

# **JAMES AGEE AND THE WOUNDED BODY**

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## ABSTRACT

JAMES A. CRANK: James Agee and the Wounded Body  
(Under the direction of Linda Wagner-Martin)

Of all American authors, poet/novelist James Agee might be one of the most misread and maligned. Overcome by his larger-than-life personality and biography, the work of Agee is frequently dismembered and read in pieces – mainly as works that might help to divine more of the author’s personal life and inner voice. This work calls for a reevaluation of the modern American fiction writer’s relationship to his text by working towards a new recognition of the aesthetic. In particular, this study seeks to re-imagine the wounded body of James Agee’s fiction as a whole entity with a discernable structure and singular voice. It takes as its unifying principle the peculiar obsession throughout Agee’s fiction with dismembered, tortured bodies. Unraveling the thread of this thematic preoccupation allows a careful reader of Agee’s fiction to plot a course for his career in fiction, from the hybridized *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* to the paternal nightmare of *A Death in the Family* and the ritual violence of *The Morning Watch*. The study will also discuss in detail – and for the first time – portions of Agee’s unpublished works that will help to fill in gaps between the author’s major fiction. By manifesting a clear and unified vision for Agee’s artistic endeavor, this study will help to construct not only a methodology for Agee’s fiction but also a new semiotics which emphasizes American modernist writers’ works on their own terms.

*for my mother and my brother:  
the two constants of absolute good in my life*

*...and to Daniel, my guardian angel*

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## **Introduction: The Wounded Body**

Of the number of articles and books that have come out about James Agee in the fifty years since his death, more than half are books of praise, mourning and remembrance. The man that James Agee seemed to be – the alcoholic, introspective literary hipster whose personal demons etched themselves onto every living page he wrote – has easily eclipsed the Agee who was writer, novelist, and poet. Like fellow American writer Thomas Wolfe, the bloated biographic persona of Agee has overwhelmed serious and sustained critical readings of his work. So entirely has the focus shifted to Agee’s life that the most recent book-length criticism on Agee must fly a distinct and curious caution banner for its readers: “This is a book that attempts to study what James Agee wrote as opposed to who he was or what he did when he wasn’t writing” (Spiegel 1).<sup>1</sup>

By the beginning of 2001, momentum seemed to be building for projects on James Agee. The longtime head of the Society for James Agee – a notoriously difficult obstacle in getting permission to work in Agee’s manuscript archives – stepped aside, and the new head of the organization, Paul Sprecher, husband to one of Agee’s daughters, opened material to critics and artists alike. Since that moment, work on Agee continues to grow stronger. Agee’s unpublished “America, Look at Your Shame” appeared in the relaunch issue of *The Oxford American*, and Michael Lofaro and Hugh Davis collected

Agee's previously unpublished journals from *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* in *James Agee Rediscovered*. Their book is only the first from the University of Tennessee Press of a multi-volume project that seeks to edit and publish all of Agee's manuscript work. For a man who had very little fame in his life and a writer who had no work in print at the time of his death, the sheer number of Agee's texts in circulation would suggest that there is a renewed interest in the author's writings.

Even so, while interest in James Agee's work continues to swell in 2007 – due in large part to current critical fascination with his complex and multi-layered photo-text *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* – Agee's fiction seems, for the most part, to be ignored, or quietly recognized as companions to his other, “more important” works. Critics have long pointed out Agee's intense interest in poetry, and more recently, scholars have begun to explore his film criticism and screenplays. However, his autobiographical Pulitzer Prize winning novel *A Death in the Family*, while still a popular choice on high schools' reading lists, has almost dropped completely off the critical radar, and his first slim novel, *The Morning Watch*, now out of print, has garnered less attention in the past twenty years than it received in the first ten of its publication.<sup>2</sup>

Critics who focus on James Agee's work seem one-sided. Even though his work within multiple fields presents Agee as a figure that could be discussed and claimed by several disciplines within the academy, few studies of Agee's work focus on more than one achievement. Those critics who appreciate his work in film criticism rarely discuss Agee's work in poetry or fiction, and while many critics are quick to praise Agee's intellect and potential in countless books of remembrance, they seldom focus on the

prodigious and talented work Agee displayed for photography, journalism, or even for fiction.

So, it seems that now, Agee has become a polarizing figure in critical estimation. Routinely heralded as a genius by his friends, mentors and acquaintances, Agee is currently imagined as an artist with immeasurable talent, but with little accomplishment in one genre, and his oeuvre is seldom discussed as a unified and whole body of achievement. What is most interesting throughout the critical debate on Agee, however, is the decline of articles, studies, or solid discussions of Agee's fiction. Such a lapse is puzzling; after all, the James Agee that is written about on the back of book covers is usually the "Pulitzer Prize" winning author of *A Death in the Family*. *The Morning Watch*, in many ways the prequel to *Death*, was once studied as the ultimate example of the "modern" novel through its use of theme, symbol and characterization. But serious work on both *A Death in the Family* and *The Morning Watch* hasn't taken place in over a decade.<sup>3</sup> With over thirty to forty unpublished short stories or fragments of novels and two major works of fiction, why has Agee's fiction suffered from critical apathy?

Part of the reason for the lack of activity surrounding Agee's fiction can be blamed on the difficulty of translating Agee's distinct and mannered prosaic style into American literature classes. Anthologies have always maintained a strained relationship with the author and his writing. Editors will sometimes include the "Near a Church" section from *Famous Men*, but more often than not, Agee's unclassifiable and largely insular writing doesn't lend itself easily to being broken piecemeal. Similarly, work on Agee's fiction ceases to challenge modern scholars. *A Death in the Family*, for example, seems an easily identifiable "Freudian" and "modern" exploration of Agee's childhood;



more a victim of its editor than Agee, *Death* refuses to deliver the complexity most contemporary critics want. From his earliest review in the 1940's, critics derided the simplicity of Agee's precocious and self-defeating style, and it seems now, sixty years later, critical interest in Agee's biography is experiencing something of a rebirth, while his work remains neglected and misread.

### **James Agee in Pieces**

Critics, for the most part, deny that Agee's fiction is a whole entity with a singular pre-occupation. Sections of *A Death in the Family* may be singled out as offering a structure on its own, and parts of *The Morning Watch* sometimes offer critics ideas that relate back to Agee's other interests. But Agee's fiction came to the reader in pieces. His body of fiction, wounded from neglect and sectioning, ceases to attract or interest scholars unless it somehow relates to another piece of the Agee puzzle – his swelling biography, or his interest in the cinematic, or photographic, for example. The de-emphasis on his achievement in fiction undermines Agee's credibility as author, but more than that, it encourages the unsatisfying and fruitless “work” that continues supposedly on Agee's behalf, including books of essays from admirers and acquaintances. The first work of any serious study that attempts to identify and analyze a coherent structure and voice in Agee's fiction must be recognition of its broken, wounded and fragmented place in American letters.

It's no surprise that Agee suffers from problems of split narrations, sectioning, and fragments – even his last editor David McDowell, while attempting to create a

workable manuscript from Agee's plan for *A Death in the Family*, inserted the previously published piece "Knoxville: Summer, 1915" as the prologue to Agee's novel.<sup>4</sup>

McDowell discusses the problem of several fragments in the manuscript "outside the time span of the basic story." Rather than integrate them into the story, McDowell chooses to "print [them] in italics and to put them after Parts I and II" (*Death* vii). Even Agee's editors could only conceive of his work in sections and fragments, and as the newly edited volume of Agee's *A Death in the Family* suggests, McDowell's piecing together of Agee's manuscript may have been done with little understanding of what Agee was trying to accomplish.

We must assume, too, that Agee's style invites readers to conceive of his art as being broken and fragmented. His most famous book – the gargantuan *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* – virtually assaults the reader with a kind of futility. By the end of his book, Agee tells us that the work is essentially not a book, but intended to be the first volume in a study in human actuality that will be the opening movement of his grand endeavor in fiction, photography and journalism. His digressive style, not just in *Famous Men* but throughout his screenplays, journalism, and poetry, suggests that Agee himself conceived of his narratives not as straight lines, but as coiling spirals that eventually lose their momentum. McDowell tacitly acknowledges as much when he notes that there is no way to completely understand Agee's trajectory for *A Death in the Family*, "for he was a tireless and painstaking writer" (viii). I believe that Agee's complexity came from his sense of brokenness. Attempting to understand any of his books or pieces of art as a whole entity seems impossible, and fracturing the art into bite-size pieces yields multiple opportunities to relate to some idea of what Agee was trying to do.

Agee's emphasis – often in his narratives – on his “failure” as an artist also connects with the perception of his work and words as broken or fractured. There may be no author who was more self-critical, or, at the very least, so fervent about detailing his paranoia over the inability to express himself as Agee seems to have been. Agee's serious work in fiction is always superseded, it seems, by the author's thoughtful and deliberate deconstruction of his own work. While *Famous Men* is a testament to that fact, *The Morning Watch*, *A Death in the Family*, and even Agee's short prose echo the author's perceived failure of his ideas. Agee's own self-criticism suggests that any one part or fragment of his work is just as terrible as another. In short, Agee's emphasis on his failure has a leveling effect on the perception of his fiction, especially by first-time readers. The notion of Agee in pieces makes sense, then, to a reader who feels as though Agee makes the case that his fiction does not do the work he intends.

The critical conception of Agee in pieces is also due to his vast and complicated work in a number of areas, disciplines and fields. His friend W.M. Frohock writes of Agee's “wasted talent” in his *Novel of Violence in America*, “America now maintains so many areas in which a creative talent can find room for exercise that a writer whose gifts at one time would have assured us a long series of good fictions is now invited to divert his energies in a dozen different directions” (212). Indeed Agee's unintentionally hilarious application for a Guggenheim Fellowship, “Plans for Work: October 1937” is full of tremendous ideas and projects that seem to spin in different directions. Some of the projects he envisions for himself include, “A study in the pathology of ‘laziness.’ A new type of horror story...A true account of a jazz band,” and “New forms of ‘poetry.’” (*Collected Prose* 148-149). In his most modern novel, *A Death in the Family*, Agee

engages poetry, autobiography, and cinema to work through his complex ideas about his father. In *Famous Men*, Agee again returns to poetry, historical musings, anthropology and ethnography, as well as photography, journalism and fiction to suggest the lives of tenant farmers to his reader. The spectrum of disciplines and methods of writing – ways of seeing, Agee might have called them – suggests a work in pieces, art that organizes itself around disparateness and sectioning.

“Whenever Agee had to state his occupation,” Frohock writes, “he simply put down ‘writer’ – not journalist or novelist or poet. He was fully aware of how many different kinds of writing could give him satisfaction, and of how little he wanted to give himself to one, excluding the others” (230). While Frohock deems such diversions a waste of real talent in fiction, Agee’s experimentation has, in fact, kept him a relevant figure of American letters. Such modern American novelists as Fitzgerald or DosPassos seem to be declining from the academy, but Agee’s experimental *Famous Men* has seen a dramatic increase in scholarship in the last two decades. But the same experimentation with forms and genres that keeps Agee relevant also makes his endeavor in fiction problematic.

And it is precisely because critics and readers find Agee’s movement in works like *A Death in the Family*, *The Morning Watch*, and *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* so diverse, contradictory, and filled with a sense of defeat that his fiction is now “problematic” in the collective imagination of American letters. The work itself is polarizing, with critics suggesting Agee’s absolute importance to twentieth century experimental literature<sup>5</sup> and the countless critics – many from Agee’s day – who labeled his work as misguided, confused and poorly written. For all these reasons, it’s easy to

understand why Agee's fiction is not imagined as a unified movement in contemporary criticism, or why Agee, when he is read, is read in fragments, his work a wounded and broken body that suggests his talent existed in other areas.

This project takes issue with the way Agee's fiction is understood. It takes as its basic principle that Agee's fiction is a unified endeavor with a distinct voice and deliberate, singular structure. The trajectory of Agee's work in fiction is clear and evident not only in his major works of fiction, but also in his unpublished shorter fiction and *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, his hybridized meta-treatise on the importance of fiction. The structure is at once thematic and philosophical, and engages with the critical response that argues that Agee simply wrote his bloated autobiography into his work, shifted his literary focus throughout his fiction from the personal to the academic, and lost himself in a digressive and self-bullying style. This work answers the idea that Agee wasted his talents in fiction on journalism or poetry, and instead refocuses attention on both Agee's accomplishments in fiction, and their importance to understanding Agee's experimentation with other forms, genres and disciplines.

### **Towards a Unified Idea of Agee's Fiction**

Before discussing the details of unifying Agee's fiction, one must first attempt to answer the questions – Why is the idea of wholeness important to understanding Agee's fiction? For an artist so interested in different methods and ways of seeing, why does unity matter? The importance of unity is offered by Agee himself, who constantly was in search of not just the minutiae of an experience but how the totality of an idea or

possibility shaped our understanding of it. In his *The Creative Process of James Agee*, James Lowe emphasizes Agee's embracing of what he terms "disparateness," but offers, "Despite Agee's important and continuing concern for the disparateness of quotidian experience and mundane things on a lower particular level...he does accept the notion of a higher unity realizable through bodily and spiritual, as well as intellectual, senses – the ultimate sacred coherence of the universe on a cosmic level" (25).<sup>6</sup>

Agee was constantly involved in getting to the center of his subject. He frequently, however, discovered that the wholeness of any project inevitably brought him back to a largeness that he was not capable of wholly enveloping. Talking to Father Flye about his subject in *Famous Men*, he writes, "My trouble is, such a subject cannot be seriously looked at without intensifying itself toward a centre which is beyond what I, or anyone else, is capable of writing of: the whole problem and nature of existence" (*Letters* 104-105). Agee recognizes that his purpose is to attempt to portray the totality of human experience, but that such a project, inevitably, cannot be properly done. But one notes that Agee's movement is towards unity and unification, not fragmentation and disparateness. He privileged the idea of wholeness and unity as one of his central motivations in writing. It makes sense, then, that when we talk about Agee's structure and plan for his fiction that we explore Agee's fiction as a movement towards unity, despite the messy and sometimes fragmented approach that rises from – among other things – his style, his sometimes contradictory approaches to writing, and his myriad interests.

This work is certainly not the first study to suggest that Agee's fiction – or, for that matter, his entire artistic enterprise – was unified, but of the number of articles and

books on Agee in recent years, this study will be one of the first to offer an approach to reading Agee's fiction – as opposed, say, to his journalism and film criticism – as a unified movement that moves towards a finite conclusion. Alan Spiegel's book, which I mentioned above, inspired a good deal of my thoughts for this study, and is clearly one of the first studies on Agee to break from the critical approach that, in his words, "compartmentalize[s] Agee's creations, and perpetuate[s] the truism that this author worked in widely different forms and genres and did unique but unconnectable work in all of them" (18).<sup>7</sup> This volume, while focused centrally on the work Agee did in fiction, also suggests a larger study that examines Agee's work in cinema, criticism, journalism and photography as a part of an artistic exploration of the interconnections between the inward world of the author and the problem of representation. But is in Agee's fiction, the now misread and under-appreciated part of the author's larger body of work, that one finds Agee's purpose and movement in clear and discernable moments. The work Agee does in his novels, short stories, and, to a lesser extent, in his fusion of fiction, journalism and autobiography *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* articulates a position that anticipates and involves Agee's other, equally important and engaging work for *Fortune*, *Time*, and *The Nation*.

If we are to imagine Agee's fiction as a single oeuvre, with a discernible trajectory and focused voice, the question next becomes: What is Agee moving towards in his fiction? For their part, critics have suggested that Agee's motivation in his effort in fiction largely concerns working through the loss of his father, working through his tumultuous autobiography, and exorcising personal demons. While there is a certain degree of truth to these assumptions, none satisfactorily answers the question posed

above. One thematic current that may suggest an answer is Agee's obsession with violence. Just as Agee's own personal biography is repeatedly integrated into his fiction, Agee frequently explores the gruesome: his fiction is full of dismembered, tortured and wounded bodies. Nowhere is his emphasis on the macabre and violent more clear than in the now-restored edition of *A Death in the Family*, where Agee's idyllic "Knoxville: Summer, 1915" has been replaced by a nightmarish opening sequence which has Agee in his pseudo-author persona relating an experience of trying to drag a rapidly disintegrating victim of a mob attack to a safe place.

About Agee's seeming obsession with the violent and the dark, little has been written. Even though Agee frequently comes back to brutal and often terrifying visions of torture, decapitation and violence, critics have either ignored them or written them off as meandering imagery. But what strikes the careful reader of Agee is how these violent visions transform themselves into meditations on the problem of representing the inward world of the author to his readers. Agee's violent digressions always mirror distortions of memory, contemplation – even composition – that plague him as he tries to work his inner consciousness into a work of art. Frequently, these problems are so abundant and difficult that Agee will admit defeat even as he writes them into existence. But the images of violence and brutality are not just thematic underpinnings or recurring tropes; they are markers that signal Agee's insistence on and anguish over making the personal artistic.

Indeed, one could argue that the unity of Agee's fiction comes from the recognition of his inability – or at least his paranoia over the possibility of failure – to connect his subject matter with his writing or his readership. The wounded body acts as



authorial trope for this paranoia and failure, but more than that, it echoes the single, traumatic and inescapable loss of Agee's life – the violent and debilitating loss of his father. Critics who push the assumption that Agee's artistic trajectory is heavily invested in his father are not wrong: *The Morning Watch*, *A Death in the Family*, Agee's interest in cinema and Charlie Chaplin, and his exploration of Alabama tenant farmers all engage the loss of his father. However, in all of his fiction, Agee moves beyond the simple exploration of the loss into artistic meditations on the (im)possibility of recovering from memory the feelings of being a child (*Death*) or adolescent spiritual reconsiderations (*Morning Watch*).

Exploring the violent in Agee's fiction offers insight not only into Agee's structure for his fiction but also into the problems inherent in composition and reflection. The emphasis on the violent in each piece arranges itself in different ways. In *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, for example, images of the freakish and disfigured are often invoked as commentary not only on Agee's feelings of alienation but also his difficulties in composition and the paranoia over the possibility of creating a disfigured and incoherent narrative. In *A Death in the Family*, Agee's emphasis on the violent shifts into a meditation on both the violent disruption of his childhood as well as the difficulty of translating personal memory into fiction. In both cases, Agee comes back to the trope of violence and disfigurement not just as structural elements that create familiar narratives but as moments that signify and comment on the difficulty of composition and translation.

These moments where Agee focuses on the body also give the careful reader the ability to understand how Agee constructs gender and race in his fiction. On this front,

there is almost no critical discussion.<sup>8</sup> However, many of the moments of violence in Agee's fiction connect with gender and race. In his unpublished fiction, Agee explores several semi-autobiographical moments of witnessing the effects of racial violence – the beating of African Americans, a dying black man in the middle of the road – and tortures himself over his inability to do anything, and in some cases, to feel anything. Similarly, both *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and *A Death in the Family* imagine worlds for the masculine and the feminine that often collide in violent and terrifying ways.

It is surprising that in a critical landscape that is so interested in exploring Agee's work through his various tropes<sup>9</sup> there is no concrete study of the clearest and most disturbing of all of Agee's obsessions. The omission is particularly surprising because of its prominence throughout not just Agee's fiction but his entire artistic endeavor. The wounded body is emblematic of Agee's concern for artistic problems that mattered to him most, chiefly of composition, of translating the personal into fiction or objective reporting, and, finally, of coming to terms with his own shattered biography. For these reasons, an examination of the through-current of violence from Agee's earliest narrative voice in *Famous Men* to his final, unfinished artistic achievement in *A Death in the Family* offers plausible and concrete solutions to understanding Agee's myriad and contradictory pursuits – even within his works of fiction – as a structured and unified exploration.

### **This Study – James Agee and the Wounded Body**

As I mentioned above, this study seeks to imagine the wounded body of James Agee's fiction as a whole entity with a discernible structure and singular voice. It takes

as its unifying principle the peculiar obsession throughout Agee's fiction with dismembered, tortured bodies. Unraveling the thread of this thematic preoccupation allows a careful reader of Agee's fiction to plot a course for his career in fiction. By manifesting a clear and unified vision for Agee's artistic endeavor, this study helps to construct a methodology for his fiction that restores portions of the author's work that have been deemed adolescent, over-written or melodramatic by critics.

This study begins to formulate Agee's fiction taking its cue from Alan Spiegel's *James Agee and the Legend of Himself*, which argues for recognition of Agee's work as a cohesive endeavor that must be read independent of his biography. Because Agee is, as Spiegel declares, more of a "distinct fragment of public romance" (1) than American writer, he has suffered from a readership more concerned with his biography than his work. Agee's predicament is the same as many modern, American fiction writers (including Hemingway and Wolfe) whose personal lives have been the subject of critics rather than their body of work. This project imagines Agee's work as separate from his life, and by doing so, takes as one of its defining principles the emphasis on the lost aesthetic in critical inquiry on canonical American authors of the twentieth century. Through an in-depth study of Agee's fiction, I argue that reading twentieth century American authors of fiction requires critical de-personalization, in turn, opening up a space for arguments about the value of work on its own terms.

I first start with Agee's hybridized memoir/sociological treatise *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. This book-of-the-moment is a useful place to start an exploration of Agee's fiction because it is his earliest book and anticipates the problems and artistic concerns that will matter to Agee throughout his career. I look at Agee's rhetoric of

failure – including his failure to connect to a readership and the failure to translate the personal into the communal – and connect it with visions of violence throughout *Famous Men*. Reading Agee’s hybridized text as a meta-treatise on the usefulness of fiction, I argue that *Famous Men* anticipates Agee’s megalomania and paranoia over the purpose of fiction and art that will recur in his later works. I emphasize the sympathetic re-gendering of bodies throughout the text and note as well Agee’s pre-occupation with failure as rhetorical signifier. Following the trajectory of his cryptic opening, I plot a course for *Famous Men* to be read as a descent into an American nightmare. Finally, with the idea of body-as-text, I discuss ways in which *Famous Men* presents real possibilities for reading Agee’s semi-autobiographical fiction.

In my chapter on *Famous Men*, I also argue that Agee is obsessed with presenting the bodies of the tenant farmers as objects of life, not art. His minute descriptions of their clothes, bodies and posture, however, fail to produce his need for absolute reality. Only through transcending that description and moving inside of his objects does Agee truly attain any kind of truthful representation of their lives. His goal shifts from producing the minutiae of the farmers’ appearance to capturing their very soul. These differing aims necessitate that Agee explore the fictive as a viable solution to his increasingly cynical problem of connecting his personal and inward experience with his audience.

Chapter Two examines Agee’s short novel *The Morning Watch*. Initially imagined as a sequel to Agee’s *A Death in the Family*, critics seldom argue that, with its emphasis on ritual violence and the purging of the body, *The Morning Watch* actually anticipates problems Agee will resolve later in *A Death in the Family*. The novella, which explores Agee’s adolescence in much the same way *Death* explores his childhood,

focuses on religious purification and self-torture as acts that offer potential enlightenment and understanding. By the end of the novella, however, Agee denies that these possibilities create any sense of deeper understanding for his main character Richard (who, in earlier versions of the manuscript is named Rufus after the protagonist of *A Death in the Family*), and instead looks to the image of his character's dead father as a possible way of understanding his identity that is both spiritual and rooted in the actual world.

For these reasons, I argue that *The Morning Watch*'s emphasis on imagined ritual violence connects with and anticipates the paternal nightmare Agee imagines at the beginning of *A Death in the Family*. Similarly, I locate both works in the tradition of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* through Agee's implicit expression of anxieties over megalomania and paranoia about miscommunication. I argue that all three of Agee's "major works" anticipate, re-imagine and contest one another's notions of identity and offer their own unique solutions to the problem of writing the inward.

In Chapter Three, I look at Agee's most famous "modern novel," *A Death in the Family*. I argue that violence in *A Death in the Family* is preliminary and unwritten. Instead of being a recurring trope as it is in *The Morning Watch*, violence in *A Death in the Family* is understood through its imagined vacancy. Rufus's attempt to imagine the death of his father ultimately gives way to the image of his dead body on the side of the road. Rufus picks clean the body's positioning, relishing the details of the lifeless body, until he has satisfied himself in the imagining. The fact that both images of the body and violence have to be imagined in *A Death in the Family* produces their emphasis. The purposeful absence of both the father's body and descriptions of his death link both ideas.

But the relationship between absent body and imagined violence isn't simply the domain of the father. Rufus's progression through the novel then becomes inward, sparked by the imagined violence of his father's car accident. His own imagined body becomes doubled in his memory of that night, where he feels as though he is torn "into two creatures" (78). The novel's reliance on memory forces the representation of bodies into intense signifiers whose ability to be recalled often verges on reconstitution, a violent act itself on the original character imagined early in the novel.

I also discuss the differences between the 1952 novel, heavily edited by McDowell, and the re-edited 2007 edition by Michael Lofaro. The new edition, which presumably follows Agee's initial plan without editorial intrusion and sectioning, enrages violence more strongly as a lens through which Agee inserts his own views about making the personal fictive. From the nightmarish opening, where Agee imagines dragging a disintegrating body to safety, to a new scene where Rufus' father assaults the owner of a carnival game where patrons throw baseballs at an African American man, I argue this new edition clearly manifests Agee's obsession with violence as an objective correlative for problems of translating the inward and personal into fiction.

The final chapter explores Agee's obsession with racial violence mainly in his unpublished shorter fiction from the archives at the Harry Ransom Center in Austin, TX and at the University of Tennessee's facilities in Knoxville, TN. Though there is little critical discussion of the way Agee uses race in his fiction, I argue that racial violence – especially race riots, lynching and mob beatings – figures heavily in Agee's consciousness as a writer. Looking at his letters to Father Flye, as well as several political pieces Agee began on segregation and race riots, I suggest that Agee's interest in

African Americans is not just political, but was, in fact, connected to his obsession with violence as a means of resolving problems of representation and identity.

Next, I look at several of Agee's unpublished fragmented texts, as well as sections of *Famous Men* and *A Death in the Family*, where Agee uses racial violence as a way of interrogating and exorcising his own personal guilt over his wordless inaction. In these scenes and fragments, Agee invokes the crippled and wounded body to both affect his reader and document his own disturbing, emotional detachment from political problems of African Americans. Later, Agee will use that detachment in literal ways to torture himself into a distinct emotional reaction in much the same way he does throughout *Famous Men*. Through this study, I complete a picture of Agee's fiction as a singular, though multivocal, work.

. . . . .

Agee's obsession with the space around violence – before the act and after – distances his reader from a direct connection with his representative bodies. Here, Agee's characters serve as models to be created, attacked, and replenished, and their movement in the text is frequently inward. Imagined violence or the possibility for violence become less threatening within the context of his characters' existence.

For this reason, Agee's characters frequently retreat from their body in favor of their "soul." For Rufus, his father's violence of absence forces an inward chasm that eventually creates his birth as a spiritual being. Only through his newfound spiritual understanding does Rufus begin to come to terms with both his and the lost body of his

father. For Richard, the body becomes baggage that must be sacrificed in order to find some peace. Like Christ, he offers his body as atonement for sin, but his body is not deified, is human. He comes to embrace the rootless-ness of the “bodiless shell” of the locust as a symbol of his soul’s reunification.

For Agee, the essence of his characters – and, indeed, himself – doesn’t rest within the body. Violent acts on the body can be purifying (as for Richard) or echo deeper truths (as in the receding black bodies, victims of unspeakable violence), but their function in Agee’s text reminds the reader of the possibility for redemption. Absence creates abundance, and violence on a body creates restoration and fulfillment. Agee is finally not concerned with the truths gleaned from the body, but rather, the concert of both body and soul that can only be experienced from an acknowledgement of the human spirit.

Understanding how the wounded body works in Agee’s fiction also makes a case for Agee’s place in the American canon. Right now, it is difficult to articulate Agee’s place within American letters. More often than not, he is read as a lesser American author, someone whose work is best understood in relationship to major figures of his time such as Faulkner or Fitzgerald. Few editors include him in their anthologies, and his texts are seldom taught in surveys. One reason that James Agee’s status as major American author is faltering might be because of a perceived adolescence in his writing that lessens the work for the scholar-critic. Among the charges leveled at Agee both in his time and by more contemporary critics, the indictment of melodrama and exaggeration seems to exasperate many readers who find his language immature, coltish and overdrawn. The emphasis on violence, violent physical action, or descriptions of



violence permeate Agee's entire fictive universe, and might be emblematic of the kind of supposed amateurism to which some critics object.

But Agee's perceived literary failure can also be read, especially with knowledge of contemporary theories of the body, as an attempt to complicate his relationship as author to his author-persona, audience, and characters. Violent action inflicted on bodies in Agee's world might well mirror intellectual struggles between subject and author, or could be emblematic of the misuse of fictive bodily representation. What I do in this study is examine the way the body is (mis)used in Agee's fiction, and what violent action to these (re)created bodies means in the context of their self-negating existence.

Finally, Agee's emphasis on violence and his complex relationship to his characters' bodies become important not only for thematic unity with the rest of his work but also in its reclamation of key segments of his fiction that are often labeled "difficult," "adolescent," or "over-written." Understanding Agee's own concept of bodily representation deepens the possibility for large portions of his work to be re-classified within his own canon and in the larger literature of America.

Too often, Agee's critics try to deny complexity in his fiction, focusing instead on how his novels and stories lose themselves in their own intricacies, or "fail." They insist his real talent was for journalism, film reviews, and poetry; in this view, the fiction is important only as a bridge to understanding the man James Agee, and is often read as straight autobiography. Such estimation reduces Agee's tremendous adeptness in the structure and content of fiction to selfish myth making. But Agee's artistic concerns deny reduction; they are complex, and multi-layered. It is finally time to refuse to continue with the assumption that, to Agee, fiction didn't matter, that he privileged the

poetic sensibility<sup>10</sup> or the cinematic eye<sup>11</sup>, for it is fiction that he turned to in the last years of his life. It is in Agee's fiction that one finds the culminating artistic vision began as a precocious student at St. Andrew's.

## **Chapter One: “A Piece of the Body Torn out By the Roots”:**

### **Failure, Language and the Limits of Fiction in**

#### ***Let Us Now Praise Famous Men***

“If I could do it, I'd do no writing at all here....A piece of the body torn out by the roots  
might be more to the point.”  
– *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*

It might seem strange to begin a book ostensibly about James Agee's fiction with an exploration of his best-known and most prolific “non-fictional” effort, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Blending the aesthetic of genres like the novel, memoir and magazine articles, the book itself is a somewhat schizophrenic attempt to address multiple points of view simultaneously. Its relegation to the genre of non-fiction may be solely out of necessity for contemporary readers, but this hulking text is also the best starting point for a study of the formulation of Agee's burgeoning aesthetic for effective writing. In it, he grapples with the problems inherent in representing subjects, and laments the unavoidable turn to fictionalize. Though Agee is obsessed with remaining strictly detached in his relationship to the tenant farmers he writes about, he cannot sustain such a limited perspective; in turn, the book becomes more of an exploration of Agee's shifting perspective between detachment and extreme subjectivity. He recognizes that his achievement will, at some point, require imagination and invention, and though

he resists it – sometimes desperately so – Agee must finally come to terms with his failure to remain the objective and bodiless documentary writer.

*Famous Men*'s usefulness in relation to Agee's fiction lies in its self-conscious, post-modern analysis of what drives subject and author to move so inescapably towards fiction. In this book, Agee argues, the fictional approach is easiest, and consequentially, not worth his time as a writer, nor the reader's. Serious readers won't be fooled, however, as Agee engages in a thorough re-writing of the lives of the tenant farmers he comes to know. The disconnection between Agee's thoughts on fiction and his attempts at it raise some interesting questions for what *Famous Men* might represent. Though it is a book written early in Agee's career, *Famous Men* really sets up a rubric for understanding Agee's concerns with how fiction operates. Even as he acknowledges the expectation of the aesthetic, he spends countless, artful pages denuding it, until what's left is a self-described wreck of distorted actualities. He begs the reader not think of it as art, while simultaneously arguing for some intrinsic aesthetic in his subjects, the tenant families, themselves. Consequently, any study that aims to argue for true value in Agee's fiction, must first answer the questions he poses to himself and his readers in *Famous Men*, especially, "What is it that fiction can accomplish in a humanistic sense?" The question gets translated, asked and re-asked throughout the book, but finally, Agee ends his bloated book acknowledging both the usefulness and limits of fictional representation.

It's also useful to start with *Famous Men* because, unlike his fiction, it is Agee's book of the moment, and has been that for over twenty years. It has been the subject of more articles, dissertations and books than any other Agee work. The current critical fascination with it might have stunned Agee, who described the work throughout as an

effort in futility, a failure. Even in its initial reception, Agee and Evans' book was barely noticed. In spite of a red herring of a quotation by Marx as one of its epigraphs, and a pugilistic, bitter and sarcastic tone, *Famous Men* garnered little comment. The few early reviews of the book were negative and oddly dismissive. Most critics saw it – perhaps justifiably – as an attempt to describe the tenant farmers that failed, ultimately, into a description of Agee himself.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps more puzzling, the bullying text seemed harmless.<sup>13</sup> Why had *Famous Men*, this monument of antagonism, failed to provoke?

Agee's text was anything but innocuous. In his preamble to the work, he questioned the intentions of everyone involved with the publishing his book, including *Fortune* (the magazine that had sent Agee to do the work for an article), himself and the reader:

It seems to me curious, not to say obscene and thoroughly terrifying that it could occur to an association of human beings drawn together through need and chance and for profit into a company, an organ of journalism, to pry intimately into the lives of an undefended and appallingly damaged group of human beings...for the purpose of parading the nakedness, disadvantage and humiliation of these lives before another group of human beings (7).

Obviously, implicit within this indictment against the magazine is a similar indictment against the reader and the author, both the composer and audience of human misery and pain. (One indicted for “pry[ing] for “profit” and thereby being complicit with the magazine, and the other for the crime of voyeurism). No one is left unscathed, save the subjects, the “undefended” poor rural farmers that Agee writes about. Agee's authorial tone in his introduction is clearly not inviting. And perhaps one reason that *Famous Men* seemed so innocuous at the time was that its overall tone, though rough and threatening, was also filled with a sense of its own inevitable failure and defeat. The book seemed to

be an indictment against itself, a plea for commonality that knew it could not connect with anyone. It chastised the magazine for sponsoring such a story, the reader for buying into its voyeurism, and, indeed, the author for creating it. In short, its antagonism was so divided, that it seemed impossible to localize it to a specific group. So *Famous Men* came into print, and quickly went – without surprise, shock or controversy: least surprised of all was Agee himself.

This final failure of communication, as I have said, was simply one of the many links on the chain of failures that is at the heart of *Famous Men*'s structure. First and foremost, the creation of the book itself is testament to its failure in a humanistic sense.<sup>14</sup> By creating a “work” or a “book,” or “art,” Agee felt he was tacitly undermining the very real lives he was documenting. By writing the farmers' lives into his book, Agee was upsetting the delicate balance he had hoped to walk between being a sympathizing author (and friend) and a detached, speculative reporter. It's no surprise, then, that in the preamble to his book, Agee makes clear that even the creation of his text is against his better judgment: “If I could do it, I'd do no writing at all here...As it is, though, I'll do what little I can in writing. Only it will be very little. I'm not capable of it; and if I were, you would not go near it all. For if you did, you would hardly bear to live” (13). Immediately, Agee defines the book as a practice in futility; he recognizes that even the recording of his thoughts and experiences into text is counter-intuitive and will, ultimately, fail. “As a matter of fact,” he continues, “nothing I might write could make any difference, whatever. It would only be a ‘book’ at best.” Agee did not want to make a book; he wanted to affect some kind of change or, at the very least, present a useful and life-altering experience for the reader.

So, by the very opening of *Famous Men*, it's clear to readers that Agee's "book" is more than what they are accustomed to. *Famous Men* is nothing less than an interrogation of a book's (or an author's) usefulness in the process of human endeavor. His motive is simple: "[to] tell this [the tenant farmer's story] as exactly and clearly as I can and get the damned thing done with," but in order to document exactly what he intends, Agee must divide the writing into four distinct planes: "...reception, contemplation"; "as it happened: the straight narrative..."; "by recall and memory from the present"; and "as I try to write it: problems of recording" (243).<sup>15</sup> These differing aims necessitate seamless and unconscious movements between the actual (straight narrative and problems of writing) and the fictional (recall and contemplation). The hybridization of these forms manifests itself violently in *Famous Men* from Agee's deathly serious and even brutal tone to the graphic descriptions of bodies being torn asunder. Agee's assertion that his book would work better as a reproduced dismembered corpse anticipates the problems of later chapters, when Agee has to finally acknowledge imagination and fiction as viable alternatives to realistic documentation. The image of the shattered body reflects the fragmented and piecemeal narrative as well as the confusion and horror of the awful conditions in which his subjects live.

So, then, a central question of the book becomes in what way failure operates as a dominant rhetoric for fiction's intrusion into actuality. In this respect, of course, most critics agree that Agee's book is far from a failure. Though it failed to gain the proper acknowledgement during its first publication, *Famous Men* has become one of the most widely studied texts of the documentary period in America. Its author, virtually unknown at the time of his death in 1955, has become something of a myth, a cultural and literary

legend. On many levels, the text succeeds in connecting author and reader, reader and subject, and author and subject, and it is from this fertile ground, from this recognition of the success of *Famous Men*, that we can begin to understand Agee's translations of "failure" and what exactly it means in the context of his book, and indeed, his work in fiction.

Each strand of failure in *Famous Men* – the linguistic breakdown of words' ability to embody the actual, the paranoia over the failure of real communication between author and reader, and the failure of the aesthetic to produce meaning – become signature movements in Agee's later fiction. In *Famous Men*, Agee presents them as nascent problems inherent in the messy business of recreating meaningful experiences that make some kind of deep impact between author and reader, but, far from being a one-book problem, these concerns exist in slightly less obvious ways throughout his career. In *Famous Men*, the careful reader of Agee's work can see them articulated first, so that this book is the best place to start an exploration of Agee's fiction if only for the reason that it anticipates Agee's perspective on the limits of fiction's usefulness. In *Famous Men*, the reader feels a cyclone of movement in contradictory directions, but for the Agee scholar, this is decidedly a movement towards something – a resolution of sorts – that attempts to reconcile Agee's humanism, his deep compassion and sympathy, with the production of a practical and self-sustaining work of actuality. That *Famous Men* fails to bring this whirlwind of movement to a satisfactory or static conclusion is beside the point; what does matter is that Agee participates in the argument, creating a work that asks the questions that will matter most to his career as a writer.



## Rhetoric of Failure: Linguistic Limits

The easiest place to start a discussion of failure is with Agee's language, which is confusing, self-absorbed, antagonistic and richly varied. His arguments and descriptions involve the microscopic and gargantuan on the same plane. His prose can be short and literal, or can twist and turn around itself in a dizzying philosophical phrase. Ask any first time reader what is most memorable about Agee's book, and he will answer – the complex language. Perhaps the most important subject of recent criticism about *Famous Men*<sup>16</sup> has to do with this same attempt to piece together a meaning from the words of the book, to attempt to locate a structure within the vastly different forms and moods of Agee's prose. In this book, one can locate the first pieces of Agee's prose style, with its self-reflexive digressions and the supra-detailed descriptions of the mundane. *Famous Men* is, as it should be as a first book, James Agee at both his messiest and his most precocious. Maybe what is most important about Agee's style in *Famous Men* lies in the honesty of its unedited and unashamed critique of itself.

Questions of how to formulate adequately the subjects of his book bothered Agee greatly. In his journals, he documents his struggle between a simplistic goal and its complex translation into words: "Why can I not write it in complete simplicity, yielding notice that of course it is incomplete, and working only for the completest possible clarity."<sup>17</sup> For Agee, as newspaper reporter, detached documenter, the subject is easy to formulate through laundry lists of furniture, and clothing, but for Agee the writer, the experience of the tenant farmer is so vastly complicated that its translation into text is almost impossible. Instead of expressing simplicity, Agee errs on the side of the vast, the

gargantuan, fully aware that as he does so he is intimidating, confusing, and possibly boring his reader.<sup>18</sup>

A large part of the book is made up of great paranoia over how his language is being interpreted. But Agee saves his longest digressions about language attempting to edify his reader about the inherent failures of words themselves. Reverting to his textual phobia at the beginning of the book, Agee rants against the simultaneous usefulness and inconsequence of written language itself. “Words could, I believe, be made to do or to tell anything within human conceit,” Agee writes, but adds a sentence later, “But it must be added of words that they are the most inevitably inaccurate of all mediums of record and communication” (236). Despite his misgivings about the impossibility of words to convey direct and meaningful ideas, Agee is palpably aware of the irony that his section of the book (as opposed to Walker Evans’ “book” of photographs that begins the endeavor) *must* be expressed through the medium of written language.

The rage against textual description at the very beginning of the introduction obviously confuses casual readers and critics, and because of his digressions on inaccuracies and falsifications within his own chosen medium, Agee severely undercuts his credibility as a writer. However, by calling attention to a fundamental failure of not just his own writing but the act of writing itself, Agee begins a crucial debate in *Famous Men* between the potential for meaningful expression and communication and the failure of its translation to the audience. By the end of his introduction, Agee has admitted defeat on all fronts, but the next 400 pages argue simply by their inclusion that Agee’s textual phobia is at least partly a moot argument. Here, as in other places through the book, failure is rhetoric, a method of arguing a position, and is not meant to be seriously

considered as a final position. If most critics took Agee at his word, as many early reviewers did, it's understandable why *Famous Men* might have seemed like a tremendous waste of time. But Agee invites skepticism of his position within the book, and his argument over the failure of language can be read as a simple introduction and invitation to participate in the immense problem inherent in documenting and communicating the personal to the public.

In terms that relate to language and words themselves, Agee sets up the debate that follows as an argument between (among others) the signifier and the actual, between what he calls “the nominal” and the “essential.” He writes,

The nominal subject is North American cotton tenantry as examined in the daily living of three representative white tenant families.

Actually, the record is to recognize the stature of a portion of unimagined existence, and to contrive techniques proper to its recording, communication, analysis and defense (xlv).

Nominally, the book, as Agee explains, is familiar: It attempts to explain recognizable words used casually by journalists and politicians. But actually, Agee's attempt, as he defines it, is to sing into the imagination of such an audience an experience that heretofore has been “unimagined.” Agee is clear to make the distinction that even though the farmers' plight might be familiar, it still remains misread, misunderstood, and finally “unimagined” by the American audience. The movement Agee wants to facilitate is a thorough re-defining or un-imagining of the familiar words and their connotations into a definition that acknowledges and accepts his personal experience with the tenant farmers. That experience has to be transmitted and filtered through an inadequate means of expression – the printed word.

Part of the reason that words fail as a means of expression for Agee is that they are beside the point of actual existence; in fact, they invalidate actuality by weaving threads of myth – by creating art, or social protest. Agee demands that his audience considers *his* book on different terms, not as art or literature, but as an expression of attempted reality. But he also recognizes that written expression is already a movement in the opposite direction, anticipating as it does, fiction, a story, a plot. Even favorable critics of *Famous Men* had to admit that Agee’s misgivings about words and language were crucial faults to the book’s literary success.<sup>19</sup> The experience of living with the tenant farmers in Alabama is so totally tied up in Agee’s deifying imagination that the possibility of expressing it is slim; what he leaves the reader with is a sense of inexpressiveness, highlighted by the futility of his medium to connect absolutely with any sense of the truth of the matter that he experienced.

By attempting to remain true to his source material, the meaningfulness of his personal experience and the actual figures of the tenant farmers – in that order – Agee finds himself moving in opposing directions. The process of achieving what he wants through a faltering and impossible means of expression forces him, inevitably it seems, to fiction. Recreating personal experience complicates itself into personal mythologizing. In the middle of the work, Agee explains to readers his dilemma by asking them to participate in the same work he is doing. He first asks readers to imagine “a certain city street” (235) and takes them through the process of its translation into the written description of that scene “*in its own terms*.” As he imagines the process, he layers on descriptions about architecture and light, until “what have you in the end [is] a somewhat overblown passage from a naturalistic novel: which in important ways is at the opposite

pole from your intentions, from what you have seen from the fact itself” (236). By attempting to capture even the most simple and remote of concrete images, Agee manifests how the imagination mythologizes and fictionalizes all memory and experience. Similarly, Agee finds that, through the inaccuracy of words, he has produced a vastly different work than he had intended, a work that is moving more towards fiction than it is to true representation.

The expression of language, then, becomes an easy crutch to explain the failure of Agee’s authenticity to his experience, and like his great teacher at Harvard, I.A. Richards, Agee can claim that the central failure of representation is not so much in the performance of his language, but in the expression itself.<sup>20</sup> Because the communicatory power of language is so crippled by its inaccuracies, Agee must remain skeptical of his words (the performance) and his audience’s expectations. Eventually, Agee argues that his skepticism about language is centered primarily on the artificiality of contemporary casual usage, or the way that phrases are, simply, taken for granted. He rages against the casual use of language and the ability to swallow a definition of a group of actual people as “tenant farmers.” The identification of the supposed reader with the imaginary and false “sharecropper” is just as much an injustice as Agee’s own inability to write the actual. Agee argues that the type of identification is artificial, a false connotation of an outdated symbol. What is at stake, for Agee, is nothing less than the salvation of a human existence that has become, simply, a label, the ballooned phrase “tenant farmer.” The difference between “a word” and “the things for which it stands” becomes much more important when one is on the side of the referent. Having been among the tenant farmers and lived with them, Agee is unable to fashion a language that makes a direct

relation to what he has experienced. Victor Kramer explains that “identification is vastly more complicated when one is emotionally involved.”<sup>21</sup>

Agee desperately wants his readers to identify with the tenant farmers, to invest themselves in a struggle to re-imagine their lives apart from the emotional context they may have known them in before. So, in a very real way, *Famous Men* might also be imagined as an attempt to emotionally involve the reader into the lives of the “unimagined existence” of George Gudger and his family, to orientate him into this type of its existence, so that indirect relation is impossible. It is, in fact, an attempt to crush the reader into actual, direct experience with the subjects of the book:

And how is this [*Famous Men*] to be made so real to you who read of it, that it will stand and stay in you as the deepest and most iron anguish and guilt of your existence that you are what you are, and that she is what she is, and that you cannot for one moment exchange places with her, nor by any such hope make expiation for what she has suffered at your hands, and for what you have gained at hers (321).

Perhaps that is the central element of Agee’s perceived linguistic failure – that it is not a failure of craftsmanship, reception, nor inaccuracy of symbol, but a wild amalgamation of all three. For the reader, one must feel like Agee, that the cards are stacked against him. The rhetorical structure, however, of Agee’s discomfort with written expression anticipates his argumentative tone with his reader. If *Famous Men* will fail based on its language, Agee argues that the failure results not solely from his performance of it, but also from the audience’s inability to think of the written word as anything other than fiction, a story.

The failure of language must be shared between Agee and his readers, for they are the ones locked with him in the process of communication and connection. In an ideal world, in which words embody their referent, Agee claims that there would still exist a chasm among reader-author-subject. In the beginning of the book, he articulates that the first problems that plagued him at the time of composition were chiefly based on his audience's expectations and perspective:

Who are you who will read these words and study these photographs, and through what cause, by what chance, and for what purpose, and by what right do you qualify to, and what will you do about it (9).

Unable to weed out undesirable readers, Agee's paranoia over their qualifications bothers him. *Famous Men* might have the possibility to succeed, he argues, but the audience's motives must be similarly as pure and blameless as his own. Unable to reassure himself of this fact, Agee concludes that, more than likely, the book will be a failure. Questioning his reader inevitably leads Agee back to his own immutable self-doubting:

...and the question Why we make this book, and set it large, and by what right, and for what purpose, and to what good end, or none...

What one finds in the introduction to Agee's work is a rhetoric implying through the failure of language a skepticism of the reader and the author: skepticism that Agee will fail to connect with his subjects and their experience (his fault) and fail to connect with readers because of different perspectives and preconceived notions (their fault). Agee's rough rhetoric of failure births the pugilistic, insulting tone throughout the book, and the active, bitter descriptions of the reader and his world.<sup>22</sup> Agee's conclusion is that the

failure of language must be evaluated in relation to author and reader. The problem over *Famous Men*'s language, then, is more than simply a gripe of first-time readers; it is a legitimate problem that Agee refuses to resolve. Rather than offering plausible solutions or different methods of meaningful communication, Agee seems to revel in the limits of his language and conceives of a rhetoric of failure in order to redefine the terms for his audience regarding their implicit involvement in the text.

### **New Art & A Mutual Failure**

As his earliest book, *Famous Men* allows insight into Agee's budding philosophy on the aesthetics of writing, especially his fiction. Luckily for the critic, Agee cannot, as author, remove his earnest and complicated thoughts about the tenant farmers from prominence in the narrative. To do so, he feels, would be to deny a truth about the experience of attempting to portray a real living family. He admits to his reader, "I would do just as badly to simplify and eliminate myself from this picture as to simplify or invent character, place or atmospheres" (240). To reach some kind of truth, Agee must violate first the aesthetic principle that the author should be out-of-frame, bodiless, unbiased. Because the situation becomes wildly unfocused, Agee acknowledges that these complications undercut his attempts at unity. However, the same problems that disconnect the book from a sense of chronological progression simultaneously establish a new aesthetic that sets a rubric for Agee's conception of art that matters; that is, it must be fundamentally concerned with truth; not simply the truth of the moment, but the truth of recollection, and problems of recollection. In short, art must become window into not



just a truth about the subject, but a simultaneous window into the artist's movement behind the scenes. This is such a crucial concept for Agee, and its influence can be felt throughout his journalism and fiction: denying no truth that is valid within the framework of composition and recollection.

It's not surprising that, armed with these ideas about a new kind of art, Agee has, by the middle of *Famous Men*, changed his mind about what art can do.<sup>23</sup> But, the careful reader will note that Agee must first un-imagine art from its current context of ineffectual and detached interpretation. By shifting the definition over what art can be, Agee is doing nothing less than establishing not only the rubric by which a serious reader might understand *Famous Men* as a book of artistic and social merit but also the criteria under which art can be personally relevant. For Agee, art as it is understood by his readers is a thing to be avoided, because of the connotations it implies. The word *art* itself moves reader and author away from subject and truth and into selection, fiction, imagination. Agee's art, the kind he's intent on describing and simultaneously creating in *Famous Men*, involves the co-equal effort of artist and observer, and has its basis in an extreme and gentle humanistic understanding. The artist's aesthetic is fashioned through his ability to both affect his reader's sensibility while remaining truthful (even reverently so) in relation to the actual events and persons he experienced. This is not "high art," which is a Judas kiss for Agee: "...the truth is more important than any pretty lie he may tell," he says of the author. But equally so, the reader must come to the book with a different expectation, because such work is chiefly important through the reader's idea of it. Here, too, Agee finds much to work against, including the reader's own perspective on art ("he is so used to the idea that art is a fiction that he can't shake himself of it), and,

the history of reception (“the whole weight of art tradition, the deifying of the imagination”) [241]. This new art, Agee’s art, has much in common with tradition, however, including the need to move constantly towards a proper aesthetic, and to recognize and validate beauty.

Though Agee begs that his audience not consider his book as proper art, he is constantly in search of the aesthetic. Agee weaves beauty out of the seemingly repulsive elements of the tenant farmer’s life. In his descriptions of the house, and the minutiae of its contents, Agee verges on melodrama as he imagines the cups and furniture as holy relics in a sanctified space. It’s interesting that in a book so paranoid about the movement towards imagination Agee relishes the metaphorical. Though he professes to undermine the aestheticism of art, or books, he engages in it himself by his worship of the families he comes to know. He wonders to himself why they cannot experience the beauty of their surroundings in the way he can.<sup>24</sup> Writing of the Gudger house, Agee breaks from the narrative and descriptions of its frame to the final and unavoidable failure of imparting its beauty to anyone: “that this square home...[is] one among the serene and final, uncapturable beauties of existence: that this beauty is made between hurt but invincible nature and the plainest cruelties and needs of human existence in this uncured time...” If Agee’s new definition of art is one of allegiance to truths of composition as well as experience, then the new aesthetic must also recognize a beauty that isn’t wholly decipherable. Beyond that acknowledgement, Agee admits that this messy aesthetic cannot supersede a fierce loyalty to the truth of his experience: “but I say these things only because I am reluctant to entirely lie,” he explains. “I can have nothing more to do

with them now” (134). Agee’s aesthetic mattered little to him if he didn’t have a reader who would appreciate the kind of mutual effort it takes to work in this new kind of form.

Agee knew what kind of reader he didn’t want – the kind who picked up books casually, without attempting to involve herself in the job of communicating meaning; the kind that wanted to consider writing as art, political manifesto, or scientific discourse. In short, Agee did not want the reader who worked in what he might label outdated definitions. However, circumstances being what they were in the late 1930’s, Agee was keenly aware that this, indeed, was the type of audience he would get. In one of the many introductions to his book, he exercises his sarcastic wit at the expense of this armchair liberal:

...this is a book about “sharecroppers,” and is written for all those who have a soft place in their hearts for the laughter and tears inherent in poverty viewed at a distance, and especially for those who can afford the retail price, in the hope that the reader will be edified, and may feel kindly disposed toward any well-thought-out liberal efforts to rectify the unpleasant situation down South... (14)

These “liberal” minded readers, who wanted to keep their poverty distant, were exactly the kind of reader that Agee did not want: they represented the continuation of a pathetic cycle of human indifference; though they were interested in tenant farmers, they were drawn to books such as Agee’s only out of an obsession to see how the “peasant” lives. These readers could most certainly call *Famous Men* and its author chaotic, complicated, and a failure. But, for Agee, though he constantly took himself to task in the writing of it, his performance was not the only potential failure of the book. In order to imagine the tenant farmers and his experience in a direct way, Agee became aware that, ultimately,

his readers would establish the validity and genre of his work. So, he tried to create a situation by which he can connect disparate perspectives of reader and author.

First and foremost, Agee articulates *his* position, his paranoid perception of what his book might mean as “art”: “In a novel, a house or person has his meaning, his existence entirely through the writer. Here, a house or a person has only the most limited of his meaning through me: his true meaning is much huger. It is that he *exists*, in actual being, as you do and as I do...” (12). The novel presupposes fictional characters; Agee wants to remind his reader throughout that there are real farmers at the base of his book. These farmers have real lives, and the expression of those lives, Agee argues, should be as real and meaningful as the fact of their existence.

But Agee can’t help, in his paranoia over his own perception, anticipating as well his reader’s position: “...who have picked up their living as casually as if it were a book, and who were actuated toward this reading by various possible reflexes of sympathy, curiosity, idleness, et cetera, and almost certainly in a lack of consciousness, and conscience, remotely appropriate to the enormity of what they are doing” (13). Agee recognized that most readers of the sociological photo-texts of the tenant farmers<sup>25</sup> read out of a voyeuristic need to see how the other half lives, in a way a type of intellectual “slumming” that allowed them to adopt an alien perspective. This is *Famous Men*’s core audience, and Agee vehemently attacks their ineffectual liberal perspective. He will finally cynically declare that such disparate perspectives can never be united in any meaningful way, especially in a “book.” He imagines the possibility of affecting his reader with “fragments of cloths, bits of cotton, lumps of earth...” but eventually discards these as a “novelty....art...[and] a parlour game.” His conclusion?: “A piece of the body

torn out by the roots might be more to the point.” Agee’s solution to problems of communication is this violent and disturbing image. He concludes that a book makes no lasting impression: a tortured and dismembered body, in contrast, never leaves your imagination. He wonders aloud about the possibility of conceiving a story or manner of writing that might approximate the gory image, but concludes there is no audience for it: “...you [the reader] would not go near it all. For if you did, you would hardly bear to live.” In his digression over dismembered bodies, Agee, even as he both admits defeat and recognizes inevitable failure, imagines and invents possibilities for affecting his reader through the tired medium of written expression.

Attempting to break the barriers of linguistic limits and decontextualization, Agee felt the reader must be his co-equal author. If the reception of words was not immediate enough for Agee to reach his reader, he imagines that gruesome images might work or his ethnographic “records of speech, pieces of wood and iron,” but it would still, inevitably, fail to connect, for “booksellers would consider it quite a novelty; critics would murmur, yes, but is it art; and I could trust a majority of you to use it as you would a parlor game” (13). The immediacy of his new art and aesthetic, then, required a reader that could mine from the altogether inaccurate words a clear idea of the realism of the situation.

This failure, then, is not centered in the inaccuracy of language, nor its misuse; rather, it is a failure that springs from the inability of the reader to collaborate directly with its author, and thus create a connection, a direct relationship. This may be one of the most misdiagnosed specifics of Agee’s style in *Famous Men*; critics usually dismiss Agee’s attacks on his readers as undisciplined rhetorical markers that signal a larger debate about the limits of language.<sup>26</sup> However, Agee is clearly obsessed with

formulating a concrete method of reception. Large parts of the book are devoted to directives on how, specifically, to read, how to treat the text, and what to make of it. He gives the overwhelmed reader mental cues to his process of composition, and hopes that such exposure will open up possibilities for them to react accordingly. Constantly, Agee pushes readers violently away from complacent detachment and forces them to re-evaluate what they read. Agee's insistence on a new way to read makes the case for him that his book should be considered on different terms than most readers are used to. "I must say to you," he tells the reader, "this is not a work of art or of entertainment, nor will I assume the obligations of artist or entertainer, but this is a human effort which must require human co-operation" (111). By attempting to engage his reader as co-equal author, Agee re-imagines his task and redefines the particulars of success and failure for himself and his reader. By this careful argument, Agee wants to make his reader aware that he is engaged in the creation of a new form of art that has yet to be fully imagined, an art that is set apart by its insistence on the communication of truth and human cooperation. It should be direct, unflinching and have some kind of practical impact whose success stems from the communication of two human beings, not a human being and a page. Even though Agee sets up his own rubric for the new art and its potential success, he is aware, still, that such an endeavor is doomed to fail.

In order to understand the tenant life, Agee postulates, one must not passively receive the particulars of such an existence, but, in a real sense, "collaborate with the author in a brotherhood of imagination" (Madden 34). Even if Agee could individually produce the experience for the reader, it would not work, for the completion of an effort in actuality requires the participation of both the enforcer and the audience. In Agee's

equation, the artist is no more important than the audience he is trying to move; if anything, the balance is tipped in favor of the audience, for they are able to invalidate the author's intention by their reaction. In this way, a serious study in actuality and humanity (from Agee's perspective) can easily be turned into a dodge, hustle, parlor game, novelty, or worse, art. Agee's unwritten goal is to make his perception the audience's. So, then, this text does not exist as, simply, "a literary manifesto about the capacity (or incapacity) of language,"<sup>27</sup> but rather a dialogue between two subjects – author and reader – whose language is radically different, even alien to one another. What was a failure of language becomes a failure of mutual perception and understanding.

Agee's optimism and cynicism collide in his attempts at creating a new art. While he believes that the possibilities of the human effort exist, he has to finally admit that *Famous Men* will not be its exemplar. There might be, he imagines, a "language of 'reality,'" but it requires a skilled craftsman to produce; Agee denies that he is such an author. However, the complex language of a new art would also

require an audience, or the illusion of an audience, equally well trained in catching what is thrown: an audience to whom the complex joke can simply be told, without the necessity for a preceding explanation fifteen times the length of the joke which founders every value the joke of itself has (236).

The problem lies not just in the medium of communication, as Richards postulates, but in the very hearts of the two creatures attempting to communicate. In fact, the language that comes out of such a union is merely a symbol, an example of the inability of these two beings to connect on any real level, and, therefore, Agee must admit the linguistic rhetoric of failure he postulated in his introduction: "words are not...at all necessarily accusable" (237).

What is at the center of the book, then, is Agee's attempt to connect his audience to the possibilities of a new art, an art centered on human endeavor, where possibilities remain to imagine an "unimagined existence," in which experience and a complex language of reality must be the medium. The failure of his attempt comes partly because of his reader, who is not prepared to be so involved, and partly through Agee, who cannot imagine the proper method to make it work. So, even by the introduction, Agee pines, "The communication is not by any means so simple" (12), and later concludes, "I'm not capable of it" (13). Agee's failure is central to his reader's failure; indeed, they are the same. What readers lack is the context of human experience, filling the void instead with artistic detachment, or suspension of disbelief, which Agee thinks of as "hermetically seal[ing] away from identification with everyday reality" (240). Such a false motive forces the purpose of the book to fail, for the book is primarily about connection – between Agee and the tenant farmers, the tenant farmers and the reader, and Agee and the reader. For Agee, any break within this delicate chain causes the end purpose of such a book to lose its validity, and fail. This, of course, complicates any notion of Agee's failure, for the author and the reader share the book's birth and perpetuation, and likewise, any breakdown of those cycles inevitably must be a mutual failure.

### **Violence and the Broken Body**

Agee's deflation over the inevitability of his failure as creator of a new aesthetic recurs throughout *Famous Men*. The cynical idea that a book with which he had wanted to do so much would, in actuality, matter little bothered Agee. His turn from cynicism to



melodrama when dealing with his readers did little to help the cause, and by the end of the introduction, Agee's style has become almost unbearably overwritten. Perhaps out of frustration over his multiple perceived failures, Agee's anger begins to manifest itself through a lingering and disturbing obsession over the violent, the painful, or the cruel. By the time we begin the first section after the introduction, "(On the Porch: I)," Agee's style and tone have slipped into a deep melancholy, and his introduction of one of his primary families comes through as a dark and morbid description of their deaths: "Bone and bone, blood and blood, life and life, disjointed and abandoned they lay graven in so final depth..." (20).

Following such a dark introduction, it's no surprise that one of the first accounts of Agee's documentary is a brooding exploration of the very uselessness of communication. Coming up on the lodging of several African American farmers, Agee is forced to sit through what the landowners call authentic "nigger music" (28); he tries to express to the singers his sincere "full and open respect" (29), but finds that his attempts to communicate wordlessly are unsatisfactory. The whole scene becomes nightmarish for Agee who imagines the bass's notes sinking in modality "as might a body sunken from a cross" (30). Agee himself feels physically ill, feeling "...they were here at our [Agee and Evans'] demand...and that I could communicate nothing otherwise" (31). Agee gives the "leader" of the singers 50 cents, and in his "perversion of self-torture," attempts to "communicate much more" through his eyes. But, ultimately, the scene ends the worst possible way for Agee, with his coming across as the generous and condescending patron and the singers thanking him "in a dead voice, not looking me in the eye...."

The connection between Agee's lingering obsession with bodily pain and torture and his acknowledgement of the failure of communication is a consistent and disturbing fascination in *Famous Men*. Agee in his pseudo narrator persona becomes the critical protagonist of the muddled plot of his own documentary. He is the well-meaning and sympathetic onlooker who is read continually and without irony as a figure of authority, power and privilege. Unable to remove himself as such a figure, Agee tortures the body of his persona in the book, forcing it to undergo the most extreme forms of suffering he can devise. By attempting to purge his persona of its irony, Agee attempts to translate the passage of *King Lear* he quotes as one of his epigraphs, "Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,/ That thou may'st shake the superflux to them,/ And show the heavens more just." Not only does Agee immerse himself in the farmers' land and culture, he even intrudes on their house, and asks one particular family if he might spend the night.

There, in the beds that belong to their children, Agee believes he has something of a breakthrough. It is, of course, a moment he cannot describe for the reader in all of its mythological and mysterious movements. "But somehow I have lost hold of the reality of all this," he admits, "I can scarcely understand how; a loss of the reality of simple actions upon the specific surface of the earth" (414). Still, lying in bed, Agee comes to feel as though he is somehow a part of the family he documents. He takes great pleasure at the naked pain he derives from having the small insects crawling on the bed bite him, just as they would the children of the house. Late in the evening, he strikes a match and watches as the insects move in every direction: "I caught two, killed them, and smelled their queer rankness. They were full of my blood" (425). At first, Agee, not accustomed to sleeping with vermin, goes through a ritualistic cleansing of his bed of what he

discovers are lice, fleas and bedbugs. He even tries to wrap his body tight against their biting, but cannot keep them out. Finally, he strips back down to his naked body and tries to ignore their bites. Surprisingly, Agee, for the first time in the book, finds himself in a good mood:

...all the while I would be rubbing and desperately scratching, but this had become mechanical by now. I don't know exactly why anyone should be "happy" under these circumstances, but there's no use laboring the point: I was: outside the vermin, my senses were taking in nothing but a deep-night, inmeditable consciousness of a world which was newly touched and beautiful to me, and I must admit that even in the vermin there was a certain amount of pleasure (428).

The image of pain and torture in *Famous Men* becomes a way for Agee to finally connect in some meaningful way with an emotional and intellectual experience that seems to be slipping away from him. The moments that are most pleasurable and exciting to him are also the ones where he experiences some kind of pain or turmoil. Similarly, Agee attempts to connect his readers to primacy of his experience through shock, melodrama and an emphasis on cruelty, brutality and pain. These images and ideas have a weight to them that Agee uses for his own end: if his readers could get caught up in over-intellectualizing, Agee forces them into a confrontation with horror and pain. Afraid that his readers will remain detached, Agee brutally attacks them. The first part of his book might truly be described as a descent into an American nightmare.<sup>28</sup>

As he enters town for the first time, Agee notices three figures staring at him from a porch. Immediately, he tells his reader that their bodies are not destined for a documentary: "They were of a kind not safely to be described in an account claiming to be unimaginative or trustworthy, for they had too much and too outlandish beauty not to

be legendary.” He concludes that, “since...they existed quite irrelevant to myth, it will be necessary to tell a little of them” (33). By setting up these figures as at once mythological and actual, Agee confronts his reader with a dizzying paradox, and he continues to suggest that the critical question of his book will be, whether fiction or non-fiction is the correct method of reading and writing for such goals.

His description of the men and woman alternates between fictionalizing and straight facts: The woman has “blanched hair [that] drew her face tight to her skull as a tied mask,” while the older man seemed like a “hopelessly deranged and weeping prophet, a D.H. Lawrence whom male nurses have just managed to subdue in a straitjacket” (33-34). As Agee loses himself in his reverie, the older man comes up behind him and pokes him with his chest, muttering gibberish. Quickly, Agee is caught up in a surreal, nightmarish scene, with the man continuing his “assault”: “he did want to say something, but all that came out was this blasting of *awnk, awnk*, and a thick roil of saliva that hung like semen from his beard.” The woman speaks to the man “as if he were a dog masturbating on a caller” which causes the man to draw up into a ball with his hands “jammed as deep as they would go down his gnashing mouth” (35). Agee cannot help but feel as if he has caused this fit, and tries to speak with the younger couple, but is constantly interrupted by the prodding verbal attacks of the older man on the ground. Finally, he extricates himself from the situation, wanting to communicate some kind of sympathy for their problems, but can only play the role of detached, smiling outsider: “Now after a little while I thanked them here on the porch and told them good-bye. I had not the heart at all to say, Better luck to you, but then if I remember rightly I did say it,

and saying it or not, and unable to communicate to them at all what my feelings were, I walked back..." (37).

This initial scene that Agee labels "AT THE FORKS," sets up, in much the same way his long introduction does, Agee's movement in the book. It establishes the difficulties of representation, specifically fiction and its limits, as well as the frustration of communication. But more than that, all of these failings are linked to the gruesome, or the violently bizarre. The old man is only as understandable as a "gorilla" or "dog," and Agee's inability to decipher his mutterings parallels his own inability to communicate with the younger couple (so much so that, by the end of the conversation, Agee imagines the woman thinking, "You are more stupid than he [the old man] is." ). It is a trial by fire for both Agee, in his bumbling author-persona, as well as the readers who are trying to make some kind of sense over these short, bizarre episodes. In this world, which Agee literally descends into, inhabitants are animals, dogs or "a kicked cow scrambling out of a creek" (41). The Agee-author enters the world really unable to decipher the shared language, and unable to communicate himself with those he sees. Instead, he documents his frustrations over his inability to communicate with a reader, who, also, is not able to fully understand the new language he is building. The only thing that has any kind of immediacy, it seems, is a shared understanding of pain or brutality, and Agee mines this material for all of its shock-producing value.

Gradually, as most critics have pointed out, Agee becomes less and less intent on creating a book of any measurable practicality, and instead tries to think of his writing and creation in forms of new art: music, photographs, and the moving image. By writing his book in such a way, Agee asks his reader to accept what, for all intents and purposes,

is a distorted body. He breaks the “body” of his book into small fragments, and his eschewing of proper time progression or plot movement (frequently after a long passage, he will add a phrase similar to, “But as yet this has not happened” [69]) fragments any idea of a traditional narrative into nothingness. But the idea of the fragmented body itself is key to understanding Agee’s progression in *Famous Men*. In one of his key digressions, Agee wonders aloud about how “through so long a continuation and cumulation of the burden of each moment one on another does any creature bear to exist, and not break utterly to fragments of nothing...” (57). Agee, however, claims that such matters are “too gigantic” to think about and not “forever to worship.”

The fragmented body of the book, through its broken narrative, sense of time, and plot, then, all parallel Agee’s interest in the fragmented body of his subjects. Their lives seem to him broken, sporadic, and unfinished, and yet, their beauty seems to be in their very fragmented nature. The language they speak is “a music that cannot be communicated” (58); its very nature is elusive and broken. Agee tries to describe it for his reader, but cannot exactly pinpoint how it works in its emphasis on silence. Listening to the sound, Agee remarks on how it is “drawn up from the deepest within them without thought and with faint creaking of weight as if they were wells, and spilled out in a cool flat drawl, and quietly answered; and a silence; and again, some words...” The whole matter of the communication is odd to Agee, who describes it as “not really talking, or meaning, but another and profounder kind of communication, a rhythm to be completed by answer and made whole by silence, a lyric song...”. However, what sets the communication apart from regular speech and makes it lyrical is the speaker’s use of silence. By breaking the subject up, the two are able to speak “as horses who nudge one

another in pasture, or like drowsy birds who are heavying a dark branch with their tiredness before sleep” (71).

For Agee, who is so obsessed with the frustration of communication, this animalistic and lyrical speech astounds him with its effortless communication, and he attempts to model his narrative after the broken speech he finds in their homes. In this way, the unfinished and broken are exemplars for Agee; in short, he wants to write his book the way his subjects talk, even if it means a total disregard for the tradition of writing that he assumes through the process of writing a book. It’s not surprising, then, that large sections of *Famous Men* are *Tender Buttons*-esque listings of items in the house, or fragments of sentences. In his “CLOTHING” section, for instance, he writes:

Sunday, George Gudger:  
Freshly laundered cotton gauze underwear.  
Mercerized blue green socks, held up over his fist-like calves by scraps of  
pink and green gingham rag.  
Long bulb-toed black shoes: still shining with the glaze of their first  
newness, streaked with clay (257).

The ability to sustain such speech is beyond Agee’s patience, or, as he later agues, his reader’s. Also, the ability to maintain the written translation of broken speech becomes less possible over time. Finally, Agee has to give up his enterprise. He explains, “I must give this up, and must speak in some other way, for I am no longer able to speak as I was doing, or rather no longer able to bear to.” The immediacy of the moment, his experience with his subjects, is all too distant, leaving him only to “describe as at a second remove, and even that poorly” (403). But Agee can’t really relinquish his desire to speak as subject, and has to let the reader in to the complexities of the

experience: “but the music of what’s happening I more richly scored than this; and much beyond what I can set down,” he frets. The idea of trying to sustain the broken record forces him to imagine a medium that is not exclusively written: “I can only talk about it: the personality of a room, and of a group of creatures, has undergone change, as if of two different techniques or mediums.” Suddenly, the idea of how to describe the event mutates for Agee into the potential translation of art, photograph, music and writing mixed together: “what began as ‘rembrandt’ deeplighted in gold, in each integer colossally heavily planted, has become a photograph, a record in clean, staring colorless light, almost without shadow...” Interestingly enough, the actual description he settles on is as lyrical and broken as the speech of the farmers he admires: “...two iron sheeted beds which stand a little away from the walls; of dislocated chairs; within cube of nailed housewood a family of tenant farmers, late in a Sunday afternoon, in a certain fold of country, in a certain part of the south, and of the lives of each of them...” (494-495). The moment of this experience slips from Agee anyway, though he recalls its meaningfulness.

The moment of communication is important mostly because in it, Agee relies for the first time on what he calls “quietness” and “improvisation” (405-406) to speak with Mrs. Gudger. Similarly, Agee’s uses of silence, space, and improvisation in *Famous Men* are all methods of communicating to his reader the broken narrative of his experience. By relying on these techniques and the disturbing obsession with brutality and violence, Agee attempts to create some kind of practical impact on his reader and his own detached remembering. But the failure of the book haunts him even then: He is, finally, not one of his subjects, though he desires to be, and that recognition, the acknowledgement of his identity, is the final failure of the book.



If *Famous Men* is, in fact, as many critics suggest, an inward journey, the exploration of Agee's identity, it remains unfinished and searching. By attempting to understand the lives of the tenant farmers, Agee has to come to grips with his own complicated idea of who he is. Not surprisingly, Agee does this through imagined violence. Driving one night in Alabama, Agee moves to the central question of the book, "Who the hell am I." He attempts to answer the self-questioning through his absence, imagining, "I could put my foot to the floor right now and when it had built up every possible bit of speed I could twist the car off the road, if possible into a good-sized oak, and the chances are fair that I would kill myself..." (384). The imagined suicide does nothing more for Agee than to frustrate him further, and he concludes his self-indulgent and profanity filled reverie by acknowledging that either option, living or dying, is useless. The frustrating and answerless question "who in Jesus name am I" (385) still haunts the book, and never clearly gets resolved.

The frustration of identity, both as author and protagonist, becomes more complicated for Agee because of his assignment's location – Alabama – the Deep South, his family home, the land of his father's people. By returning to the South, Agee was, in a sense, returning to a part of his life that he had not completely resolved. He sensed in the Woods (the actual Gudgers of the book) his own misplaced notions of family, so much so that he actually obsesses over the possibility of becoming a true member of their family. Eating with the Gudgers at the end of the book, Agee feels "at the end of a wandering and seeking, so long it had begun before I was born, I had apprehended and now sat at rest in my own home, between two who were my brother and sister" (415). Not only did Agee know these people as he knew the people of the south – his father's

people – but he also knew them intimately, as though he were a member of their group. *Famous Men* has drawn an understandable amount of Freudian criticism that deeply examines the specter of Agee’s father throughout his book. Shultz senses that the same sense of primal identification with the farmers drives Agee: “He is those children, those are his parents, that ‘pallet’ is his bed, his place for the night.”<sup>29</sup> In coming to Alabama, Agee must confront a part of himself that is tied to the land of the South; he must explore it, and, finally, connect with that old self.

In one sense, Agee’s book is less about the creation of a new art or the inevitability of failure than it is about memories and self-exploration.<sup>30</sup> *Famous Men* grapples with the idea of Agee’s relationship to the land of his birth and childhood. As a now Northern writer, much more familiar with the crowds of New York and the cinema, Agee felt alienated from his roots as a Southerner. Louis D. Rubin maintains, “...what Agee was really drawn to wasn’t sharecropping and sharecroppers but their symbolic relationship to his own imagination, something that he sensed was tied in with his memories and his origins, but without knowing quite why.”<sup>31</sup> For these reasons, then, one of Agee’s purposes in the book is not only to reproduce a way of life, or an “unimagined existence,” but to imagine it personally and wholly, to become a part of this elite and fragile group of people that he once called family. Importantly, the physical bodies of his subjects become potential keys to his identity. Trying to imagine the Gudgers sleeping in the next room, Agee writes,

But it is not only their bodies but their postures that I know, and their weight on the bed or on the floor, so that *I lie down inside each one* as if exhausted in a bed, and I become not my own shape and weight and self, but that of each of them, the whole of it, sunken in sleep like stones; so that I know almost the dreams they

will not remember, and the soul and body of each of these seven... (58 – *emphasis mine*).

The physical metamorphosis of the farmers' bodies into Agee's represents the final movement in his search for his identity. By lying down inside each tenant farmer, by wholly becoming and enveloping their bodies and postures, Agee attempts to completely transform himself into them. The whole experience becomes not only a way for him to identify with some lost version of himself but also a means of willing himself violently back into the world of his ancestors and into the culture of the South. Though he cannot sustain the feelings of familiarity, Agee does find, through the farmers, a way to identify with the land. He feels "an exact traction with this country in each twig and clod of it as it stood, not as it stood past me from a car, but to be stood in the middle of, or drawn through, passed, on foot, in the plain rhythm of a human being in his basic relation to his country" (409). Instead of the detached, bumbling observer at the beginning, the Agee-author persona, by the end of *Famous Men*, has been transformed into knowing insider, a fellow inhabitant of the land and customs of the people he has come to know.

One of Agee's unwritten and, perhaps, unconscious purposes in *Famous Men* was to immerse himself completely and totally in the culture of the Southern farmer, to connect finally and palpably with his personal past, which has haunted him ever since he was six years old and lost his father. If Agee succeeds in some small way with connecting to the land, or a sense of identification with his father's people, however, the ability to connect with his own past seems, like the others, unfulfilled, still pending, a failure. A large reason that he cannot discover or maintain a sense of his past is that even though he spends a lot of time in the book as protagonist, Agee's guilt over how he uses

the farmers' lives doesn't allow him to validate or maintain any kind of self-fulfilling meditation. Madden writes, "The subtle dialects of sin and guilt pervade his [Agee's] life and work. The very things before which he shivered in awe, in fear, or ecstasy, Agee felt he eventually betrayed."<sup>32</sup> In this feeling of betrayal, which correlates with Agee's feeling that he has betrayed his subjects in *Famous Men*, he must fashion a way to atone, to ameliorate his faults and absolve himself.

In front of the tenant farmers, Agee felt humbled: their houses were churches with holy relics, whose inhabitants were actualized saints. Agee longed for his absence in the whole process: "If I were not here; and I am alien; a bodiless eye," he postulates, "this would never have existence in human perception." But the guilt over his presence leads to his self-hating guilt over his authorship, "I do not make myself welcome here. My whole flesh; my whole being is withdrawn upon nothingness" (187). The possibility of reconciling his personal history with the holiest lives of his subjects causes Agee to shrink in guilt. Here, *Famous Men*, as an early book, anticipates Agee's literary movement; his complex oeuvre perpetuates because of his feelings of inadequacy and betrayal, as well as inability to forget his father and his "people." By attempting to embody his subjects, he is creating "the strongest possible sensation of inhabiting (and being inhabited by) what he sees."<sup>33</sup>

Agee's guilt stems from both his perception of himself as author-spy, but also perhaps from the humiliation and shame of his father's legacy in relationship to his life. In this way, *Famous Men* is not such an anomaly when placed among *A Death in the Family* (1957) or *The Morning Watch* (1952), for both of those major works of fiction address the same palpable search for identity through the focusing lens of his father.

More importantly, by refusing to betray the trust and “actuality” of the tenant farmers, Agee refuses to betray the memory of his own father, of the culture that has produced him and the world that he once knew. It is a powerful vindication of Agee’s past that is finally the conclusion of this purposeful connection to the Southern landscape and its people. Toles describes it as a need to penetrate “the mystery of being in and of a home” (42). The tenant farmers are more than words and actions to Agee – in fact, they refuse to exist completely as one thing or the other; frequently, Agee’s descriptions defy absolutism in any terms when referring to his subjects. Rubin says, “...their [the tenant farmers] imaginative significance for him [Agee] is that they move him backward in time to his origins, to his father’s people in the Tennessee mountains...” (171). It is only there – in his past – that Agee can hope to locate some sense of himself, to connect with a people and a time that he has never forgotten, and, finally, to become a member of that family.

This, of course, does not work. It doesn’t work partly because Agee is in such awe of these farmers, that he cannot imagine himself, blind Judas that he believes himself to be, as anything other than a spy, unworthy of his subjects’ pity. In fact, standing around the dinner table, furiously trying to become a member of the Gudger family, Agee is painfully aware of what has past: “...these, the wife my age exactly, the husband four years older, seemed not other than my own parents, in whose patience *I was so different, so diverged, so strange as I was*” (415 *emphasis mine*). He cannot connect with this family, and by failing to do so, he cannot connect with his past, or atone for his sin of leaving. He must remain an outsider to the family of his father’s land, restless, journeying. Though he can locate parts of himself within the framework of this culture,

he finds, finally, that full and total connection is a sad dream, unattainable and beyond reach. It's beneficial to look at this conclusion in full:

...and all that surrounded me, that silently strove in through my senses and stretched me in full, was familiar and dear to me as nothing on earth, and as if well known in a deep past and long years lost; so that I could wish that all my chance life was in truth the betrayal, the curable delusion, that it seemed, and that this was my right home, right earth, right blood, to which I would never have true right. For half my blood is just this; and half my right of speech; and by bland chance alone is my life so softened and sophisticated in the years of my defenselessness, and I am robbed of a royalty I can not only never claim but never properly much desire or regret (415).

This failure is, I think, the most regrettable, unbearable and symbolic of the entire work. Agee recognizes his inability to connect with his past; he watches it break off into a piece that is unattainable, a half-section of who he is that can never be fully joined. The recognition comes through the acknowledgement of the physical aspects of the bodies in front of him. Reading their characteristics, noticing their age and mannerisms, Agee experiences at once familiarity and strangeness, and has to recognize that a part of him will never exactly feel comfortable in those bodies. The frustration of his identity in relation to his past, however, is also Agee's artistic inspiration, his motive to creation, one that provides him with an endless and inexhaustible source. In this way, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* can be understood in the context of *A Death in the Family*- the search for familiarity and connection with a lost ideal of family. The failure becomes, finally, an inability to find himself, to connect with "the sources of my life, whereto I have no rightful access, having paid no price beyond love and sorrow" (415). And it is this failure, this final recognition that he is not capable of willing himself back to his past, which becomes the driving inspiration of the book.

This now four hundred and seventy one page book was once an assignment for a magazine, fifteen to twenty pages at most including photographs to illustrate the text. When Agee first got the assignment, he already knew that what he was going to embark on would be not only life changing, but also a failure as an “article.” He writes to his spiritual mentor Father Flye that he felt “terrific personal responsibility toward [the] story” and had “considerable doubts of my ability to bring it off; [and] considerable more of *Fortune*’s ultimate willingness to use it as it seems (in theory) to me.” Later, he confided that to do the story right, he would have had to take on

The whole problem and nature of existence. Trying to write it in terms of moral problems alone is more than I can possibly do. My main hope is to state the central subject and my ignorance from the start...well, there’s no use trying to talk about it. If I could make it what it ought to be made I would not be human.<sup>34</sup>

Agee clearly needed direction on how to imagine his story: would it be a story? How would he manage to address not only his farmers’ lives adequately but also the problems inherent in all existence? With Evans, Agee conceived of a “book” that would assault the reader directly with an entire preliminary book of photographs. After a scathing introduction that assaulted, attacked and condescended to his reader, Agee offered a book made up of multiple perspectives, genres and methods of writing.

Early on, he pushes past his previous assertion that fiction is counterproductive, artificial, and tries to make his farmers characters in a novel. He tells us of Annie Mae, “She is dreaming now, with fear, of a shotgun: George has directed it upon her; and there is no trigger” (77). Later in the same chapter, Agee shifts his third person authorial perspective to first person, and tries to imagine the farmers’ inner monologues: “In what

were we trapped? Where, our mistake? What, where, how, when, what way, might all these things have been different, if only we had done otherwise?” (78). And, finally, he comes back to the perspective of the town itself and their reaction to the family: “Fred Ricketts? Why, that dirty son-of-a-bitch, he *brags* that he hasn’t bought his family a bar of soap in five year” (79). All of these exercises are finally unsatisfying for Agee, who ends the section with The Beatitudes from the *Bible*.

Following his attempt at fiction, Agee writes directly to the farmers themselves about his difficulty with the book in a section marked “COLON.” There, he explains that he cannot turn them into characters in a novel any more than he can “document” their lives for a magazine: “...how am I to speak of you as ‘tenant’ ‘farmers,’ as ‘representatives’ of your ‘class,’ as social integers in a criminal economy, or as individuals, fathers, wives, sons, daughters, and as my friends and as I ‘know’ you?” (100). Fiction limits Agee’s ability to humanize and sustain his moralizing because it denies these people their space in reality. Agee acknowledges that he wishes his account could be “globular....eighteen or twenty intersected spheres....the heart, never, center of each of these, is an individual human life” (101). Unlike the exploration of his own muddled past, Agee cannot turn the farmers’ lives into lyrical poetry and pretty art. However, though Agee is able to imagine the globular, he recognizes that he “shall not be able to so sustain it...” (111). The book would have to describe the conditions by which such an art might work, but it would not, finally, be able to succeed in its primary goal.

This sense of futility spreads throughout the work like the branches of a tree; it is impossible to read *Famous Men* and not feel as though one has experienced something along the order of a literary mess. Nothing is completely focused: Agee’s style is varied



and confusing: he confronts the reader with wild grammar without explanation: and he recognizes the end product as a complete and total failure. But we must be careful when we examine Agee's definition of failure, and look instead for the context of failure that he is speaking of.

In a simple way, it is possible to say that an exploration of "the whole problem and nature of existence" fails as a magazine article. The subject is too broad and sweeping, and doesn't lend itself to the particular genre (including, perhaps, an audience's interest). In the same way, perhaps, Agee's genre was incorrect. He had always been interested in film, and the cinematic eye abounds in *Famous Men*. In fact, Bergreen says that in the midst of the difficulties of writing the book, he "seized on the idea of making a documentary film about sharecroppers in collaboration with his new friend Jay Leyda."<sup>35</sup> But Agee had to write- and write he would- even if he claimed that if he could, he "would do no writing at all here." By producing the book, he was, in fact, failing – failing in his original purpose to do no writing: failing to make the sub-textual literal, to translate the untranslatable. The beginning of this work, as most critics and first-time readers will tell you, profoundly declares, "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here," for there will be no reward, no success. The writer has bitten off more than he can chew, and so, too, have you, gentle reader.

It's beneficial to note, however, that Agee's description of his process of composition in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* was accurate. About the failure of how exactly to use his language in correlation to his audience, he writes,

I made a try lately of writing the book in such a language that anyone can read and is seriously interested can understand it. I felt it was a failure and would take

years to learn how to do but became so excited in it I had (and have) a hard time resuming my first method; including a sense of guilt. The lives of those families belong first (if to any one) to people like them and only secondarily to the 'educated' such as myself (*Letters* 115).

These feelings of the inadequacy of language in relation to a new (liberal) audience obviously remain in the final text; his distrust over whom he is writing for pervades his text. Similarly, written expression, he finds, is an inaccurate medium for expression. These are both grounds enough for Agee to conclude that he is not capable of his subject: not capable because his medium, audience, and language are not in agreement with his purpose, or as the critic Mark Allister says, "He dooms his book to failure, therefore, as language can only fail at being life."<sup>36</sup>

The final purpose of *Famous Men* must be related to this idea of failure; Agee predicted failure from the moment he received the assignment, and as his work continued. Spiegel, in a recent perceptive study of James Agee, *James Agee and the Legend of Himself*, describes best the distinct failure-theme of the book: "At any point in *Famous Men*, Agee is perfectly capable of sounding like all our other classic American warblers. But with one enormous and definitive difference: *his unhappy recognition that he cannot write such a nonbook book*, that no one can legitimately write such a book, and further, that everyone of his anti-art, 'life' embracing gestures has been permanently short-circuited by this recognition" (73). The purpose of such a book as *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is to manifest the failure of language, author, reader, subject, and "books" in general to fully and finally connect anything. In this way, Agee's book might be one of the most unrivaled successes of experiential and experimental prose written by an American. The exact point of the book is to bring the reader, struggling behind the

rough writer, to a place of blunt understanding- not only about the farmers he reads about in the newspapers, but also the casual language he uses, the distance he is from “actual” reality, and where it all went wrong.

Of course, no one should confuse the subject of failure as Agee’s actual failure, but many critics do. David Madden answers these charges quite well,

*Is Famous Men a failure?* Yes, if one insists that it be a book like the others of that time, a kind of book Agee clearly never attempted. No, if one looks at Agee’s own statements of purpose and the extent to which he achieved them (40).

What is at the heart of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is an ideal, sublime and life-altering failure. Failure is not just a theme- it is an obligation, for to succeed would require an inhuman and suspicious work of the imagination. Agee’s book is the opposite of that. It edifies, enrages, excites, instructs, inflames, and bewilders its reader. It is unfathomable and volatile, a testament to the ability (and inability) to connect with things, people and ideas. That Agee fails to connect completely is the life of the book, his inspiration and style, and it is precisely that failure, and not the challenges, taunts, and calls for collaboration, that inextricably connect Agee with his subjects, those beatific farmers, his audience, and his limiting language.

Perhaps the reason for Agee’s obsession with failure, both in this book and in the ones that follow, is that situations that involve failure are inevitably more interesting for him. He tells his reader that for a book like *Famous Men* to succeed in any way as a book of social actuality: “Failure, indeed, is almost as strongly an obligation as an inevitability, in such work.” And failure is such a crucial idea for Agee – including its consequences – that it almost becomes a dominant motif for his fiction throughout his

career. Both *A Death in the Family* and *The Morning Watch* take as their models the exploration of Agee's deep biography, and how such a meditation on the past ultimately fails to offer any concrete sense of either Agee or his family. Readers familiar with *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* will find familiar ground in both those books, as well as Agee's short fiction such as "Boys will be Brutes" (1930), "1928 Story" (1948), or "A Mother's Tale" (1968). The over-emphasis on (mostly imagined) violence, the failing structure of the text as body, and the lyrical obsession with recreating through absolute moments that cannot be captured, are characteristic of Agee's interrogation of fiction's usefulness. *Famous Men* provides the guiding principles of Agee's writing, and simultaneously, introduces the careful reader to problems and questions that will matter to Agee throughout his career.

## Chapter Two:

### The Achievement of *The Morning Watch*

James Agee began work on *The Morning Watch* in the late 1940's, though one could argue that he had been preparing to write it since he was a student at St. Andrew's. The book follows a young boy, Richard, during the Easter weekend at a small school in the mountains of Tennessee – clearly mining Agee's experience as a boy at the secluded mountain school of St. Andrew's.<sup>37</sup> In much the same way Agee acknowledges the importance of the childhood loss of his father in his developing artistic consciousness in *A Death in the Family*, in *The Morning Watch*, Agee recognizes the importance of his religious education in relation to his aesthetic framework. Instilled at a young age, his deeply religious perspective transforms itself in his fiction and journalism into moral sensibility, a reverence for the living, and palpable humanism. In one way, then, *The Morning Watch* is important in chronicling, through his autobiographic-fictive mask of his young protagonist, how religion became, for Agee, a guiding principle with artistic merit.

However, unlike his later unfinished novel, *The Morning Watch* remains one of the few texts in Agee's body of work that has yet to be reassessed and satisfactorily explored. A large part of its critical absence might possibly be due to its complex and notoriously poetic language. Richard Chase, an early reviewer of the book, noted Agee's

clever motives for the book, but, at the same time, lamented the style, which he described as, in turn, “ambitious,” “monotonous,” “highly wrought,” and “a kind of free-lance, predatory agent within his book” (688-89) that kidnaps the reader’s dramatic interest.<sup>38</sup> Reviews of this sort were content to read the book’s central interest as the “charming” explorations of a boy’s experience with religion that becomes, essentially, “a little series of homilies and prose poems” (690). Critical interpretations of Agee’s book, in turn, followed the same kind of formula, focusing solely on Richard’s spiritual musings.

In his thoughtful *James Agee and the Legend of Himself*, Alan Spiegel concedes that *The Morning Watch* might be “terse, dense...psychologically adroit and theologically abstruse,” but in this book more than perhaps any other, Spiegel claims one might actually locate the “nuanced power and sensuous detail that...[is] this author at his characteristic best” (203). In short, Spiegel recognizes that Agee’s book is vastly more complex and focused than critics have envisioned it. What Agee achieves through the book is a chronicle of the beginning of differentiated consciousness in the young, sensitive artist. However, the novel achieves this perspective through complex meditations on the language of the religious (and the subsequent disturbing problem of its relationship to violence and the body), and more importantly, the figure of the father as a metaphysical bridge between the literal and the figurative. In it, he also meditates pointedly (and one might argue topically since the specter of the atomic bomb looms over the period of its publication) on the failure of violence as a possibility for reconnecting inherent humanity. Richard’s imagined violence derails his intense desire for spiritual connections and negates ideas of his changing body. However, through the image of his

father, Richard achieves the enlightenment he cannot experience within the framework of his education.

But Agee's achievement in *The Morning Watch* is not simply thematic. As the only novel published in his lifetime, *The Morning Watch* should be recognized as an important text in understanding Agee's perspective on what it meant to write a novel,<sup>39</sup> a question that necessarily had to be answered with his posthumous *A Death in the Family*. The book seems to be interested in not only Richard's struggle with achieving moral enlightenment but also Agee's struggle with questions of literary construction. In this way, *The Morning Watch*'s narratives become simultaneously isolated and connected. It's possible to locate through the challenging style of the novel a multi-vocal exploration of Agee's composition of the book that informs his protagonist's narrative. For these reasons, understanding *The Morning Watch* is absolutely essential to piecing together the meaning, evolution and problems inherent in Agee's fiction. Instead, in its receding from not only the landscape of modern fiction (the book has been out of print for over 30 years) but also from Agee's own canon, *The Morning Watch*'s achievement is seldom recognized by even Agee's staunchest apologists.

In this chapter, I want to help to re-center *The Morning Watch* as a text in which some of the central artistic and literary concerns of Agee's life and work are first documented. I want to do this first by examining the way in which Agee explores the possibilities of violence within the context of a moral world, and how violence, ultimately, proves to be self-negating. He does this through Richard's inner struggle with attempting to remain spiritually relevant during his early morning vigil. I also want to locate Agee's complex meta-narrative in which one might connect artistic concerns first

voiced in the looming *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, specifically the way in which words succeed and fail at embodying remembered experience and his anxiety over those problems. Reading this novel in such a way establishes *The Morning Watch* as a text of importance to Agee, one that must necessarily be explored for the purposes of understanding the richness of his career.

### **Reading Bodies, Imagining Violence, Recovering the Father**

While his simplistic plot and careful organization invite symbolic or allegorical readings, Agee's language denies any kind of direct or easy meaning. Critics have labeled it either too simplistic (in structure and motive) or too messy (in language and meaning), and sometimes both simultaneously. Agee's structure makes his trajectory of the book clear: It takes place during the Easter weekend, in a three-part structure that invites the reader to connect Richard's journey to Christ's.<sup>40</sup> If Part One of the book is Richard's own muddled Gethsemane, by Part Three, Richard's introspective self-torment unlocks his potential for spiritual fulfillment. However, his movement from spiritual confusion to epiphany<sup>41</sup> relies on a thematic obsession with violence and its impact on Richard's body that has never been properly addressed.

Agee's thematic concern with the representation of body and violence recurs throughout his fiction, and he often creates bodies only to have them assaulted, dissected, or even split into pieces. Characters, like Richard in *The Morning Watch*, symbolically replicate, multiply, or divide themselves through imagined violent confrontations with their failures. The translation of these failures becomes a violent discursive act that answers critical reaction against Agee's exaggerated language, as it represents perhaps



the most complex associations between bodily representations and violence in all of Agee's fiction. Understanding the importance of Richard's body in relationship to violence within the framework of *The Morning Watch* is crucial to an understanding of the achievement of the book itself, and Agee's simultaneous spiritual misgivings and affirmations. The presentation of the body in relation to violence also establishes a critical link between *The Morning Watch* and Agee's posthumously published (and structurally similar) novel *A Death in the Family* for it is in this novel that one understands the legacy of Rufus' father's death.<sup>42</sup>

Richard shares many of the autobiographical traits that are typical of Agee's heroes. He is deeply sensitive, quiet, curious, and shy. The book largely follows his inward movement from selfishness to selflessness, or in the case of representations of the body, presence to bodilessness. As a novel that is deeply concerned with religion and the language of religion, the disconnection between mind and body becomes a prominent theme for Agee throughout. Richard lives inside of his mind throughout the book, and his sufferings are clearly perpetuated by inward turmoil. For Richard, however, this mental anguish can, in turn, become sacrificial, holy or purifying.

Although the short book follows young Richard and his forced vigil during the Easter weekend commemorating the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, the central action of the text takes place in Richard's imagination as he attempts to establish some kind of material connection between the spiritual ideas he has been taught and his personal experiences. The frustrating attempts to make matter of the immaterial cause him to confront, instead, his body in relationship to imagined and ritual violence; he longs for spiritual enlightenment through the directness of self-violence and punishment.

Frequently, Richard will castigate himself for imagined irreverence, striking his breastbone or kneeling for long hours until he feels faint, but his self-punishment is never more acute than the psychological torment he forces himself to endure in order to attain some kind of spiritual cleansing. His inability to maintain absolute focus on pressing spiritual ideas presented to him during the day's events causes him tremendous guilt, and incites his desire for self-punishment in order to atone. In this way, violence and spiritual fulfillment are intertwined in Richard's mind so that violence becomes the necessary tool for unlocking the soul's potential.

The frustration of Richard's spiritual life has often lead critics, starting with Kramer, to read *The Morning Watch* as emblematic of a theological-secular debate (and its subsequent relationship to the spirit-body dialectic).<sup>43</sup> Kramer locates the centrality of the theme in Agee's own self-questioning on the manuscript copy at The University of Texas at Austin: "What really am I after in this story, and is it worth doing? Religion at its deepest intensity or clarity of childhood faith and emotions, plus beginnings of a skeptical intellect and set of senses; how the senses themselves, and sexuality, feed the skeptical or non-religious or esthetic intellect..." (226). The unique place of Richard's body in the short book underscores Agee's meditation on the frustration of the spiritual by the secular, or as Kramer puts it, "the futility of the young protagonist's attempt to sustain his religious feeling as it is intruded upon by all manner of things from sex to skepticism" (225). For Richard, his body is something to be sacrificed, and through its absence, he imagines the possibility for spiritual presence. Bodies, both his and those of his classmates, are vastly important to Richard's growing spiritual and aesthetic development. They are subjects to be read, interpreted, and, finally, discarded through

sacrificial violence, but Richard's own attempts at sacrifice are complicated by his selfish inability to deny his body an imaginative space within his spiritual musings. Rather than discarding his body, Richard often multiplies it, or replaces other prominent images of the body with his own. In the frenetic world of his spiritual imagination, however, the violence of self-sacrifice only serves to reaffirm the distinct presence and importance of Richard's body. His obsession with his physical presence also seems to undermine Kramer's critical estimation that the book is solely the exploration of the emerging artist's confrontation with skepticism and science. Richard's literalistic readings of prayers and hymns (which connect with his innocence about "reading" bodies) deny the space of metaphor. Though he is concerned with the intricacies of words within the context of their meanings, he longs primarily for the physical connection, the literal truth.

Agee's exploration of Richard's frustrations with religion suggests that the other religious dialectic (as opposed to the sacred-profane) of mind and body is crucial to the fulfillment of his journey. Book II of Agee's novel takes place in the chapel and is highly concerned with Richard's intellectual puzzlement over understanding the complex ideas presented to him by his religious education. In Book III, however, Agee moves Richard beyond the chapel into the physical world of nature. Here, Richard frees himself of the concerns of religious strictures but still finds himself confused by the physical, his body and sexuality in relation to his classmates. Agee suggests that total immersion in either extreme of the dialect – body or mind – fails to unlock spiritual fulfillment. However, through the (often-violent) synthesis of the two, Richard is able to receive and understand the complex meanings that elude him. Read in this way, then, Agee's book is less about

exploring the struggle between the emerging aesthetic life and moral sensibility than it is a meditation on the importance of synthesis in achieving spiritual knowledge.

Setting up the cycle of frustrations that Richard will experience throughout his journey, the novel opens with failure, Richard's inability to stay awake throughout the night. Imagining himself as the ultimate apostle stand-in, Richard, "in hidden vainglory ...had vowed that he would stay awake through the night, for he had wondered, and not without scorn, how they, grown men, could give way to sleep...leaving Him without one friend in his worst hour..." (3). But Richard falls asleep shortly before midnight and wakes sharply to "his failure" (5). He realizes immediately that he has been worse than the apostles because here at this "deep hour," Christ would be standing "peaceful before Pilate" (4). This first attempt (and failure) by Richard to assert some kind of imagined presence in the pre-written narrative of the Passion will be repeated throughout the book. Here, Richard's acknowledgment of his primary failure suggests the importance of bodies (or the presence of bodily images) in the novel. Unable to replace the image of the apostles' sleeping bodies with his own, Richard is forced to acknowledge not the presence of his body, but, in fact, his absence. What Richard recognizes is his inconsequentiality to the process of the day; the narrative of the Passion has started without him.

The cyclical failure of his attempts at replacing images of the crucifixion and resurrection reminds Richard throughout the book of his waning spiritual presence, and, ironically, redouble his desperate efforts to remain spiritually relevant on the holiest of weeks. Richard's significant prayer at the beginning of the narrative begs of God, "Within Thy Wounds hide me" (5). The metaphorical prayer suggests a deeper and more

disturbing literal meaning: Richard's constantly present body must be sacrificed through violence. Within the first pages of the novel, then, Agee suggests that Richard's movement from presence to absence is only possible through a deep ritual violence. The more Agee's story progresses, the more the possibility for some kind of reclamation of Richard's spiritual understanding is frustrated and invalidated. It is only through Richard's own significant personal narrative with his father (and, specifically, his father's physical body) that Richard comes to understand the complexities his religious education denies him.

Agee, however, is aware of the body's importance in religious ritual and purification. Throughout the novel, Richard finds palpable meaning in bodies that surround him. His attempts to "read" these bodies underscore the importance of not only Richard's awareness of his own body but also the problem his body might present in the religious awakening he longs for. Far from being a simplistic purification of the mind through a sacrifice of the body (as perhaps Christ's journey is), Richard constantly acknowledges the presence of his body. Richard sees his imitation, both of his roommates and figures in the Passion's narrative, as simultaneously an act of presence (i.e. his replacement of one body for his own) and absence (i.e. the replacement of his body's individuality into prefabricated molds).

From Book One to Book Two, Richard tests his simplistic and innocent readings of bodies around him, and each time, must admit a failure centralized by the belief that the relationship between body and ability is direct and sustainable. At the beginning of the novel, Richard notes the unique body structure of one of his fellow schoolmates, Willard.<sup>44</sup> He notices "the hump between Willard's heavy shoulders, which he had often

wondered about” (23). Richard decides that the hump must be a muscle because if it were a bone, “that would be a deformity” (24). Unable to reconcile how such a popular and athletic schoolmate could also be deformed, Richard interprets his slight hunch as a physical manifestation of Willard’s superiority. “...And on Willard, more than any other thing, it was what made him unique among others, and marked his all but superhuman powers.”

For Richard, Willard’s unique body is an easy representation of his ability. It’s interesting to note, however, that Richard interprets Willard’s hump as lending him physical talents; the body in this case is neither emblematic nor suggestive of an intellectual or inward life. Following the thread of imitation, Richard tries to make his body physically similar to Willard’s “whenever he [did] anything physically credible [by] carry[ing] his head low, let[ing] his mouth hang open...” Richard believes that his body, through imitation, can unlock potential he is unable to summon on his own, but his attempts are futile. When he comes face to face with the boy in the chapel, Richard shrinks at the very sight of him. In his presence, Richard recognizes his masculine immaturity and sexual innocence.<sup>45</sup> He reminds himself with this failure of imitation of the inability to exorcise the image of his body from his overworked imagination, and his search for meaning is thwarted just as at the beginning of the book by his naïve belief that physical imitation produces inward or localized significance.

Imitation or embodiment also becomes problematic for Richard when he attempts to use his body as a way of unlocking mental or spiritual potential. He tries to purify his imagined body through sacrificial and imagined violence, punishment and torture in order that he can experience Christ’s sacrifice on a deeper level. If Richard begins the novel in

Book I imagining himself as the embodiment of Christ's apostles, sleeping away the night he is to be taken, as he goes about the symbolic rituals of the day in Book II, Richard begins to imagine his body as Christ's himself. It is in the role of Christ that Richard tries to sacrifice his imagined self into non-existence. He attempts to do this through imagined ritual violence. However, his attempts at self-sacrifice always seem to be thwarted by an omnipresent self-awareness that refuses to diminish his body's presence.

In his imagined sacrifice, Richard tries to find ways that he can be sure that his bodily sacrifice will matter. He imagines scourging himself but cannot bear the pain to do it himself. He tries fasting but cannot make it through a full day without eating something. He even imagines being crucified like Christ himself, but loses himself in the intricacies of such a feat: "...he could undoubtedly nail his own feet, and even one hand (if someone else would steady the nail), [but] his right hand would still hang free, and it would look pretty foolish beside a real Crucifixion" (46). The gap between his imagined act and Christ's produces a kind of guilty inauthenticity for Richard, but even so, he muses, the act would provide the opportunity for individual suffering. He imagines his teachers, angry at what they will read as blasphemy, punishing him, but even the punishment is further bodily sacrifice. The scholastic punishment of a schoolboy then becomes the ritual scourging of Jesus: "... [He] would give himself up to his punishers without making a struggle. Scourge me, he said; paddle me with the one with holes in it; put me in bounds all the rest of the year; expel me even; there is nothing you can do that won't be to the greater glory of God..." (49). Richard longs for some kind of connection between his mind's embodiment and physicality, and finds it through corporal violence.

In fact, he convinces himself that “it had become a secret kind of good to be punished, especially if the punishment was exorbitant or unjust.”

Trying to imagine some sacrifice he could make for Jesus’ sake, Richard attempts to lose his body in a sudden vision of Christ’s terrible crucifixion, hoping that, as Rewak argues, “in experiencing the image, he would be able to derive the meaning behind the image” (24). Richard’s intense focus turns unsurprisingly inward: “supplanting Christ’s image, he saw his own body nailed to the Cross and, in the same image, himself looked down from the Cross and felt his weight upon the nails, and the splintered wood against the whole length of his scourged back” (45-6). This sacrificial vision becomes distorted for Richard as both seer and object, simultaneously crucified and crucifier. He is unable to totally disassociate himself from either position and becomes confused as he imagines himself “stoically, with infinite love and forgiveness, gaz[ing] downward into the eyes of Richard and of the Roman soldiers...” Through the imagined crucifixion, Richard is able to visualize his sacrifice, but is tragically unable to remove his body from any positions of prominence. The vision is “solemn and rewarding” on one hand, but also “almost within the next breath he recognized that he had no such cause or right as Jesus to die upon the Cross: and turning his head, saw Christ’s head higher beside his own and a third head, lower, cursing; and knew that he was, instead, the Penitent Thief.” His inability to reconcile the images he formulates of himself causes him to reject outright the possibility that he has any physical connection with the pre-written story of the Passion. He understands that even violence cannot establish physical meaning, and that “It would be impossible to get a Cross without removing the image of Jesus from it...” (47). The primary bodily image, Christ suffering on the cross, cannot be supplanted for Richard,



and his attempts to replace the image with his own imagined body do not work. In fact, Richard's frenetic substitution of his body into the prefabricated roles of the Passion – Christ, Thief, Roman Soldier, apostle – all fail to connect him to spiritual epiphany. The book suggests that Richard's spiritual journey will not be achieved through the violent replacement of predetermined religious figures but rather through some kind of confrontation with and reclamation of his actual body.

Richard's failed and misguided attempts to connect sacrificial physical violence to localized spiritual meaning constitute much of Book II. Within the chapel, during the early prayer service, Richard struggles with the puzzle of words that surrounds much of his spiritual education. Just as the slightly alarming "within thy wounds hide me," Richard cannot "avoid" the literalness of the hymn that asks, "Blood of Christ inebriate me" (32). The word "inebriate" confuses him in its religious context: "Inebriate meant just plain drunken, or meant a drunken person...and as it was used here, it meant to make drunk, to intoxicate." Just as with Willard, Richard's mind cannot move into the realm of metaphor, and remains locked on the simple, literal meaning. "Don't take it literally," Richard tells himself, "but the literal words remained and were even more firm" (33). Christ's blood, the surrogate for the whiskey or beer Richard imagines in his mind, makes the whole thing even more disturbing. "But the blood was 'drawn from Emmanuel's veins,' so that did make it pretty awful," he thinks. Richard's difficulty with the hymn's metaphor suggests his preoccupation with the physical, the tactile, and his self-conscious reflection over literalness does not allow him to locate any spiritual meaning suggested by the hymn's figurative language. And with its reference to blood, the hymn re-centers

the importance of violence in Richard's imagination in the context of spiritual achievement.

Richard's problems with language represent the same chain of failure that Agee highlights throughout Book II. Within the realm of language, Richard's mind can only locate literal meaning. In one instance, Richard has trouble feeling the correct meaning behind the phrase "the burden is intolerable." He wants to make sure that the weight of his sin is properly felt, so that his contrition will be authentic. Disgusted at his inability to feel the proper emotion, Richard tries to "squeeze...his eyes so tightly shut that they ached...and [strike] himself heavily on his breastbone, groaning within his soul, *the burden...is intolerable*" (52). The violent act immediately awakens Richard's contrition, so much so that he strikes himself again. But as he prepares to strike a third time, Richard becomes keenly aware of his body's presence among his classmates: he has a "recognition that his action was conspicuous and that it must seem to others as affected, as much put on for outward show, as he himself, observing others, had come to feel that various mannerisms in prayer must be." Frightened by how literally his body might be read by his classmates, Richard gives up his self imposed suffering. As he kneels in prayer, Richard is consumed with himself, the angle of his chin, his arms, how he must look to everyone else. Closing his eyes, Richard imagines the scene of the chapel: "He saw, and was himself, grown and vested, genuflecting, raising the consecrated Host, again genuflecting, while a bowed kneeling boy, who was also himself, shook the three bells" (66). His desire to replace his image with that of Christ or the apostles only multiplies his body into confusing versions of himself that he cannot reconcile. Again, Richard is entirely unable to disassociate his body's presence from the violent action of

self-sacrifice and must admit his failure. In this case, Richard's own super-consciousness, of himself and how he is perceived, shatters his inward and imagined sacrifice. He is again drawn back to the very image of his body, how he must look, and cannot continue with his imagined sacrifice.

Agee seems to suggest that, for Richard, both imagined and performed violence doesn't just fail to connect spiritual meaning but is, in fact, an act of ultimate selfishness. Richard sees punishment and self-violence as possibilities that might allow him to disassociate the image of his body from his mind, but all he accomplishes is the direct opposite. He reminds himself constantly of not only his perception of his body but also how his body is being perceived, or read, by his classmates and teachers. Richard is finally unable to remove the image of his own body from even the thoughts of its sacrifice. While critics might argue that Agee's motive in this book is to represent the nascent aesthetic impulses of the young artist, Richard seems to be constantly repelled by the metaphorical and figurative in Book II. That he must come back to the idea of his own body suggests further evidence of his privileging of the physical and literal over the spiritual and figurative, and anticipates the scene at the "sand cut" where Richard's body will play a crucial role in his spiritual journey.

The possibility for Richard to achieve spiritual fulfillment through his wounded body haunts him in the book. Richard is not simply content to be a good Christian; he desires to be the exemplar. He wants desperately to be considered a saint, or, at the least, a prophet. However, he cannot seem to make a case for his spiritual uniqueness. As Richard meditates on this dilemma, he imagines that his uniqueness might come through the marks of Christ's wounds, the stigmata. For Richard, the supplanting of Christ's

wounds onto his own hands would be a way of proving his faith and strength to his teachers and classmates, but even as he imagines the stigmata on his open palms, Richard must let the image of the wounded body go. The vision of his stigmata represents for him the movement from religious sobriety to blasphemy: “He realized that once again this night, and even more blasphemously and absurdly than before, he had sinned in the proud imagination of the heart” (77). The balance Richard maintains through his imagined sacrifice between being spiritually present and selfishly blasphemous is always tenuous, and frequently, his melodramatic and violent indulgences represent to him deadly sins of pride.

In Book III, Agee moves Richard beyond frustrations of embodiment with Christ and into spiritual understanding. Unlike Book II, Richard’s spiritual epiphany takes place not in the chapel but in the physical world of the forest. Tired from the long morning at the Chapel, Richard and his schoolmates Jimmy and Hobe linger outside of their dorm. They toss around ideas of whether they should go exploring or follow the rules and go back to their dorms to sleep. Surprisingly, Richard leads the other boys to the forbidden “sand cut” to swim. In this setting, literally and metaphorically free of the religious strictures of the school, Richard feels comfortable in his body for the first time. He no longer conjures his violent sacrifice, but instead is able to contemplate his physical body in relation to the other boys. When the boys undress by the lake, Richard is at first shy of his nakedness, but gradually he begins to furtively seek out the physical characteristics of his schoolmate’s adolescent puberty – the size and shape of their genitalia and the abundance or lack of pubic hair. Again, Richard is engaging in an active search for meaning by “reading” bodies. Richard notes, “Although Jimmy was the smallest of the

three in every other way, his was much the biggest and during the winter he had grown much more hair than Richard had realized up to now” (101). Richard’s shame of his genitalia causes him to turn away in shyness, but moments later, he runs his hands along his body in an odd gesture of self-discovery and celebration. No longer willing to hide or sacrifice his body, Richard delights in his “exposure.”

As Richard jumps into the icy water “the brutal shock and pain” causes him at once to be “aware of the entire surface of his body as if it were fire, and every muscle seemed to feel its own exact shape and weight” (103). Richard’s new appreciation of his body simultaneously recalls his previous desire for suffering. He stays under a long time, hoping to suffer more during this day of remembrance. Again, he must admit failure: Unable to drown himself purposefully, he rises to the surface. After this faux baptism, Richard begins a re-examination of his body through physical touch. Agee writes, “his body still blazed with pleasure in its existence, and it was no longer urgent and rigid but almost sleepy” (106). Running his hands along his skin, he realizes the wonder of his existence: “*Here I am!* His enchanted body sang. I could be dead right now, he reflected in sleepy awe. *Here I am!*” Richard’s acceptance of his body through the morning swim comes about through the recognition of its potential for absence. Swimming under water for such a long time that even Hobe almost dives in to save him, Richard connects that important word from the chapel – dead – to his body. Instead of being absent, Richard is able to celebrate the presence of his body and, likewise, his existence.

If Book II chronicled Agee’s (through Richard’s) acknowledgment of the difficulty to achieve spiritual enlightenment through solely a religious framework, this scene at the beginning of Book III maintains the opposite – the inability to achieve

spiritual fulfillment through an emphasis on the bodily and physical. Richard's celebration and affirmation of his body surprisingly connect with his capacity for violence moments after he emerges from the water. As he goes to retrieve his shirt, Richard and the other boys spot a snake slithering through the branches. At first, Richard is fascinated and dazzled by the snake's quick movements, even debating whether or not to fling the rocks Hobe and Jimmy are using to pelt the snake back at them. But, as he watches the boys, he becomes possessed, transformed, and kneels down beside it "pound[ing] at its head" with his own rock (110). Even though Richard understands that he is caught up in, what Agee calls, "the darkness of his own violence," he only can think of destroying the snake quickly and finally: "...but he only cared for one thing, to put as quick an end as he could to all this terrible, ruined, futile writhing and unkillable defiance."<sup>46</sup> He flattens the head of the snake, but even as it dies, the body remains in constant movement. Richard notes "still the body, even out beyond the earlier wound, lashed, lay resting, trembled, lashed." This movement-in-death upsets Richard who wishes he could "crush the snake [so] that it would never move again" (111).

The destruction of the snake moments after Richard becomes comfortable with his body suggests some kind of relationship. Richard's imagination, which was filled with spiritual matters in the chapel, is now riddled with thoughts of sexuality and its relationship to the body. These thoughts translate themselves into disturbing instinctual violence. Even though his action gains him respect from his peers, who wordlessly congratulate him for "killing so recklessly and with such brutality," Richard understands that in killing the snake, he has interrupted his earlier comfort while swimming. Agee, clearly playing with religious symbolism, has Richard drive out of the clearing the Edenic

snake, but the exorcism of supposed evil rings hollow. Richard is numbed by his unexplainable brutality, and only takes the snake's body with him (a supposed trophy) for the other boys' benefit. Again, violence has failed to connect Richard's imagined self with his experiential self, but in a more profound way, Richard understands, through the killing of the snake, that violence not only fails to offer spiritual connections but also acts as a means of disconnection itself. His flattening of the snake disconnects his earlier feeling of comfort and celebration in relation to his body. Instead, the ruined body of the snake haunts Richard, who can't help experiencing the effects of his violence: "From the break on back it lay belly up and the pallor of the belly, and the different structure of the scales, so well designed for crawling, were quietly sickening to see" (114). Richard tries to think of the snake's intricately designed body, but keeps coming back to "the annihilated head...mashed almost like soft metal against the rock." Richard must confront not only his capacity for violence but also the results of that possibility, the wrecked body, and the wounded snake. For the first time in the novel, Richard's violence is real and outward, is performed rather than imagined, and performed on an object other than his own body. It is not self-scourging or punishment, but the destruction of a living body. As he watches the snake's movement, Richard knows that it will "not die until sundown"<sup>47</sup> (111), thereby connecting its body with Christ's. His act of violence forces him to deny his own body any association with Christ's. Violence, finally, comes to be a false answer for Richard and Agee, and through the final death of the snake, Agee removes the possibility for violence from Richard's desire for a reverent and religious life. The firsthand experience of his own violence opens Richard up to what Barson labels "an increased moral sensitivity" (161).

Richard's hollow feeling after the snake's death corresponds to Agee's presentation of a locust shell, a symbol Agee debated over because of its obvious representation.<sup>48</sup> It is, in fact, the objective correlative to Richard's previous struggles with his own body. On the way to the lake, he comes upon the shell, "transparent silver breathed with gold..." (98). Significantly, the locust's "whole back [is] split, [as] the hard claws, its only remaining strength, so clenched into the bark that it was with only great care and gentleness that he was able to detach the shell without destroying it." Richard is fascinated with the little shell, with its simultaneous presence and weightlessness: "it was as if air had been tightened into substance; only by touch and sight, not at all by weight, could he know he held it." It represents to him both the weight of his unshakable body and the deep machinations of his inwardness, his soul. But, the bodiless shell connects Richard to thoughts of violence, as even the ghost of its talons "could pierce a finger," and the shell's ripped skeleton reminds him of his struggles in Book II: "That whole back is split," he thinks to himself, "Bet it doesn't hurt any worse than that to be crucified" (99). As a symbol, Agee uses the shell to represent many things for Richard, the obvious bodiless shell of a soul, the simultaneous presence and absence of the body, and the purifying violence that Richard longs for. He encounters it at the beginning of Book III, and retrieves it from the tree at the end of the novel. Agee ends the book with a final image of Richard's "left hand sustain[ing], in exquisite protectiveness, the bodiless shell which rested against his heart" (120). Through the idea of the locust's shell (as in the image of his dead father), Richard is able to begin to understand the complex relationship his soul has to his body.



But, if the locust shell is the material site wherein Richard locates the novel's trajectory, which we might define as the religious body's recognition of the soul, then the death of Richard's father, specifically the absence of his body, comes to represent the crucial link to the meaning Richard is working towards throughout the book. Richard's musings on the body, violence and punishment cause him to remember his father's death in the middle of Book II. Like Rufus in *A Death in the Family*, and like Agee himself, Richard's father's death in an automobile accident figures prominently into his intellectual life. In fact, Richard's acceptance of the idea of death only can come through a reconnection with the image of his dead father's body: "Dead, the word prevailed; and before him, still beyond all other stillness, he saw as freshly as six years before his father's prostrate head and, through the efforts to hide it, the mortal blue dent in the impatient chin" (28). Unlike his experience with Willard, Richard's father's body (imagined in its absence) manifests an ability to allow complex understandings. Like Christ's absent body, the body of his father offers spiritual connections through the lens of shattering violence. Remembering his father's unmoving body, Richard is "for the first time convinced" about the meaning of death "...when he saw how through that first full minute of looking his father has neither stirred nor spoken." Agee will later use the image of the father's body in *A Death in the Family* in much the same way for the young Rufus.

The imagining of his father's body and its pointed absence moves Richard in the final scenes of the novel to the crucial connection between his body and soul that he could not locate during the watch in the chapel or at the lake. As Richard heads back to his dorm, his violent attack on the snake so affects him that he feels it as "an all but

impossible weight in the middle of his body” (118). He attempts to recall the same feeling he had as he woke in the morning and the “absoluteness of emotions” after swimming, but can only imagine the violence he has just performed: “Here I am,” he repeats again in his head, “He struck his breastbone and tried to imagine how it would feel to be scourged with a cat-o’-nine tails with lead tips, and to wear a crown of thorns,” but his imagined association rings only as blasphemy, and he ends his thoughts asking for God’s forgiveness. Coming up on his dorm, Hobe throws the mangled body of the snake to the hogs, which begin to tear “it apart at its middle wound” (120). Richard realizes with horror that the snake “however chewed and mangled” is still alive and will remain alive until the end of the day. The persistence of the snake, his ability to remain alive despite the annihilation of the body, reminds Richard of the language of his mother. Agee ends the novel as Richard remembers her words on the death of his father: “Daddy was terribly hurt so God has taken him up to Heaven to be with Him and he won’t come back to us ever any more.”

Somehow those words “ever any more” and his father’s death supersede the snake’s death in his imagination and cause his body to lighten. For the first time, Richard is able to fathom the complexities of life-in-death that this day has awakened in him. It is a Joycean epiphany, connecting the soul of his father to that of the snake. Richard’s connection with the snake and his father’s automobile accident draws his attention away from obsession over the physical characteristics of death, the chewed snake and his father’s mortal bruise. For the first time in the book, Richard draws inward without being self-obsessed. His focus on his father frees the image of his own body from prominence. Significantly, Richard finds salvation through the idea of his father’s soul and his body,

purified through the violence of the accident. Though he recognizes in his mother's words the physical truth of his father's absence, he finds the exquisite potential for his father's spiritual presence. His father becomes what Phillipson describes as "a surrogate-deity" (360), for like Christ, his father suffered, died, and has come again to Richard to help connect missing pieces within himself. More importantly, his father's body allows him the opportunity that Christ's body does not, to imagine within his own personal framework the possibility for the soul, grace, and spiritual truth.

After his epiphany and, for the first time, Agee mentions Richard's soul and body together in one sentence. He speaks of their "diminishing weight" (120) as he makes his way back to the dorms. Agee ends the book with Richard walking silently back to his dorm, carrying the bodiless shell of a locust in his right hand. The locust shell, which he had retrieved from the tree, transforms itself into a reflection of his father's soul that he carries with him "against his heart." The major symbols of the book, the snake and the locus shell, unite Richard's coltish and divided consciousness into focused meditation on his father. Although Folks claims that there is some tone of hope in the end of the book, he comes to the conclusion that this is "only temporary comfort": "...it seems highly unlikely that Richard will for long escape his father's ghost" (79). But Richard's understanding comes through contact with his father's memory, not from its denial. In this sense, an "escape" from the image of the father, for both Richard and Agee, would be a devastating interruption of their religious and artistic consciousness. By ending the novel with Richard's father as spiritual bridge, as a figure through which complex meanings can be deciphered, Agee creates a clear connection between this short novella

and *A Death in the Family*, for it is only through the father that Agee (in his Rufus-Richard disguise) can begin to understand the intricacies of his slippery identity.

The narrative stretches from hopelessness to optimism; there are possibilities open to Richard that were not available at the beginning of the novel. The specter of violence has failed to produce any palpable opportunities for Richard. Instead, it has limited the space of his body and imagination. It is only through his father, and the tacit rejection of violence by giving up the ruined body of the snake, that Richard's imaginative potential is unlocked and allowed to grow.

. . . . .

Read in this way, and not simply as an allegory of the skeptical intellect, *The Morning Watch* is a rich and complex meditation on Richard's struggles with his spiritual growth<sup>49</sup> in relation to his changing body. By negating, sacrificing and hiding his body with imagined ritual violence, Richard hopes to achieve the spiritual fulfillment that eludes him, but he never allows the image of his body to recede from his imagination. It is only when his inward journey looks outward that he attains his spiritual epiphany. If Book One offers Richard's nascent religious education, then Book Two deals with Richard's heart in conflict with his education. Stuck during the watch in the chapel, he tries to find some way that his body can matter in the pre-written spiritual narrative of the Passion, but each time he tries to establish some presence (usually through imagined physical violence), he is thwarted by a self-conscious sensitiveness about his body. In Book Three, however, in the world of nature and the forest, Richard gradually begins to

understand the spiritual epiphany that he couldn't in the confines of the chapel through his father's body. It is an understanding gleaned through experience, not education. Just as Agee synthesizes his previous books in Book Three, Richard learns to synthesize his spiritual education through independent experience, so that he can "read" local meaning into spiritual concepts.

If we can locate Richard's journey from spiritual frustration to enlightenment within the book, I believe it's also possible to find Agee's as well. Since Agee is concerned with understanding through a version of himself (Richard) how a kind of religious sensibility connects with problems of physicality, one might argue that the central concerns discussed above have repercussions within Agee's lifelong exploration of problems inherent in writing itself.<sup>50</sup> Substituting the terms as we've defined them thematically, I'll argue in the next section that *The Morning Watch*, in many ways, explores Agee's anxiety over the problems inherent in both writing a "modern" novel and in doing justice to writing about his past. Both events, I'll argue, can be read as violent acts that are transportive rather than transformative: they move both reader and author to perspectives that were previously unattainable. In this way, though Agee frequently works in terms of absolutes, success and failure,<sup>51</sup> his recognition of his failure successfully reconstitutes the book as a novel that chronicles not just the material of his past but, more critically, the unique problems of its composition.

### **Success, Failure, and Humor: Reading Agee's Meta-Narrative**

Agee was obsessed, it seems, with the value of his own work.<sup>52</sup> It's not just that he was, as has been suggested by his colleagues, his harshest critic, but that his writing

was so often full of its own defeat that its detractors and critics didn't have to look very far to undermine Agee's skill. Jeffrey Folks meditates on Agee's perceived literary failure in his study of *The Morning Watch*; he argues that if Agee was a failure, his failure was centered in imagination, that Agee's aesthetic was too tied up in his "late Modernist... bohemian attraction to moral ambiguity." A victim, it would appear, of his own time, Agee's attraction to modernism led to "paralysis within the Modernist sensibility itself." Folks' conclusion is that "he was too predictably modern" (77).

But what does it mean to be "too predictably modern"? And how does Agee's reaction to and valuing of his texts fit within that estimation? To be sure Agee was aware of the literary scene, and as an avid reader and reviewer, he would have been familiar with the major texts and literary movements associated with the first half of the Twentieth Century.<sup>53</sup> Above, I suggest (as do many critics) that *The Morning Watch* owes a debt to James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Agee acknowledges Richard's connections with Stephen Deadalus, but in his re-exploration of his past experiences, Agee's book dialogues with Joyce's.<sup>54</sup> Stephen actively denies association with his past, breaks the bonds of religion and country, and moves towards independence and self-affirmation. Agee moves in the opposite direction, towards an affirmation of identity entangled inextricably with his homeland and religious education; unlike Joyce's Deadalus, Richard and Agee both do not affirm the secular alternative advocated by so many modernist writers. In many ways, *The Morning Watch* becomes Agee's rewriting of *Portrait*, where he simultaneously acknowledges the modernist sensibility of Joyce and moves beyond it.<sup>55</sup> We might define the "failure" of *The*

*Morning Watch*, in fact, as the opposite of Folks' conclusion – as Agee's failure to totally sustain a modern sensibility in his first novel.

It's my contention that Agee's failure didn't lie in his predictability or even within his adherence to the form and structure of modern literature, but that his construction of himself as "failed author" is evidence of his obsession over questions of authorship and the validity of writing that anticipate more elements of postmodernism<sup>56</sup> than they do the late modernism. I want to argue that Agee's anxiety over the gap between his perspective and the modernist's perspective is clearly evident in *The Morning Watch*,<sup>57</sup> and that he constructs the book in such a way that his failure as a modernist is also emblematic of a moral success, the reconstruction and reconditioning of moral sensibility within the secular world. The very act of composing the religious novel in the secular world of modernity insured its failure. So it's not surprising that when Folks explains why Agee is a gifted writer, but not a great one, that he comes back to the test subject of Joyce: "...unlike a similarly disadvantaged child from Dublin's lower middle class, Agee lacked the great shaping imagination that might fully order his raw experience into art and thus remedy his wounds" (80).

If Folks accuses Agee of being too predictably modern, in failing to recede from the perspective manufactured by Joyce and his contemporaries, it's easy to understand why he's so critical. But *The Morning Watch* refuses to follow the Joycean path to self-affirmation. Yes, Agee fails to create a novel that achieves and sustains the modernist's perspective, but in such an instance, the intentional failure of perspective is just the point. However, like Joyce's *Portrait*, *The Morning Watch*'s achievement lies in its experimentation with language and content,<sup>58</sup> including Agee's anxiety over the

boundaries of the literary, questions of authorship and perspective and the possibility of re-affirming the moral in a world of atomic bombs and madness.

At the time Agee began his work on *The Morning Watch*, he was also struggling through what was to later become, through the editing of Dwight McDowell, *A Death in the Family*.<sup>59</sup> As early as 1945, Agee writes Father Flye of his work on “a short novel about adolescence in the 1920’s – a fairly good start. But in ten days,” he concedes, “I haven’t come back to it” (*Letters* 152). Indeed, if what Agee was referring to in his letter was *The Morning Watch* (as Father Flye labels it in his footnote),<sup>60</sup> it would take Agee a full five years to complete what he considered a workable manuscript. During the years between 1945 and 1950, then, though Agee was engaged in the cinematic – his friendship with director John Houston was blooming, and he was hoping to get a chance at writing screenplays – in many respects, Agee was even more concerned with the form, structure and possibilities available in fiction.

In his “Plans for Work: October 1937,” which he submitted with his application for a Guggenheim Fellowship, Agee makes it clear that – even at the beginning of his career – a primary interest of his will be to re-condition the novel from its structural confines. His plans include “A new form of ‘story’: the true incident recorded as such and an analysis of it” (*Short Prose* 132) and one labeled “An ‘autobiographical novel.’” Here, Agee is more specific about just what he means:

This would combine many of the forms and ideas and experiments mentioned above. Only relatively small portions would be fiction (though the techniques of fiction might be much used); and these would be subjected to nonfictional analysis (*Short Prose* 147).



That Agee mentions his concern with the combination of fictional accounts and the simultaneous nonfictional analysis of the validity of its rendering suggests that his subsequent fiction does more work than the predictably modern novel. His interest in the re-working of his biography into fiction, of course, connects with both *The Morning Watch* and *A Death in the Family*, and the fictional presentation and nonfictional analysis reminds the reader of the possibility of simultaneous narratives within the same book. It makes sense, then, that critical problems with *The Morning Watch*'s language and structure might spring from a misreading that ignores the sometimes "disparate" narratives in favor of the "unity" of the text.<sup>61</sup> If we can, instead, locate the distinct narratives and explore their interaction, it's possible I think to understand more completely Agee's achievement in the text.

Though Agee had experimented in form throughout his life, writing numerous short stories at St. Andrew's and Harvard or fragments of plays, *The Morning Watch* was Agee's first attempt at the novel in his lifetime. As such, he took his self-assignment seriously, questioning the viability of his symbols and the literary value of his style. While Agee's book operates on one level about Richard's struggle with his intellect in conflict with his passion, on another more significant level, *The Morning Watch* can be read as Agee's own struggle with his passionate, personal exploration of his childhood in conflict with the structure, form and confines of the novel. The importance of this meta-narrative remains relevant beyond Agee's life, for it is a question at the heart of editing and reworking the fragmentary *A Death in the Family*. What *The Morning Watch* offers then, is the simultaneous exploration of anxiety, Richard's anxiety over his spiritual relevance, and Agee's anxiety over his literary relevance. Both narratives explore the

failure of imagination, with Richard's failed association with Christ, and Agee's perceived failure of re-imagining his boyhood.

Clearly, Richard represents the youthful St. Andrew's Agee, just as Rufus is Agee's stand-in for Agee's pained childhood. The direct connection between author and subject has been commented on throughout Agee scholarship, but more specifically, Richard's anxiety over his religious development connects to an anxiety in the style of writing. Richard Chase's critical review notes the parallel between Richard's frantic consciousness and Agee's own "nervous...fear" about how his book will be read (689), and he argues the language of the book seems incongruous for its subject: "...there is a great surplus of poetical consciousness as compared with what the persons and situations of the story appear to necessitate; there is a disproportion between substance and form, between meaning and metaphor..." (688).

For Chase, this represents a failure of the literary, or an accident in composition that is emblematic of the unskilled artist, but Agee's pained self-questioning suggests, in fact, that this "accidental failure" instead is intentional. It seems as though if *The Morning Watch* can be read as recapturing a transcendent moment in Agee's past, it can also serve to capture the moment of its composition as well. If Agee was always "in frame," why is it so difficult for critics to suppose that Agee was interested in documenting not only the memory of important experiences in his past but also the important event of transcribing those experiences into "art?" As an author whose movement could swing from the infinitesimal to the epic, Agee jars the reader into questioning the act of composition. In that kind of writing, the author's status, as an over-the-shoulder everyman, forces the reader to reaction; the work invites passionate

disapproval or repulsion. Critics have long understood *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* to be such a work, but they fail to read Agee's fiction with that paradigm.

Agee's movement from epic to local might be located most easily in a passage Chase cites for its ridiculous over-reaching. Here, it's possible to discern Agee's literary anxiety as well as a kind of intentional explosion of the minute:

The nave replied to their timid noises with the threatening resonance of a drumhead. Not even the sanctuary lamps were lighted, but the night at the windows made just discernible the effigies and the paintings and the crucifix, no longer purple veiled but choked in black, and the naked ravagement of the High Altar. The tabernacle gawped like a dead jaw. By this ruthless flaying and deracination only the skeleton of the Church remained; it seemed at once the more sacred in dishonor, and as brutally secular as a boxcar.

To cross its axis without the habitual genuflection felt as uneasy as to swim across a sudden unimaginable depth, and as Richard turned and bowed before the central devastation he realized: nothing there. Nothing at all; and with the breath of the Outer Darkness upon his soul, remembered the words: And the Veil of the Temple was rent in twain (25-26).

Chase argues that such a passage is emblematic of a problem with the entire book, that Agee's language becomes "a kind of ravenous metaphorical beast who has swallowed up the hero" (690), but to be sure, the only beast within the pages of the book is Agee himself. In the above passage, one distinctly notes the shift in perspective from the first paragraph to the next. Chase's criticism that the description of the inside of darkened tabernacle consumes Richard's narrative makes sense, but in that description, the narrator's interest is not focused on the action of his protagonist but rather on reconstructing in brutal detail the memory of the chapel from his consciousness.

This over-emphasis on constructing the inside of the temple forces the reader outside of the progression of the novel, and the effect is a disconcerting series of shifts

from the local action of the book (Richard's narrative) to the epic description (Agee's narrative). In the above passage, Agee's description suggests the possibilities for revelation to his protagonist. If his first paragraph presents the mineable material of his memory, the second is the practical application, the meaning of that memory sifted through Richard. What Chase labels a linguistic and structural failure in effect might be the movement of dual narratives that dialogue and inform one another. The shift in perspective, tone, and style reminds Agee's readers of his monumental and deliberate disconnections in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.<sup>62</sup> What Richard and Agee both share is what Chase calls an "unguarded sensibility," which he decides is not enough to create a "durable fiction" (691),<sup>63</sup> but *The Morning Watch* is the exploration of that sensibility and its consequences for both author and protagonist in their simultaneous narratives.

Agee did more than just create the language of anxiety; both thematically and stylistically, *The Morning Watch* itself is nervous, self-conscious, and questioning of its own validity. Agee's protagonist, Richard, who is so consumed with proving himself worthy of spiritual fulfillment, embodies, I believe, a kind of megalomania about authorship, or what it means to be an author. Richard's anxiety over how to imagine his presence in pre-written narrative, or the intricacies of imitation come to represent difficulties of authorship. The question for Richard becomes how to write one's self into relevance without becoming self-absorbed and brooding, and this question necessarily relates back to Agee's concern about how to produce a work of literary relevance that doesn't consume itself in its writing. Richard's failures, then, are Agee's failures.

If Richard's narrative recalls the anxiety over megalomania, it's clear that there must be some division between Agee and his character. However, Chase's difficulty in

recovering the character Richard from the linguistic quicksand that he calls Agee's overwriting suggests that he ignores the separation Agee sets up between himself as author and his character. These clear moments of ironic detachment constructed by Agee often focus on humorous characteristics of Richard, his absurd earnestness or self-conscious seriousness. In other moments, however, Richard's adolescent sincerity bridges the gap between author and character. By locating places in the novel in which Agee comments *on* Richard, as opposed to commenting *through* him, the reader can decipher Agee's anxiety over authorship.

The often overlooked humor in *The Morning Watch* comes from Agee's ironic detachment from his protagonist. Richard is a funny character. In his absurd introspectiveness, Richard imagines ridiculous scenarios for his spiritual maturity. Though the figure of Richard's mother is slightly condemned for her severity, she reads Richard's spiritual musings right – "that there might be a kind of vanity mixed up in his extreme piety" (43). Agee's ironic detachment from his character is clearly evident in Richard's response:

...but remembering the role of dismayed parents and scornful villagers in the early lives of many of the saints, he answered her gently and patiently, with forbearance, that was the word, as befitted communication between creatures of two worlds so unabridgeably different. He had been tempted on more than one occasion to say to her, "Woman, what have I to do with thee? Mine hour is not yet come"...

The passage shows the distance between author, as Agee clearly comments on his character's absurd earnestness. As I argue above, Richard's inward meditations allow space for only his body.

The desire for sainthood so overwhelms Agee's hero that he is forced into imagining his "self-mortification" (44) through eating worms, attempting to eat his own feces, and scourging himself. Agee's description of these events is clearly laced with hyperbole and humor. When Richard tries to imagine his own crucifixion, Agee tantalizes the reader with the practicalities of self-crucifixion – how to manufacture the cross; should he wear a loincloth?; who could he trust to properly nail his hands for him? These questions disturb Richard, though not long enough for him to imagine the swarm of visitors who come to the site of his execution. Imagining his mother kneeling before him, Richard thinks, "No, Mother, I deeply repent for making you cry, and feel so badly, but mine hour is not yet come" (49-50). Richard's repetition of the phrase "mine hour is not yet come" in both the crucifixion scene and as imagined response to his mother's hurtful comments about his vanity show how thoroughly and earnestly he has cast himself as the role of the messiah. His imagined self-importance is not lost on the reader, nor on Agee who, in constructing Richard humorously to become the self-possessed author of his own martyrdom is simultaneously commenting on his own authorship. The scene ends, predictably, with Richard's crucifixion reaching the zenith of its importance as it is broadcast throughout the world: "STRANGE RITES AT MOUNTAIN SCHOOL," Richard imagines the caption would read under a photograph of his crucified body (51).

But what is so remarkable about the humor of Richard's earnestness is Agee's inability to maintain it. If Richard is to be solely the caricature of the misguided teenager, or a commentary on religion's corruption of perspective, then why does Agee turn, as he does in the passage just below Richard's crucifixion, to Richard's complex

recognition of his own absurdity and “insupportable self-loathing” over his self-authored “ensar[ment]” of his soul? (51) Richard is a character who is at once able to spin himself into ridiculous self-manufactured scenarios and recognize through incredible self-awareness the very absurdity of his own authorship. It’s unsurprising, then, that Agee’s language in the passage that follows is odd, dense, and self-reflexive:

For, musing upon his past vanities with affectionate scorn or even as with a scornful wonder, the scorn, the living vanity, of one who has put away childish things, and dwelling upon them in remembrance, he had dwelt once more within them (within Thy Wounds hide me), ensnaring himself afresh (51).

Agee’s simple linguistic structure shifts dramatically after Richard’s imagination, and Agee marks the shift by the insertion of spaces between the two. In the following passage, Agee moves from the interiority of Richard’s imagination to the interiority of his own text by repeating key phrases (“within Thy Wounds hide me”), disorienting syntax, and references to the literal phrases in the Bible (“put away childish things”). The effect is something like shifting perspectives, and would certainly be the kind of thing Chase would label as bad writing. But within the structure of the passage, Agee comments on the anxiety over the progress of his own novel.

If, in the passage that preceded it, Agee pokes fun at the absurdity of Richard’s imagined authorship, in this passage, he takes his own authorship to task, interrogating its failure for the same reasons. The prose that follows is tortured – tortured because Agee is both describing in humorless detail Richard’s awareness of his absurd authorship and Agee’s own tortured anxiety over his prose’s believability. Both Richard and Agee detail what the shifting narrator calls “those absurd imaginations of his heart” that are in danger

of being read as “contemptible silliness” (51). I mention the importance of this passage in relation to Richard’s imagined crucifixion in order to show not only Agee’s anxiety over authorship but also his anxiety over *how* his book will be read or received. At this point, Agee moves from commenting *on* Richard to commenting *through* him. Richard’s earnest desire for credibility is overshadowed by Agee’s.

Agee’s anxiety over the conditions of authorship can be located as well in his symbolic structure. Though he struggles with ways to present the symbols in his book with complexity, ultimately he cannot express his vision through them. Numerous critics have taken the symbolic work of *The Morning Watch* to task. Agee, himself, was unsure of whether or not he was doing too much with his own symbols; he wrote on his manuscript: “Is [the snake] too obvious a symbol, and the locust? They seem so.” (quoted in Kramer 226). According to Rewak, Agee’s misuse of symbolism stands as the one imperfection between the failure of *The Morning Watch* and the success of *A Death in the Family*.<sup>64</sup> If Agee was worried his symbols were too “obvious,” he needn’t have concerned himself. John Phillipson in an early review of the book does flips and twists trying to unpack the possibilities of Agee’s snake symbol, which he offers as “a phallic symbol,” “the symbol of Satan,” and “Judas.” Richard, in his slaying of the snake is both “St. George in miniature” and “an *alter Christus*” (364).

In spite of (or one might argue: because of) Agee’s anxiety over the transparency of his vision through his symbols, the actual process of interpretation is muddled. Because of the multiple meanings possible, Agee’s book was confusing to readers, reviewers and critics. Was he advocating the possibilities of morality? Was he denying the process of maturation? Is the destruction of the snake hopeful or another mis-step on



Richard's path to self-enlightenment? The problems stem from Agee's self-diagnosis of being too "dry and literary." In the process of understanding what it meant to write his first novel, Agee necessarily had to come to terms with the problems inherent in not just fiction, but also its smug brother literature. To be a serious writer of literature, Agee needed to balance symbol, theme, or character, but his palpable overbearing calculation of these devices compromised his very purpose. *The Morning Watch*'s core narrative of the simultaneous self-congratulation and censorship of a boy's imaginative life intersects with Agee's own skepticism about his authorship.

Agee's relationship to fiction during the process of composition for *The Morning Watch* was self-torturing. He doubted, as he did in the composition of *Famous Men*, his motive for writing the book as well as his method. "What really am I after in this story, and is it worth doing?" he writes on the manuscript copy, but more central than these questions are his second-guessing of fiction as the adequate medium to convey his topic:

Is this worth doing? I can't get any solid hold of it or confidence in it. A much gentler way of seeing & writing it? Or more casual? Mine is very dry and literary.

Agee's anxiety over the viability of fiction and the novel is evident; he wonders twice on the manuscript about the value the work has, whether it is "worth" the effort. If we're to believe, as I've argued, that Agee's fiction is as valuable as his journalism, criticism, and poetry, then we must take his questions not as rhetorical motivators but as legitimate anxieties over what is possible through fiction and the novel. Agee's creation of Richard's narrative suggests his own inner narrative, one that addresses and interrogates these problems inherent in composition. Through the lens of his fiction, Agee allows the

careful reader to participate in the deliberate and constantly shifting paradigms of writing itself, and finally to judge the value of the work based not solely on the success of its effect but also on its ability to create a space through which the process of that movement is clear. Taken in this way, *The Morning Watch* is not the failure that critics argue, but, like *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, is a successful re-imagining of the boundaries of representation, fiction, and the real.

If we believe, as Chase did, that *The Morning Watch* is a failure, that it loses itself through its writing, one must examine the consequences of such a failure. The consequence of failure on those terms represent the strongest type of “modernist” success, the exploration of the failure of a narrative to totally convey the truth of any situation. As a modernist equivalent, Faulkner’s own discussion of the composition of *The Sound and The Fury* is rooted in his own failure.<sup>65</sup> *The Morning Watch* becomes Agee’s working through of the failure of fiction to maintain a singular perspective, and it is not surprising that the novel ends with Richard’s re-affirmation of his father’s perspective. For both Richard and Agee, though the movement in the novel leads to inevitable failure, it offers precious alternatives for possibilities in authorship that lead inevitably to Agee’s *A Death in the Family*. Taken this way, one might come to the conclusion that Folks’ accusation that Agee was “too predictably modern” is accurate. Rewak argues, however, that while Agee is indeed in the long line of American writers who “have been disenchanted with the American dream,” the core purpose of the book is not of disenchantment but “of hope and personal pride” (36). If Agee advocates the modernist vision with *The Morning Watch*, he simultaneously denies its conclusion,

moral ambiguity and decay. This conflict, unsurprisingly manifests itself in a different kind of violence.

The shifting movement of Agee's perspective makes itself clear, often, through his use of the shocking or disturbing. Violence is instrumental not just as thematic device with strong relations to plot, motif, or moral, but as a kind of touchstone that comments on the writing of his novel. Like the self-reflexive prosody that does double work, Agee's use of violence often takes the reader out of the narrative through disturbing detail that disorients the reader. In these moments, Agee's seeming obsession with violence connects, I believe, with a kind of figurative violence on Agee's subject, his own boyhood. In this case, Agee's anxiety centers itself on negating his past through conscious deliberation on it; then, here, as with Richard, violence obscures truth, eradicates possibilities.<sup>66</sup>

Agee buys into the definition of writing as discursive violent act that obscures the subject it looks to encompass. He recognizes that words fail to embody actuality, but the breakdown of language becomes not limiting but ripe with possibilities. Even though Agee's anxiety over discursive violence is both predictably modern, it is, at the same time, decidedly reactionary. He seems to have at once that modernist urge to escape the world through apocalyptic violence, but without the ability to sustain both the desire and the possibility for the diminishment of the real. The anxiety becomes, then, the modernist urge for violence to transport author and reader beyond the confines of reality in conflict with Agee's inability to wholly give up possibilities to detail actuality. Agee's goal, then, to write both a sense of his growing religious sensibility and specifics of his boyhood into material existence becomes compromised by the very act of setting it down.

In a letter to Flye around the time of *The Morning Watch*'s composition, Agee expresses concern over how to "speak" about his spiritual life, something that to him is "essentially a very private matter." He concludes that "any expression of it is probably best indirect, if at all. Or 'direct' in a highly formalized way" (184). *The Morning Watch* is Agee's exploration of that spiritual intangibility through the highly formalized structure of the novel. But, even within the tight structure of the novel, Agee loses the very thing he had hoped to describe. Instead, Agee delivers a piece of it, the thread of his anxiety over possibilities for spirituality and how that relates to modernist concerns. Ohlin describes the artistic venture as dual narratives that fail: "...as Richard tries to experience Easter as happening for the first time, so Agee tries to render Richard's experience as occurring here and now, within the context of his language. The attempt is, finally, doomed to fail. The experience of reading a book is always different in kind from the experience described." For Ohlin, the failure is in using language to write something "beyond the realm of language" (192). While Ohlin suggests that Agee finds solace in the "world of meaning" (194) he creates in confronting his failure, I want to suggest that Agee's failure moves him, necessarily (just as it does to Richard) to the figure of his father. The figure of the father becomes the literal and psychological bridge to alternatives to the construction of the modern novel. It is in the alternative of the understanding of his father that Agee imagines a narrative that can co-exist with the necessary limitations of language.

For all these reasons, *The Morning Watch* is not emblematic, as has been suggested by one critic, of "the first sign of a decline in Agee's postwar work"<sup>67</sup> (Barson 158), but rather a text that unifies and documents some of the central concerns of Agee's

expansive oeuvre, including the reconditioning of the religious sensibility in the context of aesthetic and artistic concerns, and the movement from confusion and guilt to epiphany and empowerment in relationship to the devastating loss of his father. Its importance to Agee's artistic structure necessitates its reappreciation, not just as a chronologically anomalous "sequel to *A Death in the Family*" (Folks 69),<sup>68</sup> but as a separate entity where many of the frenetic concerns of Agee's art move together towards a satisfying conclusion.

### **Chapter Three: Paternal Nightmare:**

#### **Division and Masculinity in *A Death in the Family***

In much the same way Agee explored his adolescence in *The Morning Watch* in order to work through a kind of crisis of spirituality, he comes back to his childhood in *A Death in the Family* to make sense of his father's influence on the way he had come to understand himself. Agee felt as he wrote the novel that it would be a work written not for an aesthetic value, but as a means of documenting the central event of his life. The book was, in all senses, personal and interior, especially because through it, he hoped to complete a picture not just of his absent and heroic father, but to finally piece together the interior image of himself and project it to his reader. *A Death in the Family* moves from Agee's first recollections of life with his father to his death in an automobile accident and the ensuing inner turmoil he experiences at the funeral and beyond. Though the novel explores Agee's inner world as a child, it also clearly examines his emotional life during its composition.<sup>69</sup>

Agee writes in a fragment about his intention for this "autobiographical novel," that its composition is not just to preserve memories of his childhood, or to stand as a "memorial to my father," but is an effort to regain a significant part of his life that suddenly seems lost to him. In the short piece, he writes:

Now as awareness of how much of life is lost, and how little is left, becomes even more piercing, I feel also and ever the more urgently, the desire to restore, and to make a little less impermanent, such of my lost life as I can, beginning with the beginning and coming as far forward as need be. This is the simplest, most primitive of the desires which can move a writer. I hope I shall come to other things in time; in time to write them. Before I do, if I am ever to do so, I must sufficiently satisfy this first, most childlike need (*Short Prose* 142).

*A Death in the Family* will be for him, as Agee describes it, a book for himself first, a work that not only restores the experience of his childhood, but is itself an expression of the child-like need to focus entirely on himself. Though Agee has turned the focus of most of his works of art and fiction into explorations of his own psyche and image, in *A Death in the Family*, he makes no pretense about exploring another subject first.

Through the novel, he hopes to memorialize his father even though the book is “chiefly a remembrance of my childhood.” As such, it is all ego,<sup>70</sup> and Agee understands the selfishness of its composition, even as he justifies his need to work through himself.

Though he defines the book in terms different from his other work, Agee here sounds surprisingly like the Agee of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. He wants to remain true to the memory and image of his father and the direct experience of his childhood, but finds that the media of his expression – fiction and poetry – are inadequate to the task. “But now I believe that these two efforts [fiction and poetry] were mistakes,” he writes. “I value my childhood and my father as they were, as well and as exactly as I can remember and represent them, far beyond any transmutation of these matters which I have made, or might ever make, into poetry or fiction.” Just as Agee argues that he cannot turn the sharecroppers into fictional characters in a novel, he rejects the notion that his childhood and memories can be satisfying as art. To write the book he wants to write – or believes he needs to write – Agee must first remove the idea of a readership

other than himself from the equation. He defines the choice in the same terms as in *Famous Men* – between actuality and invention: “I know that I am making the choice most dangerous to an artist, in valuing life above art” (142-143).

The struggle over making art out of the personal forces Agee to re-imagine what fiction and poetry are capable of, and though he denies art’s usefulness, he also recognizes its possibilities: “I know too that by a good use of fiction or poetry one can re-enter life more deeply, and represent it more vividly, intimately and truthfully, than by any such means of bald narration as I propose” (143). Agee here shifts his argument – for the first time – toward understanding the aesthetic as a site that allows the personal to be translated more clearly into meaning. This perception is critical for understanding the composition of *A Death in the Family*, and by extension, Agee’s search for meaning within the framework of the aesthetic – a search that began with *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, his earliest book.<sup>71</sup>

However, it seems to me that his argument breaks down when he decides that fiction and art are not suitable for his process: “...but now it seems to me that I have no actual choice, but am in fact compelled, against my better judgment and wish as an artist.” The book he imagines as “bald narration,” or events reported as-they-happened can not truthfully ever be art. Agee recognizes his choice of privileging exactness over artifice even as he longs for the clarity and vibrancy that fiction would allow him. To write the book as an artist, Agee felt he would violate both his father’s and his own humanity, but in order to write a book of straight and detached remembrance, Agee felt would violate his duty as an artist to suggest and create meaning. In order to write the book from both these contradictory viewpoints, Agee decides that “within the limitations



imposed by this plain method to which I seem compelled, I shall, of course, in so far as I am able, use such varieties of artfulness as seem appropriate.” Essentially, the book will present both possibilities – the possibility to memorialize his father through detached narration, and the possibility to understand himself by connecting the narrative to a sense of himself as an artist.

Both of these possibilities are present in *A Death in the Family*. Agee’s strictly detached style is evident from the stark and impersonal title itself. The death of his father, the central figure of Agee’s interior life, is reduced to being only a death in the family. In the same way, Agee’s complicated and prosodic manner of writing is presented: Agee relies on dreams, richly detailed memories and stream-of-consciousness in order to tell his story. That Agee was concerned with remaining true to the memory of his father while creating a work of art is clear, however, when he addresses his ancestors in a final passage that is filled with artifice and poetry:

Those who have gone before, backward beyond remembrance and beyond the beginning of imagination, backward among the emergent beasts, and the blind, prescient ravenings of the youngest sea, those children of the sun, I mean, who brought forth those, who wove, spread the human net, and who brought forth me...I call upon you, I invoke your help...

In this brief fragment Agee writes large the central problem of his undertaking: to create a meaningful artistic achievement that remains violently connected to the truth of his past, his memory and his father. What started as a simple desire to document for himself the particulars of his own situation as a child grows into a meditation on the potential for understanding one’s identity through the particulars of the past. Just as in *Famous Men*, Agee eventually acknowledges that such a motivation is too unfocused, too large, and,

finally, impossible to reconcile with his motives and desire as an artist. However, the process of understanding himself in relation to his father, his memory, and even his needs as an artist are the true achievements of *A Death in the Family*.

Remaining strictly and seriously committed to the plan he sets out, Agee emphasizes bodily violence throughout *A Death in the Family*. Unlike *The Morning Watch* or *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, the wounded body in Agee's narrative in *A Death in the Family* is tied into notions of masculinity. Rufus, Agee's central character in the story, learns ideas about what it means to be a boy and a man through the example of his father. Rufus reads bodies – as Richard does in *The Morning Watch* – and finds his father's body as a text where the secrets of masculinity are uncovered. These secrets are dark and disturbing in nature to the young boy, and throughout *A Death in the Family*, Rufus constantly imagines his father's lifeless body as a vessel through which Rufus might understand his own masculinity.

Tied into this notion of masculinity is the prominence of dreams and nightmares within Agee's narrative. Rufus' nightmare at the beginning of the novel anticipates the nightmare of losing his father, and throughout his narrative, Agee frequently moves beyond the detached reporting of events into Rufus' interior, dream-like world. These moments, often presented in italics by Agee's editor, fragment the progression of the story, and by doing so, suggest Rufus' and Agee's fragmented and lost identity. It is only through meditating on his father that Rufus and Agee both connect themselves to an idea of themselves as a boy, man and artist.

Agee emphasizes the connection between Rufus and his father from the beginning of the book. His father suggests to his mother that he take Rufus to the movies for the

night, which is, in some ways, an excuse to go drinking afterwards. By the end of the novel, however, Rufus is unsure of the difference between his father's body and his own. Coming to terms with his own identity necessitates removing the image of himself from his father's. The images of split bodies and doubling are a constant trope in *A Death in the Family*, and one that emphasizes violence, masculinity and childish nightmares to the central purpose of the book: to understand Agee's identity in relation to his father. Because Agee cannot totally remove the distinct shadow of his father from his life, he writes it into non-existence, and creates a situation whereby his autobiographical stand-in, Rufus, literally breaks through and moves past the image of his father's body.

For all these reasons, *A Death in the Family* is a satisfying last work for Agee. Though he did not know it, this book would become the defining work of his career, and because of his editor's arrangement of the text, *Death* was easily the most popular and accessible of the texts in Agee's oeuvre. However, the progression and motive of the text are satisfactory ends for this study as well, for they adequately address the disturbing emphasis on the wounded body throughout Agee's fiction. The paranoia over making art out of the personal, the fragmentation of the body, the imagined violence as atonement and the re-imagining of his father's body are all present in some fashion in *A Death in the Family*. However, Agee, though he doesn't come to a satisfactory conclusion or ending in the book, confronts and moves past the wounded body as a way of expressing his delicate and slippery identity.

## Part One: Two Creatures

Agee presents Rufus in *A Death in the Family* as two distinct bodies: the pre-death Rufus, and the post-death. Both versions of Rufus are defined by their relationship to his father and his masculinity. The boy at the beginning of the novel is the shadow of his father. In fact, in the opening scenes of the novel, Agee has Rufus literally shadow his father to a movie theater and later a bar. Already, from our first glimpse of the domestic life of Rufus, the reader is able to associate Rufus with his father. “Well, spose we go to the picture show,” Jay Follet suggests to his wife, Mary. The suggestion is more of a declaration, however, and we find out that the “we” encompasses only father and son. Mary claims that “the horrid little man” they want to see is “so vulgar,”<sup>72</sup> to which Jay laughs. Rufus defines the laugh as an auditory symbol of the unspoken bond he shares with his father: “His father laughed, as he always did, and Rufus felt that it had become a rather empty joke; but as always the laughter also cheered him; he felt that the laughter enclosed him with his father” (11).

Agee emphasizes the relationship between Rufus and Jay and suggests the detachment from Mary in the opening scene of the book, and throughout the beginning of the novel, Rufus is constantly at his father’s side. On the way home from the cinema, Rufus wishes to assert his masculinity by asking his father for a cap, but knows that his mother will not allow it. Before they go home, Jay takes Rufus to a bar, and shows him off to the patrons. Here, in the den of masculinity, Rufus allows himself to be admired by his father’s friends. “That’s my boy,” Jay explains, and all at once Rufus feels “his father’s hands under his armpits, and he was lifted high, and seated on the bar, looking

into a long row of huge bristling and bearded red faces” (15). When his father brags to the men that Rufus is “six years old, and he can already read like I couldn’t read when I was twice his age,” however, Rufus feels shame at his masculine failure: “Rufus felt a sudden hollowness in his voice, and all along the bar, and in his own heart. But how does he fight, he thought. You don’t brag about smartness if your son is brave” (16). His inferior strength continues to bother Rufus, who thinks “If I could fight...if I were brave; he would never brag how I could read” (17).

Despondent after his father’s boast, Rufus is once again initiated back into the world of the masculine by his father’s offer of a Life Saver, which is offered “courteously, man to man.” By accepting the Life Saver, Rufus understands that he has “sealed their contract” to keep their time at the bar to themselves. “Only once,” Agee writes, “had his father felt it necessary to say to him, ‘I wouldn’t tell your mama, if I were you’” (16). The boy and the man share a secret and a bond that remains unspoken. Agee connects the idea of their mutual happiness to one another, as though they were one creature inhabiting separate bodies. Jay is brave and heroic, while Rufus is smart and kind. Walking together, Rufus feels a completion, a satisfaction that comes from knowing that he and his father form some kind of mysterious union. When his father stops a block from his house, Rufus ponders about his mysterious feeling of happiness and its relationship to his father. The epiphany is critical in understanding Rufus’ progression throughout the novel:

...it was clear that he liked to spend these few minutes with Rufus. Rufus had come recently to feel a quiet kind of anticipation of the corner...a particular kind of contentment, unlike any other that he knew. He did not know what this was, in words or ideas, or what the reason was...It was, mainly, knowing that his father,

too, felt a particular kind of contentment, here, unlike any other, and that their kinds of contentment were very much alike, and depended on each other...a part of his sense of complete contentment lay in the feeling that they were reconciled, that there was really no division, no estrangement, or none so strong, anyhow, that it could mean much, by comparison with the unity that was so firm and assured, here (18).

Even at his young age, Rufus understands that his father will always be a “lonely” man, but when they are together, Rufus senses, if not an end to his loneliness, the ability to be “on good terms” with it. Their happiness is dependent on the presence of one another, and their sense of well-being “lay in this mutual knowledge, which was neither concealed nor revealed” (19).

Agee sets up this crucial relationship between Rufus and Jay in order to suggest completeness, unity and strength. The unity is dependent on a kind of unspoken masculine presence, and Agee presents Rufus’ initiation into the world of the masculine, though it comes with a sense of shame and guilt, as the beginning of the exploration into his identity. The moment where father and son stand a block from the house and share a sense of peace and well-being becomes vital to Rufus’ identity later in the book. Once in bed, Rufus hears “the crumpling of subdued voices and words, ‘Naw: I’ll probably be back before they’re asleep.’” Hearing his father’s voice for the last time seems “only a part of a dream” to him now, and without his father’s presence, Rufus doubts himself: “...by next morning, when his mother explained to them why his father was not at breakfast, he had so forgotten the words and the noises that years later, when he remembered them, he could never be sure that he was not making them up” (21).

Here in this opening chapter, Agee presents Rufus as his father’s double. Jay and his son are constantly together; they share the same secrets, code, and sense of one

another's well-being. Agee also sets up the central problems of the book through his emphasis on the masculine, Rufus' shame at his effeminacy, the shadow play of dreams and nightmares, and Rufus' need for the presence of his father's physical body. All of these concerns will eventually be tested by Jay Follet's death. In the opening chapter, Rufus is a single entity, but after being confronted with the death of his father, his emotional world is fragmented. The remainder of the novel deals with Agee's attempt to piece together Rufus' now fragmented idea of himself from the scattered memories of his father's body. Through Rufus, Agee picks apart these memories and reads his father's presence in them as though they were a text that revealed the mysteries of Agee's identity and masculinity.

While his father visits his dying grandfather on the day of the accident, Rufus goes shopping with his Aunt Hannah in a scene that further emphasizes the masculine and feminine worlds that confound Rufus. Out in the world of downtown Knoxville, Rufus notes how Hannah shops like a professional: "Shopping had never lost its charm for her. She prepared her mind and her disposition for it as carefully as she dressed for it, and Rufus had seldom seen her forced to consult a shopping list, even if she were doing intricate errands for others" (70). Usually not interested in shopping with his mother, Rufus finds himself in awe of his aunt's method, and consequently, enjoys her company throughout the errand. When "taken shopping with anyone else," Agee writes, "Rufus suffered extreme boredom, but Hannah shopped much as a real lover of painting visits a gallery; and her pleasure clarified Rufus' eyes..." (71). Unlike his mother, Aunt Hannah asks Rufus' opinion on her purchases, including a book for his Uncle Andrew. By the time they finish shopping, Aunt Hannah offers to buy Rufus a cap.

From the earliest section in the novel, we learn that Rufus desperately wants to ask his father for a cap. After their experience at the movie, Rufus sees a boy mannequin dressed in “short, straight pants, bare knees and high socks” (14). Even as a mannequin, he recognizes the image as “obviously a sissy,” but he does wear a cap, “not a hat like a baby.” The cap is the centerpiece of his masculinity; it is the one feature that defies a reading of him as feminine, or a sissy. Looking at the cap, Rufus’ “whole insides lifted and sank.” He remembers asking for a cap from his mother over a year ago, and being rebuffed. For some reason, his mother did not “want him to have a cap, yet,” and his father does not press the issue. But, for Rufus, wearing a cap represents a movement not just from infancy to boyhood but from effeminate sissy to a masculine young man.

It is surprising to Rufus that his aunt, not his father, has the tenacity to go against his mother’s wishes. After she makes the offer, Aunt Hannah herself is afraid that Rufus will “try in any cowardly or goody-goody way, to be ‘truthful’ about his mother’s distaste for the idea” (72). Recognizing that she doesn’t want to set up Rufus against his mother, she mentions, “Don’t worry about Mar—about your mother. I’m sure if she knew you *really* wanted it, you would have had it a long time ago.” Speaking out loud about his mother’s obvious desire for Rufus to remain cap-less embarrasses both of them into silence. Rufus is astonished that Aunt Hannah continues “straight past Miller’s” (73), a “profoundly matronly store in which Rufus’ mother always bought the best clothes, which were always, at best, his own second choice,” and instead heads for “Harbison’s, which sold clothing exclusively for men and boys, and was regarded by his mother, Rufus had overheard, as ‘tough’ and ‘sporty’ and ‘vulgar.’”



There, in Harbison's, Rufus recognizes that both he and Aunt Hannah have entered an environment that neither of them knows much about: "And it was indeed a world most alien to women; not very pleasant men turned to stare at this spinster with the radiant, appalled little boy in tow." As the pair look over the caps, Hannah is surprised by Rufus' choice of a "thunderous fleecy check in jade green, canary yellow, black and white, which stuck out inches to either side above his ears and had a great scoop of visor beneath which his face was all but lost." The cap, she thinks, is one that "even a colored sport might think a little loud," and she knows the result: "Mary would have conniption fits; Jay wouldn't mind..." Besides worrying about the impact such a gaudy hat will have on his mother, Hannah especially considers that his father "would laugh; even the boys in the block, she was afraid might easily sneer at it rather than admire it" (73-74). Unwilling to boss Rufus, Hannah decides to let him decide for himself.

Rufus' first initiation into the world of masculinity comes through his aunt, as both of them traverse a world that is alien to them. Agee emphasizes the significance of the cap in Rufus' maturation from a self-perceived infant-sissy to masculine boy, but because of his choice of the gaudy cap, Agee also suggests that Rufus' independence is tied into a kind of effeminate personality that will not be read kindly by his peers. Having his aunt and not his father navigate him through the masculine world of Harbison's further emphasizes Rufus' confusion over the possibility of achieving masculinity. The scene also acknowledges the feminine and masculine as two separate worlds in the boy's mind, and the dichotomy that exists throughout the novel further isolates and separates Rufus from an understanding of himself.

After a deeply personal opening, Agee shifts his interior narrative into a detached account of the events leading up to Jay's death, including a call from Jay's brother telling him that his father is dying. Agee presents the narrative in third-person, as Jay gathers together his clothes, drives down to the ferry, and Mary stays behind to explain to the children what's going on. It's not until the eighth chapter of the book that Agee presents the central event of the novel: the death of Jay Follet. The death, however, is not given its own detached narration, and it is introduced by a dream sequence that suggests the fragmentation of Rufus' identity. One of the scenes that the editors claimed to be outside of the time frame of the original story, the McDowell version of *A Death in the Family* places it right before Part II of the book. However, the original intention of Agee with regards to placement (or even insertion) is not resolved. Here, at the end of the first part of the narrative, the section seems to make less sense than if it were integrated into Part II, in which Rufus tries to come to terms with his father's death.

What sets these sections off from the normal narrative is not only their existence outside the scope of the linear time progression of the narrative, but Agee's style. While the chapters leading up to the section are detached and emotionless, the scene presented in italics is prosodic, difficult, and entirely focused on Rufus' interior emotional life. The opening description of the scene recalls a dream, with the narrator suddenly willing himself into his old bedroom as a child: "Walking in darkness, he saw the window. Curtains, a tall, cloven wave, towered almost to the floor. Transparent, manifold, scalloped along their inward edges like the valves of a sea creature, they moved delectably on the open air of the window" (74). Agee uses the idea of a dream in order to connect with an interiority that is not available to him in straight narration.<sup>73</sup> Standing in

the room, the narrator listens to the calming sounds of the night, “rocking chair[s]” and “a cricket,” but then shifts into a first-person address to darkness itself.

In this scene, darkness comes to represent death itself, and in his apostrophe, the narrator speaks of its inevitability: “Children are violent and valiant...but before long now, even like me, they will be brought into their sleep.” Indeed, even though the narrator hears “my mother and father,” and claims no fear, he recognizes “they are my giants, my king and queen, beside whom there are no others so wise or worthy or honorable or brave or beautiful in this world...But before long now they too will leave and the house will become almost silent, and before long the darkness, for all its leniency, will take my father and my mother...” (76-77). In the dream, the personified darkness becomes a masculine force, a paternal and benevolent figure. The narrator, who at times is both man and child, speaks to him as his father, and in his imagined form as “a dead snake in a jar” (78) suggests both the phallic and infinite.

In his dream, the imagined conversation with darkness shifts to a discussion of his father. “You hear the man you call your father,” the personified darkness tells the boy. But he recognizes that the darkness itself is his true father: “He knew that he would never know, though memory, almost captured, unrecapturable, unbearably tormented him. That this little boy whom he inhabited was only the cruelest of deceptions. That he was but the nothingness of nothingness, condemned by some betrayal, condemned to be aware of nothingness” (78). Finally, the narrator can no longer bear the conversation and cries out, but in the cry, Agee notes a violent division: “But with that, the child was torn into two creatures, of whom one cried out for his father” (79).

Agee explores through this nightmare the paranoia over his need to capture the “unrecapturable,” and document his identification with his father.<sup>74</sup> However, through the dream sequence, Agee splits his image of himself into two distinct fragments: the child, Rufus, that is alive in his memory, and the detached artist that recognizes the artifice and “nothingness” of the potential for his memory. The two images struggle throughout the book, but it is here in the nightmares sequence, that Agee acknowledges them as two palpable presences in the composition and motive behind his novel. The sequence also explores the importance of masculinity in the shaping of Agee and Rufus’ consciousness of themselves. The acknowledgement of death-as-darkness’ absolute supremacy over all living things comes as a direct affront to the masculine power and supremacy of Rufus’ father. Agee further explores masculinity as the dream shifts to memory, and the narrator is the young Rufus in bed at night after a nightmare.

As his father comes into the room, the door opens “full of gold” (80), and his father sits down by the crib. When Rufus explains that he is afraid of the dark, his father chides him: “Nooooooooo...You’re a *big* boy now. Big boys don’t get skeered of a little dark. Big boys don’t cry” (81). After spending time lighting matches around the room to scare away the darkness, his father sings to him, and the boy falls asleep. The masculine presence and power of his father has banished the darkness from his room, and as Rufus slips into sleep, Agee shifts his narrative once again into the thoughts of Jay Follet. He thinks of being put to sleep by his mother, and then imagines her being put to sleep by hers, all the way back, “away on back through the mountains, away on back through the years, it took you right on back as far as you could ever imagine, right on back to Adam,

only no one did it for him: or maybe did God?" (87). His imagination carries him from himself as the center of masculine power to Adam and God.

His father's thoughts and memories lead him to Agee's conclusion: "How far we all come. How far we all come away from ourselves." In imagining his father's interior life, Agee connects his sense of loneliness, the burden of memory and the loss of identity to his father. If Agee has split the voice of his narrator in two, it is Agee the artist who narrates this section, as he imagines his father's interior monologue as a commentary on Agee's own motive in *A Death in the Family*. "So far, so much between," Jay Follet thinks, "you can never go home again. You can go home, it's good to go home, but you never really get all the way home in your life." The movement away from the home represents, in Agee's equation, a movement away from a primary sense of himself. For Jay, becoming "something" and moving away from his family has only brought him farther from understanding himself than he could have imagined. He concludes his thoughts on the subject by questioning himself: "And what's it all for? All I tried to be, all I ever wanted and went away for, what's it all for?"

Through imagining his father, Agee attempts an artificial connection, but the only ideas such an image produces relate to Agee's own interior life. Unable to glean anything from his subjective exploration of his father's psyche, the narration splits and shifts again to detached memories of his mother. The narrator as two creatures suggests its own gender. Agee the artist, the son of "nothingness" and artifice, manifests a striking and easily identifiable masculine power over his narrative. By shaping his narrative through imagination and invention, Agee exerts control over the external events that he documents. But as the narrator of detached remembrance, Agee is decidedly feminine.

These two fragmentations of narration are also easy to identify. The exploration of the mother and of the death of his father is told in strict detachment, while Agee's exploration and imagination of his father is complex, full of metaphor and artifice. Frequently, Agee speaks of his father in the freeing world of dreams and nightmares, and it is through these divisions that one can truly appreciate Agee's split narratives.

The section following Agee's exploration of his father presents memories of his mother's singing to him. Unlike the scene with his father, Rufus' experience with his mother is non-collaborative and distant. She sings to him, "Sleep baby sleep. Thy father watches the sheep," and as she does, Rufus imagines "his father sitting on a hillside looking at a lot of white sheep in the darkness..." (89). Comparing his father's and mother's styles of singing, Rufus decides that his father is the more creative of the two. When they sing, "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," Rufus notes that his father "started four full notes above [his mother] , and slowed up a little, and sort of dreamed his way down among several extra notes she didn't sing." His mother, however, "sang the same thing clear and true in a sweet, calm voice, fewer and simpler notes" (91). Even within the different singing styles, Agee emphasizes the creativity and artifice of the masculine and the detachment and directness of the feminine. By making the connection, Agee also implicitly suggests that his father and mother's singing styles are connected to his own narrative style in the book. Instead of privileging one style over another, Rufus likes it "best of all when they sang together and he was there with them, touching them on both sides...." The interplay of the two distinct styles eventually creates a harmony that comforts Rufus.

Rufus isn't simply comforted, however, by these subtle changes in singing. By noticing his father's and mother's physical differences, Rufus achieves some kind of a balance that soothes his childish imagination. He documents these differences by connecting them to his idea of masculinity: "She wore dresses, his father wore pants. Pants were what he wore too, but they were short and soft. His father's were hard and rough and went right down to his shoes. The cloths of his mother's clothes were soft like his" (92). Agee has Rufus delineate the differences between his father and mother using all of his senses. His father's clothes are scratchy and hard: he wears "hard coats...and a hard celluloid collar and sometimes a vest with hard buttons. Mostly his clothes were scratchy." Of his father's smell, Agee emphasizes an earthiness, "like dry grass, leather and tobacco," as well as a smell that Rufus knows through his parents' arguments: whiskey. Finally, the image of his father himself is "very frightening," and Rufus ends his description with his father's hands, which are "so big he could cover him from the chin to his bath-thing." Though comforting, his father's hands are also coiled snakes, with a violence under the surface that Rufus can only guess at: "There were big blue strings under the skin on the backs of them. Veins, those were. Black hair even on the backs of the fingers and ever so much hair on the wrists; big veins in his arms like ropes."

Though his father's presence is monumental to Rufus, his mother's emotional absence is even more pronounced. Rufus notices his mother's pregnancy, though he doesn't know what it means, but he feels it only as a movement away from him. He knows "his mother had seemed different...Almost always when she spoke to him it was as if she had something else every much on her mind, and so was making a special effort to be gentle and attentive to him" (93). Because of this, Rufus feels pushed further and

further apart from his mother, and notices “there were other times when she seemed to have almost no interest in him, but only to be doing things for him because they had to be done.” During these times, he “felt subtly lonely and watched her carefully.” In Rufus’ mind, his father has also changed in his interactions with his mother. As the secret of her pregnancy is explained to Rufus gradually, the boy grows closer and closer to his father.

Through these scenes, Agee sets up a situation whereby the image of his father’s body is an enormous masculine presence. It symbolizes power – not just over the family, but over the story itself. The feminine presence of Rufus’ mother is either absent or distant throughout the first section. Agee uses this interplay of masculine and feminine as the imagined sectioning of his story into detached narration and dream-like invention. However, in the second part of Agee’s novel, the situation is radically reversed. It is the presence of femininity, through his mother, Victoria, and his aunt that Rufus must learn to read and respond to, and it is the absence of the masculine – especially after the death of his father – that leaves Rufus feeling lonely and orphaned. If Agee has emphasized the masculine narrative through the stream-of-consciousness dream sequence and the opening scenes with his father in Part I, by Part III, Agee’s narrative becomes strictly detached as he explores the new world of the feminine that the death of Jay Follet leaves behind.

### **Parts II and III: Absence as Presence, Violence as Absence**

Though the dream sequence sections were added by McDowell, Agee’s plan for his novel as a story in three parts is clearly documented. Agee meant for the first part of



his book to be both a straight narrative of the events leading up to his father's death – including the phone call from his brother, the drive to his father's house, and Mary's goodbye – as well as a meditation on his father's metaphorical and emotional presence in his life. Parts two and three of the novel follow the same progression by being an amalgamation of a detached narrative that deals with the events following Jay Follet's death as well as Rufus' interior difficulty over the absence of his father's body.

During the opening chapters of the second part of his novel, Agee remains the detached spectator over Mary and Jay's family as they try to first understand what exactly happened to Jay, and then deal with the grief of learning of the tragedy. At first, the family debates the language of the man who called Mary. He does not tell her exactly what's happened, but Mary recognizes that not telling her was the right thing to do: "It ought to come from a man in the family, somebody—close to Jay, and to me" (124). Eventually, Andrew, Mary's brother, comes and tells everyone the news of Jay's death. The story of his death starts with the emphasis on his remarkably unwounded body: "There was just one mark on his body...right at the exact point of the chin, a small bruise. A cut so small—they can close it with one stitch. And a little blue bruise on his lower lip. It wasn't even swollen" (135-136). Because of Jay's relatively unwounded body, the man who finds him is surprised that he is really dead: "The man said somehow he was sure he was—dead—the minute he saw him. He doesn't know how. Just some special kind of stillness" (146). Andrew goes on to relate how the cotter pin had worked loose from Jay's car, so that after he hit a small bump, the car thrust him forward so hard that the impact killed him instantaneously.

During the story of his father's death, Rufus sleeps in the next room. His absence allows the adults to speak more graphically of Jay's death. Though Jay is now physically absent from the family, his spiritual presence infests the scene. Mary speaks to Jay as though he were alive, and the family debates the luck he had of dying in the accident, instead of being "an idiot, or a cripple, or a paralytic" (157). During the height of the conversation, Jay's spirit appears to the members of the family as a mysterious presence: "It began to seem to Mary, as to Hannah, that there was someone in the house other than themselves. She thought of the children; they might have waked up. Yet listening as intently as she could, she was not at all sure that there was any sound" (169). Though the mysterious "something" enters the house, it is restless and violent, and in it, Mary feels "a terrible forcefulness, and concerns, and restiveness, which were no part of any child." Finally, Mary decides Jay's spirit has come to visit her. She speaks to it, "Don't be troubled, dear one. Don't you worry. Stay near us if you can. *All* you can. But let not your heart be troubled. They're all right, my sweetheart, my husband. I'm going to be all right...Rest, my dear. Just rest" (170).

Jay's presence is not all spirit, however. Andrew is haunted by the image of Jay's dead body. Agee spends several pages narrating the body's position in an objective way, but as he conjures the image, Andrew feels Jay slipping away from him: "The strong frown was still in the forehead but, even as they watched, it seemed to be fading very slowly; already the flesh had settled somewhat along the bones of the prostrate skull; the temples, the forehead and the sockets of the eyes were more subtly molded than they had been in life and the nose was more finely arched" (180). Andrew recalls being unable to move "in the presence of anything which is great and new, and, for a little while, in any

place where violence has recently occurred.” Eventually, the spirit and body of Jay pass out of their minds, and Mary tries to sleep.

McDowell’s placement of a second italicized section after the family’s discussion makes less sense than the dream sequence in the first part. Here, in this long portion, two important scenes are presented. The first scene deals with Rufus’ increasing isolation from his peers, and how they continue to make fun of him despite his innocent and naive belief that they want to be his friend. The second scene concerns Jay, Mary and Jay’s brother Ralph going deep into the mountains to meet Rufus’ great grandmother. Agee here emphasizes the palpable nostalgia for identification based on family. When Jay introduces Rufus to his great grandmother, he has him speak lines: “Tell her, ‘I’m Jay’s boy.’ Say, ‘I’m Jay’s boy Rufus’” (216). When he speaks to the old lady, Rufus notices her body’s difference from his own, and relates aging as a supreme violence: “Her temple was deeply sunken as if a hammer had struck it and frail as a fledgling’s belly. Her skin was crosshatched with the razor-fine slashes of innumerable square wrinkles...”

Staring into his grandmother’s eyes, Rufus feels “...some kind of remote ancestor’s anger, and the sadness of time...lost and alone and far away, deeper than the deepest well.” Rufus kisses the old woman, who eventually hugs him fiercely before letting him go. However, the scene ends with the woman urinating on herself, while Jay and Mary politely begin to leave. The sense of connection, however, between Rufus and his family is almost beyond words, and Agee’s sense of identification (“I’m Jay’s boy”) emphasizes how important his father is in his idea of himself. In this way, it sets up the problem that his father’s absence will exert over Rufus’ interior life in Part III. However, the placement of this section is suspect for several reasons. First, Agee’s progression in

his three-part sequence suggests that Part I is meant to emphasize the importance of his father in Rufus' consciousness, while Part III stands as an exploration of the way his father's absence impacts his identity. Part II is the only moment when Agee explores the situation in the absence of his main character. McDowell's arrangement of these three scenes seems out of place. While it's impossible to understand where Agee actually wanted these section to go (if anywhere at all ), the structure of the novel suggests that this section would make more sense in either Parts I or II.

The second part of *A Death in the Family* is the last section of the novel where Jay Follet's presence exerts an influence on anyone. Throughout Part III, it is the absence of Jay that is palpable, and that absence translates itself into a kind of emotional (and sometimes physical) violence for Rufus. Coming to terms with the idea of his father's absence is especially hard for Rufus, who doesn't quite understand that his father will not be coming back. Agee signals his shift back into Rufus' consciousness by opening the final section of his novel with the continuation of Rufus' narrative from the end of the first section. What Agee had explored in Part II through the perspectives of Mary and her family in his detached narrative now finally shifts back to the central character and consciousness of the novel – Rufus. At the opening of the first chapter of Part III, Agee clearly emphasizes Jay Follet's bodily absence as a silent violence that inflicts itself constantly on Rufus and Catherine.

Awakening during the night after his father's death, Rufus wants desperately to show his father his new cap, and "pelt[s] down the hallway calling '*Daddy Daddy.*'" But once he arrives in his father's and mother's room, he finds only his mother looking "sick, or very tired, and in her eyes she seemed to be afraid of him" (225). His mother explains

to Rufus and his sister Catherine as simply as she can the result of Jay's accident: "Daddy didn't come home. He isn't going to come home ever any more. He's—gone away to heaven and he isn't ever coming home...Because God wanted him...Daddy was on his way home last night—and he was—he—got hurt and—so God let him go to sleep and took him straight away with Him to heaven" (227).

The euphemism isn't lost on Rufus, who understands that his father is dead. When his mother explains to Catherine that "neither of you will quite understand for a while," Rufus mind retorts "I do...he's dead. That's what" (228). Even Catherine begins to understand that her father's absence is related somehow to a sense of horror: "...every sound she heard and the whole quietness which was so much stronger than the sounds meant that things were not good. What it was was that he wasn't here. Her mother wasn't here either, but she was upstairs. He wasn't even upstairs (232). Catherine imagines that if her father were to walk in now, "then it would all be fun again," but in her mind cannot reconcile his temporary absence with his complete absence: "Ever any more."<sup>75</sup> He won't come home again ever any more. Won't come home again ever. But he will, though, because it's home. But why's he not here" (233).

Rufus' thoughts turn immediately to the potential for violence. When Aunt Hannah tells the children that she will explain to them the situation because their mother is not feeling well, Rufus' first question is "Who hurt him?" Hannah is shocked by the question, but explains that "That's true he was hurt, but nobody hurt him." Rufus imagines his father's body as being just "like the rabbits...all torn white bloody fur and red insides." Though he can remember their torn bodies, Rufus "could not imagine his father like that" (234). Remembering the scene with the rabbits, Rufus also remembers

how his mother comforted him with the idea that they are now in heaven, and that, had God not taken them to heaven, their bodies would never recover: “They could never get well,” she explains. The connection between the wounded body and the body’s regeneration in heaven brings little comfort to Rufus or Catherine, who both pepper Aunt Hannah with questions about the story of their father’s fatal accident.

By the time Rufus understand the story, he purposefully isolates himself from Catherine and Hannah, and tries to understand the meaning behind the new ideas he has learned. However, he has difficulty understanding the difference between sleep and death. His mother explains that God has put his father to sleep, but to Rufus, sleeping is something that you eventually wake up from. As he tries to understand the difference, he repeats the particulars of what he knows to be true over and over again:

He died last night while I was asleep and now it is already morning. He has already been dead since way last night and I didn’t even know until I woke up. He has been dead all night while I was asleep and now it is morning and I am awake but he is still dead and he will stay right on being dead all afternoon and all night and all tomorrow while I am asleep again and wake up again and go to sleep again and he can’t come back home again ever any more but I will see him once more before he is taken away. Dead now. He died last night while I was asleep and now it is already morning (239).

Thinking about his father’s death doesn’t help Rufus understand it, but the act of speaking it seems to make it more real to him. When Rufus moves from thought to speech, he also recognizes, however, that the very act of speaking it out loud carries with it weight and violence. “My daddy’s dead, he said to himself slowly, and then, shyly, he said it aloud: ‘My daddy’s dead.’” The phrase sounds “powerful, solid, and entirely creditable” (242).

Armed with the weapon of his father's death, Rufus stands on the porch of his house and attacks passing men with the information. Finally, when Rufus says it to one man passing by, he notices "the man's face looked almost as if he were dodging a blow." When he comes back, Rufus explains that his father has gone to heaven, and delights in how "the man looked at him as if something hurt him" (243). Shamed inside by the man's reaction, Rufus next retreats to the back alley corner occupied by his schoolmates. Especially excited about gaining respect with the boys who have teased him so mercilessly, Rufus is eager to attack them with the news of his father's accident. At first, none of the boys believe him, but one of the boys verifies the truth because of its inclusion in the newspaper. When the boy explains the story of his father's death to the others, Rufus felt a sense of pride, "as if all of this were being spoken for him, and on his behalf, and in his praise..." (245-246).

More than just bringing Rufus new respect from the boys, his father's death allows him the opportunity to take control over his own story. For the first time, Rufus feels as though he is in control over how to define himself to the boys. When they had teased him, Rufus felt as though his identity was something they had the power to decide for themselves, but now, in the face of his father's death, the boys give him the power to explain himself. "How do *you* know," one of the older boys asks the boy whose father had read about Jay in the paper. "Anybody here knows it's *him*," and he points directly at Rufus. "Let *him* tell it," they yell at Rufus.

Rufus tells the story as it has been explained to him, and as he does it, he can clearly see "the auto upside down with its wheels in the air and his father lying beside it with the little blue marks on his chin and on his lip" (248). The story silences the boys

for awhile, and Rufus feels a sense of accomplishment in not just telling the story but also in conjuring the image for the boys of the dented, blue chin. One of the boys offers, “way I heard it, ole Tin Lizzie just rolled right back on top of him *whomp*” (249). Rufus understands “this account of it was false,” but somehow, he is taken by the story, which “seemed to him more exciting than his own, and more creditable to his father and to him...so he didn’t try to contradict.”

Afterwards, when Rufus thinks back on his interaction with the boys, he is deeply ashamed of himself: “He felt so uneasy, deep inside his stomach, that he could not think about it anymore. He wished he hadn’t done it” (255). He wishes that his father could tell him that it was all right, but knows that he cannot. Rufus thinks about his father’s soul, however, and how if it were “around always, watching over them” that meant he already knew. The pain of his father’s knowledge overcomes Rufus because “there was no way to hide from a soul, and no way to talk to it, either. He just knows, and it couldn’t say anything to him, and he couldn’t say anything to it. It couldn’t whip him either, but it could sit and look at him and be ashamed of him.”

Thinking about the presence of his father’s soul inevitably leads Rufus to the knowledge of the absence of his father’s body. Rufus connects his father’s chair to the specter of his father’s wounded and absent body: “He looked at his father’s morsechair. Not a mark on his body.” Stealthily, Rufus “smelled of the chair, its deeply hollowed seat, the arms, the back,” and he attempts to recreate the image of his father sitting in it. But “there was only a cold smell of tobacco and, high along the back, a faint smell of hair” (255-256). Agee ends the scene with Rufus running his finger on the inside of his father’s ashtray. At first, Rufus wants to save the ashes in his pocket or in paper, but



recognizes that there is too little to save. Instead, after he licks the dirty finger, “his tongue tasted of darkness” (256).

The first three chapters of Agee’s third part establish Rufus’ struggle with his father’s death as an interior struggle between selfishness and selflessness. Rufus’ desire to speak his own story and control his narrative eventually causes him to be ashamed, and his interactions with Catherine and Hannah suggest that Rufus’ isolation angers the family. Rufus is torn between remembering his father as his own and sharing his father’s story with those around him. Each time Rufus attempts to assert some kind of control over the narrative of his father’s death, he is reminded of his father’s bodily absence, which in turn leads him to shame and sorrow. These movements recur throughout Part III for Rufus as he attempts to locate a place for himself within the larger narrative of his father.

But Rufus also understands immediately that his father’s absence has opened up the potential for violence. Speaking about his death does some kind of physical and emotional harm to those around him and to himself. And Aunt Hannah – who was once so calm and kind to him – has become a strict and violent guardian. When he attempts to instruct Catherine on the correct way to color, Rufus infuriates his sister to the point of crying. Suddenly, Aunt Hannah appears at the door “mad as a hornet” (252). She grabs Rufus by the shoulders and shakes him violently: “I don’t want to spank you on this day of all days, but if I hear you say one more rough thing like that to your sister I’ll give you a spanking you’ll remember to your dying day...” (253). The scene leaves Rufus “terrified,” and more withdrawn than before.

Once Rufus comes to terms with the physical meaning of his father's death – specifically, the absence of his body – he attempts to connect with him in a number of ways that ultimately prove unsatisfying. Significantly, he searches out signs of his father's bodily presence throughout the house, and even, through the ashtray, attempts to integrate his body with his father's. None of these attempts succeeds, and throughout the rest of the novel, Rufus' journey changes from attempting to articulate his father's narrative to locating his own story and its meaning.

After his father's absence is clearer to Rufus, his journey in the rest of the novel becomes explaining his personal identity and how it has changed since the death of his father. Rufus' construction of his identity in the wake of his father's death is ultimately consumed with an attempt to locate a wholeness from the sense of fragmentation he feels. Because his perception of himself is so intimately tied into his father's life, Rufus tries to define himself by his father's absence. He asks his mother whether he is an orphan, and though she is shocked by the question, she explains that he is not. Secretly, however, Rufus longs to be an orphan, and devises a way to explain to his schoolmates the credibility of his argument. The idea he has emphasizes Rufus' longing to make his body whole in some way: "Well, so he was not an orphan. Yet his father was dead. Not his mother, too, though. Only his father. But one was dead. One and one makes two. One-half of two equals one. He was half an orphan, no matter what his mother said. And he had a sister who was half an orphan too. Half and half equals a whole. Together they made a whole orphan" (263).

When Rufus is confronted with his father's body at the visitation, he is shocked by how still everything is. Coming alongside his father's body, Rufus feels a tremendous

“indifference” in him, and knows “he would never see him otherwise” (281). The feeling bothers Rufus because it is an “indifference that would have rejected them; have sent them away, except that it was too indifferent even to care whether they went or stayed....” Rufus shocks himself by feeling something else, something that he hadn’t imagined he could feel, and it is a feeling that comes from the body of his father itself in its obviously manipulated pose: “...there was perfected beauty. The head, the hand, dwelt in completion, immutable, indestructible: motionless. They moved upon existence quietly as stones which withdraw through water for which there is no floor.”

Rufus spends a long time with his father’s body, memorizing the exact location and angle of his hands, legs, fingers and arms. Glancing from his eyes to his mouth, Rufus feels “as if his father were almost about to smile. Yet the mouth carried no suggestion either of smiling or of gravity; only strength, silence, manhood, and indifferent contentment” (282). The scene is “unreal,” but Rufus recognizes that his father’s body is the one real thing in the room. Finally being in his father’s presence both comforts and troubles Rufus, and he longs to touch his father’s neatly manicured hand. Finally, Rufus understands the motionless and indifference as the abstract embodiment of being dead, and the weight of it causes him to look away from the body: “...he turned his eyes from the hand and looked towards his father’s face and, seeing the blue-dented chin thrust upward, and the way the flesh was sunken behind the bones of the jaw, first recognized in its specific weight the word, *dead*” (284-285).

After the revelation, Jay’s body ceases to be his father’s, and becomes instead a kind of object for Rufus to wonder at. He reads the body now “as if he had been flung down and left on the street, and as if he were a very successfully disguised stranger”

(287). Rufus and Catherine are ushered into the next room, where Rufus can only think over and over again “Dead. He’s dead. That’s what he is: he’s dead” (289). Thinking it over and over causes Rufus to feel a darkness and weight “in his own being” that he cannot overcome or resolve. Catherine, in turn, imagines her father as “a huge mute doll” that ceases to exist anymore in a meaningful relationship.

Seeing the body allows Rufus to exorcise the image of his father from his imagination. The body of his father is no longer something to be deified and exalted: instead, it is a stranger’s body. Instead of feeling his father’s presence, Rufus is only aware of the striking absence of his father and how that absence will never really dissipate. After the funeral, Agee moves from his panoramic scene of the mourners leaving the house to a miniature scene in which a small bird attacks a worm. The scene evokes the emotional struggle of both Rufus and Catherine, but also emphasizes division, violence and masculinity. As the small robin catches the worm, he “braced his heels, walked backward, and pulled hard” (299). The worm’s body stretches “like a rubber band and snapped in two.” The division of the worm reminds the reader of Agee’s division of Rufus in the first part of his novel; it also references the wounded body as objective correlative to the sense of fragmentation and isolation both Rufus and Catherine feel in the presence of their father’s dead body. As in Part I, Agee’s emphasis on the bisected body comes after a realization of the absence of Jay Follet’s body. As the worm breaks in two, “Catherine felt the snapping in her stomach.” The robin “quickly gobbled what he had and, darting his beak ever more quickly, took hold of the rest and pulled again. It stretched but did not break, and then all came loose from the ground.”

The final scene of the robin and the worm echoes Agee's scene with the snake in *The Morning Watch*.<sup>76</sup> In it, Agee re-examines the motifs of division, masculinity, violence, the wounded, sublimated body. After the death of his father, Rufus' sense of his identity is similarly fragmented, and Agee here hints at his future inability to regain a sense of himself or an understanding of his masculinity<sup>77</sup> because of the absence of his father. By Part III, his father's body ceases to be a person and instead becomes an object, an alien and wounded body that offers no comfort or hope. Rufus ends the book walking with his Uncle Andrew, a scene that echoes the first scene with his father, but unlike the former scene, his Uncle Andrew is no stand-in for his father. By the time his uncle finishes talking to him, Rufus, who had begun to feel all right, suddenly felt "now it was changed and confused" (308). The absence of his father violently – almost surgically – divides Rufus from his father, and more importantly, from a sense of his own identity.

### **Paternal Nightmare: The Lofaro Edition**

Few critics really have questioned the authenticity of the McDowell version of *A Death in the Family*, even though Agee had provided no actual blueprint for how he wanted his book to be laid out.<sup>78</sup> After the novel had won the Pulitzer Prize, no critic actively questioned the novel's literary merits, and it gave the McDowell version a credibility that continued for close to fifty years. However, the serious question over how Agee saw his book, including central ideas of progression and placement of key scenes, deserves an answer, or, at the very least, a comprehensive review. Michael Lofaro's new

edition from the University of Tennessee Press – one of a ten-volume series that aims to republish and re-edit Agee’s manuscripts – argues that McDowell may have edited and excised far more than Agee had initially planned.

The version that Lofaro presents comes directly from the manuscript of *A Death in the Family* that Agee had begun close to ten years before his death. Lofaro finds that this manuscript is closer to complete than McDowell and his editors had claimed. Instead of being a highly fragmented and chronologically broken piece, the Lofaro edition manifests Agee’s work as a tight and unified exploration of his childhood. More importantly for this study, Lofaro replaces Agee’s wistful “Knoxville: Summer, 1915” – a piece originally published long before Agee began work on *A Death in the Family* – with Agee’s original idea for the opening. (Removed from the posthumously published edition, portions of the introduction to *A Death in the Family* were later published under the title “Dream Sequence”).<sup>79</sup>

The new introduction clearly connects with the central problems that Agee explores not just throughout his book but his entire fictional career – namely, identity, violence, the wounded body, paternal nightmare and masculinity. The fact that the sequence is itself a dream lends a kind of meditative state to the remainder of the novel. As a book introduced by a dream, *A Death in the Family*’s insistence on stream-of-consciousness and interior monologue begin to make more sense. Agee begins his introduction only with a particular time: “towards the middle of the twentieth century.”<sup>80</sup> And he begins his dream sequence with blistering heat, “The sun boiled straight down without shadows. It was so hot that the air was a gunmetal haze, smelling of soft coal,

live steam, and exhausts” (p1). The town itself is “shapeless,” and the people who walk along the streets seem unreal.

Gradually, the protagonist of this short section begins to piece together from the abstract setting that he finds himself in a connection with his past: “He had thought that it was one of the streets of Chattanooga between the two depots, but now he began to realize that he was back home, in Knoxville, for he could see that the broken street thickened, far ahead of him, into the busiest blocks of Gay Street” (p2). Almost as soon as he gets his bearings, he notices that above him in the street, “a crowd was doing some terrible piece of violence.” He reacts to the mob violence at once by feeling struck in the pit of his stomach, but also “really at home.” He tries to reach the scene of the violent attack, but as he does so, understands that the mob may turn its anger on him. Instead, he keeps his distance for a few blocks, and waits for the crowd to break up some.

Finally, when the mob seems done with their victim, the protagonist gets close enough to see the victim. He is “naked across the sidewalk, and even before he came up to him he knew that he was dead.” Immediately, the Agee-persona in the dream world understands why the mob had attacked him: “He knew too that this man had stood in the street with furious eyes and had dared to shout into the noon hour, for everyone to hear, the truths and self-deceptions and the passionate beliefs and commitments which must certainly and always mean great danger to him and sooner or later, now at last, death.” The motive for the murder connects back to the man’s first feelings as he realizes he is back in Knoxville. Though he is “happy to be home,” the man is also “wary, for he liked the Southerners who had never gone North but he knew if they knew his mind they would hate him.” The protagonist recognizes in the man dead on the street his own sense of

responsibility, as well as the inevitable reaction of the town. For Agee, the exploration of the insider-outsider mentality is clearly an introduction into the interior world of Rufus in *A Death in the Family*. Like Rufus, the character in the dream sequence feels divided between an allegiance to himself and his people. The struggle between these two identities leads inevitably to violence and death, which suggests the death Agee will meditate on throughout *A Death in the Family*.

As the protagonist looks down at the dead body, he realizes with surprise that the body on the ground "...was indeed John the Baptist. It was the first time he had seen him face to face, but he knew him."<sup>81</sup> The saint's body raises the difficult idea of identification. As he stares at his body, he feels

The whole time, everywhere, was bursting with woe and fear and injustice and with this kind of passion and cruelty, and he was no longer of any side, no longer capable of any sufficient conviction except in the heroism, and meanness of soul, and blind hopelessness, of the whole gnashing machinery: one who could truly love liberty and honor must know that all those who tried to advance either, destroyed both (p3).

The man is determined not to be on "any side," but to be of all sides, to be both townspeople and saint. He recognizes the dead man as a hero, "a stubborn, intrepid, archaic, insanely bigoted man, begging for trouble, begging for violence and for death until finally they gave it to him." The saint is unlike himself, "a hero, not a neutral." Being neutral causes him guilt, and he reminds himself that "Neutrals can die too...caught in the crossfire from all the convinced ones; they are despised by all the convinced men, and by each other, and by themselves." His self-defeating thoughts eventually lead him to declare, "The only possible faithfulness is faithfulness to the best



you can understand at the time,” a useful introduction to Agee’s process in *A Death in the Family*. In the novel Agee presents to his reader, there is a desperate fidelity to the immediate truths of composition and remembrance. Those two truths often deny each other, but they represent the same ideal that Agee articulates here.

Guilty because of his “inevitable but convenient lack of conviction” (p4), the protagonist decides he must do something. Even as he notices the mob in the corner of his eye – “The sons of bitches, he said to himself. The damned scum. The Common Man.” – he decides that he must do something to restore “devotion and the absolute honor that is in absolute courage” to the dead man. Leaning down, he whispers to the dead man, “Come on, John, he whispered, smiling again. We’re going to find you a better place to rest than this. We’re going to find you a place where you can lie out in the open, but in honor and in state. Laid out decently as a dead man ought to be” (p5). The protagonist bends down and carries John the Baptist “like a baby, but with the killed head lolling deep and heavy” away from the still-watchful mob. He immediately knows where to take the body, “a certain corner, a certain vacant lot; he could already see it vividly in his mind’s eye. That was where John wanted to lie for a while before burial,” and he sets out to bring him there.

The narrator’s unflinching responsibility towards the dead clearly echoes Agee’s responsibility to tell his father’s story, and the burden of the dead body echoes the same burden Agee takes up in explaining his father’s impact on his life. Throughout the short passage, the saint’s body becomes Agee’s, his father’s, and finally the incomprehensible stranger. Agee’s responsibility – and guilt over his perceived failure to live up to the responsibility he sets – is evident in this opening scene, especially as he delivers the body

to the vacant lot. The narrator welcomes the violence of the mob directed at him, “a rock or a tire-iron to jolt him or bring him down, or even that some ex-football star might clip him” (p6). Though he cannot escape his “dread of violence and of pain,...he was quietly happy to realize, all the same, how little he really cared what would happen to him; and he began looking forward to how much damage he might be able to do them before they should make that impossible.” However, he is saddened by the crowd’s watchful reaction, and feels exposed as a neutral even more than he had guessed. He imagines the crowd thinking of him using the body as “a shield behind which he was hiding.”

Just as *A Death in the Family* becomes a rumination on Agee and his identity, he realizes with shame that “he had been thinking only of himself and of the others, not of John at all” (p7) during his long walk with the body. As he looks down at the body in his arms, the connection between John the Baptist’s body and his father’s is clear. The narrator sees “the ruined body and down across his elbow at the head which hung so heavily, so deeply sunken into this death only a few minutes old, that he could see only the arched throat and the plowlike underside of the jaw and the chin through the pointed beard which stood straight upward like a spike.” Agee clearly borrows from his language during the scene where Rufus encounters his father’s body for the first time after his death, especially with the emphasis on the chin. The ruined body of the saint, a burden to shield and honor, gradually ceases to be the saint’s body at all.

As he passes the buildings and streets of Knoxville, the memories of his childhood and adolescence overwhelm the narrator. He remembers his confirmation and the doctor’s offices he had visited. By the time he shakes himself from his memories, he realizes he is lost, and sets the body down. When he next looks down at the body, it has

changed: “The whole body had softened and was streaked with brown” (p9), and there is a terrible odor coming from it. Realizing he cannot carry the decaying body the way he used to without vomiting, the narrator “began slowly to drag the body along the pavement like a sled.” He tries to “drag it respectfully, but one backward glance was enough to convince him that in what he was doing, there could be no respect.” Turning back to his duty, he looks at Knoxville, and finds that it has changed: “It wasn’t as he remembered it from childhood, nor did he like its looks as well as his memories of it; nor was it as he remembered it from the middle thirties; he didn’t like its looks even as well as that; it was a blend of the two...” (p10).

Dragging the body along, the narrator becomes aware that it is no longer hot; in fact, there is snow on the ground. He is also shocked to realize he is “as naked as the man he dragged.” John’s body is slowly falling to pieces behind him, and he notices that

Through some kind of interplay between freezing and corruption, much of the head had become a kind of transparent gristle, yellowish and rubbery. He could see the thin dirty snow and the thin blue ice straight through it and, through the ice, the yellow and brown sand colors of the pavement, and all these colors of snow and ice and pavement were striated by the movement of the dragging into straight grainy streaks, and the trail the body had left in the snow was blue and brown (p12).

As he hits the curb, he realizes that the head “now...hung to the body only by translucent shreds” (p13), and finally, “the last shred broke and the head rolled clear, in a half circle, to a wobbling stop, cradling quietly in the middle of the street.” Like a quarter spinning and circling on the sidewalk, the head refuses to be contained. Finally, blocking its escape, the narrator gently picks it up “as if it were a Grail.” However, the dream ends as he examines the ruined body part in his hand, and realizes “it was no longer a head. It

was a heavy rondure of tough jelly and of hair and beard and the hair sprang wild and radiant from his center where, meeting his eye, was one organ, so disfigured, that it was impossible to know whether it was a bloody glaring eye, or a mutely roaring mouth.”

The narrator wakes to “horror and the coldest sorrow” following the dream. The wounded body in his dream has had a profound impact on him. He attempts to make sense of the dream, and reads the body of the saint as acknowledgement of his responsibility in his death. “It was he who was responsible” (p14), he realizes, for John’s beheading. More than that, he realizes that the corner he wished to drag the body to, was, in fact, “The corner...where he used to sit with his father and it was there of all times and places that he had known best that his father loved him, and had known not only that he loved him but that he was glad of his existence and that he thought well of him.” In his piecing together of his guilt, he recognizes the importance of John the Baptist as well, for “... his father had come out of the wilderness, and it was there that the son had best known his homesickness for the wilderness.” The meaning that he places on this nightmare also connects to the memory of his father:

So I suppose I’m Christ, he thought with self-loathing.  
But which was John?  
I’ve betrayed my father, he realized. Or myself. Or both of us.  
How? (p15-18)

The answer to the central and final question that the narrator asks himself is explored in the pages that follow. *A Death in the Family* becomes Agee’s need to work through the paternal nightmare he has experienced and massage his guilt, fear and horror over the loss of his father’s body.

The narrator “thought of his father in his grave, over seven hundred miles away, and how many years. If he could only talk with him. But he knew that even if they could talk, they could never come at it between them, what the betrayal was” (p19). He imagines the dream’s significance to working through the betrayal, and though he recognizes that “its meaning was the meaning he sought” (p20), he finally admits that “every effort to interpret a dream serves only to obscure and to distort what little of the true meaning may ultimately suggest itself.” Neither the dream, nor the imagined conversation with his father is adequate or satisfactory in exploring his perceived betrayal.

From the dream’s unsatisfactory conclusion, the narrator decides to create a testament to his father’s memory:

He should go back into those years. As far as he could remember; and everything he could remember; nothing he had learned or done since; nothing except (so well as he could remember) what his father had been as he had known him, and what he had been as he had known himself, and what he had seen with his own eyes, and supposed with his own mind (p21).

The birth of the idea for *A Death in the Family* comes from the paternal nightmare of division and the wounded body. Unsatisfied with simply picking apart his dream for the meaning deep behind it, Agee attempts to create his own meaning through his writing. Even if all he accomplishes in the book is the memory of his father, the narrator recognizes that “All the same, he could make the journey, as he had dreamed the dream, for its own sake, without trying to interpret; and if the journey was made with sufficient courage and care, very likely that of itself would be as near the answer as he could ever hope to get” (p22).

The sequence finally ends with the man in his bed speaking the words “my father,” as though he were a child again who calls for his father after a nightmare. Speaking the words brings his father to him “clearly visible to the imagination, and his presence much more than imagination, a silent but almost unendurable power and aliveness” (p23). Though he cannot contain his father’s presence, the important knowledge of how the narrator’s father has affected his life remains the true vision:

All his life, as he had begun during recent years to realize, had been shaped above all else by his father and by his father’s absence. All his life he had fiercely loathed authority and had as fiercely loved courage and mastery. In every older man, constantly, he had looked for a father, or fought him, or both. And here he was, and all was well at last, and even though he was now rapidly fading, and most likely would never return, that was all right too.

Significantly, the Lofaro edition follows the dream sequence introduction to *A Death in the Family* with the first italicized scene of the McDowell edition, Rufus’ dream-nightmare sequence, thus connecting the two paternal nightmares together. Both of the nightmares essentially explore the difficulties of remaining absolutely committed to protecting the honor and dignity of their father’s wounded body.

The dream sequence introduction restored by Lofaro is clearly the only adequate introduction to Agee’s deep meditation on his father’s body. In this sequence, Agee struggles with and articulates the difficulties of representing the unity of multiple perspectives, as well as his central concerns of justifying and honoring his father. Though he claims an exploration of his father, Agee really explores himself, his identity and its relationship not just to his father’s absence, but also to masculinity and division. The wounded body in Agee’s dream represents not just an ideal or a person, it comes to

be a critical image of *relationship*, the relationship between Agee and his father, between Agee and his home, and between Agee and his art. That Agee's motivation for his novel comes from the disintegrating and decaying image of the wounded body manifests that, for Agee, the wounded body is more than just symbol, trope, or motif; instead, it is the central unifier of artistic vision and purpose. Through an exploration of violence, and the wounded body, *A Death in the Family* becomes the book Agee meant it to be: a meditation on the difficulties of representation, remembering, and forgiveness.

## **Chapter Four: Racial Violence, Receding Bodies**

Even a careful reader of Agee's major works might be hard pressed to formulate what exactly he thought about the struggles of African Americans during his lifetime. African American characters are virtually non-existent in Agee's fictional world, and even in his brutally honest journalism, Agee's viewpoint on racial violence and protest is somewhat ambiguous. Though Agee sympathized with many different people, including minorities and the marginalized, his silence on the African American experience (especially in the south) might provoke concern in those who try to reconcile his obvious political sympathies with his writing. But Agee's major works do mention, often in passing, a tremendous guilt about his inability to communicate his complicated feelings about the situation between whites and African Americans. We know from his letters that race and the politics of racism were clearly on his mind during the turbulent times of the 1940's, but Agee's inability to work through these ideas in fiction has never been properly addressed.

While Agee didn't exactly publish extensively on his thoughts on racial segregation or racism, he did spend a large part of his journals and letters advocating some kind of common ground between whites (specifically southern whites) and African Americans. But it is in his short (and often unpublished) fiction and journals that one



finds the most straightforward and intense window into Agee's complicated feelings over the mistreatment of African Americans in his time. Agee divides his sympathies between poor, southern, rural whites and African Americans, but his emphasis on the violent translation of African American political problems to his personal experience suggests that African Americans played a large role in Agee's artistic and personal consciousness.

In Agee's fiction, African Americans are often presented as mute and inwardly stoic individuals, or as the incomprehensible "other" that resists easy interpretation. The only time such characters come to life for Agee is through photographs or meditations on the violence they endure. When read together, these meditations comprise a significant portion of Agee's fictional endeavor, and raise questions about the representation of African Americans throughout Agee's other work. The preoccupation with violence seems to connect to Agee's reflections on race in unique ways. African American bodies in his fictions are subjects to be tortured and attacked, but instead of lingering over the violence – as he does with white bodies throughout his fiction – the images of these bodies are always receding in Agee's fiction. He never quite imagines either the beginning or end of these scenes of violence, instead creating the still image of them for his reader: the scene is akin to a continually darkening photograph that eventually becomes impossible to decipher.

Agee has a movement, then, to imagining racial violence in his fiction that is different from his preoccupation with ritual violence or even self-torture. Because the movement is so unique, an exploration of its significance across his fiction suggests that race itself, especially the African American predicament in America, was a central topic in and unifier of Agee's fiction and artistic voice. Agee's interest in race problems in the

United States is emphasized in his letters to Father Flye as well as his extensive unpublished fiction, journalism and screenplays. Such problems also lend weight to Agee's own guilt over his inadequacy to be a leader in America on issues of race or the problems that African Americans faced.

Taken together, Agee's fiction and fragmented non-fiction prose create a self-authored picture of himself as guilt-racked, ineffectual white liberal reformer. His guilt over his supposed inadequacy to *do* anything is precisely what perpetuates his writing. Though he confronts his readers (and frequently himself – either as author or character-author) with the specter of racial violence, the image of the bodies of those subjected to verbal and physical harm rapidly vanishes to become the body of Agee or his persona. This movement from body to bodilessness for Agee's African American characters is bothersome in that black characters are frequently not allowed agency and action on their own terms. Instead, they are bodies to be used and discarded by Agee in the work of understanding his own complicated history.

As I mentioned above, Agee's most passionate arguments about race and race relations in the United States occur in his correspondence. His letters to his mentor Father Flye record an ongoing debate over the responsibility of white intellectuals – especially southern ones, as Agee considered himself – to find some kind of solution to problems like segregation and violence. In 1945, Agee and Flye exchanged several letters that articulated their disagreement about recent federal legislation to combat discrimination against African Americans. While Flye felt that such legislation would actively subvert the rights of employers in favor of the rights of the minority, Agee spoke vehemently for the underlying tenants of the law. "I...feel that any human being has the

right not to be discriminated against in order to indulge somebody's right to hate...I feel it more strongly," Agee writes, "because I don't regard that right to hate as a right at all but as a deadly wrong" (143). Though Agee bristled at the notion of supporting through inactivity others' right to hate, he simultaneously concluded that he (and by extension, anyone) would be unable to solve what was then labeled "The Negro Problem." His personal experiences living in the south as well as a strong tie to the region's impoverished white families cooled his momentum, until his cynicism conquered his idealism. He writes to Flye in a later letter, "I understand more about the attitudes of both sides....than anyone else I happen to know....[and] often feel a strong pull, even obligation, towards trying to act as mediator, moderator and mutual explainer in the battle; but I am so immobilized several ways...understanding so little and knowing it [and]...the certainty of the overall uselessness of all that will transpire" (147).

His reaction to the "problem" of African Americans creates a diffuse, contradictory and self-defeating perspective. Taken as pieces, Agee's work might be read in the tradition of white liberal reformers, southern literary figures whose thoughts on race and racism might be termed "southern white racial conversion narratives," in the language of Fred Hobson.<sup>82</sup> However, mapping a course for Agee's thoughts on race is difficult in his fiction, journalism, and letters because his perspective is so often cluttered with misgivings, sentimentalized over-understanding, and dramatic self-defeating cynicism over the practical effect of change in America. In his thoughtful book, *James Agee and the Legend of Himself*, Alan Spiegel claims that, while interest in Agee has spread, the specialized focus has left his influence largely raised to cult status. Each fetishized branch of pseudo-scholarship promotes itself into what he defines as unique

sub-groups – “the Poor Jim,” cult, which emphasizes the continuous internal conflict Agee felt, the “Saint Jim” cult which dilutes the author’s work to being secondary to the possibility of his genius, and the unfulfilled promise of his fragmented manuscripts, and finally to the localized critics, who emphasize Agee as depression-era writer, high-modernist experimenter, and lost southern gentleman. Because of Agee’s earnest recording of his thoughts on African Americans, his work suggests the potential for a body of criticism that declares Agee as liberal reformer.

However, while Agee’s piece “America, Look at Your Shame” is introspective and thoughtful, Agee hardly becomes the radical racial advocate that a reader might want him to be. In fact, the treatment of race in Agee’s work borders on ignorance or ineffectual self-promoting guilt. If anything, Agee’s sympathies are divided between the African Americans that he feels for and the southern white that he can’t help erase from his memory. His *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is endlessly sympathetic toward white southern tenant farmers in Hale County, Alabama, though he is significantly tight-lipped about the African American neo-slave system that clearly outnumbers the white minority. In *Death in the Family*, young Rufus is taught that the word “nigger” is not socially acceptable, though his African American nurse is clearly the outsider, and never considered a member of the large and extended family. Any Agee revisionist critics who want to claim a radical racial connection between Agee’s work and life might be able to produce minimal connections, but to do so would to commit the intentional sin of pseudo-cultism that Spiegel warns against.

## A Preface to Decisions

I want to bring an understanding of Agee's thoughts on race together by focusing on an unpublished article housed in the archives in Austin, Texas. The piece, unlike "America, Look at Your Shame," is a critical response to Donald Davidson's article in the summer 1945 *Southern Review*, "A Preface to Decisions." In that article, Davidson counsels against the Neo-northern reformers who he feels are railroading pro-African American legislation in order to change the south's vibrant history, and destroy southern unity. After Agee read the article at the request of a northern friend, he wrote to Father Flye, "By the way, my hair stood on end both with interest and at times intense disagreement...reading Donald Davidson's article about some aspects of the so-called Negro Problem. I do wholly agree with him on one point:," he says in his letter, "that infinitely more harm than good will come of the pro-Negro Federal legislation" (148).

The response is typical Agee: conflicted, contradictory, sensitive and, finally, inching toward hopelessness. In it, he tries to find common ground with Davidson's perspective, while setting his own ideas apart from those of the southern leader. Agee reacts against Davidson's interpretation of the so-called Jim Crow laws, which he feels are "born out of custom and establish the conditions of tolerance," and are "intended to prevent conflict by diminishing the provocations to conflict." To that, Agee claims such a simplistic interpretation might be hard to swallow, but comes back with a sympathetic reading of Davidson's motive: "Yet such statements ... are worth serious attention. For they are not the hypocrisy or rationalizations which sociologists or many non-southern laymen might make them but are the honest utterance of a cultivated southerner, who is

in this article asking for a spokesman for the south, and might reasonably aspire to be it.” Agee recognizes not only Davidson’s credibility as a southern gentleman but also his honesty as a non-sociologist who is legitimately arguing for a re-appraisal of white perspective. He finds some similarities between this conservative white southerner and his ideas on the “Negro Problem.” In fact, one might even suggest that, by writing his response, Agee might be attempting to become a kind of spokesman for the south about matters of race. In the opening paragraphs of his response, Agee speaks about Davidson’s assertion that it is “a practical impossibility to oppose Law to Custom in any part of the United States and especially the south.” Agee replies, “...as a southerner of some experience, I (am convinced is replaced with “know”) that Mr. Davidson is putting it (mildly replaced with as mildly as a southerner can).” In this article, Agee is clearly trying to advocate and promote his southernness not only to speak with Davidson’s authority but also to place himself as insider within the debate, unlike the northern agitator that Davidson is reacting against.

Agee shares Davidson’s dislike of the sociological treatment of what is called “The Negro Problem.” They both object to the sociologists’ awkward perspective on the south, especially because, as Agee says, “sociologists are as a rule totally uninterested in why the southern white developed his attitudes towards the Negro... [and] incompetent to understand those attitudes, or even to observe them, better than very superficially.” It is, therefore, a shame to both Davidson and Agee that African American southern leaders chose sociologists as their “authorities.” To Agee, the debate over sociology’s use in understanding the condition of the south is moot, however, not only for the African Americans, who does “not need to have ever heard the word sociology to learn [their]

predicament and to know it is bad,” but also for the “southern white,” who “doesn’t need to learn the difference between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> amendments...to know his own predicament and to learn that he is threatened.”

Agee is also quick to agree with Davidson that, for the most part, “the Northern abolitionists were fools.” In fact, in this article more than most of his letters and all of his fiction, Agee’s disdain for Northerners is palpable. Ostensibly speaking to a southern audience, Davidson’s readership, Agee condemns a northern perspective to maintain any appropriate understanding about the delicate and unique situation of the south. For Agee and Davidson, non-southern politicians will hopelessly confuse the issue and exacerbate an already bad situation. Agee says of the northerner’s inability to understand, “I am afraid this applies not only to the sociologist but also to the non-southerner – and here I especially mean the Northerner – in general. (A parallel to this is the inability of the benevolent bourgeois to understand the very poor).” He relates an instance where a well-dressed northerner explained to him his shock over discrimination against African Americans in New Orleans. Agee defines his southernness by opposition to the shock of the northerner: “That he could be shocked betrays his ignorance ...southerners, on the other hand, even ‘pro Negro’ southerners like myself know too much about that sorry thing even to be shocked enough.”

Both Davidson and Agee see the possible solution to the tension in the south located in personal relationships between African Americans and white southerners. And here, Agee is even more explicit, “This is the reason why I love the south, and loathe the North: in the south... relationships are intensely personal and are valued as such, as nowhere else in this country. I know too, by personal experience as well as by my

reading, that some of the finest personal relationships possible can develop between whites and Negroes...and that virtues are developed in some Negroes with that predicament who will rest alone those excellent friendships, when the Negro has won his equality.” Such an assertion might seem naïve, but appears to be an extension of his insider-outsider argument, that only the solution to the south’s problematic relationship with race can be achieved in the south, through the will of the southerner. It’s interesting to note that both Agee’s response and Davidson’s “A Preface to Decisions” ends almost the same way. Davidson upholds the bi-racial system of the south as decent and tolerable, but concludes that “if the tendencies I have discussed in this article continue, even that hopeful aspect will vanish.” Agee turns Davidson’s article on its head and places the possibility for hope on the shoulders of white intellectuals in the south: “Yet it would chiefly be through the effort and success of such southerners as Mr. Davidson that one might have any hope whatever. I see none.” Both Davidson and Agee locate no hope in their respective possibilities. For Davidson, northern liberal agitators (of whom he might have listed turn-coat Erskine Caldwell, and had he known much of him, possibly Agee himself), would confuse the situation and force legislation to deconstruct the south. For Agee, he would feel the same distrust of the northern liberal agitator, but would also call to arms the southern white intellectual (an identity he takes on and puts off throughout his response) to examine the problem with the same awareness and sensitivity he feels.

In discussing Agee’s common ground with Davidson, I don’t want to neglect the criticism he levels at the southerner. He takes him to task for his defense of southern custom: “He never bothers to mention the fact that custom, of itself, is the worthiest



element to [its] creators, and that law is one of the few possible means of budging it and is about the only possible defense against it if you happen, like every Negro, to be on the (wrong) side of the body of custom Mr. Davidson reveres.” He mentions the inconsistencies in Davidson’s perspective, and de-mystifies Davidson’s assertion that, generally, the southern white is good friends with his Negro brother: “In the first place, I doubt that he ever does [know them]; their mutual predicament guarantees that.” Agee’s argument with Flye also surfaces in his response to Davidson. He refuses to totally condemn legislation aimed at African American enfranchisement because of what it represents, though he consistently denies its practicality. In his May 15<sup>th</sup> letter, Agee writes that while he dislikes the law’s ability to coerce white employers, he “with at least equal intensity...dislike[s] the forms of discrimination which this kind of legislation is trying to combat” (142). Acknowledging the hopelessness of reform, Agee nevertheless validates its core ideals and principles: “such as the ways are, and poor as they are, I am for them,” he says.

Agee’s May 15<sup>th</sup> letter is perhaps his most vehement condemnation of the machinations of racism or race difference. In it, he calls into question the African American’s economic status, something Agee feels is frequently overlooked in the politicized argument. He berates Flye by asserting, “The whole complex of those preferences and prejudices the right to whose indulgence you are defending, works to help keep the Negroes...by the millions, impoverished...” (143). Though he understands Flye’s position that such legislation undermines an employer’s right, he condemns any notion that discrimination is any free American’s right. Such language, I believe, is not posturing, nor is it the whimsical meanderings of Agee on race, but is a genuine disgust

with discrimination, hate, and injustice. However, it is important to note that his next letter, less than a week later, opens with a much more conciliatory tone: “I feel as I think you do, that the practical facts and practical possible outcome are both hopeless.”

During his correspondence with Flye, Agee recommends Richard Wright’s *Black Boy* to his mentor as a kind of conclusion to their debate. Wright’s autobiography might have helped fuel the opposition voiced in the May 15<sup>th</sup> letter, and could have inspired a reaction against Davidson’s article in the *Southern Review*, but Agee is tight-lipped about his perspective on Wright, a figure he could have easily identified with politically. One gets the feeling that Agee’s interest in race and discrimination is vaguely dependent on mood and interest. In a September letter to Flye in the same year, Agee plays with races as though they were toy soldiers: “If I feel a sense of being in love with any people as a people, it is the Chinese, with Negroes and Italians a close second, or sometimes not second at all” (151).

### **“America, Look at Your Shame”**

This unpublished article of Agee’s is interesting if only that it solidifies his slippery opinion on African Americans and their situation during Agee’s lifetime, a question that he does not satisfactorily address in any of his “major works.” That Agee was thinking about the situation, and, indeed, was conflicted about it sheds light on what I feel is his emphasis on racial violence and receding bodies in his fiction and journalism. Agee’s perspective in these works is difficult to explain, but the publication of Agee’s previously unpublished article, “America, Look At Your Shame” in the re-launch issue

of *The Oxford American* in 2003, drew Agee's confusing perspective on race to the foreground. In the previously unpublished article, Agee recounts an experience he had in a New York bus with a racist southern soldier. He details his intense reaction to the man and his even more intense internal conflict as to how he, as a spectator, should react to over-hearing the comments. If the publication of "America, Look at Your Shame" is emblematic of Agee's thoughts on race, one would hardly consider Agee radical or revolutionary. In the short piece, Agee struggles between what Lofaro and Davis call his "soaring creativity and...self-absorbed intellectual guilt." The end result is a two-part indictment, not unlike the indictments implicit in *Famous Men*, that of reader and author. Agee always shares co-equal blame with the very enemy he attacks. "Who are you who will read these words," he asks in *Famous Men*, and "by what right," but these questions may be secondary to his own culpability, "Why we make this book...and by what right, and for what purpose" (9). Agee is first interested, however, in exploring his intentional and shameful silence that causes the small scene to be etched forever into his memory.

What brings back Agee's guilt is his perusal of several photographs in the magazine *P.M.* of the race riot in June of 1943. The photographs are of African American bodies, beaten and bloodied; the front page of the magazine shows one such terrible image with the caption: "AMERICA LOOK TO YOUR SHAME!." As Agee works through the brutal and bloody picture spread, the images themselves become grotesque cartoons of pointless violence, until the absolute reality of the subjects is lost behind what they could represent. He says, "The mixture of emotions on their face was almost unbearable to keep looking at...a terrific, accidental look of bearing testimony -- a sort of gruesome, over-realistic caricature; which was rather, really, the source of those

attendant saints or angels who communicate with the world outside the picture in great paintings of crucifixions and exalted agonies” (36). Though sympathetic, his reaction to the pictures necessitates the complete loss of realism, turning the photographs of the riot into cherished symbols of suffering saints. Like the tenant farmers in *Famous Men*, these subjects have an otherness which allows them to transcend typical means of communication, to stand outside their scene and comment with their bodies on the whole tragic condition we are involved in. They become de-humanized and deified. All of this, of course, leads Agee to the same shameful perspective he conveys in *Famous Men*, not only at his easy read of the pictures but at his doubts about his own courage in the face of the rioters in Detroit. The pictures, like his own sympathy and guilt, move him, though he is forced to admit his own culpability as reader: “there is...something criminal and indecent about the camera; and there is a great load of guilt on the eye that eats what it has predigested” (36). Being confronted with the unforgettable images of mob violence, Agee again replaces the other with the image of himself. Though the bodies of these victims inspire feelings of sadness and anger in him, Agee can only think of his own guilt and culpability. This same progression happens again in the next scene he describes in “America, Look at Your Shame.”

Agee’s courage is tested soon after seeing the photograph for the first time, when a drunk southern soldier’s speech catches his attention, “vocaliz[ing] about the niggers on the bus” (37). Agee and the other passengers are stung by these words, which “cut across my solar plexus like a cold knife,” as he puts it. Agee cannot remember the exact speech, though he reproduces a version of it in baroque dialect. In his mind, he imagines himself as the half-drunk protagonist of the scene, and pictures the moment when he stands and

delivers a tremendous punch to the *smallest* sailor in the company. He imagines next all the soldiers tearing him to pieces. Instead of locating the courage and bravery he wondered at through the pictures in the riots, Agee is trapped by self-absorption and introspection. He mentally rehearses a variety of scenes in his mind, including speaking through his eyes to the group of soldiers, shaming them into silence. These scenes are explored thoroughly, as though predigested, and Agee can clearly “visualize the phonograph-records of talk they would bring on; nigger-lover is the favorite word” (38). He wishes that he were one of his elderly friends whose speech, he is sure, would shame the soldiers into “deep abashment,” but that kind of man is not Agee. He possesses “perfect forgetfulness,...unquestioning intrepid.”

Like the Agee of the Davidson response, Agee in “America, Look at Your Shame” is none of those things, least of which “single-hearted in any one of my perceptions or emotions.” Agee is unable to totally defend the soldiers or condemn them; he finds himself as the ultimate insider-outsider. Even the directness of his language as author-artist fails him, as he imagines himself breaking down in front of the group, “I know how you feel,” he imagines his figure saying, “I know...This is one of the main things this war is about (is it? Is it?). If it isn’t about this we might as well not be fighting it all (we might as well not, indeed). You’ll ask me where I’ve got any right to tell you what you’re fighting for. I’m not even in uniform. I’m not I know but I’ll be in one soon – next week (will I? Do I want to be?) But that’s not the point anyhow (this is falling apart).” Agee cannot speak because the meaning of his speech would be lost, not only on his audience, but on himself as speaker. In that moment, he cannot force himself to either believe in the words he’s thinking or make their meaning salient. “I only know I could

not believe a word I said; and had images of saying it and having the hell beaten out of me..." In the end, Agee's thoughts are interrupted by an "elderly Negro women" as he describes her, speaking to the sailor; she tells him that "he ought to be ashamed, talking that way. People never done him no harm" (39). At that moment, Agee catches the eyes of a man across from him, whom he classifies as a Jew, an intellectual, and gives him a "tickling, uncontrollable, nauseating smile." It is the same response he has when he tries to dismiss the African American couple in *Famous Men*. It is a smile of incrimination, a smile that relishes his disgust, "which is so liable to seize my face," he explains, "when I tell one close friend disastrous news of another."

Agee's disgust comes from his silence and fear, and the guilt renders him totally inactive. As with his major works of fiction, Agee constructs this article as a means of atoning for his sin of insensitivity and introspection. He directly confronts the reader, who might at this point have formed a negative opinion of Agee's action, with the same choice he was given on the bus. He remembers telling friends of his who seemed "favorably stirred by [his] honesty...and...their agreement that they would have done the same thing," which Agee finds "almost as revolting as my own performance in the doing of it, and in the telling." He ends his essay with the sentence, "So now I am telling it to you," as a challenge to readers who might, like Agee, have been an armchair moralist, in order to prepare them for the reality of racism, or racial confrontation.

The problem Agee encounters in both his response to Davidson and here in his reaction to injustice is the tension between his desire to appease his political conscience and his desire to make art. It is one of the qualities he identifies to Father Flye that keeps him from acting as a moderator in the African American discussion: "the still stronger

desire and sense of obligation towards trying to make works of art” (147). Agee as craftsman cannot totally reconcile himself with his political persona. As Moreau comments in *The Restless Journey of James Agee*, he can “certainly be criticized for having chosen for the most part to be silent in the face of the most prolonged injustice the country had lived through. Agee was a moralist but not a reformer” (211). The gap between his political conscience and his artistic sensibility would frequently cause self-negating guilt that would paradoxically serve as an impetus for his work. His artistic eye must capture, distort, and assign meaning, the force of which causes him to suffer the artistic disease of aloofness, introspection and inaction. In this way, Agee is suspended on a wheel of torture of his own device: wanting desperately to incite reform in his fellow countrymen, but unable to disconnect himself as mute observer. He becomes the symbol of the ineffectual white liberal, well-meaning, riddled with guilt, and obsessed with his own futility.

Critics, most notably T.V. Reed, have read *Famous Men* as a kind of allegory about the impossibility of the privileged to represent the underprivileged with any authority. This futility of representation is felt all the more powerfully in Agee’s perspective on African Americans because of the author’s own consciousness of it. Agee locates the problems between his reformer-persona and his artistic persona. Unable to represent African Americans politically, he chooses to represent them artistically, as best he can. But in that representation, spaces between artistic and actual representation again cloud the picture, and Agee must always admit failure. One cannot explain away the problematic silence of Agee as reformer because of ignorance. In all things, Agee is supremely self-aware. It is almost as if – recognizing that he cannot be the reformer he

wants to be – Agee’s guilt (racial, familial, political) becomes his artistic motivator. In short, Agee needs his guilt to produce his art: it is an art born out of necessity, atonement, and forgiveness. Reading pieces like “America, Look at Your Shame” and the response to Donald Davidson complicates any simple reading of Agee as either reformer or radical.

Agee can’t totally become the reformer that he knows is necessary because of a divided loyalty to the family of his father, the white southerner with whom, as he describes, he feels, “a great deal of sympathy... They are trapped;” he writes in his response to Davidson: “I am afraid, now more seriously and more permanently than the Negro is trapped. They are trapped in passions of convictions and of reactions whose intensity no Northerner can be qualified even to guess at who has not at least suffered a severe neurosis... That they should even incline to jumble and blast their way against the power of such a tyranny of heart and mind and world is all but unthinkable; that they should succeed in it, I am sure, out of the question.” These white southerners remind Agee of his Tennessee ancestry. Simultaneously, however, he realizes that the responsibility he has to both his family and his artistic vision necessitates a similar responsibility to his sense of morality. Far from a problem solely with representing African Americans, Agee’s struggle with the problems of responsibly portraying any subject that he cherishes in the face of his sensitive and divided artistic vision is perpetuated throughout his career from *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* to *A Death in the Family*.

Above all else, Agee was a consummate artist, constantly attempting to sharpen his focus on the exterior actuality, but often, in his fiction and non-fiction, Agee’s real



subject was his own persona in relation to what he was trying to create. As an early reviewer of *Famous Men* noted, “the real interest of the book...is as a study of its author, who – for my money – is in a much more tragic condition than any exploited sharecropper” (Cort 500). For Agee, then, anyone, even the subject of his text, must become the abstracted other, and necessarily becomes less interesting, or less important to the progression of his narrative of self. Ever conscious of his role in the creating of the text, Agee recognizes the demotion of the other in favor of himself with a guilty hopelessness. In the end, his book might become what Cook calls “an accumulation of episodes celebrating the misery of his own white, middle-class guilt...” (148). White sharecroppers, African Americans, all become objects that Agee can only represent through his unique perspective of self-representation, and his undying obligation to create works of art supersedes any immediate or professed goal of representing them in brutal actuality.

Agee’s race writing is useful if only to clarify Agee’s own inability to act, and can be read in some instances as “an invitation to the reader to make the adjustments of bias that Agee himself could not,” as Cook puts it. But Agee’s guilt over his own self-absorbed inaction becomes personal redemption in its ability to fuel Agee’s creative process. It allows him the opportunity to speak out of himself to himself, and by doing so, to create a gap for readers to challenge their own assumptions and examine his complicity in the crime of silence. However, it is in his fiction that Agee re-imagines his African American characters as stand-ins for his own imagined self-torture.

### ***Famous Men and A Death in the Family***

Agee so tortures himself in a famous and frequently anthologized scene in *Famous Men*. During the section Agee titles “Near A Church,” Walker Evans and Agee attempt to photograph a Negro church, encounter an African American couple, and try to speak to them. But their actions are misunderstood, and the moment turns toward hopeless disconnection and misunderstanding. In the narrative, Agee and Evans attempt to photograph the church by breaking a window, “in all the racist innocence of 1936,” as Robert Zaller puts it. Looking at the church’s structure, Agee realizes that he must possess it, even if just through the act of photographing it: “...I watched what would be trapped, possessed, fertilized, in the leisures and shyness which are a phase of all love for any object...” (39). As he contemplates his initial guilt over capturing the church, he sees a young African American couple walk by. All at once, Agee’s guilt over wanting to possess the church surfaces, but as he walks after the couple, his photographic eye documents every aspect of the two, until they are romanticized and fetishized into the strange other: “I was taking pleasure also in the competence and rhythm of their walking in the sun, which was incapable of being less than a muted dancing, and in the beauty of the sunlight on their clothes, which were strange upon them in the middle of the week” (40).

The African American couple can not only see Agee but see through him, “through a subtler sense,” as he describes it. When he breaks into a run, the young woman becomes a cow tumbling out of a creek, “eyes crazy, chin stretched tight [like] that of a suddenly terrified animal” (41). Agee’s shame retakes him as he understands

that he has frightened the couple, a white man running after them in the south. He recognizes immediately that he has shattered “their grace and dignity,” a realization which is only matched by his own “horror and pity and self-hatred” (42). He thinks about ways to restore his value in their estimation, including throwing himself down before them and kissing their feet, but instead stands quiet: “I stood and looked into their eyes,” he says, “and loved them, and wished to God I was dead.”

Agee recognizes his complicity in perpetuating fear in southern African Americans through his very presence, as well as the utter hopelessness of atoning for such a crime. His conclusion comes through self-negation and hate: that only through his absence can he truly redeem his crime and free the couple. Yet, Agee as artist cannot erase his presence from the photograph he is creating. He cannot reconcile his desire to possess the quaint church and the African American couple, and stands compounding in his mind both his crime and guilt: “...they had to stand here now and hear what I was saying, because in that country no negro safely walks away from a white man, or even appears not to listen while he is talking.” Agee is paralyzed into inaction, forced to choose between leaving the couple inexplicably and keeping them there, horrified by the potential of his presence. Either choice is hopeless and useless, fraught with the possibility of committing a “still worse crime against nature” (42), as he terms it.

This scene is important in understanding Agee’s complex association between himself and the black other he constructs. Above all else, Agee in *Famous Men* is interested in adequately portraying the absolute clarity of his subjects, beyond artistic concerns. He wants brutal actuality. But, this African American couple, trapped not only by the Agee-persona, grinning in mute self-anguish, but also by the confines of his tragic

description, is a fetishized and romanticized symbol of an other that Agee wants desperately to possess, as though an object of his child-like infatuation. His consciousness of his need to possess the church torments him, but is not enough to free him from his intense desire and ultimate documentation.

In a similar way, *A Death in the Family* mines Agee's childhood in order to examine central questions of his identity. Tied up in his definition of himself is Agee's relationship with his father, a relationship so meaningful that Agee will repeatedly turn to it as the defining part of his life. However, the African American characters in *A Death in the Family* help the young Rufus best understand himself, especially in relation to his family and hometown. Several pivotal scenes in *A Death in the Family* evoke African Americans as useful tools through which Rufus' identity is made clearer.

During one of Agee's many sections in which Rufus loses himself in his memory – sections his editor McDowell set apart in italics – Rufus remembers being teased by the neighborhood boys because of his name. Agee uses the scene as a way to connect Rufus' identity and problems of race. The boys beg Rufus to tell them his name, as though they had never heard it before. Knowing well that they know his name, Rufus refuses until he convinces himself that perhaps they are not tricking him. But as soon as he tells his name, the boys tease him. The taunts they hurl at him are the same ones "he had often heard them yell after the backs of colored children and even grown-up colored people," a fact that confuses Rufus, and makes him wonder briefly about his racial background. They say to him "Nigger's name, nigger's name," and chant the hurtful rhyme:

Nigger, nigger, black as tar,  
Tried to ride a lectric car,

Car broke down and broke his back  
Poor nigger wanted his nickel back (197).

In a book so interested in unraveling the mystery of Agee's identity, Rufus, as both a name and a symbol of Agee as a child, is intimately connected not only with race but also with racial persecution and violence. The boys who taunt him push and hurt him, and Rufus' confusion over his possible connection to the mysterious world of African Americans frightens him. He asks his mother whether or not the name Rufus is "really a nigger's name," but is frightened by her response: "...she turned to him sharply and said to him in a sharp voice, as if she were accusing him of something, 'Who told you that?', and he had answered in fear, that he did not know who, and she had said, 'Don't you just pay any attention to them. It's a very fine old name. Some colored people take it too, but that is perfectly all right and nothing for them to be ashamed of or for white people to be ashamed of who take it'" (199). Rufus' first meaningful connection with African Americans, then, is through racial violence. He recognizes that though the boys don't actually harm him, their words enact a different kind of violence, as though "the name itself was being physically hurt" (197). Speaking words, he learns, is sometimes akin to a kind of violence, and his mother reinforces the lesson: "And Rufus: don't ever speak that word: 'nigger'" (199).

Convinced by his mother that his name does not come from an African American descendent, he tells the boys proudly of its heritage, how "I got it from my Great Grandpa Lynch." The persecution, however, continues: "Then your grandpa's a nigger too...Rufus is a nigger, Rufus' grandpa's a nigger, he's a ning-ger, he's a ning-ger." Eventually the boys on the street start conversations with Rufus with the phrase, "How's

your nigger grandpaw?” (199). These games confuse Rufus. He is afraid to ask his mother if his grandfather really was an African American, and so little by little, begins to suspect that he – unlike his friends – has some connection with the “colored” people he knows.

Rufus’ kinship with the African Americans he knows is emphasized by his relationship with Victoria, the African American nanny who watches him in the afternoons. In a key scene in the novel, Victoria takes the young Rufus to his grandmother’s house. As they cross the street, Rufus suddenly asks, “Why is your skin so dark?” The question itself does violence to the woman, and she does not answer him immediately: “He saw her bright little eyes thrust into him through the little lenses and he felt a strong current of pain or danger. He knew something was wrong” (98). When she explains that her skin is “the way God made me,” Rufus tries to connect her physical self to the words he hears on the playground: “Is that why you’re colored, Victoria?” he asks, finally. Even though she responds to the question, Rufus feels that something has changed between them, and an immense sadness creeps over him.

His question to Victoria echoes his earlier conversation with his mother about his name and heritage, but also recalls his mother’s sharp rebuke, when he tells her that Victoria smells good. “Because Victoria is – is colored, Rufus. That’s why her skin is so dark, and colored people are very sensitive about the way they smell” (97). From all of these conversations, Rufus connects the act of speaking – especially about skin color – and a kind of violence. When he mentions the word “colored” to Victoria, he watches her flinch as though he has slapped her, and his memory of the boys’ vicious taunting reminds him of his own capacity for verbal cruelty. Rufus tries to explain his earnest

questioning to Victoria, but he cannot get past his initial comment: “She seemed to have no more to say, and he had a feeling that it was not proper for him to say anything either” (99).

Victoria eventually explains to Rufus about the potential for his innocent words to inflict emotional harm. Just as his mother cautions him against speaking about color, Victoria offers, “...dey is lots of other colored folks dat don’t know you, honey. And if you say that, you know, about their skins, about their coloh, they goan think you’re trying to be mean to em...So you be careful.”<sup>83</sup> Through both Victoria’s and his mother’s advice, Rufus learns that speaking of race is similar to doing some kind of harm. Rufus ties this moral epiphany with something personal – as he does throughout the book – and remembers how it feels when the boys at school tease him because of his name. Rufus’ discomfort about speaking about racial differences suggests Agee’s own confusion over how to write about race in a meaningful way. There is the acknowledgement of influence, especially Victoria’s “kindness” (100) to Rufus, but throughout the scenes with his mother and Victoria, Agee frequently comes back to confusion and bewilderment: Rufus feels “mystification” (97) over Victoria’s dressing of him, and by the scene’s end, Rufus is unable to entirely piece together either the significance of their conversation or Victoria’s perspective: “...somehow he felt that she was not talking exactly to him...A silence opened around them in which he felt at once a great space, the space almost of darkness itself...and the whole of this immensity was pervaded by her vague face...” (100). The memory of Victoria’s advice to Rufus fails to provide a concrete or meaningful possibility that explains how to speak or write about race.

Further complicating Rufus' perspective on the differences of race is the attitude of his father. We get the sense throughout the book that Rufus' moral education comes from his mother, the central religious figure of the book, and the biggest influence in Rufus (and clearly, Agee's) life is his father. In the McDowell edition of *A Death in the Family*, there is little evidence of the father's attitude towards African Americans. However, in the Lofaro edition, Agee writes a scene that is critical to understanding Rufus' – and quite possibly Agee's – confusion over matters of race because of the influence of his father.

During a trip to a carnival in Chillhowee Park, Rufus and his father visit all of the rides and attractions. One midway game involves “a darky with his head through a hole.” Rufus notes, however, “only the man at the counter called him nigger, ‘hit the nigger in the head and you get a cigar,’ and the ladies got a kewpie doll.” The game infuriates Rufus' mother: “Mama just hated it, she said it was an outrage and it ought to be stopped, there ought to be a law,” but Rufus' father argues that the man is “making a living.” Gradually, their argument becomes more and more serious. To show the softness of the balls, Rufus' father, Jay, picks them up: “They're lopsided like they're soft...Couldn't even hurt if they did hit you.” The man behind the counter badgers him for picking up the balls if he isn't going to play the game. Jay's temper gets the best of him, and he explodes at the man. After his wife calms him down, Jay tells her, “I won't do nothing with you around.”

Agee moves ahead to the next time Jay takes Rufus by himself to the park. He walks up to the man at the game, and waits until he sees him and recognizes him. Jay picks up a ball, and tells the man, “All I want to know is, do you want to talk bossy



now... Looky here...Now I'm not stealing your damn ball...In a minute I'm putting it back where I got it. Now you got anything bossy to say about it?" The man admits he doesn't want any trouble, and Jay backs down. As he leads Rufus out of the park, the boy connects his father's simmering violence with the man's repeated barking, "all right now, three for a nickel, hit the nigger and you win a cigar."

Though there is no actual explosion of violence in this scene, Agee draws it bubbling just under the surface. Rufus' mother's shock over the barbaric game of striking an African American with a ball leads directly to the conflict between Jay and the carnival barker. As in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and "America, Look at Your Shame," the image of the wounded African American is replaced, supplanted by Rufus' memory of his father's capacity for violence. The sanctioned racial violence that the game is meant to represent only serves as a point for Agee to explore his father's person, and by doing so, understand himself. The progression is the same throughout all of Agee's fiction, and the racial, wounded body presents an opportunity to connect with his own identity.

### **"Death in the Desert"**

The scene at the park in *A Death in the Family* mirrors the same movement Agee first articulates in one of his best known stories; perhaps no other piece of Agee's fiction deals more directly with the issue of racial violence than his early story "Death in the Desert," which is included in Robert Fitzgerald's *James Agee: The Collected Short Prose*. In the brief short story, Agee again utilizes a first-person authorial voice to

recount a troubling experience hitchhiking through the desert that connected Springerville, Arizona to Magdalena, New Mexico. The narrator describes the difficulties of catching a ride, the interplay between the couple who eventually pick him up, and their attitudes towards the educated elite that trickle through their small town. However, the story ends in a nightmarish fashion, as a dying, young African American man stumbles in the road in front of the car in the middle of the desert. As the car keeps on driving, the woman berates the man for not stopping to help the man, and Agee watches out the back window as the man runs after the car flailing his arms and crying until he is out of sight.

“Death in the Desert” is a useful place to end a chapter that examines the movement of Agee’s emphasis on violence inflicted onto African Americans because its progression suggests the structure of the other instances mentioned above. More than that, the story’s climax – with the Agee-narrator stunned into inaction and burdened guilt, and the body of the African American victim receding into nothingness – mirrors the conclusion of all of Agee’s scenes of racial violence mentioned above. The story begins, ostensibly, about Agee’s obsession with himself, especially the peculiarities of his own body (he has been hurt, we learn quickly), but the image of his own body is gradually supplanted by the dark image of the African American man’s wounded figure. Even after the man is out of sight, Agee tortures himself with the idea, the picture, of the man and his own guilty inaction. Finally, however, Agee loses the sense of reality of the situation, and comes back to meditate on his own image. This movement of replacement and supplanting is Agee’s signature movement in all of the scenes of racial violence discussed above. “Death in the Desert,” as one of Agee’s earliest stories,<sup>84</sup> manifests this

artistic structure and movement of racial violence and receding bodies that Agee will keep coming to in order to explore the way such brutality affects and revises the perception of persona within the story.

The emphasis on the body – especially the wounded body – is evident at the very beginning of the story. The Agee-narrator explains that as he prepares to hitchhike across the expanse of the desert, he buys food at the local A&P, but has to take his time eating, for “my jaw was so swollen I could hardly chew” (69). The source of his agony is a large and painful boil on his left ear that throbs as the heat begins to intensify throughout the day. Already, Agee establishes that the world of this story is one of pain and suffering. Throughout the story, whenever the narrator feels his situation improving or his spirits rising, he is brought back to the sharp pain in his ear or jaw. His wounds exempt him from becoming too externalized, and keep him focused constantly on his own story.

Similarly, Agee emphasizes the carnivalesque atmosphere of the brotherhood of hitchhikers through an emphasis on the wounded and distorted bodies of his fellow travelers. He meets “a peg-legged man of perhaps sixty,” who offers him the ambiguous advice that he should “let well enough alone.” After the man is picked up, the narrator mulls over “the manifold advantages of being conspicuously a cripple,” and imagines holding up a sign that reads

SORE EAR  
PLEASE

In much the same way that Agee's first entry into the world of Hale County, Alabama is filled with freaks, misfits and distorted bodies, so, too, is the reader's first glimpse of the community of hitchhikers in "Death in the Desert." Unlike the peg-legged man, the narrator's wound is less visible. If he could somehow advertise his condition, the narrator imagines, he might be able to take advantage of the sympathies of the cars that go by. The reversal of the situation – whereby the wounded body is somehow more whole – is a crucial idea that Agee meditates on later in his story through the image of the wounded body of the African American man.

Eventually, the narrator catches a ride with an Oklahoma family – a couple in the front seat, and a ten-year old boy who sleeps throughout the story. The narrator explains about the boil on his ear, which begins a conversation that spreads from doctors, to miracle cures, to the importance of education. Gradually, the narrator sleeps, moving in and out of consciousness, and distances himself from the situation in the car. As he moves into sleep, he removes the image of the two bodies in the front seat from his mind, and does "one of my favorite tricks." He imagines the couple in the front seat as skeletons:

One wore a dirty sleeveless dress and remarked that it sure would be good to get back to Oklahoma. The other manipulated the steering wheel, and its skull chewed tobacco mournfully. I allowed this skull to sprout horns, and they were very funny until I realized that the lady skeleton couldn't possibly fulfill her requirements. So I dehorned the man.

The strange stripping of the couple's flesh mirrors the narrator's detached perspective. As he listens to them talk, he imagines witty rejoinders and sarcastic critical comments on their vacuous words. When the woman explains that the man at the filling station said

the water would last them through the night the narrator thinks sarcastically, "...ask the man at the filling station; he knows and knows and knows. The man at the filling station is trained to help you. He is not only your servant but your dear friend. He loves you and you love him" (76). The narrator reads these bodies, both the man and the woman, as a text that he not only understands, but also has read before. They are shells of actual people, figures from his imagination that act in a Halloween pantomime. By imagining them as droning skeletons, the narrator emphasizes his superiority to them by making them bodiless. In the palpable world of the wounded body, this couple's vacuous and lifelessness is as clear as if they were bones.

However, once the car slows down to help a stranded motorist, the narrator cannot sustain his imagined scene: "The car slowed down and the skeletons sprang into flesh. Nothing I could do prevented it." Despite the loss of his skeleton-scene, the narrator remains the introspective and smug critic of the scene around him. When one of the motorists – a "good looking girl" – tells the couple that they "mend our own tubes," the narrator thinks, "Oh you mend your own, hunh?...Talented girl. Great girl to have around the house. 'Please, sir: I majored in domestic science and eugenics. May I be your bride?'" However, the image of the girl haunts the narrator down the road, and interrupts his ability to strip back the Oklahoma couple to bones again: "...so I dropped back into my skeleton routine. But the girl kept breaking in on this train of thought, and I found that a confusion of lovely flesh and Oklahoma bones wasn't as amusing as you might think" (77). If he is to remain the detached spectator, the narrator cannot quite juggle the detached images of both the inane figures in the front seat with the sexually inviting body of the woman he has just seen. After reading the bodies of the couple in the front seat as

bodiless and chattering skeletons, the narrator is confronted by a figure that is all body. His sleepy confusion leads the narrator to retreat into his memory of his hometown in Tennessee and his boyhood.

Because this is such an early story for Agee, it is worth noting that even at this nascent stage, artistic detachment and cynicism inevitably lead to interiority and images of the self. The narrator's cold and sarcastic commentary is not sustaining enough, but his boyhood and the deep well of his remembering offer not a simple escape from reality but a way to connect more meaningfully with the experience at hand. In his flood of memory, the narrator imagines a memory in which he witnesses a king snake attack and swallow a rattlesnake: "...in the end the rattler lay shuddering with a broken back, and slowly, head first, the king had eaten him and crawled into the dark laurels with rattles still purring beneath his jaws."<sup>85</sup> It's significant that in a story that is so concerned with supplanting and consuming the image of the wounded body, Agee has his narrator remember the consumption of the wounded rattlesnake by the king snake. The disturbing scene will be recalled later in the story, when Agee in his narrator-persona subsumes the image of the dying African American man within the body of his own persona. The movement of replacement and consumption through dark violence is the hallmark not just of Agee's structure in this story, but, as I argued before, throughout his entire fiction. As the narrator imagines the whole scene of his boyhood, he notes with regret, "I tried now, knew I would fail, and failed, to feel about it as I had when I was eleven" (78). Even at this early stage, the attempt to move towards a meaningful connection with his past through violence is doomed to fail. Agee will later come to the same conclusions in his

meditations on his childhood (*A Death in the Family*), adolescence (*The Morning Watch*), and his experience with Alabama tenant farmers (*Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*).

Nearing sleep after his memory, the narrator slips into a stream-of-consciousness passage that is infested with thoughts on the body: “How about ears? Your ear, or my ear, or anybody’s ear? If you wore your ear around your neck you’d change I oftener. If you ate eggs with your knees you’d look to your garters, if you wore any garters.” These strange meanderings are interrupted by a bump in the road, which causes the narrator to slam the heel of his hand into his sore ear. Agee’s narrator’s internal monologue is subsumed by his pain, and he finds himself unable to move back into his detached and smug philosophizing. “I couldn’t doze now, and I couldn’t think; I simply sat there, enclosing the agony of my ear and my half-numb fatigue and a simmering gripe at everything on earth” (79). The movement between internal musings and the reconnection with the bodily and the physical seem, in fact, to suggest that Agee’s narrator in his pseudo-autobiographical persona cannot yet imagine himself in the same detached manner. However, by the end of the story, the Agee-narrator moves beyond himself and is able to conjure his own image in the cinema of the story.

The potential for imagining himself comes through what appears to the narrator and the couple in the car as “a black speck” (80). After discussing how terrible it would be to walk through this part of the desert, the narrator and the couple encounter a blurred dot on the highway, that eventually takes shape: “...it was moving, and was a man, and the man was limping toward us and waving wildly.” Suddenly involved in a shifting narrative, Agee’s narrator forgets his detached and sarcastic criticism of the couple and seems to inhabit the mute body of their sleeping son in the back. By the time the Buick

speeds up to meet the man, the entire group is shocked to discover that the man is black: “It was a nigger all right,” the narrator declares, “and every second we saw him more clearly.” But the man’s race isn’t the only shocking thing for the narrator, who takes great pains to discuss the wounded man: “A nigger, an exhausted nigger, very tall, and with terrible effort limping towards us. He was grinning and crying and laughing, and the noises he made were strange and unintelligible.” The narrator feels not sorrow, pity, nor compassion, but shares in the couple’s “shameful” emotion, “the effect was grotesquely funny.”

For the narrator, who during the whole story shifts between detached meditations on the body, and his own agony of pain, the man in the road suddenly forces his introspective and detached thoughts into brutal and concrete practicality. That the young man happens to be African American is not lost on the narrator, who is able to shamefully witness the man’s grinning and crying as a grotesque performance. The wounded man becomes the Agee-narrator’s dark double, but unable to recognize himself in the distorted face of the other, the narrator’s indifference to the man’s plight shocks him. After finally deciding the man was black, the driver of the car speeds off leaving the man running behind them. The turnabout is now complete: Agee’s narrator is now complicit in the suddenly shifting moral narrative that recalls the story of the Good Samaritan. Though not responsible for the act of leaving the man behind, the narrator remains detached, “excited and horrified and ill and quite unable to think” (81) as they pass the young man. The failure that Agee emphasizes here is the narrator’s inability to connect his intellectualizing to the body of anyone other than himself. The narrator cannot shake the image of the man, however, and his description of him emphasizes his



detachment: “The nigger’s laughter and weeping still alive on his face, as a machine still runs when the power is cut off; the laughter and the weeping frozen in a mask and gone; then only an astounded blackness and marbled eyes and a bestial burnt stalk of tongue.”

The remainder of the story deals with the narrator’s increasing concern with his inaction and his creeping guilt over his detachment towards a dying man in the middle of the road. Barson calls the story a “confession and moral indictment of himself as an artist,”<sup>86</sup> but Agee is primarily concerned in articulating his position as an artist that is connected meaningfully with morality and responsibility. For these reasons, “Death in the Desert” seems to become a meditation on how the aesthetic can produce, predict and deepen a moral responsibility and sensibility in both reader and author. By this method, Agee’s story connects deeply not just with his emphasis on racial violence but, in fact, with the larger expression of the possibilities that fiction offers to do practical work. All of this crystallized for the Agee narrator as he begins to shake off the receding wounded body of the African American, and is left with the emotionally wounded image of himself.

Though he claims at first that he was not able to think, the narrator clarifies his statement, and instead discusses how his “chaotic” (83) emotions had interrupted concrete thoughts or ideas. Gradually, however, he does begin to piece together the experience, and his thoughts on the matter “begot themselves and built upon themselves.” He becomes, at once, ashamed of his place in the car, especially given the driver’s argument that the car was too crowded to take anyone else in: “I was the extra man in the car. I was the reason why an exhausted Negro remained in the desert near death. I could offer my place; I could refuse to ride any farther, unless something were done to help

him.” However, he discards the guilt over his presence because, as he concludes, the driver had used the crowded car as an excuse to leave the man behind. He next examines his guilt that he did not stand up for the wounded man and argued, like his wife had done, about the responsibility they had to help him. On this matter, the narrator is especially surprised because “In purely abstract argument I had talked myself red-eyed and ready for murder, on this matter of the Negro and his place; and now, when I was involved in actuality, I could say nothing and do nothing; and my silence made me confederate in a monstrous wrong” (83-84). He tries to allay his guilt by telling himself that, had he spoken for the man, he may have been thrown out of the car in the middle of the desert. He was only in the car by “this man’s charity,” and besides, he argues, “there would be something cheap and mock-heroic in anything I might do, and I despised mock heroics.”

The narrator finally soothes himself by imagining that the plight of the man was “no tragedy,” only something he had built up in his mind, and that “there was, indeed, no real tragedy in life. Tragedy was the perennial flower of the ego, and the ego is inconsequent manure.” However, the conclusion that the Agee narrator comes to suggest that Agee himself is distancing himself from the persona he creates. The narrator, though sorry for his “cheap weakness,” had done his primary duty, which was “to take care of myself.” He comes back to the peg-legged man’s advise and agrees the right thing to do was “to let well enough alone” (85). But Agee’s fierce responsibility to the moral and the aesthetic suggest that his narrator’s conclusion is not adequate – or even satisfying artistically. The narrative, which had shifted several times throughout the story, ends with his narrator criticizing his over-thinking of the situation, and being satisfied with inaction and taking care of himself. If Agee is being serious, one assumes that this

satisfying conclusion is clearly re-imagined in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* as deliberate and inauthentic cruelty. However, Agee's satiric reading of his own body in the story suggests a different interpretation.

For a story in which reading bodies is emphasized metaphorically, Agee's shift by the end of the narrative suggests that the same critical detachment his author engaged in by first criticizing the couple in the car and then becoming complicit with them in a "monstrous wrong" is a crucial component to reading the narrator himself. The narrator's inability to translate the physical personally – that is, to intellectually connect to an external physicality – should make his conclusion by the end of the story unsurprising. Just as he does in "America, Look at Your Shame," and through the scenes in *Famous Men*, *A Death in the Family*, and his journals, Agee's narrative persona attempts to infiltrate his audience's perspective by creating outrage and disgust. His confession and subsequent validation in this story mirrors his conclusion in "America, Look at Your Shame" – that inaction and guilt are not only ineffective but morally reprehensible. By emphasizing the receding body from the image of its own sacrifice and pain, Agee forces his reader to engage in the critical deconstruction of his narrator-persona's perspective, and by doing so, engage in work that is, at its base, fundamentally concerned with action, not intellectualization.

Fiction and the aesthetic ironically allow Agee a space to create possibilities by which he can affect his reader into a confrontation with the way things actually are and argue for some kind of change. In this regard, the abstract argument over "the Negro and his place" is tested in the realm of actuality. That Agee's narrator fails to connect the abstract to the actual is the cautioning moral of his story. More than that, his narrator's

cool and detached validation of his inaction further argues for an audience that will accept the charge to do real work – a charge that Agee, ultimately, feels that he fails to engage.

Though critics are unusually silent on Agee's curious use of African American characters, racial violence and self-conscious engagement over matters of race in American culture, Agee's fiction suggests that African American characters and racial concerns were deeply connected with understanding himself. Always the sensitive artist, Agee felt a kinship with the African American southerners he grew up with, and his fiction and journals, especially *A Death in the Family*, "A Preface to Decisions," and "America, Look at Your Shame," certainly show how internally conflicted he was about "the Negro predicament." However, instead of portraying his African American characters as symbols of human actuality, as he does with the tenant farmers in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Agee recasts them as dwindling images that he subsumes in the image of himself.

The progression of Agee's portrayal of his African American characters is easy to map, and their movement from dwindling image, to larger-than-life caricature to a receding body implies that, for Agee, race and racial bodies are less figures of human actuality than they are dark doubles of himself. Though they play a significant role in helping Agee understand the mystery of his identity, they are bodies to be used and discarded, usually through some horrific violence. No other character in Agee's fiction has such a fate. Though Agee mines the memory of his father, the tenant farmers, his mother, Father Flye, and his acquaintances from St. Andrews, their images remain distinct and substantial throughout his works. It is only the image of the racial body that

Agee subsumes and replaces with his own heavy body, and it is the violence of their absence that one feels throughout his fiction.

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144-54.

## Notes

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### Introduction: The Wounded Body

<sup>1</sup> Alan Spiegel's *James Agee and the Legend of Himself* attempts to shift the direction from Agee criticism as memoir and reflection to serious, critical arguments about his writing and work. However, Spiegel himself spends quite a bit of time debunking the various Agee-biographic myths surrounding the author.

<sup>2</sup> The most intense critical period for Agee's *The Morning Watch* occurred in the early 1970's. Since 1985, however, there have been few scholarly articles that deal solely with the work, with the exception being Jeffrey Folks' 1996 article in *The Southern Literary Journal*. In that piece, Folks calls *The Morning Watch*, Agee's "largely ignored short novel" (69).

<sup>3</sup> This work pre-dates the soon-to-released, re-edited edition of *A Death in the Family* (Lofaro, U of Tennessee 2007).

<sup>4</sup> Though McDowell admits in his introduction that the short piece was "not part of the manuscript which Agee left, . . . the editors would certainly have urged him to include it in the final draft" (*Death* vii-viii).

<sup>5</sup> A *New York Times* article ranked Agee and Evans' book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* as the fourteenth most important twentieth century American journalistic endeavor. (in Barringer C1).

<sup>6</sup> Lowe's astute critical assessment of Agee's process constantly takes into account the two philosophical ideas of disparateness and unity throughout Agee's work, arguing that the dialectic is, in fact, one of the unifying principles of Agee's artistic process.

<sup>7</sup> Though Spiegel seems to suggest that Agee's work in multiple genres is connected, he, too, spends the majority of his study on Agee's fiction, especially *A Death in the Family*, *The Morning Watch*, and *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.

<sup>8</sup> The only exception is Linda Wagner-Martin's feminist reading of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men – and Women: Agee's Absorption in the Sexual" (in *James Agee: Reconsiderations*, ed. Michael Lofaro. Knoxville: U of Tn. Press, 1992: 44-58), which argues that Agee's obsession with the sexual in *Famous Men* rises, in part, from his inability to differentiate the feminine from the masculine.

<sup>9</sup> I mentioned that Lowe looks at "unity" and "disparateness" as two unifying tropes of Agee's artistic movement, but books by Seib, Doty, Moreau, and Barson all examine Agee's popular tropes as a potential way of reading the author.

<sup>10</sup> His friend and collaborator John Houston writes of Agee's work, "In a sense, it was all poetry" (*Agee on Film: i*). Spiegel describes his statement as an "off-handed and patronizing sweep" (10).

<sup>11</sup> Denby, in his introduction to *Agee on Film: Criticism and Comment on the Movies*, argues that Agee's film criticism "should be seen as a kind of sequel to his strange, much praised but still drastically unread masterpiece, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*" (x), and reminds us that Agee really "had always wanted to write for the movies" (xiii).

### Chapter One: "A Piece of the Body Torn out By the Roots": Failure, Language and the Limits of Fiction in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*

<sup>12</sup> In John C. Cort's review in *Commonweal* (12 Sept, 1941: 499-500), he declares "the real interest of the book . . . is a study of its author, who- for my money- is in a much more tragic condition than any exploited sharecropper," while Agee is described as "the most confused intellect and set of emotions that have come down the pike in several moons" (500).

<sup>13</sup> Bruce Jackson's article, "The Deceptive Anarchy of 'Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,'" *The Antioch Review* 57:1 (Winter 1999), 38-49 gives a good overview of the early critical response to *Famous Men*, including the largely negative reaction to Agee's writing.

<sup>14</sup> Little has been written on Agee's interest in humanism and its strong tie to his religious and moral sensibility. *Famous Men*, I believe, is an example of Agee's marrying his deep respect and sympathy for the human condition within a clear moral framework. Lowe (in *The Creative Process of James Agee*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State U Press, 85) writes that, for Agee's readers, "he wants them to respond to his



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work as they would do to life and for a purpose; what, he demands to know, will they *do*, 'for what purpose' do they read, just as he declares that he writes with a purpose." Agee is obsessed with the slippery situation he has placed his subjects in by writing of them in this way, and he cannot totally reconcile his respect for their actual existence with any kind of method of representation without some kind of pragmatic good coming out of it.

<sup>15</sup> Agee recognizes the four separate planes of writing are in inevitable "strong conflict," but argues that such opposition only helps him to describe the actuality of his subjects: "So is any piece of human experience. So then, inevitably, is any even partially accurate attempt to give any experience as a whole" (247). He also acknowledges that memory and recall have to include "imagination, which in the other planes I swear myself against." Seib (in *James Agee: Promise and Fulfillment*. Pittsburg: U of Pittsburg Press, 1968, 48) renames the four planes, "flashback, chronological narrative, imaginative reconstruction, and central consciousness."

<sup>16</sup> In Spiegel's useful study, *James Agee and the Legend of Himself* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998), he discusses readers' reactions to Agee's complex language, especially pages 49-73.

<sup>17</sup> Agee writes in his notebooks during the composition of *Famous Men*, "Why do I feel I lose so much by openness, by saying I don't know how, yet how can I give this up, or why can't I. Many things in it I do know, and in terms beyond apology or personality, or a leverage on personal effort or intelligence" (in Lofaro, Michael A. and Hugh Davis. *James Agee Rediscovered: The Journals of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men and Other Manuscripts*. Knoxville: U of Tennessee Press, 2005: 128).

<sup>18</sup> Agee was aware that he might be tiring his reader even in the introduction, but he acknowledged it as the least of his concerns: "And if there are questions in my mind how to undertake this communication, and there are many, I must let the least of them be, whether I am boring you, or whether I am taking too long getting started, and too clumsily. If I bore you, that is that" (10). Moreau (in *The Restless Journey of James Agee*. New York: William Morrow and Co, 1977) declares that Agee's book was "designed to disorient the reader, surprise him and little by little cast a spell on him..."

<sup>19</sup> Of the few favorable early reviews of the book, Lionel Trilling's critique ("Greatness with One Fault in It," *Kenyon Review* 4 (1942), 99-102) described the successes of the book against its one great moral failure which, he postulates, is an "inevitable and intended failure"- "He [Agee] cannot use these people as 'material' for Art and supply the intelligent reader with the proper social emotions.... He must conceive his part of the book as a series of false starts and inadequate attempts- as an inevitable failure, for failure alone can express the inexpressibleness of his matter" (101).

<sup>20</sup> Clearly a large section of Agee's thoughts about words and their inaccuracy of representation come from his influential Harvard teacher, I.A. Richards. Richards' treatises on language are vast in scope from the philosophy of rhetoric, to the meaning of meaning itself. Richards, writing about the artificiality of casual meaning (in Richards, I.A. and C.K. Ogden. *The Meaning of Meaning*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1948.), explains,

The connotation of a word determines its denotation which in turn determines its comprehension, i.e. the properties common to things to which it can be applied.... It will be plain to all who consider how words are used that this account is highly artificial. Neither denoting or connoting can be used as if it were either a simple or fundamental relation....The relations between a word and the things for which it stands are indirect...and we have urged, casual (188).

A better description of the influence of I.A. Richards on James Agee can be found in Michelle A. Balée's unpublished dissertation *Composing Acts: Rhetoric and the Reader in Agee and Evans' Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (New York University, 1996), especially pages 42-81 and 127-146.

<sup>21</sup> *Agee and Actuality: Artistic Vision in his Work*. New York: The Whitsun Publishing Company, 1991, 57.

<sup>22</sup> T.V. Reed (in "Unimagined Existence and the Fiction of the Real: Postmodern Realism in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*," *Representations* 24 [Autumn 1988], 156-176.) states that Agee and Evans knew that they were "in danger of merely amusing its privileged readers, in danger of merely confirming them as consumers of fashionably avant-garde texts. Thus Agee insists at key points that the text is ultimately structured not by passive reception but by active relationships that develop among the authors, the tenants, and the readers" (168).

<sup>23</sup> "...call it art if you must," he tells the reader in the middle of a section that begins, ostensibly to describe the particulars of his families (245), and before that, he concedes that imagination is unavoidable: "all right, go ahead and deify it," he tells the reader (241).

<sup>24</sup> In his journals, Agee wonders aloud about "the enjoyment of 'beauty' (the ability to perceive it)...The only esthetic remark I heard in the whole time was from Allie Mae, who liked a given sunset. It was of the sort which has appeared over and over in the only 'art' she knows: calendar art." This bothers Agee, who feels that circumstances hide beauty from her perception: "Withdrawn from the environment, however, many or most would feel nostalgia, and on returning, or in recall, would find much to be 'beautiful' which they had never suspected of it" (in Lofaro, Michael A, 126).

<sup>25</sup> Of the number of magazine articles, and photo-texts published about sharecropping from 1930-1950, Agee probably most despised the Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White collaboration *You Have Seen Their Faces*. In that photo-book, Caldwell supplies lengthy plot-driven captions (often in dialect) to Bourke-White's dynamic, often-staged photographs. In his appendix of *Famous Men*, Agee includes an interview from the *New York Post* with Bourke-White, one that spends more time discussing her clothing than her photographic aesthetic. Agee's reaction against that book in some ways inspired *Famous Men*'s composition, and in his introduction, he makes clear to the reader that his book will be much different than Caldwell and Bourke-White's collaboration.

<sup>26</sup> Victor Kramer was one of the first critics to discuss the emphasis on the shared failure of reader and author. His *Agee and Actuality* discusses Agee's shared responsibility with his audience. See especially pages 32-72.

<sup>27</sup> "Seeing, Knowing, and Being: James Agee's 'Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,'" *Prose Studies* 9, 3 (1986), 97.

<sup>28</sup> The connections between the nightmarish opening of *Famous Men* and the newly restored text of Agee's fictional masterpiece *A Death in the Family* deserve attention. In *A Death in the Family*, Agee begins his journey back into the nostalgia of his youth with a frightening scene of dismemberment, as he tries to shelter a decomposing body from an ever-increasing mob. The parallel to *Famous Men* comes in his famous declaration to his readers that "a body torn out by the roots" might make more sense than a book about tenant farming. The fixation on broken and dismembered bodies within both works suggests that Agee's exploration of both subjects, the subjectivity of his past and the desperate objectivity of the tenant farmers, both hold the potential for nightmarish consequences.

<sup>29</sup> In Shultz, William Todd. "Off-Stage Voices in James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*: Reportage as Covert Autobiography" *American Imago* 56.1, 87.

<sup>30</sup> A useful and critical study of Agee's life in relation to his writing, is Mark A Doty's *Tell Me Who I Am: James Agee's Search for Selfhood*. LSU Press, 1981, and specifically, pages 38-73.

<sup>31</sup> In "Trouble on the Land: Southern Literature and the Great Depression," *The Canadian Review of American Studies* 10, 2 (Fall 1979), 162.

<sup>32</sup> In Madden, David. "The Test of a First-Rate Intelligence: Agee and the Cruel Radiance of What Is," *James Agee: Reconsiderations*. Ed. Michael A. Lofaro. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992, 34.

<sup>33</sup> In Toles, George. "'Practically an American Home': James Agee's Family Solitudes," *Southern Literary Journal* XXV, 2 (Spring 1993), 41.

<sup>34</sup> In *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye*. New York: George Braziller, 1962, 92, 105, respectively.

<sup>35</sup> *James Agee: A Life*. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1984, 180.

<sup>36</sup> In "Seeing, Knowing, and Being: James Agee's 'Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,'" *Prose Studies* 9, 3 (1986), 97.

## Chapter Two: The Achievement of *The Morning Watch*

<sup>37</sup> The relationship between Richard's education at the unnamed school in *The Morning Watch*, and Agee's education at St. Andrew's in the Tennessee Mountains is clear. In a letter to his mentor, Father Flye, Agee wrote on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of May, 1950, asking for help for the upcoming book: "What time, about, is just daylight, Standard Time, at St. Andrew's in early April (say April 1) and around April 12?" (*Letters* 181). Mark

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Doty's *Tell me Who I Am: James Agee's Search for Selfhood* provides interested readers with the specific connections between characters in Agee's book and their actual counterparts at St. Andrew's.

<sup>38</sup> Richard Chase's article in *The Kenyon Review* maintains the attitude of most early reviewers of *The Morning Watch*. Chase, interestingly, comes to the conclusion that Agee's pained language is the result of a "preposterous fear that if the reader doesn't feel somewhat crucified along with the boy he may accuse the author of being inarticulate" (689).

<sup>39</sup> Writing to his friend James Stern, Agee described the book as "the first piece of work I feel really good about" (quoted in Bergreen 345).

<sup>40</sup> Roger Ramsey's "The Double Structure of *The Morning Watch*" suggests that Agee's structure connects to his vision of "The Triptych," or "an altarpiece of three panels, the center one of which is dominant" (494).

<sup>41</sup> This word suggests an obvious reference to Joyce, whom Spiegel claimed as one of Agee's "front-ranking literary deities" (203). In fact, the connections between Agee's *The Morning Watch* and Joyce's own *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* have been suggested by many critics, including Spiegel, Folks, Kramer and Rewak. For his own part, Agee describes his main character Richard to director John Houston as a "backward scrub-team version of Stephen Deadalus" (Bergreen 331). A more detailed discussion of Joyce's novel and Agee's can be found below.

<sup>42</sup> For more information on these connections, see Jeffrey Folk's "James Agee's Fashioning of Guilt: *The Morning Watch*" in XXIX *Southern Literary Journal* Fall 1996.

<sup>43</sup> See Kramer: "Religion at Its Deepest Intensity: The Stasis of Agee's *The Morning Watch*" (*Renascence* XXXVII, 4; Summer 1975).

<sup>44</sup> Doty argues that the character of Willard Rivenburg was "clearly modeled after St. Andrew's... Clarence Lautzenheiser," who symbolized for the younger boys "masculine prowess and independence" (77). Doty finds a connection between Richard's idolization of Willard and Rufus' desire for masculine approval from his father in *A Death in the Family*.

<sup>45</sup> To the young Richard, Willard "looked as many men can only at thirty or so, and then only if they had been through a war" (20), furthering the cult of experiential masculinity that surrounds him. Willard's "blue-black cheek" and "the mortal blue dent" in Richard's father's chin might also suggest a physical connection between the two avatars of masculinity in Richard's life.

<sup>46</sup> This scene with the snake has connections with Agee's short story, "Boys Will Be Brutes," in which a young boy (named Richard) and his friend kill baby birds with rocks. After being attacked by the mother bird, Richard, though initially unaffected by his actions, feels ill and vomits.

<sup>47</sup> A superstition prominent in the American South was that a snake's death was prolonged until after sundown. Agee uses the superstition here in order to connect his symbol of the snake to Christ's crucifixion.

<sup>48</sup> Agee seemed concerned over the transparency of his symbols; in notes on his manuscript, he writes, "Is [the snake] too obvious a symbol, and the locust? They seem so. Is this worth doing? I can't get any solid hold of it or confidence in it. A much gentler way of seeing and writing it? Or more casual? Mine is very dry and literary" (quoted in Kramer 226).

<sup>49</sup> The idea of religious growth was a topical dilemma for Agee, who at the same time he was working on the manuscript of *The Morning Watch*, was also preparing a piece on religion for *Partisan Review*. In a letter to Flye, Agee writes in the later part of 1950, "At times or moments I feel virtually sure that nothing short of coming back into a formal religion (probably the one I was brought up in) will be nearly enough for me...but at all times I feel sure that my own shapeless personal religious sense, whatever that might be, is deepening and increasing" (184).

<sup>50</sup> This is most clearly seen in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, when a pained Agee (perhaps in an author persona) interrogates the reader at the beginning of the book, and in turn, turns the questions on himself: "Why we make this book, and set it large, and by what right, and for what purpose, and to what good end, or none..." (9). The comparisons between his self-questioning in the introduction to *Famous Men* and his writing on the manuscript of *The Morning Watch* prove Agee has still not answered his questions about the validity of writing.

<sup>51</sup> Again, the clearest example of failure as success, or the rhetoric of failure for inscribing success comes in *Let us Now Praise Famous Men*, where Agee defines the failure of his work as a success of actuality: "If I could do it, I'd do no writing here. It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of

cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech...as it is, though, I'll do what little I can in writing. Only it will be very little. I'm not capable of it" (13).

<sup>52</sup> As early as 1930, Agee, significantly after reading Joyce's *Dubliners*, wrote, "I don't know of anything more ghastly than the prospect of being a *definitely minor* writer, sitting around with some patience waiting for mild little ideas to turn up—then writing them in a mild little way" (quoted in Bergreen 92).

<sup>53</sup> In a strange break in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Agee answers a questionnaire from the *Partisan Review*, which asks him to answer pertinent questions facing American writers in 1939. For the question of "What figures would you designate as elements in [the usable past]?", Agee first questions the idea of "usable past" ("All of the past one finds useful is 'usable' because it is of the present..."), and then presents a list of people that have influenced him, ranging from "Christ," and "everybody's letters" to "Melville: Cummings: Kafka: Joyce..." (351, 353). Spiegel divides these into different categories with figures like Mann and Joyce representing "the regulation high priests of modernism" (139). Clearly, Agee was interested in modernist works, but reflects that of these authors, "some you study; some you learn from...some choke the heart out of you and make you dubious of ever reading or looking at work again..." (353).

<sup>54</sup> Of the number of critical works that discuss Agee's relationship to Joyce, perhaps Barson's *A Way of Seeing* best examines the way in which Joyce's conception of the artist affected Agee's work. In that work Barson argues that Agee's early work reflects "Joyce and the moderns" (99), but that by the time the atomic bomb had dropped, Barson sees Agee as moving away from the author's influence: "The ambience of unfulfilled ambitions and semisuicidal compromises, of madness rampant in a maddeningly sane world, affected the Joycean clarity of the aesthetic with which [Agee] had begun the [the 1940's]" (124). Barson acknowledges that, in the end, Agee's moral sensibility undermined Joyce's influence: "Although he was led to believe – because of the Romantic tradition of the artist and especially because of Joyce's conception of the role – that art was amoral, the real accomplishment of [Agee's] work was the tension he sustained between a record of his perceptions...and his evaluation of them" (188).

<sup>55</sup> Agee's struggle with Joyce's artistic vision is long-standing with a great deal of anxiety over the author's influence. After reading *Ulysses*, Agee wrote to his friend Louise Sanders in May of 1933, "Joyce I think sees all sides and presents them more consistently, clearly, and simultaneously than even Shakespeare." Even though Agee found Joyce's mastery of the literary daunting (Agee mentions his desire to "spit on every word" of his work after reading it), he clearly critiques Joyce as mentor: "yet even with Joyce there's a feeling of rolling chords rather than playing them vertical with all 10 fingers; and Joyce makes a brave sacrifice of pure and definitive utterance" (quoted in Bergreen 135).

<sup>56</sup> Spiegel claims that Agee can be considered emblematic of a number of modernist authors from Thomas Wolfe to the "Janus-faced modern[ists]" like Joyce and Faulkner, but he also offers that unlike any modernist, "Agee interrogates his own heightened passion, dissects and dismantles his legend even as he creates it" (24).

<sup>57</sup> Bergreen mentions Agee's motive for writing *A Death in the Family* as springing somewhat from his desire to create "a long work combining the discursiveness of Proust with the stylistic virtuosity of Joyce." However, according to Bergreen, his attempt at "servile imitation of Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*" only further separates himself from the author. Bergreen adds, "...he was inclined to look on the still incomplete *Morning Watch* as a mistake, for it was both too religious and too subjective." Agee's changing ideas about how to write his autobiographical fiction highlight his struggle with how to write the modern novel without sacrificing his perspective.

<sup>58</sup> Agee writes in a draft of the preface to what would become his only volume of poetry to be published in his lifetime about the power of Joyce in relation to religion: "Joyce is among the supremest of poets because, more than any of the others, he has given a pure, whole, intense, and passionless statement of things as they are. Pureness, wholeness, passionlessness embracing all passion, are highest among the attributes of God which have yet been attributed." Moving to the work of a "lesser poet," which suggests Agee in his description "confused, incomplete and wholly passionate," Agee actually describes Hart Crane's poetry which still "has reached an immensity so terrific as to burn apart all the structure of Ulysses" (in *James Agee Rediscovered* 187). The dialectic Agee sets up between the "great writer" Joyce and the "lesser writer" Crane suggests that he privileges neither work. This seems to contradict a great deal of Bergreen and other critics' assessments that Agee wrote in "servile" imitation of Joyce.

<sup>59</sup> The exact dates during which Agee worked on what would become *A Death in the Family* are not totally agreed upon by scholars. Barson suggests that it "was written between the autumns of 1947 and 1949,"

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though he acknowledges that many critics suggest that it was written later “to a time closer to Agee’s death in 1955” (142).

<sup>60</sup> Barson takes exception to Father Flye’s suggestion in a footnote that Agee is, indeed, referring to *The Morning Watch*. Instead, Barson notes that Agee was working on a variety of story outlines for film dealing with adolescent love in the 1920’s, and that his letter to Flye referenced one of them. However, Agee’s key word – novel – undermines Barson’s argument.

<sup>61</sup> I am purposefully using the words “disparate” and “unity” in the way James Lowe does in his *The Creative Process of James Agee*. In his book, Lowe explores readings of Agee’s work in terms of these two ideas, reclaiming a good portion of his body of work from sometimes shaky critical estimation.

<sup>62</sup> The connection between Agee’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and *The Morning Watch* is worth exploring. Lowe notes that Agee’s motivation for writing his the novel, a return visit to St. Andrew’s in May of 1936, coincided with his receiving the assignment from *Fortune* that would later lead to *Famous Men*. It’s therefore noteworthy that during his time in Alabama, Agee would be thinking about how to piece together his experiences both with the tenant farmers and deep in his past.

<sup>63</sup> This isn’t simply Chase’s criticism, but rather lays the basis for many critics’ problems with *The Morning Watch*. Barson, for instance, finds “ample support for Chase’s criticism” (158).

<sup>64</sup> Rewak claims, “There is an uncomfortable feeling...of a manipulation of symbols that is not warranted by the actual events of the story. Richard has grown in self-understanding by the end of the book, but that growth is carried almost exclusively by the symbolic structure and not enough by his own actions or his own suffering” (37).

<sup>65</sup> Answering a question from a student at the University of Virginia, Faulkner claimed that the disjointed narrative was “part of [the novel’s] failure...I wrote the Benjy part first. That wasn’t good enough so I wrote the Quentin part. That still wasn’t good enough. I let Jason try it. That still wasn’t enough. I let Faulkner try it and that still wasn’t enough...” (Gwyn 237).

<sup>66</sup> This anxiety must necessarily remind readers of the opening of *Famous Men*, in which Agee first articulates the problem of writing his tenant farmers into existence: “I am liable seriously, and perhaps irretrievably, to obscure what would at best be hard enough to give its appropriate clarity and intensity” (12). His anxiety over the limitations of imagining the farmers for an audience relates to the same anxiety here in *The Morning Watch* over the possibility of obscuring his ostensible subject.

<sup>67</sup> Lowe finds the book emblematic of Agee’s “declining sensibility” (146), and Ohlin reminds the reader that Agee’s attempt in the book is “doomed to fail” (192).

<sup>68</sup> Though Rewak finds discernible talent in *The Morning Watch*, he still argues that “Agee had to wait until *A Death in the Family* before he could create a situation in which an encounter with death is as personally and experientially felt and expressed as the symbolism suggests” (37).

### **Chapter Three: Paternal Nightmare: Division and Masculinity in *A Death in the Family***

<sup>69</sup> In his *James Agee: A Life*, Laurence Bergreen notes that Agee struggles with the idea of remaining true to his subject matter, which he views as “I worship [my father]: I fail him: I need his approval: he is killed: everything is changed” while simultaneously writing “completely detached” in regards to how he feels now about his father. Eventually, however, one finds that Agee gives himself over to what Bergreen labels “the great temptation...[of] succumbing to his personal feelings about the events he described” (308).

<sup>70</sup> Though Agee thought that “Freud was a great man,” Bergreen notes that he didn’t wholly subscribe to his concept of id, ego and superego. However, he did greatly admire *The Inner World of Childhood* by Frances Wickes, a Jungian disciple. And during the composition of *A Death in the Family*, Agee engaged in “sporadic Jungian analysis” in order to work through dreams he had been having about his father (152, 305).

<sup>71</sup> Writing about *A Death in the Family*, Victor Kramer connects Agee’s last novel with his first book: “...when Agee recalled earlier autobiographical experiences related to remembrances in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, his mind flashed back to years when he had been a fatherless adolescent in Knoxville.” Kramer locates the constant push towards the autobiographical as Agee’s prime motive for art. He writes, “All of Agee’s important fiction is autobiographical...” (“Urban” 105).

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<sup>72</sup> The “horrid little man” Mary refers to is Charlie Chaplin, one of Agee’s idols. Jon Wranovics’ book length study *Agee and Chaplin*, examines the way in which Chaplin influences Agee’s fiction and screenplays as well as the unique friendship both men share.

<sup>73</sup> Bergreen notes that dreams were a “further stimulus for a major work about his father.” Before the composition of *A Death in the Family*, Agee had a series of disturbing dreams, and “under the influence of his sporadic Jungian analysis, he had been paying increased attention to them.” The two dreams which appeared to him the most during this time were one where “he ventured into an old well house, where he saw an enormous green fog.” The second involved “Agee...walking uphill, pulling a sled with a rope over his shoulder. When he turned to look at the sled he saw the saint [John the Baptist’s] head resting on it, staring at him” (305). The first dream obviously has connections with the scene Agee describes in this instance, while the second dream anticipates the original opening he conceived of for the book.

<sup>74</sup> Barson reads the dream sequence as a split narrative: a dream and nightmare: “The dream is of security and shelter, which brings with it a sense of personal identity. The nightmare, however, is that the dream is false—further, that the identity which security and shelter provide is an illusion” (154). Barson is able to connect all of this back to the image of Rufus’ father, because “what Jay is yearning for is actually the identity of Rufus’ dream.”

<sup>75</sup> The three words “ever any more” are repeated in the final, key scene of Agee’s *The Morning Watch*, as well, only they are meditated on by Richard, Rufus’ stand-in.

<sup>76</sup> I am referring here to the scene where Richard attacks a snake with a rock, and completely destroys the body. The snake’s mutilated corpse is almost broke in two, and the boys convince Richard to take it with him as a trophy of his kill.

<sup>77</sup> Bergreen notes that Agee’s shift from sensitive child to a “savage” eight year old comes after his mother’s forceful desire to have him circumcised. The act, Bergreen claims, has tremendous impact on the young boy: “James understandably resisted the idea and considered the operation as punishment for his masturbating. But his mother maintained that the circumcision was necessary for reasons of ‘health,’ and James was forced to submit” (23). Later, Agee would write in a poem directly to his mother about the incident:

*Mummy you were so genteel  
That you made your son a heel.  
Sunnybunch must now reclaim  
From the sewerpipe of his shame  
Any little coin he can  
To reassure him he’s a man*

<sup>78</sup> Spiegel is one of the few critics who interrogate the authenticity of McDowell’s vision in his *James Agee and the Legend of Himself*. He writes, “...what I want to know is, is the McDowell solution all around the best one possible? I raise this question with the full understanding that only a couple of commentators seemed to have voiced serious objections to it...” Even though he recognizes that any decisions might be unsatisfactory with an “unfinished” novel, he takes McDowell to task for his decision to place long sections in italics, a decision he finds “aspir[ing] to an artistic decision” and “far more presumptuous in tampering with the author’s intentions and effects than simply presenting all the episodes together before chapter one...or at the end of the text as a ‘sort of’ appendix” (217-218).

<sup>79</sup> Victor Kramer was the first to assert that this sequence was the original opening intended by Agee. Michael Lofaro, in his edition, presents the long piece as Agee’s digression to his audience before beginning the book.

<sup>80</sup> All the quotations in this chapter that reference the Lofaro edition are taken from an electronic manuscript of the book, and therefore, are noted by paragraph numbers instead of page numbers.

<sup>81</sup> Bergreen writes about Agee’s intense recurring dreams that lead him to analysis. The most prominent is a nightmare concerning John the Baptist: “...in these, Agee would be walking uphill, pulling a sled with a rope over his shoulder. When he turned to look at the sled he saw the saint’s head resting on it, staring at him.” According to Bergreen, Agee had the dream so often that “he came to feel he was personally acquainted with St. John the Baptist.” More than anything, however, the dream not only inspired the sequence that Agee originally conceived of to begin *A Death in the Family*, but “expressed his unresolved feelings about his father’s death and the fear that it would follow him wherever he went” (305-306).

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## Chapter Four: Racial Violence, Receding Bodies

<sup>82</sup> Fred Hobson's *But Now I See: The White Southern Racial Conversion Narrative* (LSU Press, 1999), defines such a narrative as "autobiographies...or very person social commentaries...in which [white southerners] attempted to come to terms with racial guilt – their own and their regions" (xiii). Agee's personal and deeply autobiographical "America, Look at Your Shame," his response to Davidson's "A Preface to Decisions," the short story "Death in the Dessert," and even sections of *A Death in the Family*, and *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* surely fit this definition.

<sup>83</sup> Agee's use of dialect here might be troublesome to the modern reader, as well. Though he frequently engages in dialect with some of his white characters, Victoria's dialect is much more mannered and somewhat surprising. One effect Agee's dialect has here is to set Victoria apart from Rufus' family, but it also suggests the same mystification Rufus has over understanding or explaining the difference between white and black characters.

<sup>84</sup> "Death in the Desert" was published in *The Harvard Advocate* in October 1930, Agee's junior year.

<sup>85</sup> This memory has striking connections with Agee's scene in *The Morning Watch* in which Richard, a stand-in for an adolescent Agee, strikes and kills a snake. The imagery, including the "broken back" and the description of the jaws echoes Agee's later work set in the Tennessee mountains.

<sup>86</sup> Of the very few critics who mention "Death in the Desert," Alfred Barson interprets the story as Agee's attempt to come to terms with an artist's ability to remain detached. Further, he concludes that "the narrator, unsuccessful though he is at recollecting his childhood, does acknowledge that in the concatenation of impressions surrounding the story's climax, disciplined and impervious to morality, his thoughts had 'assumed substance and shape.'" The matter of the story, then, is as an "objective correlative to the artistic struggle: his mind must be as 'quick and fluent' as the touring car bypassing the Negro. And of course, except for the luck that he is *in* the car, the hitchhiker he is bypassing might be himself." (in his *A Way of Seeing: A Critical Study of James Agee*: 32-33). However, Barson doesn't really contextualize Agee's struggle to remain fiercely connected to a moral and aesthetic purpose, which becomes clearer in later works such as *Famous Men* and "A Mother's Tale."