

On the Death of Lillian Hellman
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Lillian Hellman, born in 1905, was a much-honored author of plays, film scripts, and memoirs and an outspoken advocate for left-wing causes. For thirty years, she maintained a high profile relationship with the mystery writer Dashiell Hammett that ended in his death in 1961. She famously declared in a written statement distributed following a 1952 appearance before the House Un-American Activities Committee, which at the time was investigating communist influences in the arts, "I cannot and will not cut my conscience to fit this year's fashions." She was one of the most prominent and controversial women of her era.

But now it was the early 1980s and Lillian Hellman was well into her seventies and her health was failing drastically. Bronchial problems impeded her circulation and contributed to heart failure. A series of strokes reduced her ability to walk and, eventually, to even eat by herself. She had to be carried about and placed in chairs and fed her food. She ate less and less and lost weight until she was down to eighty pounds. At an event at which she managed to speak, a member of the audience reported being shattered to see her so emaciated and to hear her sputtering amid a terrible cough like a voice from the grave.

Glaucoma and cataracts reduced Lillian's eyesight to the point that she could no longer read the printed page. Unable to see well enough to write, she dictated her part of a co-authored cookbook and listened as her words were read back to her. One of the highlights of her life was when, a couple of times a week, a friend dropped by to read to her.

At times Lillian raged. She cried alone. She couldn't sleep. But her pride persisted to the end. Each morning, she managed to dress carefully and apply her make-up. Just a few days before she died, she showed up at a party elegantly dressed wearing a magnificent Russian amethyst necklace

Finally, on June 30, 1984, Lillian Hellman died.

Source: Alice Kessler Harris, *A Difficult Woman: The Challenging Life and Times of Lillian Hellman* (Bloomsbury Press: 2012).