6-1-1970

God and death in selected works of James Agee

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GOD AND DEATH IN SELECTED WORKS OF JAMES AGEE

A Thesis

Presented to the

Department of English

and the

Faculty of the College of Graduate Studies

University of Nebraska at Omaha

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

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June 1970

ProQuest LLC.
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Accepted for the faculty of the College of Graduate Studies of The University of Nebraska at Omaha, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is with the deepest appreciation I acknowledge my devoted wife for her countless hours of typing, proofreading and retyping; Dr. Bruce Baker for his expert guidance and penetrating comments (e.g.,"This part really makes no sense"); and finally to Mr. Harvey Leavitt and Mr. David Raabe for agreeing not to advise, inasmuch as with their aid this thesis would have been never accomplished.

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Introduction

James Agee died in 1955; he was forty-five years old. While riding in a New York taxicab, the author was stricken with a fatal heart attack which was not completely unexpected. Agee, a tall, gangling individual, had little regard for physical fitness and he often subsisted on heavy smoking, drinking,and all-night bull sessions. His personal appearance was his least worry as a close friend relates:

> His clothes were dark and shiny. I can't imagine him in a new suit. Black shoes scuffed gray, wrinkled collar, a button off his shirt and a ravelled tie--he wore clothes to be warm and decent. Jim's elegance was inward. I doubt whether he had any idea of what he looked like, or whether he ever looked in a mirror except to shave. Vanity wasn't in him.[1]

When Agee was six years old, and living in Knoxville, Tennessee, his father died in an automobile accident. The widow later decided to send the young Rufus, as he was then called, to a parochial boarding school. It was at St. Andrew's that Agee met a teacher, Father James Flye, an Episcopalian priest, who befriended the fatherless boy and accepted him, for the most part, as an

[1]John Huston in the foreword to Agee on Film: Five Film Scripts (Boston, 1964), p. ix.

adopted son. Much later, Father Flye commented on the friendship between himself and Agee as "beginning when the younger of the two friends was not quite ten years old, and continuing unchanged when he was forty-five except by deepening and the maturity of years."[2]

Agee eventually graduated from Harvard University and had published a small book of poems entitled Permit Me Voyage. On the strength of a college spoof on Time magazine, Agee was given a job with the Luce organization. The major part of his writing career was subsequently spent in the field of journalism where his unsigned articles may be found in Fortune and Time magazines. Developed from a rejected article he had written for Fortune, Agee's second work, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, is non-fiction and concerned with three tenant families during the depression. Before his early death, Agee wrote only a small amount of fiction: a novella, The Morning Watch, a short story, "The Mother's Tale," and several poems as well as the posthumously published A Death in the Family.

As can be felt from reading in A Death in the Family

[2]Father James Flye in the introduction to Letters of James Agee to Father Flye (New York, 1962), p. 12.

of the young Rufus Follett and his father as they enjoy a Charlie Chaplin film, Agee greatly admired the motion picture medium. For many years he wrote film reviews for both Time and The Nation. His criticism was highly regarded as the following excerpt from a letter by W. H. Auden will testify:

> I do not care for movies very much and I rarely see them; further, I am suspicious of criticism as the literary genre which, more than any other, recruits epigones, pedants without insight, intellectuals without love. I am all the more surprised, therefore, to find myself not only reading Mr. Agee before I read anyone else in The Nation but also consciously looking forward all week to reading him again.[3]

A collection of Agee's film criticisms have been recently published along with an accompanying volume of five film screenplays he had written. Probably his most famous screenplay, an adaption of C. S. Forester's The African Queen, was directed by John Huston, who became a close friend of Agee's during the latter's final years. Huston later related how he attempted to stave off the author's propensity towards self-destruction; and it can be seen from Huston's words how difficult it was to dislike Agee:

[3]Reprinted as a foreword to Agee on Film: Reviews and Comments (Boston, 1964), p. v.

> I can hear myself uttering some nonsense about doing things in moderation, like sleeping eight hours every night and smoking say half a pack of cigarets a day and only having a drink or two before dinner. Jim nodded his head in mute agreement with everything I said, or if not agreement, sympathy. And he went on nodding until I faltered and finished. Then he smiled his gentle smile and, after a decent interval, changed the subject.[4]

It is hoped that within the following pages there exists some small portion of the humanity I experienced, if only from the books of this gentle but complicated man, James Agee.

[4]Huston, pp. ix-x.

Chapter I

Permit Me Voyage

Permit Me Voyage, James Agee's first book, was published in 1934 with an introduction by Archibald MacLeish. His comments included a statement concerning the poet's "delicate and perceptive ear."[1] Other reviewers tended to be even less explicit. Lincoln Kirstein, a friend from Agee's Harvard days, stated that "Agee's rhymed and subtly scanned stanzas, formal with a loving careful formality indicate an instrument achieved for future serious purposes."[2] In short, most reviewers found the poet's ability a sign of future serious purposes, but they mention little constructive criticism of the book.

Agee used traditional forms and themes in Permit Me Voyage. Twenty-five sonnets, both Elizabethan and Shakespearian, are included in the volume. The book has been compared with Carew, Whitman, and, of course, Hart Crane, from whom the title was borrowed. Agee obviously owes a debt to Andrew Marvell's poem "To His Coy Mistress," in the contemporary poet's first poem under "Lyrics." In this work of two stanzas, Agee advises a "child,"

[1]James Agee, Permit Me Voyage (New Haven, 1934), p.x.

[2]Lincoln Kirstein, "First Poems," The New Republic, LXXXII (February 27, 1935), 80.

presumably a young girl, to "Spread all your beauty" before a young admirer "and do him kindness every way, / Since soon, too soon, the wolfer night / Climbs in between and ends fair play."[3] The most obvious difference between Marvell's poem and that of Agee is the latter's probable use of the narrator as a third party, someone not directly concerned with the situation. Agee seems also to be less concerned with lust than with the hope that the "child" fully realize the grave potential of the "wolfer night" which will terminate not only love, but everything else as well.

Also included under the general heading of "Lyrics" are three more poems of varying length in lines and stanzas. However, there is one theme which they all share: the theme of death. The second poem in the volume consists of three stanzas and is concerned with an individual's thoughts for the future. The protagonist here is optimistic as he lies under "a summer noon" until "The shade o'erswam [him] like a sheet" (3) and implants within his mind unpleasant images which end abruptly as does the poem and, perhaps, life itself.

Poem number three relates a couple's love and then

[3]Robert Fitzgerald, ed., The Collected Poems of James Agee (Boston, 1968), p. 3. Henceforth, page numbers of quotations will follow the quotation in parentheses.

separation as they realize neither particularly cares for the other. But Agee may be suggesting in the remaining lines that since life is short and there is little time, two lovers should return to each other since isolation multiplies discomfort:

> Yet there is pity in us for each other
> And better times are almost fresh as true.
> The dog returns. And the man to his mother..
> And tides. And you to me. And I to you (4).

The final poem under "Lyrics" relates the story of a child who died in early life. Rather than revealing a sorrowful outlook, the poem views the situation as somewhat joyful. With close references to the philosophy espoused in the poems of A.E. Housman, particularly "To An Athlete Dying Young,"[4] Agee's poem states the dead child is better off leaving this world of discomfort:

> Therefore with reason
> Dress all in cheer and lightly put away
> With music and glad will
> This little child that cheated the long day
> Of the long day's ill (4).

Death is thus seen as a release, an optimistic situation that should be favorably viewed. Kenneth Seib has stated

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[4]To his lifelong friend and possible father-image, James Flye, Agee wrote at the age of nineteen: "It's funny--I can't write real lyrics--subjective things. I have to trump up a situation and story--and write them as of another character. I wish I could do it straight, as Housman does--Have you read A Shropshire Lad or Last Poems? they're perfect and lovely things--touch rockbottom in disillusionment without a single line of cynicism, and without cheapness. And things so utterly simple." Letters of James Agee to Father Flye (New York, 1962), p. 38.

that Agee's "writings exhibit a preoccupation with self, a spontaneity of emotion, and a fascination with death, the macabre, melancholy, and childhood."[5] These characteristics can certainly be seen in Agee's poems, but there is one attribute Seib fails to mention, but which is also often discussed in relation to death: religion. It is in "A Song" that Agee brings out all of the above:

> I had a little child was born in the month of May.
> He croaked and he crowed from early in the day.
> He sang like a bird and he delighted to play
> And before the night time he was gone away.
>
> Little child, take no fright,
> In that shadow where you are
> The toothless glowworm grants you light.
> Sure your mother's not afar.
>
> Brave, brave, little boy,
> Angels wave you round with joy.
> Soon through the dark she runs to you,
> Soon, soon your mother comforts you (5).

Although in this poem we find Agee using the traditional images of shadows and angels, the work nevertheless maintains its individuality. Seib puts it this way: "The mother's comforting words console the child with the thought that soon, she, too, like all of us, will be there with him. This grave is a fine and private place, but unlike so much Elizabethan verse which

[5]Kenneth Seib, James Agee: Promise and Fulfillment (Pittsburgh, 1968), p. 129.

elaborates upon the same theme, it seems to have little religious meaning."[6] There is the Judaic-Christian concept of a heaven in this poem with the mention of angels, but there is also the feeling that the child should forget his fears not because he will be taken care of by superior beings so much as the thought that his mother will soon be there with him. Agee does not here appear to use death in the sense of a spiritual reward, but rather he is more concerned with allaying the fear of the culmination of life. Rather than the picture of God opening his arms to admit the new soul, there is merely the rationalization that death should not be feared since it occurs equally to everyone. In the last chapter of this paper we shall see that this philosophy or theme also exists in Agee's final published work, A Death in the Family.

In Permit Me Voyage James Agee is certainly concerned with religious themes in a majority of the poems. Robert Fitzgerald, a close friend of the poet and editor of Agee's Collected Poems calls attention to the religious conflict he feels Agee experiences:

> ...the cultivated gift, the literary preparation is not the most notable [aspect] about Permit Me Voyage. More notable, and in the long run more important is something that might be called preparation of spirit. This was religious. No one can fail to perceive that, but it is not

[6] Ibid., p. 29.

> so easy to define it. After boyhood, the anima naturaliter Christiana in Agee had taken on endless complications, complications that arose in part from the use of his mind, a good one, curious and angry and highly trained, and from his artistic conscience, one of the most spacious and inflammable of the age.[7]

Several of the poems in Permit Me Voyage deal not within a Christian framework, but with a mythological background or, as in the case of "Description of Elysium," a combination of both. This poem will not be closely analyzed except to say that the first seven stanzas appear to deal with the general view of Elysium as a paradise of supernatural beauty and abundance. The last four stanzas curiously change the tone of the poem to a harshness conveyed by images that apparently allude to the Crucifixion:

> The stony mark where sand was by
> The water of a nailed foot:
> The berry harder than the beak:
> The hold beneath the dead oak root (6).

Possibly the author is illustrating the duality of thought in his mind concerning death as a paradise along with the Christian reference to the troublesome agony of the Saviour's death. Whatever the idea behind the poem, a great deal of ambiguity remains. Horace Gregory, speaking of Permit Me Voyage, states that "throughout the book

[7]Fitzgerald, pp.x-xi.

there is a desperate, almost hysterical necessity for the poet to sustain his Position [sic], his faith in God; the poems are often shattered by this necessity; the inward conflict becomes too great and the poet's equipment at this moment is inadequate."[8] Agee then, according to Gregory, found the topic of religion, in certain contexts, personally difficult to deal with, and thus produced poetry difficult to comprehend. Possibly Agee then reverted to poems with mythological backgrounds since this context produced a base upon which the poet's thoughts could more easily be laid.

"Ann Garner" is, in this book, the poem written earliest. As one scholar has written, it deals with "eternal recurrence, the oneness of all nature, and the endless cycle of birth and death."[9] But it is also much more. Ann is the wife of a farmer. Her child is dead at birth and Ann attempts to determine the reason for this loss of life. Her answer lies in the fields along with her child. The first winter after the death is spent in solitude and contemplation. Not until the spring, when the fields rise and Ann is "caught in the

[8]Horace Gregory, "The Beginning of Wisdom," Poetry, XXXXVI (April 1935), 50.

[9]Seib, p. 129.

wash and welter of two waves / Of life" (20) does she begin to see the correlation between the outside world and her own life: both are part of nature. For the child she has lost, Ann substitutes the earth by giving it life. The closest relationship a person can have is one in which the individual gives of himself. Ann thus participates in a symbolic sexual union:

> The sky glowed greenly, stealing out alone,
> Ann pressed her body to the raw, rich earth
> And felt life swelling great against locked stones.
> As the fields grew toward grandeur of the harvest,
> Ann walked in silent joy through the tall grain
> Silver and shadowy in the shifting wind,
> Or stood beneath the dip of apple-boughs,
> Long fingers searching out the ripening fruit
> Let down in heaviness through clasp of leaves (21).

Seib has noted that the Permit Me Voyage poems "in both tone and subject matter, move from earthly despair to spiritual acceptance."[10] It is precisely that movement which Ann Garner explores. Ann thus finds her solution. Her religious feelings and attitudes are satisfied. Since God, in this poem, is pantheistic, Ann is able to combine herself with Him in a mystical union which is the culmination of the poem:

> Ann lay half sinking in the fragrant needles
> Fallen beneath the pines...

[10] Ibid., p. 24.

Down wide skies the golden plow
Riving, cleaves a flaming furrow
Wide for the seeds of a greater sowing.
Whence comes the sower? Along the furrow

Striding great upon the sky,
Sweeping wide a flaming hand,
He sows the universe anew,
Advancing toward her pasture-land,
Arms flexed above her, blotting the sky
With body bent to the world's rim... (25-26).

Ann's problem is Agee's problem: the acceptance of death in a world controlled by a supposedly benevolent God.

James Agee was a well-educated individual with a mind that could be expected to look for solutions to questions which bothered him. The seeming inconsistency between a benevolent God and a universe filled with death is not an original or unique problem, but it emerges in the works of Agee as a major theme. He was a young man who took his beliefs seriously and could favorably mention kind-hearted clergymen in A Morning Watch while painting a priest with acid in A Death in the Family. Clearly, religion was a serious subject to this man, as Peter Ohlin, a contemporary scholar has stated: "Agee's religiosity was...more skeptical and more deeply felt and asserted itself more seriously as a matter of life and death."[11] It is in the poem "A Chorale" that the poet's religious concern is for the first time vividly seen.

[11] Peter Ohlin, Agee (New York, 1966), p. 4.

"A Chorale," as the music-oriented title would imply, is a religious poem whereby the narrator speaks to God in the fashion of a church hymn. But unlike most hymns, Agee's poem is a castigation, blaming God for neglecting the Earth after the Crucifixion:

> Dear Christ awaken!
>
> Range the blest hordes that rest in you around you:
> Look down kind prince on treason to astound you:
> See now sweet farmer what a wasting shadow
> Takes your green meadow (27).

The narrator views the world engulfed in sin and perdition and God is no longer concerned:

> Though you outreign our time which is an hour,
> Yet you in us have put you in our power:
> What God man builds in God His truth is ended
> Not well defended (28).

The narrator desires a return of God to His people for the rejuvenation of belief. All that is left now under God's control is the world of the dead:

> Your faith who gave your heart for our safekeeping,
> Your love who sweated blood while we were sleeping,
> If so these waste within this generation
> Death is your nation:
>
> The time is withered of your ancient glory:
> Your doing in this dear earth a pretty story:
> O noblest heart fare well through the conclusion
> Of all delusion (28).

Agee ends the poem with a final plea to God the Father asking for help so that there will cease to be more "Deaths" of souls.

One third of the way through Permit Me Voyage is the

author's "Dedication." Eight pages in length, "Dedication" is very much concerned with God and death. It begins:

> in much humility
> to God in the highest
> in the trust that he despises nothing.
>
> And in his commonwealth (8).

"His commonwealth" is the concern of the rest of the dedication for Agee begins listing individuals whom he has apparently admired, including Christ, Shakespeare and "an unknown sculptor of China, for his god's head" (8). The dedication may be loosely divided into two groups. The first pertains to people now dead while the second section is concerned, for the most part, with the living. In both sections there are people mentioned specifically by name as well as paragraphs pertaining to the forgotten masses of individuals Agee characterized by attitudes. Occurring often is the word "dead" or its cognates which generally refer to the culmination of contributions death has caused. It appears in the context of being both unnecessary and unfair:

> To those of all times who have sought truth and who failed to tell it in their art or in their lives, and who now are dead.
> To those who died in the high and humble knowledge of God: seers of visions; watchmen, defenders, vessels of his word; martyrs and priests and monarchs and young children and those of hurt mind; and to all saints unsainted.

> To those unremembered who have died in no glory of peace, nor hope nor thought of any glory: to those who died in sorrow and in kindness, and in bravery; to those who died in violence suddenly, and to all that saw not death upon them; to those who died awake to the work of death; to those who died in the dizziness of many years, not knowing their children for theirs; to those who died virgin, or barren; to those who died in the time of the joy of their strength; to those who took their own lives into the earth; to those who died in deadly sin (8).

Section two, the poet says somewhat morbidly, is "to those who living, are soon to die" (9). There are a few exceptions to this criterion, however, as Mark Twain and Walt Whitman are included. For the most part though, the individuals named are contemporaries of Agee. Other than being still alive, they are also able to be categorized by occupation. With the exception of Albert Einstein, they are prominent men in the humanities. They include Pablo Picasso, James Joyce, I.A. Richards and Yehudi Menuhin. Also mentioned is A.E. Housman, another poet, as has been pointed out, similar to Agee in a concern with death.

Agee plainly saw Truth as being in the realm of the humanities. He had little respect for scientists although the possibility of attainment in that field is suggested at one point: "To all pure scientists, anatomists of truth and its revealers; in scorn of their truth as truth; and in thanksgiving for their truth in its residence in

truth" (11).

Possibly the most intriguing paragraph in the dedication occurs at the end:

> To those who will not watch into the mere shadow of death and behold the supremacy of man's ignorance over all man's knowledge. To those who will not see that there in that shadow is truth. To those who will not watch toward it, valuing it above all things in earth and valuing all things of earth in the thought of it (13).

Perhaps somewhat confusing in this paragraph is the negative wording. Agee is, of course, asking that people will be given aid so that they may see death not simply as the culmination of life, but as a beginning, a beginning for man in his constant attempt to understand his existence. For within the shadow of death there is, as the poet suggests, Truth. Agee's great concern with death is evident in the final line. All men must look to death as establishing the value for all living things. It is the author of this paragraph who has decided to look into that shadow of death in his attempt to find meaning, to find value, and most of all, to find Truth.

Horace Gregory states that the dedication "is a cross between a prose poem and an exercise in pulpit oratory."[12] Indeed, the poet asks that humanity be able

[12]Gregory, p. 49.

to view the world without prejudice and receive aid in their endeavors. But this minister's speech includes a request for himself as a fellow-member of the human congregation. Agee concludes: "And make the eyes of our hearts, and the voice of our hearts in speech, honest and lovely within the fences of our nature, and a little clear" (15). It is possibly this clearness that Agee was never fully able to realize in his poetry. When the poet was twenty-three he wrote in a letter to Father Flye: "One thing I feel is this: that a great deal of poetry is the product of adolescence--or of an emotionally adolescent frame of mind: and that as this state of mind changes, poetry is likely to dry up."[13] Although Agee did return to poetry on occasion, his main source of communication was prose, or, later, the film. James Agee was constantly trying to find the medium by which he could best communicate.

Agee begins his group of sonnets in this volume with a reiteration of his pessimistic view of life. In "Sonnet I" the poet speaks of Adam within a philosophy of determinism:

> So it begins. Adam is in his earth
> Tempted, and fallen, and his doom made sure
> Oh, in the very instant of his birth:
> Whose deathly nature must all things endure (37).

[13] Letters of James Agee to Father Flye (New York, 1962), p. 56.

"So it begins," writes Agee, alluding perhaps to the fact that not only is this the origin of man, but also the beginning of a situation that will be a recurring one. Adam has sinned and "his doom made sure." But of what doom does the poet refer? "Adam is in his earth"; thus, the punishment is death. The final line sums up the concept that all who are born must also die, for within birth is the essence of death.

Paraphrasing Hamlet's soliloquy, the next four lines indicate a persistence of the unpleasant aspects of life:

> The hungers of his flesh, and mind, and heart,
> That governed him when he was in the womb,
> These ravenings multiply in every part:
> And shall release him only to the tomb (37).

To Seib, "Agee was something of an escapist, always desiring a simpler world but realizing that such a world exists only in dreams. Reality, in Agee's verse, is always grim."[14] Agee's point, of course, is that all men share similar problems, problems which began with the first man. Like Adam, we will find surcease only in the tomb.

A deterministic philosophy is repeated in "Sonnet II." "Our doom is in our being" (37), the poet states. Again

[14] Seib, p. 26.

there is a "hunger death alone may spell" (37), but this hunger, as earlier, is not defined. It always exists in every man, in every generation. Just as our ancestors sought a release, so are we concerned with the same difficulty. The problem is internal, the poet continues. It is of a metaphysical nature:

> And though you rectify the big distress,
> And kill all outward wrong where wrong abounded,
> Your hunger cannot make this hunger less
> Which breeds all wrath and right, and shall not die
> In earth, and finds some hope upon the sky (37).

Man may resolve earthly conflicts, but death remains. And of course where there is no human control, man looks heavenward for assistance.

"Sonnet IV" explores modern man's attempt to overcome what all men have strived to defeat: death. The only sonnet thus far to use the first person, this poem imparts a somewhat personal, revealing attitude:

> I have been fashioned on a chain of flesh
> Whose ancient lengths are immolate in dust:
> Frail though that dust be as the dew's mesh
> The morning mars, it holds me to a trust:
> My flesh that was, long as this flesh knew life,
> Strove, and was valiant, still strove, and was naught:
> Now it is mine to wage their valiant strife
> And failing seek still what they ever sought.
> I have been given wings they never wore.
> I have been given hope they never knew.
> And they were brave, who can be brave no more.
> And they that live are kind as they are few.
> 'Tis mine to touch with deathlessness their clay:
> And I shall fail, and join those I betray (38).

The narrator states that he is connected with members of the past by a "chain of flesh." But there is a closeness

that transcends a mere filial relationship. He has with them a kinship of purpose, a desire to reach a goal which no man has reached. The narrator views his struggle as the necessity, the duty of a soldier to grasp the banner dropped from a fallen comrade. Now is the time to win since progress has come with time. Each generation looks with hope to its progeny, but the result is always the same. Some few live, the poet writes, but the remembrance is probably from a long-past, valiant, but losing struggle.

The theme of overcoming death, which all men have attempted, is evident in still other poems in Permit Me Voyage. "Sonnet XV" includes a more specific aspect of this theme. The poet sees here a family relationship as a betrayal since with offspring the battle will continue. Beginning with the protagonist "high-souled in joy and hungry for the fight" (44) the poem swiftly shows the man descending into failure. The protagonist in the poem succumbs to defeat while his son prolongs the "chain of flesh." Shifting into the first person, the poem ends with a hope for future success:

> I'll choose the course my fathers chose before.
> And, with their shadows, pray my son does more (44).

The narrator, putting faith in his offspring, joins those who preceded him in death.

"Sonnet XXIII," like the previously mentioned poems, is concerned with the themes of failure and continuing

struggle. This sonnet again employs the first person, but there is here a sense of moderation and acceptance of one's position. The narrator is impressed with his own existence and acknowledges the presence of nature and God. The lot that has befallen the narrator is surveyed and accepted; there is no struggle nor desire to struggle. Acceptance is the theme and the individual in this poem calmly "once more mindless into truth shall go" (48). Death claims also non-combatants.

In "Sonnet VII" the poet looks at a different view. In something of a mystical context, the narrator of this poem suggests that there are "dynasties of destinies undreamed" (40) if one would only look into the mind of another. Probably one of the most difficult poems in Permit Me Voyage, "Sonnet VII" seems to claim a frightful yet compulsive knowledge held within each man. If one would but make the attempt and allow "His eye to frankly watch into an eye" (40), the wonders contained there "would change this day" (40). What changes there would be are not spelled out, but this is, no doubt, part of the point.

"Sonnet XVIII" has the distinction of being the first poem to speak of death in a positive manner; it is also closely related to "Sonnet VII."

> The way the cleansouled mirror of a soul
> Dreams in the darkened flesh and smoky breath

> That only takes and tells the image whole
> When all obstruction's wiped away by death (45).

Here clearly is the concept of looking into the soul of another which, the poet implies, is hidden until cleared by death. The final four lines of this poem are possibly the most beautiful in Permit Me Voyage:

> How still each heart reluctant lies to take
> The image of its image: though so near
> We lie, that surely both our hearts perceive
> Identities they scarcely yet believe (45).

The poet places two individuals side by side and has them look into the depths of each other. But when this is done, the "cleansouled mirror of a soul" reflects the "image of its image," or in other words, we see not only each other, but ourselves as well.

In "Sonnet XXII" death is also seen as a time when Truth will finally be seen. For at that time, states the narrator of the poem, "beyond noise of logic I shall know" (47). Earthly knowledge shall no longer hinder the attainment of all that is, and there shall be seen the "essence and fact of all things that are made" (47).

Love is viewed in a most unromantic way in several poems in Permit Me Voyage. "Sonnet VIII," for example, consists of an apparent monologue from an individual to his loved one. The narrator cautions that "all love is as the grass" (40) and thus merely transcient. Somewhat cynically, the narrator concludes:

> All that we hold most lovely, and most cherish
> And most are proud in, all shall surely perish (40).

It is easy to include with this reference to love, life itself. A romantic affiliation will dissolve eventually just as surely as death comes to all the living.

Reproduction, in a sense, achieves immortality since the family name will live on with its offspring. But inasmuch as this merely prolongs the power of death, the narrator of "Sonnet XIV" feels that this "cheating of death" is a dubious victory:

> Not of good will my mother's flesh was wrought,
> Whose parents sowed in joy, and garnered care:
> The sullen harvest sudden winter brought
> Upon their time, outlasting their despair.
> Deep of a young girl's April strength his own
> My father's drank, and draughted her to age:
> Who in his strength met death and was outdone
> Of pity and high purpose, grief, and rage.
>
> Poor wrath and rich humility, these met,
> Married, and sorrowing in a barren bed
> Their flesh embraced in pity did beget
> Flesh that must soon secure their fleshlihead:
> But knows not when, on whom cannot descry,
> And least of all could vaunt conjecture why (43).

This is an especially important poem since it is possible to see many correlations between it and the later novel, A Death in the Family. More than just a commentary, "Sonnet XIV" is the history of a family. The first eight stanzas refer to the background of the two individuals, parents of the narrator. Four lines each are given to them while the final four lines of the poem portray their marriage and the result. Speaking in the first person,

the narrator of the sonnet states that the parents of his mother, although they "sowed in joy," produced a "sullen harvest." Why the resultant child of this marriage, apparently the narrator's mother, caused such a feeling is, of course, not revealed. The narrator's father is not viewed with as much depth, but he does encounter and drink of this "young girl's April strength." The seventh and eighth lines apparently refer to a premature death which robbed the father of "pity and high purpose." "Poor wrath," is possibly the mother since she is thought of with the preceding references to difficulties within her family. The father's "rich humility" meets with his wife in a barren bed and they beget the narrator who "must soon secure [his] fleshlihead." Kenneth Seib, calling this sonnet "one of Agee's best-constructed poems,"[15] sees "fleshlihead" as a type of virginity, a maidenhead. Viewing this possibility within the context of Agee's other poems, we can see that it very possibly is virginity or perhaps the state of puberty. The offspring will ultimately reach the ability to procreate and life will continue. The poem ends with the narrator contemplating the significance or meaning of his life without apparently reaching any definite conclusions.

[15]Seib, p. 37.

Death is again the major theme of "Sonnet XXI." The poet complains of physical problems that come with age. Our poison is a "swill of dreams" that acts, he says, like arsenic in a plant. It gives only the semblance of good health. The theme of recurrence, often seen in these poems, is mentioned quickly and silently. "So by my birth are you" (47), states the narrator. In other words, as I have been born, so you shall take my place in all I speak of. Again Agee speaks morbidly of death. The final couplet sums up the pessimism of the poem and lays the fault with God:

> So should we live, why then God lives also.
> That was His Will which then will be our Woe (47).

Because God has willed to live, so must we also live--and die.

The poet has earlier spoken of a reliance on the knowledge of his ancestors. He breaks free of this in "Sonnet XXIV." "My poor soul," he says, "if aught it would create, / Must fast of these, and feed on its own fate" (48). The poet begins to take on some self-reliance. But which method or devices should he use to determine the answers to his problems? In "Sonnet XXV," the final sonnet in Permit Me Voyage, the poet reiterates his statement of refusing help from the past: "My sovereign souls... / I must desert your ways now if I can" (49). The poet continues on to deride a purely intellectual

approach to the search for knowledge, but does not state just what method he will use. However, he does make emphatically clear that the responsibility for success or failure is his and whatever the result, he will "know where the fault is due" (49).

The final piece is the title poem, "Permit Me Voyage." Agee states here his decision to maintain a hope in religion and "therein such strong increase to find / In truth as is my fate to know" (50). Once more we see Agee's ambivalence toward religion. In many poems within the volume there is a strong rejection of God, a rejection which abruptly shifts in later poems to almost a plea for help. Repeating the philosophy of "A Chorale," Agee in "Permit Me Voyage," writes of the decline of God's influence on earth: "How from the porches of our sky / The crested glory is declined" (50). The author apparently desires to be one of the "true poets" (50) who shall travel throughout the world and thus "preserve this race" (50). Placing himself on the mercy of his duty as a poet, Agee ends his volume with the line from Hart Crane: "Permit me voyage, Love, into your hands" (50). And so James Agee's first published effort ends, as one scholar has said, "seemingly unfinished, with one unrhymed line as a gangplank toward the future."[16]

[16]Ohlin, p. 48.

The conflict presented in these poems of James Agee exists in the questioning of the purpose of death. The poet begins his sonnets with Adam in his grave: "And so it begins," writes the poet, and continues on to contemporary individuals with the same perplexity: why must one die? Agee has discussed the method of avoiding death by vicariously living life again through one's offspring. He rejects this because the children are then also subjected to the same problem. Nothing was answered, and even worse, the problem was prolonged. The poet has also mentioned the defeat of death through the use of religion. It is in this context that Agee appears to be the most confused, because he must then decide on his own religious position. In a poem mentioned earlier in this chapter, the poet speaks of an afterlife without mentioning a Deity. This "heaven" is pleasant, but its only advantage is the companionship provided since admission is gained only through death, which ultimately reaches everyone.

God makes few appearances in the poetry of Permit Me Voyage. The poems in this volume are clearly the result of an individual whose religious beliefs are characterized by ambivalence. Reconciling the belief in a Supreme Being with the fact of death is a difficult problem which Agee, in this section, is unable to resolve. He is

attempting to blend the emotional aspects of his belief with the logic and critical thinking derived from his relatively extensive education. Walker Evans, in the introduction to the book he and Agee co-authored, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, says:

> His Christianity--if an outsider may try to speak of it--was a punctured and residual remnant, but it was still a naked, root emotion. It was an ex-Church, or non-Church matter, and it was hardly in evidence. All you saw of it was an ingrained courtesy, an uncourtly courtesy that emanated from him towards everyone, perhaps excepting the smugly rich, the pretentiously genteel, and the police. After a while, in a round-about way, you discovered that, to him, human beings were at least possibly immortal and literally sacred souls.[17]

As with any religious individual, James Agee seeks divine intuition. But God has been noticeably absent. He remains within the nation of death and thus is absent from man as death isolates the living from the dead. Agee thus seems to conclude: while man looks into the meaning of mortality he shall, at the same time, be searching for God.

The critics who predicted future success for this young poet were not incorrect although Agee did not, for the remainder of his writing career, extensively write poetry. But he did use in his following published efforts, a very poetic, highly-detailed style of prose. Even in

[17]James Agee and Walker Evans, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men (Boston, 1960), p. xii.

the novella, The Morning Watch, Agee continued to discuss the apparent conflict between religion and mortality, a conflict he had already perceived in this first book of poetry.

Chapter II

The Morning Watch

The Morning Watch is unevenly divided into three sections. Part one introduces the protagonist, Richard, and two other pre-adolescents who are all responsible for the 4:00 a.m. morning watch, a half hour period spent before the altar during early morning Good Friday services. The boys are students at a small parochial boarding school set in the mountains of Tennessee.

Richard is a very pious individual whose thoughts are generally taken up with the maintenance of his piety: "By trying hard," Agee writes, "he was able to restore whole to his mind the thorn-crowned image of his Lord."[1] Richard's difficulties arise from a tendency toward enuresis and a poor self-image. His main other concern is a Walter Mitty style of instant canonization:

> But it was of course out of the question that in a deep country part of Middle Tennessee, in nineteen twenty-three, he could actually manage to have himself nailed to a Cross; and although (if he should have the courage) he could undoubtedly nail his own feet, and even one hand (if someone else would steady the nail), his right hand would still hang free, and it would look pretty foolish beside a real Crucifixion (46).

[1]James Agee, The Morning Watch (Boston, 1951), p. 11. Henceforth, page numbers of quotations will follow the quotation in parentheses.

Richard's two companions are not quite as religious: "'All right some mothuf-----sonafabitch is agoana git the livin s--t beat outn him if I find out who throwed that!'" (10), says Hobe Gillum when a shoe bangs against the wall next to his bed. The third member, Jimmy Toole, is somewhere in between. When Hobe continues to curse, he is reprimanded: "'Aw shut up Hobie,' Jimmy says. 'This ain't no time to talk like that.' 'Hell do I keer,' Hobe said. 'I hain't been to Confession yet'" (12).

The boys dress and leave the dormitory for chapel where, in section two, they wait patiently in the vestry for their period of adoration to begin. Also in this small room near the entrance of the building are three older boys. Two of them, senior brothers, are responsible for the maintenance of the candles and supplies during the night: "It was also believed by some of the older people that they alone among the boys now at the School, might have a Vocation" (19).

The third, Willard Rivenburg, is an enigmatic individual of indeterminant age: "Nobody knew for sure just how old Willard was, but he looked as many men can only at thirty or so, and then only if they have been through a war, or years of the hardest kind of work" (20). These, of course, are the thoughts of a twelve-year-old. Willard apparently is a student and thus closer to the ages of the

older boys. He has received the sacraments and taken part in the religious services, but he is a poor student with a tendency toward sleeping in class. His sports ability, called "magical" by the boys, makes him an uncrowned hero to his peer group. Sitting near this person Richard notes for the first time that the athlete's back may be deformed. Unconsciously it seems, whenever other students perform well on the sports field, they slump their shoulders down similar to Willard's posture. But there is also something evil about him: "When he took his turn serving Mass or swinging the Censer or carrying the Crucifix," Richard remembers, "he was never exactly irreverent yet he always looked as if secretly he might be chewing tobacco" (21).

As Richard is thinking this and squatting against the wall with the other two younger boys, the three are startled to find they have wasted too much time and it is four o'clock. "'Jesus!'" blurts out Hobie and "Willard's dark face brightened with his satanic parody of falsetto laughter" (24).

Richard kneels within the church and begins meditating. But his thoughts turn to his mother who, although living near the school, refuses to see him as often as the boy would like. "'Because,'" she says, "'mother thinks you need to be among other boys Richard'" (42). Feeling embarrassed at the thought of this reprimand, Richard's

mind, perhaps his unconscious, opens for a second:

> And for a moment so brief that the realization did not stay with him, he felt hatred and contempt for his mother, for her belief in submissiveness and for her telling him, on certain infuriating occasions, that it is only through submitting bravely and cheerfully to unhappiness that we can learn God's Will, and how most truly to be good. God's Will, he thought now. I bet it isn't just for people to be unhappy! (42).

From this quotation we can see Agee's continued concern with the existence of suffering in a world created by a supposedly benevolent God.

Bringing his thoughts back to the church, Richard stares at the myriad of altar candles:

> Opening his eyes just enough to see, looking through their rainbow flickering of little sharpness, sharp flames on the dark, thorn flames in thousands, each a thorn, a little sword, a tongue of fire, standing from pentecostal waxen foreheads; go ye unto all the world, a briarpatch of blessed fires, burning, just audibly crackling; no; the clock (59-60).

The author here presents a quick juxtaposition of words, an attempt to carry the reader through Richard's logic pattern as the boy hears a slight sound coming from the altar. Richard thinks it is the snapping of the candles as they burn, but then realizes it is the ticking of a clock. But even more intriguing is Agee's comparison of lighted candles to pre-birth souls. The candles are clustered around God, present in the monstrance, just as

the souls are near God before they go "unto all the world." Agee uses some unusual words to describe the candles. Strangely, all such words are painful in connotation: "thorn, sword, and sharp." Then the author refers to the world as a "briarpatch." Agee has often spoken of life in the context of unhappiness and difficulty; the imagery in this passage seems to reflect that very concern.

At the end of the preceding, quoted passage, Richard realizes that the sound is from a clock:

> The clock stood on the lowest step of the Altar. Its leather case was inlaid with silver wire almost as fine as hair, which outlined intricate flowers and leaves. It was his mother's, and it had been borrowed for use in the Lady Chapel, as it always was for this Thursday watch, because it was the most nearly silent clock on the place. Now that he looked at it he heard it the more clearly, a sound more avid and delicate than that of a kitten at its saucer, and now that he heard nothing else he saw nothing else except the face of the clock, hard, handless, staring white out of a shadow of trembling gold, like the great Host in a monstrance (60).

Again we have a probable reference to God in this timepiece that emits a subtle ticking which Richard mistakes for the crackling of the candles. This delicate ticking, reminiscent of a pulse beating, is the sound of God-given life. Each man is a clock whose ticking begins at birth. Richard, for the first time aware of God's power, is mesmerized with the "hard, handless, staring" face which confronts him.

For it is on this special day, Good Friday, that Richard realizes that this God is also responsible for the removal of life--when the ticking stops.

The half hour is up but the boys return for another thirty minutes. Richard begins thinking of the joyousness of the forthcoming Easter Sunday. On this day, he says to himself, there will be the celebration of His Resurrection. But immediately the young boy reprimands himself for willingly relinquishing the sorrow of Good Friday:

> But not yet. That is still not known though at the same time it <u>is</u> known. We are all in most solemn sorrow and grief and mourning. We know a secret far inside ourselves but we don't dare tell it, even to ourselves. We don't dare to quite believe it will ever really happen again until it really happens again. Until His coming again. For in the night in which He was betrayed. It has happened over nineteen hundred times now and yet it has never happened before. Not yet. And we don't know if it ever can. Never dreamed it could. Can (85).

This is a difficult passage. Richard's mind, jumping spasmodically, is represented by the author in sentence fragments and abrupt, perplexing changes of thought. The paradox mentioned of knowing a secret and yet not knowing it is possibly a reference not to the death of Christ alone, but also to the death of every mortal man. Although Richard is an extremely pious individual, the thought of the Resurrection as being a "secret" is difficult to conceive. But a person generally thinks little of the inevitability of his own death. It then, in a sense, is a secret

which is not told but yet is fully realized. "We don't dare quite to believe it will ever really happen" although it has happened to no less an individual than Christ. Thus the anniversary of the death of the Son of God is a reminder to man that one of the basic facts of life is death.

The hour is almost completed. Richard looks again toward the altar and realizes that also His hour is almost up. "He won't see the sun go down today" (86), Richard thinks.

The three boys leave the chapel and take off their shoes. Richard surprises himself and leads Jimmy and Hobe off toward the woods and an illegal swim as three roosters crow in quick, biblical succession. For a moment the boys stop by a farming pen which is probably owned by the school for instructional purposes: "Through the veering wire net he saw, black in the faintness, how the big rooster darted his vigilant head and shuffled his plumage: in the silence before daylight a priest, vesting himself for Mass. Something heavy struck and the whole body splayed, and chuckled with terror; the coward's wives gabbled along their roost" (93). Neither the type nor source of the projectile that struck the fowl is mentioned, although it is possible that one of the boys threw a rock. The comparison of the rooster with a priest is possible

not only in the context of their similar physical adornments, but also with the crowing or warning given to the boys before their decision to go into the woods. A priest's occupation would also cause him to initiate a warning to malefactors. But why is the rooster paid for his trouble with pain? It will be seen in "A Mother's Tale" that Agee is fond of using a comparison between the animal world and that of humans. Man holds a position over the life and death of animals as God does to us, Agee seems to suggest. God, then, in the context of this story, has this power similarly over the clergy who, as represented by the fowl, respond in a characteristically mortal fashion--with fear. Possibly this is a reference to the all-inclusiveness of death; and even the priest, one thought of as closer to God, reacts to this culmination of life in a manner common to all men.

As the three boys walk into the woods, Richard notices a locust shell clinging to the side of a tree. He is fascinated by the brittle "transparent silver breathed with gold," (98) and the split back. He finds the talons sharp enough to penetrate his finger and the small eyes remind him of the face of a human embryo. This in turn brings to mind an old book of his grandfather's and an illustration of prehistoric animals sluggishly moving through the mud during earth's early history. The wound

down the back makes him think of the pain required to move out of the shell: "Bet it doesn't hurt any worse than that to be crucified," he says (99).

Replacing the shell, Richard hurries ahead to catch up with his friends. The three boys remove their clothing and enter the water. Richard dives and swims downward although the water temperature stiffens him with its iciness. At the bottom of the sand cut, Richard nestles into the ooze; looking up he can make out a shaft of light that thins into the blackness in which he rests. As his air supply is exhausted the boy determinedly holds on to the sandstone shelf in a momentary attempt at martyrdom. Finally his body acts on its own and propels him to the surface where he breaks:

> ...head back, gasping, feebly treading water, watching the streaming bruise-colored clamorous and silent whirling of the world and taking in air so deeply that his lungs felt as if they were tearing; and soon the world became stable and all of the coloring and discoloration cleared and stood up strongly through the top of the woods across the tracks and he could realize that except for the remote voices of the two boys and the still more remote voice of a bird the world itself was delicately silent and all the noise was within his own head and was rapidly dying; all that he saw still twitched with his pulse and out of the woods, beating like a heart, the sun stood up (105).

Richard has apparently undergone a rebirth when he leaves the placenta-like ooze at the bottom of the sand cut and emerges from the water with his teeth aching and finds that

"in his sex he was as tightly shrunken as if he were a baby" (106). The world seems new to him as he sees it twitching with life and the traditional symbol for God, the sun, stands looking down on him "beating like a heart." The boy swims over to the side of the pond as his friend Jimmy says he was ready to dive into the water for fear Richard was in trouble. Although the cold has turned Hobe and Jimmy purple and blue, they forget their discomfort when a snake slithers out of the weeds. Like the locust, the snake has also recently moulted and "Richard was acutely aware how sensitive, proud and tired he must be in his whole body, for it was clear that he had just struggled out of his old skin" (107). Before the young boy can react, the other two are after the reptile which slips away quickly into the grass, "his brilliance a constant betrayal" (108). With a stick, Hobe flips the snake on its back and brings a rock down for the kill. As it moves, desperately attempting to escape, Richard runs up quickly and is dismayed by the evident pain. Aiming to put an end to the suffering, he grabs a stone and pummels the head "which nevertheless lifted senilely, the tongue flittering and the one remaining eye entering his own eye like a needle" (110). The three boys stand over their conquest as it twitches and they realize "that it would not die until sundown" (111). This brings to mind

the words Richard said before he left the chapel: "He [Christ] won't see the sun go down today."[2] The parallel is thus made verbally explicit.

Richard finds slime from the snake covering part of his hand. Hobe tells him he should wash it off but Richard regards it as a symbol of bravery. He wants to taste the residue as if it were mana; but the other boys are watching him. He sees the rock he used on the snake and notices slime also on it. Throwing it into the pond, Richard realizes it breaks the water about the same spot he dived into minutes earlier. Then, dipping his hand into the water, he sees the veins of his arm and how they look like an adult's. The slime remains as he removes his arm and the boys dress for their return to the school.

Several hours have passed since they walked away from the chapel, and the punishment they will receive suddenly confronts their thoughts. As they ponder their problem a train goes by on its way from Coal City. It makes a great deal of excited noises, but the boys "hardly even had the heart to look up at the blank baggage car and the empty coach and to wave at the engineer who saluted them" (114).

[2]Robert Fitzgerald, in his introduction to The Collected Short Prose of James Agee, mentions an early story of Agee's in which two boys kill a small animal. Afterwards they plan to meet again after Sunday School.

Richard keeps his eyes on the snake until Hobe asks him if he is going to take it back to the dorm. When Richard says no, Hobe picks it up with a stick and they fall into step going back through the woods. The three had earlier put on their shoes and they now walk quickly, saying nothing. Richard feels the drying slime on his hand which reminds him of spittle drying on the body of Christ as He awaited the trip to Golgotha. Coming to the edge of the woods, Richard runs over to a tree and removes the locust shell he had left behind. Hobe carelessly throws the snake into the hogpen where the animals fight over and consume it. As the boys walk up a hill to the school, the story unobtrusively ends.

Peter Ohlin states that "the theme of the story is Richard's gradual change from youthful inability to accept suffering and death to a more mature realization that these are inevitable components of the human condition."[3] It is evident that a major element of the book is concerned with suffering and death as well as life and rebirth. From the beginning of the work we can see these concerns. As the boys walk across a gravel path that surrounds the chapel and step onto the lawn Richard states

[3]Peter H. Ohlin, Agee (New York, 1966). p. 188.

that the "grass, felt like a fish," (13) a symbol early Christians used to identify each other. Probably it is here used as added religious emphasis to the chapel area. The lawn around the church also contains an oak tree that the other two boys wing with stones, perhaps a reference to the forthcoming suffering of Christ on Good Friday. The church itself is filled with images of death:

> ...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 (25-26).

Of course the day itself, Good Friday, signifies death and the author makes this point specifically:

> [Richard's] heart was lifted up and turned vague and shy as the words broke within him, upon each other, God: Death; so that the two were one. Death: Dead, the word prevailed (28).

This passage has added significance in that we have been tracing a relationship that is here so emphatically stated: God and Death. Richard repeats them together as if they mean the same. God is death. God is responsible for death.

The smell of the decaying flowers and the darkness along with the cold drafts all lend to this atmosphere of death surrounding God. But the images change as the boys

leave the church:

> They walked down the sandstone steps into an air so different from the striving candles and the expiring flowers that they were stopped flatfooted on the gravel. Morning had not yet begun but the night was nearly over. The gravel took all the light there was in the perishing darkness and shed it upward, and in the darkness among the trees below the outbuildings a blossoming dogwood flawed like winter breath. In the untouchable silence such a wave of energy swept upward through their bare feet and their three bodies into the sky that they were shaken as if a ghost had touched them (91-92).

The boys have passed from the place of death into a world of life. Possibly this gravel path is a demarcation line separating the worlds. They progress toward the woods and the pond. The locust shell Richard finds with the split back is "the double motif of suffering and death."[4] It reminds him of both prehistoric life and an embryo, the continuum of the past with the present, "a symbol of nature's ability to renew itself."[5]

The contrast of life and death is also seen in Richard's rebirth at the pond as contrasted with the lifeless imagery evident around the area: "The relics of

[4] John S. Phillipson, "Character, Theme and Symbol in The Morning Watch," Western Humanities Review, XV (1962), 363.

[5] Ohlin, p. 188.

machinery and the dead cones of putty-colored sand and the wrinkled sandstone and, at length, the sullen water itself, untouched in all these cold months" (100).

The snake, like the locust, has just finished moulting. In a sense then, it also has undergone a rebirth. The death of the snake is painful, showing the close proximity of death with suffering, while the bringing together of the stone as a symbol of death with the water as life/rebirth illustrates the continuity of death from life.

The empty train is coming from civilization, from Coal City. Its emptiness on the run past the pond is possibly indicative of man's inability to go backwards in time, backwards from the city to nature. Nature is also correlated with youth, with boys swimming in ponds. The city is age, maturity, making a living. As the boys leave the pond area, they have grown in awareness and thus are no longer concerned with the simple, childish pleasures of waving at trains. They must contend with adult situations and problems: the pain of their punishment for going into the woods.

"Where so many writers show sympathy for the vague lost innocence of their boy heroes," writes one critic, "Agee is more concerned with the state into which his own boy-hero is being inducted, the pride of maturity."[6]

[6]F. W. Dupee, "Pride of Maturity," The Nation, CLXXII (April 1951), 400.

The boys are adolescents and their increasing maturity is physical as well as mental. This period in one's life is also the awakening of the ability to procreate, and is seen as the three stand momentarily before one of the farm pens:

> The ferment of the hogpen, deepest of blacks and heaviest of oils, so stuffed and enriched their nostrils that as one they slowed against the fence and looked in. Small as the light was, on all its edges the chopped muck shone like coal. Jimmy slid his hands inside his overalls against his naked body; becoming aware of what he had done, he thoughtfully withdrew it. Straining to see into the darkness of the shed they could just discern the close-lying egglike forms of the hogs (95-96).

Of course it is to these "egglike"forms that the snake is later thrown, again combining life at its origins with the fact of death.

Possibly the symbol of the boys' involvement in the adult world is suggested by their shoes. Shoes are worn only in the chapel and as the boys walk back to the school. Being barefooted they feel more vividly the gravel path, the separation between life and death. Being young they also are more concerned and aware of this difference than adults might be. After the snake has been killed, all three have left their childhood behind and thus they realize their growth since "without consulting or imitation, all three had put their shoes on when they dressed; they walked

rather quickly, and they did not talk" (115).

Of course the major element in the story is Richard's realization that "death is finally inevitable and must recur over and over again, just as Christ's agony on the cross not only occurred at the certain moment in history but also takes place, again and again, every Easter."[7] Richard will also die, of course, and he identifies the death of Christ with his own death. This realization becomes the weight of the cross:

> The day lifted ahead of him very long and hard, a huge unshaded hill. The climbing of it would go on in the heavy sun without rest throughout this livelong day and forever so long as he might be alive and there at the top there was dying: His; His; so hard and so long. It won't be over till sundown, he said to himself. Such a terrible and cold heaviness distended in the pit of his stomach, and his knees became suddenly so weak, that for a few moments he had to lean against a tree, and found it difficult to breathe. He had never before known such heaviness or such cold, crushing sorrow. "Forgive!" he whispered, barely able to bring the word out: "Forgive! O God forgive! But the cold and enormous heaviness only increased, and the sadness now seemed more than his soul could endure (118).

Richard leans against the tree, possibly a symbol of God

[7]Ohlin, pp. 188-189.

or religion; but this fails to aid the boy. He runs ahead to catch up with the others who had continued ahead of him. For a moment the young boy thinks of the death of the snake in the hogpen. This grizzly thought triggers his memory back six years: "(The phrase jumped at him): (Who had said that? His mother. '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.') 'Ever any more,' he heard his quiet voice repeat within him; and within the next moment he ceased to think of the snake with much pain" (120). Richard thus appears to rationalize both deaths, and he is released from the psychological burden enabling him to continue, both physically and emotionally as a mature individual: "When the boys turned from the sty he followed them toward the Main Building carrying, step by step with less difficulty, the diminishing weight in his soul and body, his right hand hanging with a feeling of subtle enlargement at his thigh, his left hand sustaining, in exquisite protectiveness, the bodiless shell which rested against his heart" (120).

The difficulty of correlating God with death appears to be resolved for Richard, but the reader of The Morning Watch will have difficulty with the progression toward this conclusion. It is an incomplete picture. Gaps

are left that are possibly indicative of the reason for the failure of the book. Perhaps an argument could be made that the author was purposely ambiguous because of an intensely personal concern with the problem. In the next work to be discussed, "A Mother's Tale," Agee employed the fable as a literary device. Possibly this method allowed the author to more objectively deal with the themes of death and religion.

Chapter III

"A Mother's Tale"

Among Agee's few finished short stories is "A Mother's Tale," written in 1951. Surprisingly, this story was originally printed in Harper's Bazaar. It is doubtful the editors of the magazine realized the meaning as the story is not similar to the writing normally found in this type of publication.

Although a horror story, "A Mother's Tale" does not depend upon suspense. The action is somewhat limited and the reader knows what the result will be after reading the first few paragraphs. The "mother" is a cow, and her tale is the explanation given her progeny concerning the destination of the older steers as they are herded off to market. Her answer takes the form of a legend concerning one who escaped the slaughterhouse. He is called, in an apotheosized manner, "The One Who Got Away."

Upton Sinclair's The Jungle might have been even more effective if it had employed the viewpoint presented in this story. Describing the herd moving off in the distance for example, Agee presents a startling gothic vignette:

> In one place a twist of the air revealed the trembling fabric of many backs; but it was only along the near edge of the mass that individual animals were discernible, small in a driven frieze, walking fast, stumbling and recovering, tossing their armed heads, or opening their skulls heavenward in one of those cries which reached the hillside long after the jaws were shut.[1]

This segment, apart from setting a mood, is also a synopsis of the entire story. Being dead at the time of the retelling, the steer has long been silenced; but his tale, spoken "into the wind," now reaches our ears.

Beginning with the journey on the train, the horror builds as the reader transposes himself with the animal: "'For the first time in his life,'" the mother says of the steer, "'he became very badly frightened, he didn't know why. But he was sure, at that moment, that there was something dreadfully to be afraid of'" (227).

With an ominous fear and a death-like image hurtling past, the animal relates the occasional stopping in open country when "'something black would go by, very close, and so fast it couldn't be seen'" (229). Sometimes this "black thing," another train of course, would contain

[1]Robert Fitzgerald, ed., The Collected Short Prose of James Agee (Boston, 1968), p. 222. Henceforth, page numbers of quotations will follow the quotation in parentheses.

people:

> "These cars...[had] many glass windows like those in a house; and...they were as full of human beings as the car he was in was full of our kind. And one of these people looked into his eyes and smiled, as if he liked him, or as if he knew only too well how hard the journey was.
> ...Only they were sitting down at their ease, not standing. And the one who smiled was eating" (229).

The unfortunate animal sees compassion, but by placing the man in the dining car, the author implies an ironic misconception: perhaps the diner is actually savoring the animal's death.

The passing of the cattle and passenger trains is meant to show that inhabitants of both go through a similar life's "journey." "'So by his account,'" she says, "'it happens to them, too'" (229). The humans will not, of course, arrive at a slaughterhouse. But they will ultimately meet death.

Packing creatures into a train to be slaughtered is suggestive of the Nazi extermination procedures. However, other than similarities in emotional tensions, the story does not retain this correlation as a theme.

The animals are personifications. But rather than merely to provoke empathy, Agee employs this device to point out a particular human philosophy of life and death with which he disagrees. In The Morning Watch, Richard,

at one point, remembers with bitterness the admonition by his mother that we should accept submissively to the unhappiness in life since it is God's will.[2] In "A Mother's Tale," this view is also given attention by the animals as they approach the slaughterhouse:

> "And now as they looked back over all that was past, all their sorrows and bewilderments seemed so little and so fleeting that, from the simplest among them even to the most wise, they could feel only the kind of amused pity we feel toward the very young when, with the first thing that hurts them or they are forbidden, they are sure there is nothing kind or fair in all creation, and carry on accordingly, raving and grieving as if their hearts would break" (232).

This quotation is, of course, both cynical and sarcastic. In the context of the story, the world is actually cruel and unfair. There will be no reward for the suffering of these animals, only the permanence of death. Thus, Richard in The Morning Watch is justified in asking his question on the meaning of unhappiness in the world, a question which James Agee desperately attempted to answer.

As the cattle move past the close fences and into the slaughterhouse, the steer realizes the eternal presence of

[2] James Agee, The Morning Watch (Boston, 1951). p. 42.

death. He sees it just as suredly striking his parents and children as it will him. None escape. "'And now he was between two fences so narrowly set that he brushed either fence with either flank, and walked alone, seeing just one other ahead of him, and knowing of just one other behind him, and for a moment the strange thought came to him, that the one ahead was his father, and that the one behind was the son he had never begotten'" (233). Cynically, Agee places human religious rationalization within the mind of the animal. "'It stole over him,'" the mother relates, "'like the feeling of a slow cool wind, that he was being guided toward some still more wonderful reward or revealing, up ahead, which he could not of course imagine, but he was sure it was being held in store for him alone'" (234).

But dismay quickly replaces his religious ecstasy. At the top of the trough the animal meets a "Thor" that is not ungodlike in his power and bearing:

> "...And there he saw Him. A little bridge ran crosswise above the fences. He stood on this bridge with His feet as wide apart as He could set them. He wore spattered trousers but from the belt up He was naked and as wet as rain. Both arms were raised high above His head and in both hands He held an enormous Hammer. With a grunt which was hardly like the voice of a human being, and with all His strength, He brought this Hammer down into the forehead of our friend: who, in a blinding blazing, heard from his own mouth the beginning of a gasping sigh; then there was only darkness" (234-235).

He stands on a bridge separating him from the flow of life and is clothed with the blood of his victims. Speaking with an inhuman sound he brings his weapon down to the forehead and into the brain. Capitalization is commonly used in denoting a deity, and for all practical purposes, "The Man" is a deity. He has the power of life and death. The author also implies that as man is to this animal, so is God to man. Like the steer, we gaze upward at the omnipotent God with an awe based usually on fear. We are not speaking here of the benevolent Supreme Being, but of the Old Testament God of Wrath. The "Hammer," also capitalized, could represent the abstraction Death; it is the instrument used by God to take away life.

While being stripped of his hide, the steer breaks away and escapes the slaughterhouse. Returning to the prairie, the steer also becomes a religious symbol: a scourged messiah. The mother says "'that with his naked face, and his savage eyes, and that beard and the hide lying off his bare shoulders like shabby clothing, he looked almost human'" (238). "'He came up out of the East,'" she says, "'...and in his broken forehead [was] the mark of the Hammer...like the socket for a third eye'" (237). The "extra eye" symbolizes a knowledge no living creature should possess. He begins relating his experience but noting doubting Thomases, "'invited them

to examine his wounded heels and the pulsing wound in his head as closely as they pleased'" (239). Later the mother comments: "'Some suppose even that he may have died of his sorrow and his concern for us'" (239).

But if Agee meant the animal to represent a messiah, what was his purpose? Among other things, Christ spoke of peace on earth and the existence of an after-life. Here there is only suffering culminating with death: "'We are brought into this life only to be victims; and there is no other way for us unless we save ourselves,'" he claims. "'Never be taken. Never be driven. Let those who can, kill Man. Let those who cannot, avoid him'" (241). Rather than a model of Christ, the steer is more of a second messiah. He has come to save by warning. He seeks to prevent the manipulation of lives.

Although the steer is long dead, the mother says there are insurgents supposedly hiding out on the prairie. They are followers of "The One Who Got Away," and like the biblical insubordinate, Cain, they carry upon their foreheads the mark of defiance. "'I know there are some who say that a hollow at the center of the forehead--a sort of shadow of the Hammer's blow--is a sign,'" she says, "'of very special ability'" (242).

The young calves are satisfied. They wander off presumptuously planning how to kill "The Man With The

Hammer." Others, comprehending less, indicate the probable reaction from future generations: "'What is it, darling?'" asks the mother. The youngest animal nudges her questioningly and says: "'What's a train?'" (243).

The story is a recapitulation of the philosophy in Permit Me Voyage. Occasional lines are even duplications. Compare the statement of the steer attempting to gain converts: "'For if even a few do not hear me, or disbelieve me, we are all betrayed'" (240), with the narrator of "Sonnet IV" remarking: "'Tis mine to touch with deathlessness their clay: / And I shall fail, and join those I betray."[3]

We are all betrayed suggests Agee. The poet states man shall fail and become another betrayer. But in "A Mother's Tale," the steer is given an opportunity to succeed by promoting revolt. We are duped by religion. "Death is your nation,"[4] Agee writes to God in his book of poetry. A Supreme Being exists, but he is an unsympathetic entity. Religion thus makes us self-complacent about death. It is a delusion that leads to the vain hopefulness shown in the thoughts of the creatures about

[3]Robert Fitzgerald, ed., The Collected Poems of James Agee (Boston, 1968), p. 38.

[4]Ibid., p. 28.

to be slaughtered:

> "Even the sharp ones, who knew very well it had all really happened, began to figure that everything up to now had been made so full of pain only so that all they had come to now might seem all the sweeter and the more glorious. Some of the oldest and deepest were even of a mind that all the puzzle and tribulation of the journey had been sent us as a kind of harsh trying or proving of our worthiness; and that it was entirely fitting and proper that we could earn our way through to such rewards as these, only through suffering, and through being patient under pain which was beyond our understanding; and that now at the last, to those who had borne all things well, all things were made known: for the mystery of suffering stood revealed in joy" (232).

The "oldest and deepest" cling desperately to traditional thinking. But to James Agee, their eternal life is actually an eternal death.

Chapter IV

A Death in the Family

The Pulitzer Prize-winning novel A Death in the Family was published after the death of James Agee. Besides the manuscript of this novel, Agee left several short scenes which were not within the basic time sequence of the novel itself. The editors of Agee's publishing company finally decided to place these segments, which were ultimately printed in italics, after Parts I and II in the final version of the book. Although this could present some difficulties in a scholarly interpretation of the novel, tracing the themes of death and religion will not be appreciably affected.

According to a letter written to Father Flye in 1948, Agee had already begun to work on what eventually would be A Death in the Family:

> I think I'd better not talk much about the piece of writing. A novel, short but longer than I had foreseen or thought best for it, about my first six years, ending the day of my father's burial. I read you the little I had done of it. On the whole, I feel hopeful about it....[1]

Probably Agee continued to add to this manuscript for the remaining seven years of his life. A Death in the Family

[1] The Letters of James Agee to Father Flye (New York, 1962), pp. 170-171.

has received by far the most critical acclaim and appears to be more polished than either The Morning Watch or "A Mother's Tale," both of which were published after Agee began A Death in the Family.

A Death in the Family consists of three parts: Part I illustrates the life of the Follett family, which is composed of the thirty-six year-old father Jay, his wife Mary, and their two children, Rufus and Catherine. Near the end of this section, Jay is called away to his father's deathbed. Part II begins with the news that on Jay's return trip there was an automobile accident which took the young man's life. Mary's family--her parents, aunt and brother--immediately attempt to protect her from the tragedy, and it is on their thoughts and reactions that Agee places most emphasis. Part III encompasses the period of time immediately preceding, and the day of the funeral. As Agee indicated in the letter to Father Flye, it is at this point that the novel ends.

The major occurrence in A Death in the Family, Jay's death, is apparently employed as a device to elicit responses from the characters that explain their way of thinking much as Robert Browning portrays the speakers in his dramatic monologues in a situation that is indicative of their life's philosophy. Dwight Macdonald states that Jay's death "is conceived of in a most un-American way,

not so much a catastrophe for the victim as a mystery, and at the same time an illumination for the survivors."[2] But the adult mourners, Mary and her family, dwell not so much on Jay's death as on long-standing personal problems and conflicts that are revealed during this period of crisis. Thus, it is a period of illumination, but for the reader rather than for the characters themselves. As Peter Ohlin points out: "In terms of the people involved, the novel is curiously static: they do not change and they do not develop. Death brings no sudden maturation; it simply changes their situations."[3]

Just as Agee uses Jay's death as a means to reveal the characters, he views similarly the death that did not occur. Jay's trip to his father's deathbed proves unnecessary. But before it is realized that the older Mr. Follett will not die, Jay's alcoholic brother, Ralph, waits through the death vigil for his father and contemplates the relationship between himself and his family:

> He began to realize he was bringing [his mother] no comfort, that she was not leaning on him, that just as he had always feared, she did not really love him. ...He felt that she was

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[2]Dwight Macdonald, Against the American Grain (New York, 1962), p. 143.

[3]Peter Ohlin, Agee (New York, 1966), p. 211.

> not even sorry for him; he felt slobbering and fat, the way she looked at him.[4]

Ralph Follett has apparently long felt this way, a feeling which has perhaps induced his alcoholism. As an escape from the unhappy life of the present, he retreats to his childhood. Sympathy and attention are bestowed on a child so he acts the part: "He leaned against the cabin wall, uncorked the bottle, wrapped his mouth over its mouth as ravenously as a famished baby takes the nipple, and tilted straight up" (67). He has just left the family for a moment to go outside for a drink. Losing his balance, the man stumbles against the building and bumps his head. Back inside, his mother and wife inspect the wound: "When they agreed that it was a mean lump but needed no further attention, he felt, suddenly, sad, and as little as a child, and he wished he were" (67). Ralph is the youngest in the family and has never adjusted to the change of status adulthood has brought. He views the possible death of his father as a method which will determine his usefulness not only as a son, but also as a human:

> And here tonight it comes like a test, like a trial, one of the times in a man's life when he is needed, and can be some good, just being a man. But I'm not a man. I'm a baby. Ralph is the baby. Ralph is the baby (70).

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[4]James Agee, A Death in the Family (New York, 1957), p. 63. Henceforth, page numbers of quotations will follow the quotation in parentheses.

Ralph thinks little of the affection he may or may not have for his parent. To him the tragedy of death is smothered by his own overwhelming personal problems. One critic has mentioned that "although Jay Follett literally loses his life, it is his brother who is truly dead."[5] Thus, unlike Agee characters dealt with in previous works, Ralph's struggle is not to comprehend the reason for the fact of death, but to overcome a death-in-life.

Alfred Kazin states that Jay's personality "actually comes through better than any of the living, for he is the single fact outside them to which they all respond as one."[6] But Jay is never completely understood. His personality remains almost entirely hidden, and there are difficulties he has had which are never completely explained.[7] Like his brother, Jay has had a drinking problem. Apparently it is under control at the time of the book, but it occurs to several of the characters that perhaps Jay's accident resulted partially from too high an alcohol content in the driver's blood.

[5]Kenneth Seib, James Agee: Promise and Fulfillment (Pittsburgh, 1968), p. 88.

[6]Alfred Kazin, Contemporaries (Boston, 1962), p. 187.

[7]Jay has previously worked in the Powell River Valley, possibly as a miner in this coal region. He is now employed by his father-in-law, perhaps in a gift job given to a son-in-law with little educational background.

Jay is a sensitive individual who, although having deep love for his wife and children, sometimes seems to yearn for bachelor days and the solitude which they brought. He is disappointed that none of his friends are present in the tavern where he and his six year-old son Rufus stop for a moment on the way home from a movie; but Jay still enjoys the convivial stag atmosphere. Strangely, Rufus does not intrude into his father's reverie. Perhaps it is because the young boy knows when to keep quiet; and besides, he enjoys the camaraderie with his father.

During the pleasant May evenings, Jay and Rufus take frequent walks since they are then free from distractions and they enjoy the quiet:

> Sometimes on these evenings his father would hum a little and the humming would break open into a word or two, but he never finished even a part of a tune, for silence was even more pleasurable, and sometimes he would say a few words, of very little consequence, but would never seek to say much, or to finish what he was saying, or to listen for a reply; for silence again was even more pleasurable (20).

Later, Jay looks forward to the quiet trip to his father's even though he is on a depressing mission. He leaves his wife behind at home with the peach tree in the background as it "shone like a celestial sentinel" (38) and drives off into the darkness.

Jay, his immediate family and in-laws reside in Knoxville, Tennessee. Mary's family is intelligent and probably well-educated. Mary's brother Andrew is an artist who, at the age of sixteen, thought of himself as another Shelley. He is presently a sensitive twenty-three year-old who reacts very emotionally to Jay's death, for he greatly admired his brother-in-law. Within Andrew there is already a great deal of turmoil which has developed from his personal struggle with religion. He now feels that Jay's death was unjust and overtly places the blame upon God. "God, if You exist," Andrew screams within himself, "come here and let me spit in Your face" (166). On the day of Jay's burial, an odious Catholic priest arrives to give the service. Impatiently waiting in the living room of the Follett residence, Father Jackson sits in Jay's chair and glares condescendingly at the two children, Rufus and Catherine. Jay, it appears, had not been baptized and the clergyman refuses to bury him using the entire religious ceremony. Quickly realizing that this man is the epitome of all that he despises, Andrew becomes more than indignant:

> "And they call themselves Christians. Bury a man who's a hundred times the man he'll ever be, in his stinking, swishing black petticoats, and a hundred times as good a man too, and 'No, there are certain requests and recommendations I cannot make Almighty God for the repose of this soul, for he never stuck his head under a holy-water tap'" (337).

Andrew's candidness about the situation is explicit: "'I tell you, Rufus,'" he says to his nephew, "'it's enough to make a man puke up his soul'" (337). What the artist apparently objects to is the use of religion to gain a commanding position over others, such as the priest does. Andrew also appears to dislike the superciliousness he often finds in religious individuals as well as their propensity toward psychological flagellation, such as the self-punishment Mary undergoes and the blame from God she acknowledges for sins which are probably non-existent. Andrew would be more inclined to accept a formless religion in which there is free-expression without the "'genuflecting, and ducking and bowing and scraping, and basting...with signs of the Cross, and all that disgusting hocus-pocus'" (337).

His description to Rufus of Jay being buried is both a final sadness for the death and a hope on Andrew's part for the afterlife in which he so desperately wants to believe:

> "There were a lot of clouds," his uncle said, and continued to look straight before him, "but they were blowing fast, so there was a lot of sunshine too. Right when they began to lower your father into the ground, into his grave, a cloud came over and there was a shadow just like iron, and a perfectly magnificent butterfly settled on the--coffin, just rested there, right over the breast, and stayed there, just barely making his wings breathe, like a heart."

> "...He stayed there all the way down, Rufus," he said. "He never stirred, except just to move his wings that way, until it grated against the bottom like a--rowboat. And just when it did the sun came out just dazzling bright and he flew up out of that--hole in the ground, straight up into the sky, so high I couldn't even see him any more" (334-35).

The six year-old Rufus understands none of this, of course. To Andrew's question of whether or not it was miraculous, Rufus ponders how the bright colors of a butterfly could be miraculous. But the occurrence is brought up more for Andrew's sake than for Rufus', as the butterfly probably represents the resurrection of Jay's soul and its absorption into the abyss of the sky.

Thus, for Andrew, the death of Jay has strengthened his desire to believe in an afterlife, but there yet remains his antipathy towards traditional religion. Andrew's religious struggle apparently has not been completely resolved.

Hannah Lynch, a spinster of some three-score years, lives in Knoxville with Mary's parents and brother. She is a spry, sensitive, intellectual woman who avidly reads her copy of The Nation even though she must hold it two inches from her face. The death of Jay causes within her a religious conflict. Like other members of her family, Hannah has serious reservations about religion. She is inclined toward a belief, but feels it

should not intrude upon the necessary acknowledgements of life's vicissitudes--such as death. "Your turn now, poor child" (132), Hannah thinks as Mary begins to realize fully what the death of a loved one can be. To Hannah, this is a repetition of the death of her own mother some thirty years previous. Death is a maturing of the soul, Hannah feels: Mary's "soul is beginning to come of age" (133). The older woman feels that the acknowledging of death is part of life, and a necessity to all living things so that they may understand the meaning of life. She wants Mary to grasp this and learn from it, but her niece reaches out to religion for aid. "Oh, not yet, Hannah whispered desperately to herself" (134). But the two women kneel down at the kitchen table and Hannah thinks of how prayer can be incorrectly employed. Immediately as she feels a revulsion for this use of religion, the older woman experiences a conflict that grows within her, a conflict between believing and not believing:

> I believe nothing. Nothing whatever. "Our Father," [Hannah] heard herself say, in a strange voice; and Mary, innocent of her terror, joined in the prayer. And as they continued, and Hannah heard more and more clearly than her own the young, warm, earnest, faithful, heartsick voice, her moment of terrifying unbelief became a remembrance, a temptation successfully resisted through God's grace (135).

Although the doubt remains in the back of her mind, Hannah feels more deeply religious as the night continues. The relinquishment of logic to the peacefulness of ethereal dependance is too appealing to resist. When her brother, Joel, repeats his skepticism, Hannah thinks to herself: "How you manage not to have religious faith... is beyond me" (176). She remains with Mary that night and her sleep is pleasant as she lies back, folding her arms over her chest in a death-like slumber: "No lines were left in her face; she might have been a young woman. Her lips were parted, and each breath was a light sigh" (212). It is apparent that for Hannah, religion has become a comforting force which, Agee may be suggesting, has lessened the burden of the fact of death.

Joel, Mary's father, has the least amount of religious convictions. In earlier years a severe estrangement had disrupted the relationship between him and Mary over her "damned piety" (142) as he terms it. Joel had tried to dissuade the marriage from taking place, but she had gone ahead anyway. Now that his son-in-law has had an accident, Joel feels "respect, affection, deep general sadness. No personal grief whatever" (142). But he nevertheless is worried about his daughter and on the night of Jay's death takes her aside:

> "...I imagine you're thinking about your religion."
> "I am," she said, with a certain cool pride.
> "Well, more power to you," he said. "I know you've got a kind of help I could never have. Only one thing: take the greatest kind of care you don't just--crawl into it like a hole and hide in it."
> "I'll take care," she said (156).

To Joel, the fact of Jay's death merely reinforces his cynical view of life. "'As flies to wanton boys...'" (171) he quotes at one point. Joel relies upon his intellect for the answers, and when Mary tells him he must have faith, Joel replies: "'That's the word. That's the one makes a mess of everything, far's I'm concerned. Bounces up like a jack-in-the-box. Solves everything. Well it doesn't solve anything for me, for I haven't got any'" (194). Probably with his family watching him intently, Joel continues on, perhaps feeling that he must make his beliefs explicitly clear:

> "I'm not exactly an atheist, you know. Least I don't suppose I am. Seems as unfounded to me to say there isn't a God as to say there is. You can't prove it either way. But that's it: I've got to have proof. And on anything can't be proved, be damned if I'll jump either way. All I can say is, I hope you're wrong but I just don't know" (194-95).

In spite of conflicting religious beliefs, the accident causes Joel to come closer to his daughter than he has been for a long time. Joel's heart goes

out to her, and her sorrow brings to mind complications in his own life:

> Goddamn it! God damn such a life! She's too young for this. And thinking of that, it occurred to him that it was at just her age that his own life had had its throat twisted, and not by death, but by her own birth and her brother's (154).

Again Agee merely hints at deeper problems in the lives of his characters. Perhaps Joel refers to an ambitious beginning in business that was curtailed with the birth of his children. Earlier he had mentioned "the steady thirty-years' destruction of all of his own hopes" (142). But the reference is never completely explained. However, Agee makes it clear that Joel looks upon life--and perhaps death--as the fate of man, and the best solution is to accept them both with stoicism.

Catherine Lynch, Mary's aged mother, is in failing health with poor hearing and "damaged, merry eyes" (74). She sees the tragedy with more concern for her daughter's welfare than for the sadness of a young father's death. Mary suggests a somewhat esoteric epitaph, and her mother questions whether anyone else would understand, explaining to no avail that such an inscription would be viewed by the general public.

Because of her age and health, Catherine is close to death herself, and life is something seen through a backward-looking glass:

> How swiftly life goes! she thought. It seems only yesterday that she was my little Mary, or that Jay first came to call. She looked up from her mending into the silent light and shadow, and the kind of long and profound sighing of the heart flowed out of her which, excepting music, was her only way of yielding to sadness (143).

Catherine reacts without the personal involvement of her family, but with an objectivity capable only from a person who has accepted the inevitable fact of death.

Mary, Jay's wife, is first confronted with death in this novel after Jay has left for his father's deathbed. The possibility of the decease of Jay's father causes in Mary, as in Ralph, an evaluation of the relationship. Mary does not like her father-in-law and she thinks of the positive effects of his death: "And, it occurred to her, he'll no longer stand between me and Jay" (52). How Jay's father might have aggravated the marriage relationship is never made clear. But whatever the reason, Mary quickly maneuvers the death of her father-in-law into a position where it will hopefully assist her in resolving what she regards as the most pressing problem of her marriage--Jay's lack of religious belief:

> And Lord, if it be Thy will, that this sorrow must come upon my husband, then I most humbly beseech Thee in Thy mercy that through this tribulation Thou openest my husband's heart, and awake his dear soul, that he may find

> comfort in Thee that the world cannot give, and see Thee more clearly, and come to Thee. For there, Lord, as Thou knowest, and not in his poor father or my unworthy feelings, is the true, widening gulf between us (53).

Because it is so important to her, Mary probably exaggerates the problem, for Jay, unlike the members of Mary's own family, is reticent about religion: "She felt sure that [Jay] felt none of Andrew's anger and contempt and none of her father's irony, but it was very clear by his special quietness, when instances of it came up...that he did not like it" (53-54). Mary worries that the children will not be brought up Catholic, but there is little evidence that Jay would be against this. His reserve is interpreted by Mary as a threat to her religious plans, and she looks to God for justification:

> Lord God, she prayed, in anguish. Am I wrong? Show me if I am wrong, I beseech Thee. Show me what I am to do.
>
> But God showed her only what she knew already... (54).

Mary interprets her husband's reticence as a threat; but she judges God's response, which is strikingly similar, as an agreement with her plans.

To the death of her husband, Mary reacts emotionally, as would be expected. She is the least self-centered in thought and thinks mainly of Jay rather than invoking personal conflicts or remembrances which characterize

the reactions of other members of her family. In helping her accept the death of her husband, Mary's religious beliefs have probably indicated God's will as the reason for Jay's accident. However, there remains the possibility that Jay was drunk and thus is partly responsible for his own death. Momentarily Mary panics, and then remembers that Andrew, after returning with the body, did not mention any alcohol:

> No, she thought, [Andrew] wouldn't lie to me if it were so. No, I won't even ask it. I won't even imagine it. I just don't see how I could bear to live if that were so.
>
> But there he was, all that day, with Ralph. He must have. Well, he probably did. That was no part of the promise. But not really drunk. Not so he couldn't--navigate. Drive well.
>
> No.
>
> Oh, no.
>
> No I won't even dishonor his dear memory by asking. Not even Andrew in secret. No, I won't (184-85).

Thus, Mary eliminates from her mind the possibility that Jay's death could have occurred for any reason other than an act of God.

But there yet remains Mary's personal sorrow and pain which is, for even the most religious individual, difficult to bear. It is during the early morning hours after the accident that Mary lies in bed, and begins to comprehend the ubiquitousness of her experience:

> Mary lay watching the ceiling:
> Who may abide it, she whispered.
> Silently.
> One by one, million by million,
> in the prescience of dawn, every
> leaf in that part of the world
> was moved (212).

Perhaps the leaves in this passage suggest the myriad of individuals who have also undergone or will undergo the loss of a loved one as has Mary; it is a moment in which she becomes more and more aware of the universality of death and sorrow.

Mary, of course, also refers to God's will as the reason for cessation of life. Inasmuch as God's will is beyond man's intellectual reach, the explanation of the existence of death produces, for Mary, no philosophical conflict.

Rufus Follett, the character around whom the story is structured, is six years old, and although he talks very little, he ponders greatly:

> ...I am taken in and put to bed.
> Sleep, soft smiling, draws me unto
> her: and those receive me, who
> quietly treat me, as one familiar
> and well-beloved in that home:
> but will not, oh, will not, not
> now, not ever; but will not ever
> tell me who I am (8).[8]

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[8]This excerpt from A Death in the Family is italicized in the text. For obvious reasons, the underlining is here omitted.

Plainly, this young boy is reaching out into the world with a mind tinged with just enough understanding to make him wonder. The comprehension of death proves to be one of his major obstacles.

However, as a prerequisite to the understanding of death, one must first be aware of the existence of life, particularly the life of another individual. Rufus is found at one point in his bedroom watching the outside leaves move in slow motion against the window. He sees through the glass that there is another window across from him, but he cannot see into it. Only the curtain against the other pane of glass is visible; all else is impenetrable. Possibly this is symbolic of Rufus's attempt to see into the mind of his father which is represented by the other window. The window looks into the mind, or, by extension, into the soul. Rufus sees only the curtain, however, just as it is impossible to traverse completely the space between two human beings.

Between the two windows and intertwined through the leaves between them is darkness. The young boy feels the darkness and thinks of its pervasive power: "My dear darkness," Rufus says:

> Under your shelter all things come and go.
> Children are violent and valiant, they run and they shout like the

> winners of impossible victories, but before long now, even like me, they will be brought into their sleep.
>
> Those who are grown great talk with confidence and are at all times skillful to serve and to protect, but before long even like me, will be taken in and put to bed (82).[9]

The traditional association between sleep and death in this passage suggests again the inevitability of death. Rufus thinks of darkness and its omnipotence; the power frightens him for death takes on monstrous shapes, especially to a child. At the window, "the curtain sighed as powers unspeakable passed through it" (85) and came eye to eye with the young boy. "Darkness said: You hear the man you call your father: how can you ever fear?" (84). Rufus screams for his father and is thankful when Jay comes to protect him.

One of Rufus's major enjoyments is listening to his parents sing old traditional songs. Although he cannot completely understand the lyrics, his favorite is "Swing low, sweet cherryut":

> A cherryut was a sort of a beautiful wagon because home was too far to walk, a long, long way, but of course it was like a cherry, too, only he could not understand how a beautiful wagon and

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[9]Italicized in the text.

> a cherry could be like each other, but they were. Home was a long, long way. Much too far to walk and you can only come home when God sends the cherryut for you (98).[10]

Early in the novel there is the possibility of the arrival of a "cherryut" as Rufus begins his attempt at comprehending death with the news of the sickness of his grandfather. At his questioning, Mary resorts to the traditional view of God taking away the sick individual and putting him to sleep. Rufus, in trying to understand this difficult concept, relates it to the death of some family-owned rabbits by dogs who broke into the pens. The ensuing argument he has with his mother is the crux of the author's philosophical pondering that has been discussed in the preceding chapters of this thesis:

> "Why did God let the dogs get in?"
> "We don't know, Rufus, but it must be a part of His plan we will understand someday."
> "What good would it do Him?"
> "Children, don't dawdle. It's almost school time."
> "What good would it do Him, Mama, to let the dogs in?"
> "I don't know, but someday we'll understand, Rufus, if we're very patient. We mustn't trouble ourselves with these things we can't understand. We just have to be sure that God knows best."
> "I bet they sneaked in when He wasn't looking," Rufus said eagerly.

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[10]Italicized in the text.

> 'Cause He sure wouldn't have let them
> if He'd been there. Didn't they, Mama?
> Didn't they?" (56-57).

Mary goes on to explain the falseness of this logic by telling her son that God sees everything, and therefore another reason must exist for allowing death; but, of course, she has no final answer and the argument fades away into the recesses of the boy's mind, only to resurface at a later date.

After Jay's death, Rufus and his mother again confront each other. However, when Mary attempts to explain the death of his father, Rufus seemingly understands immediately and shows no concern for a religious explanation. Rufus realizes that his father will not return, that he is dead, but yet the significance is too much for him: "He said to himself: dead, dead, but all he could do was see and hear..." (252).

Later, Mary's Aunt Hannah attempts to explain the death. She begins with the automobile accident and, halfway through asks if everything is understood. Rufus and his sister look at her blankly. "I suppose I've got to finish, Hannah thought; I've gone this far" (260)[11].

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[11]This phrase is almost precisely the same as that spoken by the cow in "A Mother's Tale" as she tried to explain to the calves why the steers failed to return.

But when Hannah has finished, the children still fail to see why their father is not going to return. Hannah finally states that it is "because God wants him with Him. That's all. ...Rufus realized much more clearly than before that he really could not and would not come home again: because of God" (262). Rufus then asks what the word "concussion" means. Hannah tells him that the doctor stated the concussion killed his father, and Rufus immediately decides it was not God but rather the concussion that is the cause of his father's death.

Some scholars have stated that A Death in the Family traces a psychological maturation by Rufus. He supposedly learns the meaning of death and is mentally older at the end of the novel. But it seems apparent that Rufus does not change appreciably. He is as confused after the burial, talking with his Uncle Andrew, as he was earlier in the novel attempting to comprehend the possible death of his grandfather. Like the adults, Rufus at first reacts to the death in a selfish manner. He hopes to exploit the loss of his father into acceptance by his peer group. When his friends reject his claim of being an orphan, Rufus makes a second attempt on the grounds of having at least one dead parent. This, of course, fails as well, and the child dejectedly returns to the house.

Although the relatives react to Jay's death with a certain amount of egoism, it is doubtful the author meant seriously to malign them.[12] Rather, their seemingly selfish attitudes point out what Peter Ohlin describes as "the impossibility of comprehending death in human terms."[13] By necessity, the confrontation these individuals have with death causes them to fall back on thoughts over which they have control as well as understanding. To Andrew there is his apparent long-standing hatred of hypocrisy and superstition which is superimposed over a genuine regard for Jay. Mary and Hannah generally fall back on their religion as protection while Joel (who, quite fittingly, is the only indivdual the night of the accident who fails to perceive the ghost of Jay returning momentarily to the house) becomes more adamant in his agnostic position.

It can be seen that the characters in A Death in the Family form a spectrum of varying degrees of religious belief. Religion, of course, can be a solution to the acceptance of the fact of death. Certainly this was the

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[12]We are here not speaking of the relatives whose only appearance was at the funeral, those that peered ghoulishly around corners with the hope of viewing the bereaved in an exciting moment of grief.

[13]Ohlin, p. 210.

method employed by Mary, and to a lesser degree, Hannah. Joel, although not religious, did not appear to be concerned with the problem of accepting death. But for Andrew, who was unsure like his father, and yet was leaning toward the views of his aunt and sister, the problem was very real. Possibly Agee meant to place within A Death in the Family the varying views which he had considered throughout his life and works. Although Rufus is considered the main character in A Death in the Family, and Agee himself mentions the six year-old as being a model of himself, the character Andrew appears to retain the religious conflicts which existed within the author. At the end of A Death in the Family Andrew is left with a great deal of desire to believe, but yet there remains with him, as with Agee, the inevitable conflict between God and death. In summation, the possible result of Agee's struggle may be illustrated with the following excerpt concerning the young Rufus as he looks from his crib:

> He swiftly turned his head and stared through the bars at the head of the crib. He could not see what stood there. He swiftly turned again. Whatever it might be had dodged, yet more swiftly: stood once more, still, forever, beyond and behind his hope of seeing (86).

Just as the young Rufus was unable to determine what stood there away from him, so was James Agee unable to "see" and thus resolve his life-long conflict between the fact of death and the existence of a supposedly benevolent God.

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