The introduction is essential to those readers not familiar with the events of those years. Wills provides the historical details necessary to clearly understand Hellman's account of her experience during that era.

The remainder of the book is written by Hellman under the heading "Scoundrel Time" with no chapter headings or numbers and no hard breaks. The account by Lillian Hellman, who is a renowned playwright and screenwriter, not surprisingly is told in an interesting, artistic manner. She uses humor and anecdotal accounts in an engaging manner. Although the story moves along in a basically straight forward manner, at times Hellman makes vague and unclear references. It is while perusing these areas that the reader appreciates the clear-cut introduction provided by Wills. At times, Hellman employs a stream of consciousness style in that she deftly switches from one year to another time and back again in describing her feelings and experiences.

Quotes

"Senator Arthur Vandenberg had told Truman he must 'scare hell out of the country' if he meant to get his massive foreign program through the Congress. And that is what Truman did." (12)

"Clark Clifford, Truman's campaign strategist, identified Wallace as the principal threat to re-election in his famous memo of November 1947. He said Truman should head off this threat by 'some top-level appointments from the ranks of the progressives,' by offering civil rights programs ('the South can be...safely ignored'), and by 'isolating' Wallace: 'the Administration must persuade prominent liberals and progressives—and no one else—to move publicly into the fray. They must point out that the core of Wallace's backing is made up of Communists and fellow travelers.'" (24)

"But I don't want to write about my historical conclusions—it isn't my game. I tell myself that this third time out, if I stick to what I know, what happened to me, and a few others, I have a chance to write my own history of the time." (41)

"I said, 'I don't like to talk about convictions. I'm never sure I'm telling the truth.'" (65)

"We, as a people, agreed in the Fifties to swallow any nonsense that was repeated often enough, without examination of its meaning or investigation into its roots." (78)

"Very few people are capable of admitting anything so simple: the radical had to be made into an immoral man who justified murder, prison camps, torture, any means to an end. And, in fact, he sometimes was just that. But the anti-radical camp contained the same divisions: often they were honest and thoughtful men, often they were men who turned down a dark road for dark reasons." (85)

"Since when do you have to agree with people to defend them from injustice?" (85)

"But to hurt innocent people whom I knew many years ago in order to save myself, is to me, inhuman and indecent and dishonorable. I cannot and will not cut my conscience to fit this year's fashions, even though I long ago came to the conclusion that I was not a political person and could have no comfortable place in any political group." (93)

"Loss of money can take away what you like and have been good at, but in my case, I am now certain that without the trouble I would have stayed in one place, one frame too long. I am angry that corrupt and unjust men made me sell the only place that was ever right for me, but that doesn't have much to do with anything anymore, because there have been other places and they do fine." (126)

"I was learning that change, loss, an altered life, is only a danger when you become devoted to disaster." (134)



"We are a people who do not want to keep much of the past in our heads. It is considered unhealthy in America to remember mistakes, neurotic to think about them, psychotic to dwell upon them." (152)

"I have written here that I have recovered. I mean it only in a worldly sense because I do not believe in recovery. The past, with its pleasures, its rewards, its foolishness, its punishments, is there for each of us forever, and it should be." (155)



Topics for Discussion

The investigation of private citizens about their alleged un-American activities is generally referred to as "McCarthyism." What politician actually created the environment of mistrust that led to McCarthyism?

Why did Lillian Hellman believe that the mentality of the House Committee on Un-American Activities actually originated with the Russian Revolution of 1917?

Richard Nixon was a member of the House Committee on Un-American Activities. What role did he play and how did Hellman view his actions and motivations?

After World War II ended, President Truman launched the Cold War. How was fighting the Cold War connected to the investigation of private US citizens?

What signs existed after peace was won in World War II that America was not gearing down its wartime posture?

When Lillian Hellman testified before the House Committee on Un-American Activities in May of 1952, why was she dismissed without punishment?

When Hellman was working on a film in Italy after the hearings, who was following her and keeping tabs on her activities? How did she discover that she was being followed?