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RESTORING JAMES AGEE: A TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF THE ORIGINAL AND  
RESTORED VERSIONS OF JAMES AGEE'S *A DEATH IN THE FAMILY*

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Bachelor of Arts in English

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RESTORING JAMES AGEE: A TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF THE ORIGINAL AND  
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MATTHEW P. ROTHER

ABSTRACT

James Agee's *A Death in the Family*, the semiautobiographical book chronicling the death of a young boy's father in 1916, was published posthumously in 1957, winning the Pulitzer Prize for Literature the following year. The book was nearly complete at the time of the author's death in 1955, and for nearly half a century editor David McDowell's version of the book was the accepted one. Throughout the intervening years, critics took note of the myriad shortcomings of this edition. McDowell's edition utilizes a previously published sketch, "Knoxville: Summer 1915," as the prologue and presents events out of sequence in a truncated form reliant upon earlier versions of the manuscript. Written clues left by Agee clearly indicate this is not what he intended, and in 2007, Michael A. Lofaro, after several years of extensive effort, published the expanded and chronologically ordered version of *A Death in the Family* utilizing a piece entitled "Dream Sequence" as its prologue. This version of the text is much more in line with Agee's desires for his book and remedies issues of cohesion and thematic/character development problematic in the earlier text. *A Death in the Family* is the culmination of James Agee's writings, much of which dealt with the death of his father, and although subjective in nature, is the most effective in assisting Agee in coming to terms with his loss and providing a lasting memorial to his father.

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## Preface

James Rufus Agee was born on November 27, 1909 in Knoxville, Tennessee to Laura Tyler and Hugh James (Jay) Agee. Laura Tyler was born of northern parentage to a family described by Michael A. Lofaro in “The Life and Times of James Agee” as having been “well educated, thoroughly bourgeois, and progressive” (xxiv). In contrast, Jay Agee was from a rural family whose roots were in the Powell River Valley north of Knoxville. Although Lofaro is careful to emphasize that the Agees were not ignorant country folk, (*Rediscovered* xxiv) this urban/rural juxtaposition of the author’s parentage is one of the conflicts at the heart of his defining work, *A Death in the Family* (1957). Also inextricably linked with this urban/rural conflict are feelings of comfort within one’s surroundings and one’s self, combined with the potentially futile yearning to fully return, as described by James Agee, “all the way home.” While these themes are central to the novel, the death of Jay on May 18, 1916 and its effects on the author and his family as a

whole were instrumental in Agee's conception of the book and indeed much of his writing prior to it.

James Agee began work on his autobiographical novel that would later gain the title *A Death in the Family* in the late 1940's as evidenced in his March 2, 1948 letter to Father James Harold Flye, Agee's lifelong friend and mentor dating back to Agee's years as a student at St. Andrew's School from 1919-1925. In the letter Agee tells Flye of his plans for "A novel...about my first 6 years, ending the day of my father's burial" (*Flye* 170-171). Due to ongoing commitments in the realms of film criticism, screenwriting and other prose, combined with the series of heart attacks and angina that began to plague Agee in the early 1950's, Agee worked on *A Death in the Family* only sporadically over a period of seven years. However, the book was nearing completion by the spring of 1955. On May 11, 1955 Agee wrote his final letter to Father Flye stating that he hoped to "use this summer free [of other commitments] and finish my book" (*Flye* 229). This was not to be, however, as Agee died in a taxicab en route to his doctor five days later.

Upon his death, James Agee provided his family with an estate valued at less than \$500. Agee's third wife Mia, in order to help support herself and the author's three children, (one of whom was from a previous marriage) set up the James Agee Trust. Despite the pledges of donations from such luminaries as Charlie Chaplin, filmmaker John Huston and photographer Walker Evans, the trust, as noted by Hugh Davis, "initially raised less than two thousand dollars" (4). More direct action was necessary and David McDowell, Agee's lifelong friend and fellow St. Andrew's alumnus, was appointed head of the trust. McDowell immediately began to aggressively shop the manuscript of what would later be titled *A Death in the Family* to multiple publishers, but

none were willing to meet his demand for a \$2500 advance and stipulations regarding royalties (Davis 5). McDowell then “recruited novelist and ex-aviator Ivan Obolensky ...who had just inherited a sizable fortune” (Davis 6) to form their own publishing company, McDowell, Obolensky, Inc., in order to distribute *A Death in the Family*. McDowell paid the trust \$5000 for the manuscript, spending an equal amount on advertising in national publications and delayed the book’s release in order to secure reviews in New York and Chicago newspapers (Davis 6). Clearly McDowell was committed to the financial success of *A Death in the Family* both to provide for the Agee family and to make his and Obolensky’s investment worthwhile. McDowell’s edition of *A Death in the Family* was certainly that: by the early 1970’s it had sold over one million copies. In addition, it garnered the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1958.

In the introduction to the original edition of *A Death in the Family*, McDowell carefully eliminated his name from the proceedings, adopting instead a generic “the editors” to describe the process. He stated that the book “is presented here exactly as Agee wrote it...nothing has been eliminated” (McDowell ed. vii). Later evidence, however, indicates that this is not true. Lofaro points to a collection of papers purchased from the estate of McDowell in 1988 by the University of Tennessee that “made clear that the manuscript had undergone far more manipulation than the editors’ preface implied” (Lofaro ed. xii). The Agee Trust withheld these manuscripts until a change of directorship in 2002 when it was discovered that McDowell had “personally kept...and excluded from the archives of the trust two lengthy and previously unknown and named chapters of the novel...as well as drafts, outlines and correspondence” (xii-xiii). Lofaro

claims that Agee left a “contiguous manuscript at the time of his death” (xiii) that was later dispersed. Lofaro’s editorial process attempts to gather and coordinate Agee’s manuscripts and utilizes the author’s most current revisions at the time of his death.

Although McDowell acknowledged Agee as a “tireless and painstaking” (McDowell ed. viii) reviser of his work, in numerous cases, as noted by Lofaro, McDowell chose to rely upon earlier versions of the manuscript. McDowell also removed some of the country dialect attributed to Jay Agee in later versions of the manuscript. Through his omissions, sanitization and organization of the text, McDowell attempted to make the book as marketable as possible in the 1950’s literary climate given the failure of Agee’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, (1941) while still making *A Death in the Family* recognizable to Agee fans who might have expected something in the vein of the earlier work. Lofaro, in contrast, seems much more concerned with following the blueprint, imperfect as it was, left behind by Agee which specified a more autobiographical work. Lofaro also takes more ownership of his editorial choices by thoroughly chronicling his decisions, devoting nearly as many pages of appendices and notes in his edition as he does to the text itself and explaining and illustrating his process. Furthermore, Lofaro admits that “no one could assume to know Agee’s ultimate wishes for the novel” (Lofaro ed. xxiv) while McDowell attempts to deny any severe input in the compilation of the text. McDowell’s input is drastic enough that it verges into authorship, while Lofaro is content to let Agee speak for himself.

While authorial intention is certainly difficult to prove, Lofaro offers further compelling evidence in his accompanying materials to *A Death in the Family* favorable to his interpretation of the text. Among the papers kept by McDowell and purchased by The



University of Tennessee was an outline for a much larger autobiographical project that was to proceed chronologically:

The Ancestors.

(Culminate in my mother's and father's meeting in the dancing school.)

The Father and Mother.

(Ends with my birth: my father coming into the room for the first time.)

This book.

(Begins with my first remembrance; ends the evening of his burial.)

(Lofaro ed. xiv)

This outline proceeds in a chronological manner until its date of writing. Also bolstering Lofaro's claim for chronology is Agee's note attached to a possible introduction to this project as a whole, originally printed by Robert Fitzgerald in *The Collected Short Prose of James Agee*, (1968) in which the author states: "I find that I value my childhood and my father as they were, as well and exactly as I can remember and represent them, far beyond any transmutation of these matters which I have made or might ever make, into poetry or fiction" (xix). Agee seems to be commenting on the indirect approach regarding his literary canon to date and its ineffectiveness as a memorial. McDowell, in his presentation of the text, not only transmutes it, but his reliance upon earlier drafts and exclusions do not fit Agee's explicit desires to represent his childhood "as well and exactly as I can."

Agee echoes these words in an unfinished letter to his father from late 1948 or early 1949 describing the "failure in my life so far," (Lofaro ed. 573) presumably meaning as a person, an artist and in his desire to "recall and understand my life, as well as I can, and try to write it down as clearly and as well as I can" (573). Agee also wrote a letter to his mother at approximately the same time stating again his plan to write a book beginning with his first memories and ending the day of his father's burial (575). Here

again Agee reiterates his desire for clarity regarding his own experiences, asking his mother for help in filling in some of the gaps. There is no mention of a reply by Laura Agee to her son, but in a letter sent to one of her friends, Laura describes the McDowell edition of *A Death in the Family* as “a great and really universal elegy” (577). The book described by Agee was much more personal than the one read by his mother in 1957 further strengthening the argument for Lofaro’s contiguous restoration of the text.

For motives that will be argued and discussed at length throughout this essay, McDowell chose to use Agee’s sketch “Knoxville: Summer 1915” as a prologue to the book. A tripartite division, chronologically outlining the events which occurred from the day prior to Jay Agee’s death until his funeral follows. Parts One and Two conclude with italicized flashback portions containing bits of the author’s earliest childhood memories seemingly recalled in later childhood. In this format *A Death in the Family* won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1958. This was the accepted version for fifty years until Michael A. Lofaro published a “restored” and expanded version of the book with a new prologue generally referred to as “Dream Sequence,” with strict chronological ordering of the author’s recalled childhood from his earliest memories until his father’s funeral. This restored version of the text, with its new introduction and the inclusion of chapters previously excised by McDowell, more precisely follows Agee’s own explicitly outlined “maximum simple” (Agee in Lofaro xiv) plan for the book as a text of experience and does so with clarity absent from the earlier edition.

Both editions of the book ostensibly tell the same story from two separate points of view. Parts of the book are told from the protagonist of the book, Jay Agee’s son

Rufus' perspective based upon his childhood memories while others are presented based upon the narrator's supposition regarding the outlined events. Jay Agee is awoken in the middle of the night by a phone call from his drunken brother regarding the potentially life-threatening illness of their father at the family's home in the country north of Knoxville, Tennessee. The gravity of their father's illness was over exaggerated, and Jay, returning home to Knoxville is killed as a result of a mechanical failure in his automobile. Both editions of the book dedicate the greater majority of their pages to the events transpiring from the day before Jay's death until the day of his funeral, and in each the reader is strongly aware of the painfully slow passage of time, especially while Jay's wife awaits news of her husband's condition. However, McDowell and Lofaro posit this action in a vastly different manner. McDowell opens with the scene of Jay and his son attending a Charlie Chaplin movie in the hours preceding the fateful phone call by Jay's brother. Lofaro's edition does not arrive at this scene until 145 pages into the narration. Prior to this point, Lofaro's edition deals with the author's childhood, beginning with his earliest recollections and concluding with breakfast the day before his father's death. McDowell's treatment of the author's early childhood lies in two condensed italicized sections dividing the first two parts of the narration. Both books then converge and conclude in the hours following Jay's funeral.

The McDowell edition proceeds to portray the events leading to Jay's departure for home, the scene there and the events of Rufus' day before being interrupted by the first italicized section dealing with the boy's infancy. The scene then abruptly shifts to yet another phone call: the call from the country announcing the news of Jay's car accident without word of his condition. After a seemingly interminable time the news of

Jay's death is delivered and the scene again shifts to another series of incidents from Rufus' earlier childhood. With the book's fictionalized character names and nonlinear chronological structure as well as reliance upon the memory of a traumatized six-year old child, a certain degree of creativity is guaranteed. By Agee's own admission in planning the book "invention has served remembrance" (Lofaro ed. 569). The adult Agee was certainly not privy to his father's thoughts, and there is no evidence that his mother supplied him with any of her own. David McDowell's edition of *A Death in the Family* falls into the realm of creative non-fiction. According to Lofaro, "James Agee's restored text successfully merges creative nonfiction with autobiography" (xvii). The strict chronological structure of the book and retention of the actual names of the people involved combined with the use of childhood memories bear this out. Lofaro is careful to mention that Agee did use these names and that McDowell, because many of the parties were still alive at the time of the book's publication, chose to assign fictional names (549). Laurence Bergreen makes note of this stating that in later drafts Agee "chose to employ actual names for all characters and places...There was no pretense of artifice or evasion," (308) hinting at Agee's intent to present the narrative in a linear, unadulterated manner. While McDowell's decision may have been made out of respect for the family, it still constitutes an alteration to the text that Agee did not intend. As such, all further discussion will refer to the persons by their actual name.

The McDowell edition of *A Death in the Family* presents "characters" rather than the parties actually involved in a fragmented timeline that moves the text much further into the realm of fiction than autobiography. Because of these alterations, McDowell's rendering of the text ignores the author's specified desire for simplicity. McDowell does,

however, adhere to Agee's desire for "the story of my relation with my father...winding into other things along the way but never dwelling on them" (Agee in Lofaro xiv) but does so in a seemingly counter-intuitive manner. Agee's desires are made explicit in the above statement. McDowell's edition of the text complicates it, stylistically obscuring its autobiographical nature. Lofaro himself admits that "no editor then or now could assume to know Agee's ultimate wishes for the novel" (xxiv). His edition, however, is specifically the story of the Agee family, while McDowell's is a more universal story of a child confronted with the death of his father. As such, the restored version of the text is much closer to what is described by Lofaro as the "ideal form of the book" as compared to the McDowell edition. For the above reasons and those that will be discussed throughout the paper, I am arguing for the acceptance of the Lofaro edition as the standard version of the text.

## CHAPTER I

### AESTHETICS AND SUBJECTIVITY IN MCDOWELL

A divergence of the utmost importance between David McDowell's 1957 edition of *A Death in the Family* and Michael A. Lofaro's 2007 restoration of the text is immediately apparent. The choice of introductions to the book is crucial to its development, understanding Agee's motives for writing it and in attempting to define his objectives. Upon close examination, the two available introductory sections appear to serve disparate motives and to propel the book along two different trajectories. McDowell's choice of preface attempts to impart a sense of the aesthetic through external depiction of the adult author recalling the simple beauty of a time and place while Lofaro's explores the author's interiority and motives for writing the book.

One of Agee's primary concerns when writing *A Death in the Family* was the struggle between artistic objectivity and that of personal subjectivity. James Lowe claims that Agee's subjectivity in many cases is "unrestrained" and is his "nemesis" (28).

Given the personal nature of much of Agee's work, he too is well aware that he often treads precariously in this area. James A. Crank notes that while writing *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* Agee realized he was "making the choice most dangerous to an artist, in valuing life above art" (Agee in Crank 76). Although Agee allowed himself to become emotionally involved with the tenant farmers and their plight, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* was actually presented in an extremely aesthetic manner which removed it from the realm of journalism placing it into that of the artistic. Conversely, although given his earlier statement, Agee realized he must enter the realm of the subjective in his writing of *A Death in the Family* regardless of the criticism that would arise because of it. Victor Kramer notes Agee's dilemma: "I doubt if in complete detachment there is a story there. Rather, do the subjective, as detachedly as possible" (Agee in Kramer 122).

Agee's desire to render the autobiographical as objectively as possible is one potential reason David McDowell chose to print "Knoxville: Summer 1915," originally published in 1936, as a prologue to *A Death in the Family*. While the author's thoughts regarding his own childhood are still highly subjective, anyone living in that neighborhood at that time could identify with the scene Agee describes. The sketch, rendered in italics by McDowell to denote its position outside of the present time of May, 1916, is a mixed-perspective narrative describing a summer evening in a lower-middle class neighborhood in early twentieth century Knoxville, Tennessee. For nearly the entire span of the short piece, the narrator, with his intimate knowledge of the habits, but not thoughts, of the residents of this neighborhood reports on their customs and environment. Agee prefaces the introduction of each train of thought with a first-person statement of intent: "We are talking now of summer evenings in Knoxville, Tennessee, in

the time that I lived there so successfully disguised to myself as a child” (McDowell 3). He then embarks upon a highly detailed description of not only the Knoxville he remembers but that which anyone who lived in the neighborhood may recall. Additionally, this opening statement by Agee keenly illustrates the duality with which he struggled in his “fictional” works: the difficulty in coming to terms with his childhood before and after the death of his father and his desire to render it in an objective manner. Here, Agee begins with the highly subjective notion of himself at the age of six as “successfully disguised to [him]self as a child,” (3) shifting to an attempt at an objective view of the landscape, houses and inhabitants of his childhood neighborhood. The author’s perspective of this neighborhood as an adult is disguised as that of a child who exists outside the narrative’s final section.

Following this initial look at the neighborhood as a whole, Agee focuses the gaze of his remembrance upon the minutiae of summer evenings during his childhood. In “Knoxville,” Agee the artist achieves the height of his aestheticism in rendering a mundane everyday activity, such as watering a lawn or the passing of a streetcar, in poetic and even musical terms. The musical quality of “Knoxville” is such that composer Samuel Barber set it to music in 1947. Eugene T. Carroll, notes that “Knoxville: Summer 1915,” “divides into five parts with the main theme of eight measures; it moves at a leisurely pace with the blending of soft strings and predominant woodwinds to present the effect of a still and undistractable evening,” (87) in keeping with the five natural divisions in Agee’s text. “Knoxville’s” sheer aesthetic value is one possible reason that *A Death in the Family*’s original editors, McDowell in particular, made the somewhat presumptuous statement in its preface that although “Knoxville” “was not part of the



manuscript which Agee left, [we] would certainly have urged him to include it in the final draft” (McDowell vii-viii). The insistence by the editors for the inclusion of this earlier, extremely aesthetic piece that did not necessarily belong with the final version Agee intended, diverts attention away from the subjectivity of the book.

Nonetheless, in addition to its aestheticism, “Knoxville” contains its share of the subjective. Observing Carroll’s five-part structure of the sketch, the reader is aware of the subjectivity prevalent within its first four sections. Of the lyrical nature of section four, Carroll notes parallels to Whitman, Hart, Stephen Crane and Dickinson (88). If the tone of this section is reminiscent of these great poets, Agee’s shift from the lengthy paragraphs of the first three sections to a free verse style of poetry suggests homage to his “literary heroes and mentors” (Carroll 88). However, as “Knoxville” segues into its fifth and final section, a pronounced shift in tone and address is observed. Here Agee’s focus centers upon his own family and is registered primarily in the first person. Agee’s personal childhood memories of the comfort and security felt among his parents, aunt and uncle outlined throughout much of the section is quite subjective. The Agee family may be viewed as an elemental unit of the time and place which the author is describing. The final lines of “Knoxville,” however, are a partial unraveling by Agee of the idyllic reminiscences of early childhood as well as a return to his opening statement regarding the disguise of himself in childhood.

A sense of foreboding pervades this passage with the author entreating God to “remember [my people] in the hour of their taking away” (McDowell 3). This at once seems to predict the loss that will soon befall the family as well as Agee’s desire to remember past generations. Indeed, this statement is echoed by Agee in a “possible

Introduction” to a much larger autobiographical piece collected by Michael A. Lofaro as an appendix to his “restoration” of *A Death in the Family*. Agee fears the passing of previous generations from memory and calls upon his ancestors for assistance in his veneration of them (581). In a similar fashion at the conclusion of “Knoxville,” he invokes God to assist his family. Between “Knoxville” and the body of *A Death in the Family* there is a strong instance of parallel structure also centering on the opening and closing statements of the sketch. Peter H. Ohlin notes a thematic “search for identity ... first presented in the short sketch “Knoxville: Summer 1915” (201). The short final paragraph of “Knoxville” again begins with a sweet reminiscence of being put to bed by his parents and embracing a comforting sleep. This soon shifts, however, into a confused wonderment, as suggested by Ohlin, regarding the child’s identity: “but will not, oh, will not, not now, not ever; but will not ever tell me who I am” (Agee in Ohlin 201). Ohlin notes this passage’s parallelism with one that appears in the first italicized flashback section in McDowell’s edition of *A Death in the Family*. Again the child has been put to bed by his parents and has a nightmare in which the darkness queries him: “who are you child, do you know who you are, do you know who you are, child?” (201).

Lofaro’s edition begins with two year old Rufus having a nightmare and being comforted by his father. It then proceeds to outline Rufus’ early childhood until the spring of 1916 when he is six years old. The fateful phone call that summons his father to the country occurs at the approximate midpoint of the text while the remainder is dedicated to the events up to and including Jay Agee’s burial and Rufus’ “walk” with his Uncle Andrew concluding the book. The McDowell edition, perhaps in attempt to be current with the post-modern literary world of the 1950’s is a picture of confusion. The

text begins the evening Jay Agee is called away, then lapses into an italicized section dealing with Rufus' nightmare as a toddler and events preceding the birth of his sister. Section II then returns to the present with Jay's wife being notified that he has been in an accident. After an agonizing wait she receives news that he is dead then, yet again, flashes back to events from Rufus' earlier childhood. Section II returns to the present with preparations for Jay's funeral and ends in the same sequence as the Lofaro edition.

The shift from a detached, aesthetical reverie regarding a summer evening in Knoxville to Agee's highly subjective search for identity in the description of himself with his family as a child that is the only possible link between the sketch and the body of the book. If McDowell added it in the hope of adding an objective touch, he was strongly misguided and in conflict with Agee's own ideas of what form the book should take in order to be written at all. Lofaro, in his Preface to *A Death in the Family: A Restoration of the Author's Text*, notes McDowell's own admission in 1980 that using "Knoxville" as the prologue of the book was "the most reckless piece of editorial judgment I ever made" (xvi). Reckless indeed; aside from the thematic link in the search for identity between "Knoxville" and the body of the text, Lofaro is correct in his assertion that it "set[s] a completely contradictory tone for the work...never intended as part of *A Death in the Family*" (xvi). McDowell's recklessness is further highlighted in an outline for the book left by Agee with the heading "Prolog (Dream)" (Lofaro xvi). The short piece loosely referred to as "Dream Sequence," written by Agee during the latter part of the 1940's, with its intricate thematic relation to the text and Agee's response to potential critics regarding his subjective approach, is the introduction he intended for his book.

## CHAPTER II

### EDITOR AS EXTENSION OF AUTHOR

Much has already been said about McDowell's editorial decisions regarding his structuring of *A Death in the Family*. There is a plethora of evidence suggesting not only McDowell's mistakes in the ordering of the book but of carelessness as well. Although the book as McDowell fashioned it did win the Pulitzer Prize, the length and format is not what Agee would have desired, and these flaws, created by McDowell, left Agee open to unfair criticism.

To be fair to both McDowell and Lofaro, James Agee wrote much more material than is included in either edition of the book, making editorial decisions very difficult. However, McDowell's edition is shorter than Lofaro's by approximately 25,000 words which are vital to character development and the understanding of family history. Victor Kramer notes that "Had [Agee] lived to complete his book...he might have amplified the atmosphere of family life preceding the death of his father" (*James Agee* 142). All nine

chapters restored to the text by Lofaro serve this end, giving a more complete picture of the Agee family prior to Jay's death. These additions, as well as the chronological structuring of the book by Lofaro, serve to dispel the unjust criticism leveled at Agee. Leslie A. Fiedler, in an original review of the book, notes that the "family of the dead husband...comes to life briefly in the opening, is further illuminated by a visit to his great-grandmother in the deep country...but is lost at the book's close-where that family simply drops out of sight in a lapse unforgivable in a finished work" (202). To be fair to Fiedler, he was reviewing what he assumed or understood to be a complete text at the time. His criticism, however, raises questions of completeness as well as exactly who is being criticized, author or editor, dating back to the publication of the book. Lofaro's edition of the book removes the premature introduction of Jay's family in the present of May 1916, expands upon Jay's childhood remembrances of his mother, includes a chapter where his family is not seen but is discussed and disperses pictures of family more evenly throughout the narrative. It is true that Jay's family is conspicuously absent in the aftermath of his death. Much speculation could be derived from this, but as the book is based upon Rufus' remembrance and growing consciousness, it may be that the presence or lack thereof of his father's family did not make a large enough impact on either to be recorded.

Fiedler incorrectly refers to the book as finished. It was finished as far as McDowell was concerned, but as noted by Agee himself, it was a few months from completion. Lowe, writing in the mid-1990's, also unfairly and mistakenly criticizes Agee as an author based upon McDowell's rendering of his text. Lowe accuses Agee of a "declining sensibility" and an authorial "lapse" due to the "fitful structuring of parts and

viewpoints...evident in his thematic and stylistic treatments of disparateness and unity” (146). The fragmentation and disparateness of which Lowe speaks belongs to McDowell, not Agee. Had Fiedler and Lowe been privy to Lofaro’s edition of the text, they would have been able to more accurately and fairly critique Agee rather than McDowell. Again, McDowell, given his editorial decisions, assumes a role approaching authorship, meaning that he should bear the brunt of critics such as Fiedler and Lowe’s criticism. The restored version of the text presented by Lofaro is highly unified and largely discredits Lowe’s criticisms.

Not only does McDowell choose to use earlier, less developed manuscripts in his compilation of the book, there are numerous instances of misreading and grammatical mistakes throughout the published work: In McDowell’s defense, Kramer notes that Agee often wrote in a “difficult to decipher” hand with blunt pencil on porous, low-quality paper (*Actuality* 130). Lofaro also attests to the fact that Agee often crammed up to 800 words on a single page and continually revised his work, inserting intended revisions and alterations above crossed-out words or phrases (Lofaro ed. xxiii-xxv). Lofaro, with the help of Agee’s third wife, Mia, and staffers from *Time* magazine who had typed for Agee during his time there, spent three years poring over the author’s manuscripts to achieve the highest degree of accuracy possible. Lofaro also referred to letters from Father Flye to McDowell where the priest argued for the correct usage of passages regarding Jay Agee’s funeral service which the original editor chose to ignore (xxiv). As the first edition of *A Death in the Family* was published within two years of Agee’s death, McDowell did not spend nearly this amount of time ensuring its accuracy. His haste may in part be attributed to his desire to publish the book as quickly as possible to provide

income for Agee's family. It seems, however, that the bulk of McDowell's editorial energy went into his convoluted structuring of the book.

Kramer notes many of the incorrect word usages left by McDowell, stating that some are rather incidental to the meaning of the text, however, some result in a loss of "precision" and that still others "weaken" or seriously alter the meaning of the passage, citing ten instances in Chapter One alone (*Actuality* 130-131). In 2005, the Library of America attempted to rectify McDowell's errors by publishing a version of *A Death in the Family* that corrected "eighty-five instances of errors in transcription" (Lofaro ed. xii). Although this version addressed the more local errors in McDowell's text, it otherwise remained McDowell's edition of the book and failed to correct its global errors. Two years later, with his publishing of the restored version of *A Death in the Family*, Lofaro successfully rectifies both of these issues, completing a task neglected by McDowell fifty years before. McDowell's structuring of the book contains another serious example of carelessness or misinterpretation. According to Lofaro, Agee had intended to divide the book into individual sections but died before being able to make these final divisions. McDowell's edition is divided into three "Parts," with "One" and "Two" containing an italicized flashback section. Although the titles he ascribes to them are his own, Lofaro's divisions of the text into nine chronological sections much more accurately represents Agee's desires as indicated in notes and outlines left behind after his death.

The task of editing a large body of prose scattered across several manuscripts was always going to be a difficult one, especially due to the death of the author. Given the highly autobiographical nature and copious amounts of written material depicting life in

the South in the early twentieth century, comparisons between James Agee and Thomas Wolfe can be drawn. There are two schools of thought in the debate over the editing of these two authors. Kurt Vonnegut asserted that Wolfe's editor, Maxwell Perkins,' treatment of *Look Homeward, Angel* was a "shameless slander of an author and of the original manuscript as well (*O Lost* back cover). This comment is startlingly appropriate to David McDowell's piecemeal approach to editing *A Death in the Family*. Moreover, Wolfe worked in close partnership with Perkins, consenting to the cutting of his manuscripts; Agee had no say whatsoever in McDowell's treatment of his work. Lofaro too is not immune to this criticism. Although he edited Agee's manuscripts with the author's intentions in mind, he did excise large portions of the manuscript that Agee might have fought to include. Dwight MacDonald takes a different point of view saying: "What Agee needed was a sympathetically severe editor who would prune him as Maxwell Perkins pruned Thomas Wolfe" (149). In shaping the restored version of *A Death in the Family* without available input from Agee other than notes and outlines Lofaro was sympathetic to the text where McDowell was severe, unheeding and careless. Given McDowell's treatment of Agee's text and the preponderance of inexpensive copies of his edition of the book bearing the editor's imprint, McDowell did secure some financial stability for Agee's family. However, it seems that he also succeeded in linking his name to Agee's, thereby unduly receiving part of the credit for the Pulitzer Prize. Lofaro's edition is relatively new, not widely available and extremely expensive, with new copies costing fifty dollars or more. The quality of the work, however, warrants its examination and consideration by a wider audience.



### CHAPTER III

#### BRAVERY, SELFHOOD “DREAM SEQUENCE”

Agee’s primary goal in writing *A Death in the Family* was twofold: to honor and memorialize previous generations, especially his father, and to discover his own identity in the wake of his father’s passing. Both of these motifs are dealt with by Agee on an intimate level in “Dream Sequence.” Evidenced in Agee’s aforementioned letter to Father Flye, he began work on his as yet untitled book in late 1947 or early 1948. As such, Lofaro supplies “Dream Sequence” with the heading “towards the middle of the twentieth century” (Lofaro ed. 358) to denote the author’s return following a long absence to his hometown of Knoxville. Although Agee attempts a degree of objectivity in “Dream Sequence,” with the narrator referring to the man returning home simply as “He,” this introduction, based on a recurring dream of Agee’s, is highly autobiographical. Bergreen notes that Agee underwent Jungian analysis in order to help him understand a recurring dream involving John the Baptist (305). Apparently Agee experienced this

dream with enough frequency to “feel that he was personally acquainted with John the Baptist” and that this dream in particular “expressed unresolved feelings about his father’s death and the fear that it would follow him wherever he went” (Bergreen 305-06). Further evidence of the origin of “Dream Sequence” and the appropriateness of its position as the prologue to *A Death in the Family* may be found in a letter from Agee to his Jungian analyst, Frances Wickes. Agee, in the letter reprinted in *The Making of James Agee*, wrote to Wickes that his father was “more simple, violent, direct in action and courageous than I am,” certain of his father’s disapproval of his own “physical cowardice” and “interest in art” (209). Agee’s fear over his father’s concerns about him in this regard potentially extends back to early childhood.

As a young boy, Agee and his father frequented the movies, a practice chronicled in *A Death in the Family*, enjoying the westerns of William S. Hart and the comedies of Charlie Chaplin, often stopping at a bar on their way home. Being brought into the bar as a child seems to serve a dual purpose, arousing mixed emotions in the boy. The first, and most explicit, is that the elder Agee is proud of his son and relishes the chance to show him off. Rufus feels “a warmth of love...assured that his father was proud of him” (Lofaro ed. 148). This feeling becomes confused, however, when Rufus’ father brags that at “six years old...he can already read like I couldn’t read when I was twict his age” (149). This comment, with its country inflection, although in praise of his son, is also the implicit reason Jay Agee brings his son to a bar at such a young age: to observe how “real” men act. The statement also calls attention to a subtle yet key difference between Lofaro’s text and McDowell’s. Lofaro prints the country colloquialism “twict,” whereas McDowell prints the standard “twice.” Agee’s use of code-switching in his father’s

speech patterns, the country dialect prevalent when his father is speaking to men of rural origin as compared to the “correct” language he uses in the presence of his wife and her family, illustrates Jay Agee’s internal conflict, an aspect partially missing due to McDowell’s sanitization of his language. In response to his father’s statement Rufus “fe[els] the anguish of shame...you don’t brag about smartness if your son is brave” (149).

The above statement appears verbatim in both McDowell and Lofaro’s editions of *A Death in the Family* as does Rufus’ reaction to his father’s boasting: “If I could fight...If I were brave; he would never brag how I could read...Don’t brag you’re smart if you’re not brave” (Lofaro ed. 149 & McDowell ed. 17). In McDowell’s edition of the book, this scene occurs in chapter one immediately following “Knoxville” and is an immediate example of this edition’s shortcomings. What makes Rufus not brave? The answer to this question is not addressed until the second of the italicized sections, well past the midway point of the text. As a preschool boy Rufus is mercilessly teased about his name, a treatment that eventually leads to physical abuse that the child does nothing about. After a period of time, the older boys begin to become bored because “they had received more than enough hints that even if he were driven to fight, he would not have the nerve to, probably wouldn’t know he had to” (Lofaro ed. 60 & McDowell ed. 205). The boys then need to devise a new way to torment Rufus: “They would put some boy as small as he was, up to some trick which nobody bigger would have any right to do” (Lofaro ed. 60 & McDowell ed. 205). This scene appears much earlier in Lofaro’s edition under the heading “The Surprise: 1912” in a chapter ending with the mention of the boys’ plans for further torment. The subject, however, is not broached again, leaving

the reader to assume that Rufus continues to be abused and continually fails to act in a manner of self-defense that his father would expect from him.

Agee not only feels the shame of his inability to defend himself but his self-labeled physical cowardice also manifests itself in his refusal to help others. This shortcoming is also inextricably linked to his artistic and intellectual pursuits, another aspect Agee felt his father would disapprove of. Agee chronicles his own feelings of guilt and shame in a never published and until recently lost essay “America! Look at Your Shame!” printed in *James Agee Rediscovered*, edited by Michael A. Lofaro and Hugh Davis. The year was 1943 and Agee had just been reclassified by the Draft Board as “eligible for immediate induction.” Agee’s fear of being drafted is not explicit within the article, but from its tone it is evident that Agee was concerned how he would comport himself if called upon to serve.

Also included in Agee’s essay is another example of his self-perceived cowardice which surfaces following an afternoon spent with his friend, the renowned photographer, Walker Evans, in which they viewed and discussed recent photographs of the extremely violent race riots in Detroit in June, 1943. One of the photographs portrays two “rather humbly ‘artistic,’ four-effish people, (those physically or mentally unfit for military service) of whom you might think that any emotion they felt would be tainted, at least, with fancy sentimentality” (166) helping an injured African American man. Agee at once wonders at the selfless courage displayed by these bookish-looking men and feels a sharp pang of shame for “every such reflex of easy classification and dismissal...the more ashamed because whether, [I] in such a situation would have been capable of that self-forgetfulness and courage” (166). Agee does not have long to ponder this sentiment, for

on the bus trip home from Evans' apartment, a group of servicemen begins a loud, bigoted harangue about African Americans. Agee is angered enough to fantasize about the moment he would "hit the young sailor...as hard as I could" (170) but quickly dismisses the idea for fear of the physical repercussions of such an act. Agee then begins to compose a long-winded rhetorical appeal to the servicemen ending with the assertion: "you might as well be fighting for Hitler feeling the way you do" (171). Agee, however, is unable to believe his own rhetoric and again fears physical violence if he were to attempt to deliver his speech. An elderly African American woman is left to diffuse the hatred, ending her appeal with: "Just might bout's well be Hitluh, as a white man from the South...Fighting for your country. Ought to be ashamed" (172). This simple, uneducated woman's courage and direct manner of speaking, with a rural inflection not dissimilar to that used by his father, succeeds in quieting the crowd while Agee's education and intellectual rhetoric are rendered ineffectual by his fear.

Agee's writing of "America! Look at Your Shame!," although not part of *A Death in the Family*, may be seen as the turning point in his career. Before "America," much of his earlier work, namely his portrayal of Alabama tenant farmers in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, is described by Davis as "radical (but ultimately masturbatory) experimentation [shifting] to a more accessible aesthetic based on realistic characterization and linear narrative" (*Making* 200). What is important to note is that these previous works of Agee failed to help him come to terms with the death of his father and its effects on his perceptions of masculinity.

Lofaro's choice of prologues, "Dream Sequence," can then be seen as the point where Agee's writings begin to serve the functions of amelioration and realization,

concerns much more relevant to the body of *A Death in the Family* than McDowell's choice of "Knoxville: Summer 1915. At the outset of "Dream Sequence," the unnamed man, presumably Agee, returns to his hometown of Knoxville and almost immediately observes a man a couple of blocks ahead being savagely beaten by a mob. The man "was pretty sure that the violence would be over, and the crowd drifted, by the time he got there; if it isn't, he thought, and they turn on me, that's all right too" (Lofaro ed. 4). This is a paradigmatic shift away from the timid Agee who kept his seat on a bus while a wrong was being committed. He reacts to the situation as would his father and as his father would expect from him. The man's sentiment is strikingly similar to a passage in the book deleted by McDowell chronicling a conflict between the author's father and a vendor at a local park the family frequented. Jay Agee is reprimanded by a vendor for handling merchandise he has not paid for. Jay takes care not to cause a scene in front of his wife and brings young Rufus back alone at a later date to show his son how to handle himself. The vendor tells Jay: "If yer *lookin'* for trouble...just say the word, cause there's plenty here thats paid to find it," to which Jay replies: "If you want it I'll give you all I got. You and them too" (98). It does not matter to the elder Agee if park security is alerted; he has stood up for himself in the face of a perceived wrong, regardless of the threat to his physical safety. This single instance in the second paragraph of "Dream Sequence" is one of many that inextricably link it to the body of *A Death in the Family*.

McDowell's decision to use "Knoxville" as the book's prologue seems directly concerned with critical reception rather than with the author's ability to attain self-realization through an act of courage as displayed in "Dream Sequence." Agee's entire purpose for writing *A Death in the Family* is also addressed in "Dream Sequence." Crank

labels the book “an expression of childlike selfishness” (74) in which “Agee must first remove the idea of readership other than himself from the equation...to write the book he wants to write” (76). In writing the book, Agee is searching for his own self, not a universal self, and if he is to be successful in this endeavor, he must not concern himself with critical reception.

After casually determining not to be intimidated by the mob and to give its murdered victim a more favorable resting place, Agee, through “The Man,” has attained a new level of personal growth which is further evidenced in a key passage which serves a dual role:

He crossed the street at his own pace through the traffic and he looked into the eyes of those who lingered with cool arrogance. He could feel their eyes on him after he had passed and, knowing their kind, he knew that now quite possibly somebody would throw a rock or a tire-iron to jolt him or bring him down, or even that some ex-football star might clip him. He was braced for it, and he knew that he could not get rid of the dread of violence and pain, but he was quietly happy to realize, all the same, how little he really cared what would happen to him; and he began looking forward to how much damage he might be able to do to them before they should make that impossible.

(Lofaro ed. 7)

Of greater importance in this passage than Agee’s avatar facing physical harm is his growth as an author. Underlying the explicit threat to The Man’s physical safety is the potential damage to Agee’s ego and confidence in being able to effectively render his autobiographical project. He is unconcerned with accusations of violating his duty as an artist through his subjectivity. The author would do what he felt was right: to honor his father and previous generations while he himself still lived regardless of the cost to his personal reputation.

As such, Agee's willingness to honor the slain man is representative of his desire to memorialize his father. Although the man is not afraid for his physical safety, he does not rush into the crowd in order to stop the beating "for it was not his business to try to alter fate" (Lofaro ed. 4). Agee's double begins to refer to the beaten man as John the Baptist, and as John's fate was to be bludgeoned to death, Jay Agee's fate was to die in an automobile accident from a "concussion of the brain" (Lofaro ed. 230). Coming to this realization, the author must now honor his father to the best of his ability, regardless of the potential pitfalls.

The author's need to honor the body of John the Baptist and its morphing into the necessity of honoring his father makes "Dream Sequence" the only possible introduction to *A Death in the Family*. Kramer astutely notes that in "Dream Sequence" Agee "emphasizes that moments from earlier experience retain a distinct beauty which can be evoked by the artist, and when such evocation is successful, meaning is projected into the chaos and mystery of the living" (114). Here Agee successfully melds his duty as an artist with the duty he feels to remember his ancestors and, therefore, comes to an understanding of himself. Through the surreal nightmare with the unidentified stranger doubling for himself and John the Baptist for his father, Agee creates a scene in which a great many elements are repeated throughout the action of *A Death in the Family*.

Agee's narrator immediately refers to the slain man as John the Baptist, calling him "The old loudmouth...the old ranter...A stubborn, intrepid, archaic, insanely bigoted man, begging for violence and death until finally they gave it to him. A hero, not a neutral" (Lofaro ed. 5). Some loose parallels between John the Baptist and Jay Agee do exist. Both are associated with the wilderness. Jay Agee was from the "deep country"



(Agee in Davis 211) and John the Baptist was the voice that “crieth in the wilderness” (Isaiah 40.3). John the Baptist spread the message of the coming of the Messiah, while Jay Agee, despite his lack of formal education, taught elementary school for a time near his home in La Follette, Tennessee. Both are men of action who put themselves in harm’s way. Jay’s decision to leave home for Panama to work on the canal, his feelings regarding masculine pride and his overall vigor endanger his life. John the Baptist’s prophecies and espousal for the need of repentance in order to receive God’s mercy was extremely unpopular with the pagan Romans. The violent deaths met by both men, the beheading of John the Baptist by Herod and Jay Agee’s head trauma in an automobile accident, also play a significant role in linking “Dream Sequence” to *A Death in the Family*.

Upon deciding to move the body of John the Baptist to a more suitable resting place other than a downtown street corner, the narrator of “Dream Sequence” immediately focuses upon the “killed head lolling deep and heavy” (Lofaro ed. 6). As he walks, the man notices changes within the head as the corruption of death begins to take hold. He notes “the plowlike underside of the jaw and the chin through the pointed beard which stood straight upward like a spike” (8). This statement, as noted by Crank, will also resonate into the body of the book (79). At his father’s funeral Rufus peers into the coffin and notices “At the exact point of the chin, a trifle to the left of its middle, there was [a] small blue mark, as straight and neat as might be drawn with a pencil, and scarcely wider” (335). While the man carries John, the body begins to decay rapidly, gaining brown streaks and a horrible stench. The narrator is forced to abandon his idea of dignity toward the dead man and begins to drag his body. Abruptly, the dreamscape

melds into winter, with the body leaving blue streaks in the snow which are reminiscent of Rufus' observation at his father's funeral. The man takes this to mean that the flesh was frozen and "would keep at least for a little while" (11) but that the head "was not lasting well, it was only a question of time" (11). The narrator understands that John's head will soon be parted from his body, and, a few moments later, after jouncing over a curb, it is. A similar understanding is echoed again later in the book when Jay's wife, Laura, receives news of his death from her brother, Hugh, who tells her: "There was just one mark on his body," to which Laura intuitively replies: "His head" (230).

In "Dream Sequence," Agee identifies memories of his father's ruined head with that of John the Baptist and, through his narrator, does what he has so far lacked the courage to do: honor his father. In fact, Agee's concerns about the shattered head of his father and his need to tell without attempting to alter fate was a long-standing issue as shown in two short, fragmentary pieces dating back to the late 1930's. Each describes in gruesome detail victims of automobile accidents. "Run Over" deals with a cat who has been hit by a car in a representation of Agee's childhood neighborhood. The animal is not dead, although "its head was split open like a melon; against the black fur, its crushed skull was like an egg" (*James Agee: The Collected Short Prose* 137). Furthermore, in a sentiment nearly identical to one in "Dream Sequence," the ever-present crowd occasionally "murmer[ed] about putting him out of his misery [but]...nobody ventured to interfere with the wonderful processes of nature" (138). "Give Him Air" details an even more disturbing accident in which a man's "[word omitted: face?]" was snatched off as neatly as a wig off a head" (*Short Prose* 139). The unnamed first-person narrator, presumably an Agee avatar, sees that this accident has occurred directly in front of his

house, and, as before, the crowd offers no real assistance to the dying man: “A quid lay back among his teeth: no one had quite the courage to fish it out and save him the swallowing” (139). The crowd stands by to let nature take its course instead of offering the man one last act of dignity. In these instances, however, the crowd and in some part, the narrator, are mistaken: fate has already been realized; the charitable acts of which they speak are tantamount to the narrator of “Dream Sequence” wishing to give John the honor of a better resting place.

The location The Man has in mind for John also carries an important connection to the body of the text: the street corner overlooking North Knoxville where Rufus and his father frequently stopped on their way home from the movie: at this corner, alone and silently looking out over the city into the countryside beyond, Rufus feels that he and his father “were reconciled, that there really was no division or estrangement” (Lofaro ed. 151) arising from Rufus’ lack of bravery and boasting about his reading ability. Rufus is also subconsciously reassured that his father “loved their home and all of them” (151) but that his father fought a continuous battle with homesickness for his country home, a theme developed with much more clarity in Lofaro’s edition than in McDowell’s. As such, it comes as no surprise that the narrator feels that John the Baptist would want to be brought to “a certain corner, a certain vacant lot; he could already see it vividly in his mind’s eye” (6). In this place, looking out toward his home country with his son, Jay Agee feels most content and at peace; furthermore, this location holds Rufus’ fondest and most enduring memories of his father. Here Rufus sees his father for the last time, a fleeting moment of happiness Thomas Wolfe describes as “a window on all time” (*Look Homeward, Angel* 5). Recalling this precise moment Agee writes perhaps his greatest

memorial honoring his father. Appropriately John the Baptist is laid out at this corner within view of his wilderness “where everyone who goes by can know you for a dead man and a hero” (Lofaro ed. 6) and perhaps be given a permanent memorial by one of those passing by as Agee will now do for his father.

Although the courageous act displayed by The Man in “Dream Sequence” is a progression away from Agee’s previous timid preference not to endanger himself,

Kramer notes:

The death, the absence and the “betrayal” of the father all seem related to the disappointments of the dreamer with his contemporary world. But it is impossible to understand how past and present are related. What is significant is that after the nightmare has been suffered it is clear to the dreamer that he must “go back” into the years of his childhood...when that “journey is accomplished and performed with honesty, some peace of mind can be found, even though the chaos of the contemporary world remains.

(*James Agee* 115)

The actions of the narrator of “Dream Sequence” do not afford Agee any resolution regarding his father and his own life until this point. The revelation to the waking dreamer that “I’ve betrayed my father...Or myself. Or both of us” (Lofaro ed. 12) is simply one that prompts him to ask the question that will allow for a reconciliation of this betrayal and for Agee to move forward as an artist: “How?” (12) The narrator is unable to come to any immediate answer but soon realizes that “He should go back into those [childhood] years. As far as he could remember; and everything he could remember [of] what his father had been as he had known him, and what he had been as he had known himself” (13). In planning notes for *A Death in the Family*, Agee repeats the desire of the dreamer as to how the book should be ordered: “Maximum simple: Just the story of my relation with my father and, through that, as thorough as possible an image of him:

winding into other things but never dwelling on them” (Agee in Lofaro xiv). This statement allows for a seamless transition from “Dream Sequence” to the chronological structure of Lofaro’s restoration of *A Death in the Family* beginning with Rufus Agee’s earliest memories and ending on the afternoon of his father’s funeral. Both editions of the book accomplish this goal to a certain extent; however, Lofaro’s restored edition with “Dream Sequence” as its prologue, chronological ordering and expanded text answers Agee’s desires for simplicity and thoroughness.

## CHAPTER IV

### JAY AGEE: THE MAN

Aside from their choices in prologue and in how the book should be ordered, the Lofaro edition of *A Death in the Family* is significantly lengthier than McDowell's and contains a number of passages crucial to the clarification of important thematic elements left confusingly incomplete in McDowell's edition. Through prefatory remarks to their respective editions of *A Death in the Family*, Lofaro and McDowell do concur that Agee's writing of the book was essentially complete at the time of his death. This, however, is the extent of their agreement in the treatment of the text, a dispute extending as far as the title itself. In his "Textual Commentary" and notes following his restored version of the text, Lofaro asserts that "The title is most likely one created by David McDowell. No evidence has yet been uncovered that would help determine Agee's intent regarding the title of the novel; he most often referred to it as 'the book'" (357). This is in direct contradiction to David McDowell who claims in his preface to the book that

“The title, like all the rest of the book, is James Agee’s own,” (viii) a sentiment echoed by the renown critic, Alfred Kazin in “Good-bye to James Agee.” Obviously the book could not have been published without a title, and, through Lofaro’s extensive research, he would likely have found evidence of an intended title had there been one, thus immediately calling McDowell’s motives into question. McDowell also states that “nothing has been eliminated except for a few cases of first draft material” (vii) when this is simply untrue; large, vital portions of the book dealing with Jay Agee’s character and how he interacts with his family are missing from his edition. Crank perhaps best condenses an argument set forth by himself and other scholars such as Davis and Kramer when he states: “[Lofaro] argues that McDowell edited and excised far more than Agee initially planned” (75). This is supported in an outline of Agee’s, cited in Lofaro’s preface, reiterating the author’s desire for ‘Maximum Simple’: “This book. Begins with my first remembrance; ends with the evening of his burial” (xiv). In McDowell’s defense, he was made trustee of an estate which provided Agee’s wife and children with only \$450 at the time of his death. McDowell needed to make the novel as lucrative as possible and, given the literary market of the 1950’s, he may have felt that chronological shifting and heavy editing was the way in which to accomplish this. This is duly noted by Lofaro who proceeds to charge McDowell with the obligation as trustee “to ensure the accuracy of the texts published under Agee’s name. McDowell’s removal of the development of the character of the father and considerable amounts of related materials made the work more universal but quite vague” (xv).

Aside from Rufus, Jay Agee is the most important character in the novel; his early death is Agee’s primary motivation in writing *A Death in the Family* and to obscure Jay’s

development is to radically alter the text in a negative manner. To excise portions of the manuscript dealing with Jay Agee's thoughts and values as now understood by Agee is to reduce his relationship with his father, thus contradicting the author's wish for the book. Writing in the early 1990's, Kramer notes an extremely important passage which gives the reader insight into Jay Agee's early childhood (*Agee and Actuality* 89). This passage was deleted by McDowell but surfaces towards the end of Chapter 3 in Lofaro's restored text. As previously mentioned, Rufus senses his father's loneliness and homesickness despite the love and happiness he felt with his family. In the McDowell edition this episode is contained in Chapter 1. No background is given about Jay Agee's roots except for the mention of him looking for someone he might know from the Powell River Valley in the saloon he and Rufus stop in on their way home from the movies. Chapters 2 and 3 of the McDowell edition also continue to parcel out small details about Jay Agee's background such as his brother Frank's country inflections evinced during his telephone call summoning him home to their ill father and Jay's wife cooking him a big breakfast before he sets out on his journey, "standing at the stove while he ate, as mountain women did" (McDowell ed. 31). Not until the end of Chapter 3, when Jay crosses an unnamed river north of Knoxville, entering "the real, old, deep country... home country" (45) does the reader begin to gain a real understanding of Jay Agee's roots. We are, however, still not privy to the author's perceptions of home.

The passage referenced by Kramer appears in Chapter 3 of Lofaro's restored edition within a larger section given the title "'This little boy you live in': Perceptions c. 1911-1912." This heading is Lofaro's construct but the organization fits Agee's plans to begin *A Death in the Family* with his earliest recollections. McDowell includes a very



condensed one-page version of Jay's thoughts as imagined by the author about the country and home while Jay lies in Rufus' bed singing to and comforting him after he awakens from a nightmare within the italicized first flashback section; (87) however, it does not contain the detail it deserves. In Lofaro's restored edition, Jay's interior monologue, in which he recollects his own earliest memories, runs three full pages and gives the reader a greater sense of the rugged simplicity of his early life and longing to return to it. Furthermore, in Lofaro's edition of the text, the old country songs Jay sings to Rufus are rendered in a much more dialectic fashion than they are in McDowell's. In McDowell's edition, Jay's memories of home evoke "the smell of wood smoke and in the deep orange light of the lamp, the silent logs of the walls" (87). This description reaffirms that Jay was born in a log home, but the stark crudity of the dwelling is revealed in the restored edition:

He could even smell the woodsmoke. He could see how the square logs of the wall lay on top of each other side by side, ever so sleepy looking and stout and still in the shaky light of the fire and the dark brown light of the turned-down lamp...He could see the chimney up against the end of the place and the fireplace inside, both at the same time. Some of the chimney was stone and the rest was made of woven saplings and clay...He could see the marks of the axe in the oak logs of the wall and a place where the clay chinking had worked out and a towsack had been prodded in. (28-29)

Aside from the vastly expanded passage, there are also differences in word choice, namely the substitution of the very personal "he," for the impersonal "the" which also adds to the effectiveness of the passage.

Lofaro's inclusion of this expanded passage near the beginning of the book is crucial in understanding Jay Agee's roots and the personal demons he is beginning to

successfully battle in order to become the powerful father figure he is at the time of his death. Chief among these concerns are Jay's previously touched upon homesickness and a drinking problem as a younger man. McDowell's decision to begin the book the day before Jay's death affords the reader with a view of him regarding both of these issues from the perspective of his six year old son, offering almost nothing of his father's interiority from the perspective of the adult Agee, thereby lacking specific details regarding Jay's homesickness and loneliness. The reader must wait for the italicized sections for this information, and when they arrive there, they receive truncated first-draft material.

Returning to McDowell's Chapter 1 and the father/son outing to the movies and saloon, the reader is given a hint that Jay might have a drinking problem when he offers Rufus a Life Saver upon leaving the saloon: "It sealed their contract. Only once had father felt it necessary to say to him 'I wouldn't tell your mama, if I were you'" (16). This is followed by the reader's only glimpse at Jay's thoughts throughout the passage when he "reflect[s] without particular concern, that the Life Savers were not quite life saver enough; he had better play very tired tonight, and turn away the minute they got in bed" (16). This is, however, no positive evidence of alcoholism; Knoxville was a dry town in 1916, and it is possible that Jay's wife viewed his drinking in any amount as illegal. A drinking problem is not confirmed until the abbreviated passage in McDowell's first italicized section where Jay is recalling images of his childhood home: "The drinking had not been *any sort* of problem, for a long time now" (84; emphasis mine) and its full gravity made clear:

He felt thirsty, and images of stealthiness and deceit, of openness, anger and pride immediately possessed him, and immediately he fought them off. If I ever get drunk again, he told himself proudly, I'll kill myself. And there are plenty of good reasons why I won't kill myself. So I won't even get drunk again. (87-88)

It is the proud, boastful phraseology of this passage which serves to undermine the gravity of Jay's battle with alcohol and portrays him in a somewhat childish manner.

In Lofaro's edition Jay's struggle is introduced while still ongoing rather than largely resolved as in McDowell's edition. The restored edition begins with Rufus' nightmare and Jay coming in to comfort him. Given the passage's placement and Lofaro's heading, the reader immediately realizes that this action takes place when Rufus is only a toddler, a fact that is uncertain in McDowell's edition until Jay emerges from the boy's room and passes a remark about the crib to his wife. In Lofaro's restored edition Jay's thoughts are recorded as: "Not that liquor had been *much of any* problem, for a long time now" (26; emphasis mine) and later: "But he could sure use a couple of slugs...Like hell I will, he said to himself with iron amusement. Like all hell. He felt strong enough in body and in spirit to do anything" (31). Here, Jay is much more honest with himself about his drinking problem. The resolve he displays and his ability to laugh at himself removes the childishness attached to Jay in the McDowell edition and predicts a more favorable outcome to his struggle. This revision demonstrates Agee's cognizance of how Jay will be received by his readers, an assertion supported by Lofaro's claim that "Chapters 1, 2 and 3 of the restored edition are the final versions of the drafts that McDowell mistakenly selected and combined together as the first italicized section of the novel" (Lofaro ed. 435). In preparing his edition of *A Death in the Family*, McDowell worked largely from earlier manuscripts as compared to the later manuscripts used by

Lofaro. McDowell's decision to ignore Agee's own revisions serves to weaken the text as a whole and Jay's character in particular.

Although highly autobiographical, *A Death in the Family* still functions as a novel about the death of Jay Agee. In McDowell's edition of the book, Jay is by no means absent from the narration, but because of editorial excisions, episodic fragmentation and reliance upon earlier, unfinished manuscripts, he is an incomplete character. Writing in the early 1970's, J. Douglas Perry, Jr. seemingly predicts Lofaro's restoration of the text. Of primary concern to Perry is the functionality and placement of the italicized portions of the text as well as the necessity of their inclusion. Perry quickly reaches the correct conclusion that the passages should be included but does not suggest any problem with McDowell's placement of them. What is most interesting about Perry's argument is the issue of functionality. Perry states:

If the scenes were part of Agee's planned but unfinished novel, their real value does not emerge from the book as it is, but only from the book as it might have been; in effect, one must assume the unity of the total manuscript in order to prove it, to reconstruct an unwritten novel by the nature of the extra scenes themselves by the potential counterpoint they develop with each other and the rest of the novel. The result, I think, is a redefinition of the book itself: it is no longer a book which records a death in the family, but instead, a moving image of that family before, as well as after the loss. (235)

Perry's "if" can certainly be discounted; these scenes in their final and completed form, as presented by Lofaro, are vital to the unity of the book and to the before and after counterpoint they much more clearly enable. Jay's relation to his wife, Laura, is similarly left undeveloped in the earlier version of the book. Perry also takes care to note the contrasts between Jay and Laura, noting that in Agee's imagination their "marriage

works, as most marriages do, because they complement each other” (237). Their complementary marriage works in two ways: how they relate to one another and in their ideas of how their son, Rufus, should be reared. McDowell’s italicized sections, in conjunction with the early chapters of his edition, afford glimpses of Jay and Laura’s marriage and contrasting styles of parenting, but they are not as developed as they could be, making for instances where the reader is not privy to necessary information.

Chapter 2 of the McDowell edition contains such an incident. As Jay eats the large breakfast his wife has prepared for him prior to his departure for the country and his ailing father, Jay makes a seemingly incidental comment about the coffee: “Good coffee...Now that’s more like it” (31). In McDowell’s edition the minor disagreement is simply over the desired strength of the coffee and Jay’s potential ‘country’ preference: “new water and a few fresh grounds put in, without ever throwing out the old ones until the pot was choked full” (31). In Lofaro’s edition, however, the situation is expanded upon and clarified in a short chapter that McDowell chose not to utilize.

This new section is positioned by Lofaro as Chapter 16, the first in a section headed “May 17, 1916: The Day Before.” Immediately following this short chapter is the episode that McDowell chose to print as his Chapter 1: Jay and Rufus’ trip downtown to the movies and saloon. Lofaro’s Chapter 16 outlines a scene at breakfast on the penultimate day of Jay Agee’s life, revolving around the comment that the coffee was not “as strong as he really liked” although “twasn’t dishwater, anyhow” (142). With some trepidation, Laura reveals that he has been drinking a non-caffeinated wheat substitute for coffee called Postum. Lofaro explains his positioning of this chapter by noting its parallels to the dinner scene outlined in the following chapter as well as the emphasis Jay

places on his comment regarding the coffee at breakfast the following morning (Lofaro ed. 388).

In addition to the clarification of a fairly minor detail, Lofaro's use of this chapter is crucial in revealing the type of domesticity Jay has been able to adapt to. At first Jay is genuinely angry at his wife for pulling that sort of trickery, and the ensuing argument seems to have the potential to become rather heated. However, a mild rebuff by Laura for the way Jay is beginning to speak to her, followed by her promise not to "deceive anybody who can't see any humor in it," (Lofaro ed. 143) quickly sets the dispute along a much more playful trajectory in which both husband and wife end up laughing. This scene also serves to illustrate Agee's understanding of Jay's growth as a husband and father. The impulse to lose his temper over a small detail is present but he, with gentle urging from his wife, controls his anger and does not let the argument escalate into something potentially ugly and hurtful to Laura and the children. Although there is no scene to document this aside from Rufus' early childhood recollection of his parents arguing about "whiskey," (Lofaro ed. 36) it seems plausible that the more rash and youthful Jay, struggling with an addiction to alcohol, would not have so easily controlled his temper in this situation.

Jay's actions the following morning as he prepares to depart for the home country are also clarified by Lofaro's Chapter 16. While Laura prepares his breakfast and after he is finished dressing, Jay notices their bed and thinks "I can do *something* for her. He put his things on the floor, smoothed the sheets, and punched the pillows. The sheets were still warm on her side. He drew the covers up, to keep the warmth, then laid them open a few inches, so it would look inviting to get into" (Lofaro ed. 160). Minutes later, while

he is eating his breakfast, Jay pauses to put some milk on the stove to heat, realizing that it is still the middle of the night and that Laura may have difficulty falling back to sleep after he is gone. These small, considerate gestures also illustrate Agee's development of Jay's growth as a husband through his realization that he was overly harsh the previous morning and shows his appreciation of how much Laura does for him and his desire to reciprocate in some small way. Lofaro's positioning of these events near the middle of the text rather than at the beginning as in McDowell's edition allows for a clearer, more linear understanding of the Agee family.

Lofaro's edition of *A Death in the Family* also paints a clearer, more concise picture of the much discussed "gulf" as perceived by the author between Jay and Laura Agee. Scholars such as Lowe, Doty and Davis in particular point out that a great portion of this gulf lies in their religious differences. Laura Agee is a devout Catholic, while Jay, whose spiritual views are never clearly delineated in either edition of the book, is described by Laura as having a sort of "distance" and dislike for religion (Lofaro ed. 179). Doty references a passage outlining Laura's thoughts about Jay, his family and religion as she lies in bed awaiting sleep following Jay's departure for home: "For there, Lord, as thou knowest...is the true widening gulf between us" (Agee in Doty 90). Laura hopes that Jay might find comfort in faith in his time of "tribulation" but fears that he will not. If Jay does not take this opportunity to close this breach, Laura fears its widening to be inevitable for she is determined to bring Rufus and his sister, Emma, "up as Christian, Catholic children" (179).

In addition to Laura's desire that her children be brought up in the Church, she fears that her opinions regarding Jay's father will serve to further distance them. Despite

any familial differences Jay's father may have perceived in Laura, he has never been unkind to her. However, Laura sees a special kind of basic weakness about

him; that was what she couldn't like, or respect, or even forgive, or resign herself to accepting, for it was a kind of weakness which took advantages, and heaped disadvantage and burden on others and it was not even ashamed for itself, not even aware. And worse, at the bottom of it all, maybe, Jay's father was, the one barrier between them, the one stubborn, unresolved, avoided thing, in their complete mutual understanding of Jay's people, his "background."  
(Lofaro ed. 178)

Because it has been unspoken, Laura does not realize that Jay has had similar thoughts about his father. As he prepares for his journey home Jay reflects: "He had known from away back that his father was sort of useless, without ever meaning to be; the amount of burden he left to [his] mother used to drive him to fury, even when he was a boy [but that] he never meant her any harm. He meant so well" (159). Jay and Laura appear to have a mutual understanding of his father; if they were to speak of it, this perceived "gulf" between them would close, leaving them able to address the issue of religion. Lofaro's placement of this scene near the middle of the book has allowed the reader to observe Jay's growth through his reflections about his own past, his ability to largely overcome his drinking problem and to curb his previously rash temper.

There exists yet another gulf between Jay and Laura that she does not explicitly acknowledge but that is prevalent in the narration. Both Perry and Kramer note the differences in parenting style between Jay and Laura in their rearing of Rufus. Questions of masculinity are again raised with Laura's desire to protect Rufus being called directly into question. Both critics refer to scenes contained in the first and second italicized flashback sections of *A Death in the Family*. The first of these scenes revolves around



the birth of Rufus' sister, Emma. McDowell places this episode at the end of the first italicized section dealing with Rufus' early childhood. In it, Jay and Laura dispute how Rufus is to be told about the coming of the baby. Perry notes Laura's desire to protect Rufus from "the facts of life," contrasted with Jay's understanding that Rufus will figure it out for himself anyway, thus negating the need for secrecy (238). Due to McDowell's structuring of the book, Jay's acquiescence to his wife's desire that Rufus simply be told that a "surprise from heaven" is coming and that before it arrives he will need to spend a few days with his grandparents, loses some of its potency. Lofaro, through his positioning of this episode chronologically as Chapter 7 in a section labeled "The Surprise: 1912," gives this episode the potential to show Jay's growth as a character. Even though Laura's treatment of the pregnancy is against his better judgment, Jay uses this as an opportunity to close some of the cultural breach between them.

Although Laura's desire shields Rufus from the truth about her pregnancy, it also creates a cultural gulf of a different sort. Victoria, the African American midwife who delivered Rufus, arrives a few days prior to his sister Emma's birth to make preparations. One of her duties is to walk Rufus to his grandparents. Before Rufus and Victoria's departure, Laura warns Rufus to "never say anything about how she smells because you might hurt her feelings terribly and colored people are very sensitive about the way they smell" (Lofaro ed. 64). Laura's delicate explanation and admonition do nothing to allay Rufus' curiosity, virtually ensuring his querying of Victoria on the matter. Although Rufus is not malicious, he unconsciously creates a barrier between himself and someone who "couldn't hardly love you more if you was my own baby" (67). Perry regards Laura's parenting method as an "ostrich-like [and] questionable way of helping Rufus

understand, not just sex, but life” (239). This desire to protect Rufus from reality will bear rather harsh consequences for him in the very near future.

Laura, by her own admission, brings Rufus up to trust people in general, especially his elders. This imparts in Rufus an unhealthy habit of trusting almost without question anyone older than himself. At the outset of McDowell’s second flashback section, Rufus is brutally teased by older neighborhood boys about having an African American name. The name Rufus belonged to Laura’s paternal grandfather, making it a respectable name regardless of others’ perceptions. The teasing Rufus endures regarding his name also further serves to connect “Dream Sequence” to the body of the text. The author’s search for identity which begins to come to fruition in the wake of the nightmare in “Dream Sequence” has its beginning in the nightmare in which young Rufus is queried: “Who are you child” (Lofaro ed.20). The child’s first name is James, Rufus being his middle name. Agee was called by his middle name as a child, confusing his identity between the country origins of his father and the educated middle-class background of his mother.

Every day the boys ask Rufus his name, pleading forgetfulness of what they were told the day before. Rufus initially feels the maliciousness in their repeated question, but the boys are always able to regain Rufus’ trust, making him the object of their scorn. The teasing continues with ever-increasing malice due to Rufus’ trusting nature and refusal to defend himself. This episode of the flashback section concludes with the older boys finding “the right formula”: The older boys will find a small boy to torment Rufus, (McDowell ed. 205) in order to see if he will continue in his refusal to defend himself.

The editor's placement of this passage, well into the second half of the book, drastically weakens its long-term effects.

Lofaro, however, positions this chain of events near the beginning of the book as Chapter 6, the first in a section labeled "The Surprise: 1912," one chapter before the previously discussed episode with the midwife, Victoria. Chapter 6 ends with the boys plotting further torment of Rufus in identical verbiage as the McDowell edition; as before, the nature of the abuse is not specified. However, in Lofaro's early placement of the abuse, the long-term nature of the torment can be fully grasped and linked to Jay's notion, the day before his death, about the intelligence/bravery juxtaposition in his son. Aiding in this connection is an incident which Lofaro places in Chapter 12 early in a section headed "Enter the Ford": Travel, 1913-1916," suggesting a date of 1913 after Rufus has been tormented by the neighborhood boys for nearly a year. Friends of the family, addressed by Rufus as Aunt Kate and Uncle Ted, are visiting from Michigan. Kramer notes the enjoyment derived by Ted in making Rufus believe that he can make a piece of cheese jump off the table if he whistles at it hard enough (*Actuality* 93). Compared to that of the neighborhood boys, this teasing is certainly good-natured, but Rufus' belief in Ted illustrates how deeply instilled his trusting nature is. Laura is incensed at Ted because she deems him guilty of "deceiving a little child...who's been brought up to trust people" (Lofaro ed. 103) and at her husband for not standing up for Rufus. Jay feels similarly in this situation as he does regarding Rufus' knowledge of his mother's pregnancy: he "will have to learn to cope with such problems," (Kramer *Actuality* 94). One of them is learning to stand up for himself regardless of who is teasing him.

The placement of this chapter approximately midway between the beginning of the book and Jay's death also provides another opportunity to display Jay's growth as a father and husband. While he does not agree with Laura in this situation, his feelings are more in line with Ted's; Rufus has to "learn common sense," (Lofaro ed. 104) Jay does not explicitly express his opinion and tries to calm his wife's anger without berating her. Jay is also able to support his wife's opinion without truly agreeing with it. Laura accuses Ted of expecting Rufus to believe his joke to which Jay replies "trying to laugh 'Reckon she cornered you there, Ted'" (104). This scene is printed verbatim in McDowell's edition of the book, but its placement past the middle of the text at the end of the second italicized flashback section, itself not sequential in its ordering and well after Jay's exit from the narrative, obscures its importance.

CHAPTER V  
WHERE IS HOME?

A theme hinted at in McDowell's edition of *A Death in the Family*, but not brought to the fruition achieved in Lofaro's, is that of the inability to "go all the way home" after one moves away. Given a starting point for his work on the book in 1947/48, Agee had been away from Knoxville, having spent the majority of his time in Boston and New York, for nearly twenty years. In the "Dream Sequence," aptly labeled by Lofaro as "towards the middle of the twentieth century," the unnamed narrator and double for Agee arrives in a Southern town thinking "that it was one of the streets of Chattanooga between the two depots, but now he began to realize that he was back home, in Knoxville, for he could see that the broad street thickened, far ahead of him, into the busiest blocks of Gay Street" (Lofaro ed. 4). Charles S. Aiken notes the gradual changes that took place in Agee's Highland Park neighborhood beginning in the 1930's and the more radical alterations that began in the 1960's (156-157). It seems that the Knoxville

of the late 1940's would not have been so drastically different from the late 1920's, but Agee's long-term separation caused him to not immediately recognize his home town. This separation is an immediate connection to the text as a whole and strengthens Lofaro's interpretation of it.

Jay Agee's travels have taken him from La Follette, Tennessee to Panama and Kentucky before bringing him to Knoxville and an urban proximity to his ancestral home. The minimal distance to the country he is separated from heightens Jay's longing for home and contributes to the gulf caused by alcohol and cultural differences between him and his wife early in their marriage. Doty makes note of "revealing interchanges between Rufus' parents occurring in Agee's working drafts for the novel. In an eight-page manuscript, most of which is deleted from both editions of the book, the two frequently quarrel bitterly" (90). The exchange Doty refers to occurs immediately following Jay's singing Rufus to sleep following the child's nightmare and Jay's subsequent longing remembrance for home and his resolve to quit drinking as he lies in bed with his sleeping son. Initially Jay thinks "you can't ever get back where you started" (Lofaro ed. 30) but then comes to a realization: "Just one way. You make a home of your own and you get you a youngun...And ever so often there's something they do makes you remember" (30). However, with Jay's habit of taking Rufus to the spot overlooking North Knoxville and the home country beyond and the child's realization that his father was still not quite at home with his family, Jay remained unconvinced of this idea at the time of his death.

McDowell prints a less effective variant of this scene that is shown by Lofaro and Doty to be very incomplete. McDowell's rendering of this episode ends with Laura poking her head into the room to check on them and to inform Jay that their company had

left (88). Lofaro, however, prints an extended and revised scene which includes an argument between the couple:

“Jay you were in their for *ever!* They waited. What on earth kept you?”  
Lie to her. Couldn’t get him to sleep.  
“Reckon I was just studyin.”  
“For goodness sake what *about?*” She asked too quickly.  
Don’t ask! Well and why in the world *shouldn’t I!*  
“Studyin, that’s all,” he said in the cold dark voice she had known he would use. She felt as if he had slammed a door in her face. Jay I’m simply not going to stand for this any longer, she wanted to say. But that had been often and uselessly said before. (32).

Jay’s inability to communicate his feelings to his wife is certainly part of the gulf between them, and Lofaro’s placement of this scene at the outset of the book allows for a more thorough exploration of the theme of homecoming in the forthcoming chapters prior to Jay’s death. Doty also notes Agee’s writing of a more extended version of the above scene in an earlier manuscript where Jay and Laura quarrel rather bitterly after going to bed regarding Jay’s habit, as described by Laura, of “shutting her out.” Lofaro chooses not to print this extension, ending the episode with Jay and Laura locking the house before going to bed, simply noting Agee’s decision not to use that portion of the manuscript (Lofaro ed. 444). Doty provides more detailed reasoning for Agee’s desired excision of this passage from the finished text surmising that the treatment of Laura in it is “too harsh, too personally damning” (91) and would go against Agee’s claim to his sister that he would “never want to do anything against Mother or Father” (Agee in Doty 92). Since this issue is never raised again in the remaining chapters before Jay’s death, it would seem as though husband and wife are in the process of resolving this issue, making Lofaro’s inclusion of the potentially disparaging extended passage unnecessary.

Another passage instrumental in portraying Jay's feeling of separation from his roots revolves around the purchase of the automobile and Jay's inability, despite the increased mobility the car affords, to locate the house deep in the hill-country of his great-grandmother. In a passage McDowell chose not to print and labeled Chapter 13, midway through the section entitled "Enter the Ford": Travel, 1913-1916 by Lofaro, the Agees discuss the merits and drawbacks of such a purchase. Jay's primary argument for the car is that it will enable him to see more of his aging parents. Jay worries that his folks will view the car as an extravagance, but Laura ends this worry by saying: "People lose touch with each other. And it's so hard by train. Besides, I want the children to know your mother and – well mainly your mother and father, and to know the country too, but all your people" (Lofaro ed. 105-106). It seems as though Laura has come to understand the earlier feelings Jay had been keeping from her and that the car will help him with his feelings of separation from home. It will also serve to further close the gulf between Jay and Laura because she will be able to connect more with Jay's people, especially his mother, with whom she shares a mutual affection.

During one of these trips to the country, most of the extended family piles into Jay's car in search of the home of his great-grandmother. Jay and his brother, Frank, are the primary navigators and both meet with difficulty in finding their way. Frank gives directions to Jay that are of little help because, by his own admission, "its been nigh on twenty years sin'ct I was out here" (Lofaro ed. 129). Although he has not left home, Frank has lost touch with the family. Jay, on the other hand, has left and has been there more recently than that, actually being "the last of those in the auto who had seen her" (129). They are about to give up, with Jay headed in a "direction Frank was almost sure



was wrong,” (131) when they happen upon their destination. Although the automobile is no guarantee of Jay being able to find his way home, he, through the constant yearning for the home country and his desire to stay connected to his past and pass it on to his children, is able to intuitively sense his destination, allowing Rufus the opportunity to meet his great-great-grandmother. This introduction to the family matriarch firmly connects Rufus with the Agee’s, a family that has been tied to the land since the days of settlement.

In his ability to find the way in the deep and still largely unsettled country of his great-grandmother, it seems that Jay has begun to come to terms with the separation from his native land. McDowell’s placement of this episode late in the second italicized flashback section well after Jay’s death only serves to muddy the issue. Lofaro’s placement of it at the end of the “Enter the Ford”: Travels, 1913-1916” section immediately prior to the events of the final two days of Jay’s life aids in this progression. Jay’s next recorded thoughts of home are following his and Rufus’ trip to the movies as they sit in silence overlooking the city. Rufus feels that in enjoying this moment alone with him that his father “was not lonely; or if he was he felt on good terms with the loneliness; though he might be more homesick than ever, he was well” (Lofaro ed. 151). Jay’s earlier thoughts about getting back home by having a family of one’s own are now coming to fruition. Although he still yearns for his ancestral land, Knoxville is beginning to feel like home.

As Jay prepares to leave on his visit to his ailing father, he looks around his house: “In the single quiet light in the enormous quietude of the night, all the little objects in the room looked golden warm brown and gentle. He was touched, without knowing

why. Home” (Lofaro ed. 164). Jay is touched because he subconsciously realizes that he *is* home; this is where he now belongs. This is at least partially born out in his feelings after crossing the river in the rural area north of Knoxville. He still feels as if this is his home country but “the cabins looked different to him...the air smelled different...Quite unconsciously he felt more deeply at leisure as he watched the flowing freshly lighted country” (175). This is the last first-hand information the reader receives from Jay and from it can be seen a shift in his feelings. On the final day of his life his homesickness may not be completely resolved, but Jay has begun to realize he has made a home for himself with his family in Knoxville.

Throughout *A Death in the Family* the definition of ‘home’ will change for Rufus as well. McDowell’s original edition presents an aesthetically pleasing instance of parallel structure in beginning and ending the text with Rufus walking home first with his father after the movies and then his Uncle Hugh on the afternoon of Jay’s funeral. Although these two walks are separated by only a few days, McDowell’s edition of the text places several years’ worth of fragmentary episodes between them. Davis makes note of this point stating that “although obscured” by McDowell’s fragmentation, “the narrative of *A Death in the Family* is for the most part shaped by Rufus growing consciousness” (*Making* 235). Again, due to its linear and expanded structure, Lofaro’s restoration of the text renders this more visibly. In the opening sections of Lofaro’s text, Rufus, in early childhood, is portrayed by Agee as an overly trusting and inquisitive child, giving glimpses of his interiority such as when he realizes he is being teased by the older boys and in his inadvertently hurting Victoria by asking about her color. It is

during the trip to the movies with his father that Rufus' consciousness truly begins to take shape.

Rufus' realization on that evening about himself and his father already has been documented. Of course Rufus does not immediately grasp the gravity of his father's death, especially due to his mother's roundabout way of telling him: "He's gone away to Heaven and isn't ever coming home again" (Lofaro ed. 287). This simple statement foreshadows the nature of Rufus' future home. Replacing the man of action who wanted Rufus to learn the realities of life for himself is his mother's desire for protection, decorum and faith. This new home will rely solely upon the latter.

First, however, Jay Agee must be laid to rest, and, in the meanwhile, Rufus will commit one of the betrayals the narrator of "Dream Sequence" is so concerned with. Moments after being given the news of his father's death Rufus informs a stranger walking down the sidewalk in front of the house of this fact. After a gentle rebuke from the man, Rufus returns to the house "with a quailing of shame and fear" (Lofaro ed. 298). Rufus realizes this type of behavior is wrong but does not yet constitute a betrayal of his father; Rufus will later perceive the sequence that follows as a betrayal. Rufus leaves the house again, seeking out the neighborhood boys who are still abusing him and tells them of his father's death. Although the boys do not immediately believe Rufus and then tease him regarding the manner of his father's death, saying that he was drunk and had been crushed beneath his "Tin Lizzie," Rufus is able to be the center of attention without being tormented. In both editions of the book, the reader is left to decide for himself if Jay was drunk at the time of the accident. Rufus does not believe this but lends credence to the older boys' assertion that his father was crushed by the car, rather than dying of

“concussion of the brain” because it “seemed to him more exciting than his own [account] and more creditable to his father and to him,” (303) representing a further betrayal, especially given Rufus’ thought that “he was lying, and in some way being disloyal as well” (303). This feeling is intensified when moments later, after being reprimanded by his Aunt Jessie for teasing his sister, Emma, Rufus, with deep regret “wish[es] his father could know about [what he told the boys] and tell him that yes he was bad but it was all right he didn’t mean to be bad” (308). Rufus is beginning to understand the gravity of his loss. He understands how his father would want him to conduct himself but without this strong, masculine guidance he is, as yet, unable to do so. Rufus’ growing consciousness and understanding that ‘home’ will be redefined after the death of his father is illustrated in Lofaro’s Chapter 38, the first in a section entitled “all the way home”: The Last Day.” A priest of some local renown, Father Robertson, is brought in to preside over Jay’s funeral services. His overbearing and condescending manner frightens and angers Rufus and Emma when he should have comforted them. Furthering the insult, the priest berates the children for their “ill-bred incivility” (320-21) while sitting uninvited in their father’s chair. To Rufus, who overhears some of Robertson’s conversation with his mother, it seems that “something evil, to which she was submitting without a struggle, and by which she was deceived” (Lofaro ed. 322) was happening to her. Rufus is not privy to the subject of the conversation which was that due to the fact Jay was not a baptized member of the Church a full Catholic funeral service would not be read. Mary’s acceptance of this signals a shift from a home run by a partnership of earthly parents to that of a mother and spiritual Father. The interplay between Father Robertson and Laura Agee is also the catalyst for Rufus’ spiritual

confusion which is later furthered by his maternal uncle, Hugh, and reaches its culmination in Agee's novella *The Morning Watch* which deals with Rufus, as Richard, during adolescence.

Hugh, who is an atheist, wishes to tell Rufus about the events leading up to and during his father's burial. The children were allowed to view their father's body as it was laid out in the home of their grandparents but were not allowed to attend the burial service, another withholding of the "facts of life" (a dead body is buried in the ground) that Jay would likely have not approved of. Hugh, inviting Rufus to walk with him in the neighborhood Rufus so often walked with his father, seems at first to parallel the earlier scene. Rufus, instead of gaining understanding, becomes confused. Hugh's desire for Rufus to know what occurred at Jay's funeral is in line with what Jay would have wanted for his son, but Hugh's venomous attacks on religion, especially as it pertains to the family and Laura in particular, is not. Davis pays particular attention to this passage as key in "Rufus growing consciousness," (*Making* 235) a progression largely obscured due to McDowell's decision to place the two 'walks' at opposite ends of the book (235). Again, Lofaro's chronological ordering allows the reader to see the understanding gained by Rufus during the walk with his father followed by the confusion caused by the death of Jay, the presence of Father Robertson and Hugh's bitterness.

Hugh's attack on Father Robertson and the Catholic Church puts into words for Rufus that part of the conversation between Laura and the priest which Rufus overheard but could not fully understand or verbalize:

that son of a bitch...said he couldn't read the complete  
burial service because your father had never been  
baptized...And they call themselves  
Christians...Genuflecting and ducking and bowing and  
scraping and basting themselves with signs of the Cross,  
and all that disgusting hocus-pocus, and you come to one  
simple single act of Christian charity and what happens?  
The rules of the Church forbid it. He's not a member of  
our little club. (Lofaro ed. 355)

In shifting the focus of his attack from the "he" of Father Robertson to the "they" of Christians, Hugh is showing hatred for those he should love, namely his sister in her time of need.

Rufus' evolving consciousness is aware of Hugh's feelings about Christians, namely those in his own family, but Rufus is unable to comprehend why or wholly believe "He hates them...they love him but he hates them. But he doesn't hate them, really, he thought" (356). Adding to Rufus' confusion is Davis' assertion that Hugh "has implicated [Rufus] in his hatred" (*Making* 234-235) of the family by speaking to Rufus about the 'miracle' of the butterfly that lands on Jay's coffin roughly where his heart would be and the sun breaking through the clouds as the casket was lowered into the earth. Hugh will not discuss this with the adult Christian members of the family but does so with Rufus "because he hates them but I don't hate them, and when he told me a secret he wouldn't tell them as if I hated them too" (356). Hugh's diatribe serves to confuse Rufus at the time when he needs assurance the most: "everything which had been, still was, he did not see how it could stop being, yet it was hard to remember it clearly and to remember how he felt" (355). In their silent walk together, Rufus and Jay grew in their understanding of home and their places within it. After Jay's death, Rufus began to understand that although the definition of home had changed, he still belonged.

However, in the wake of Hugh's diatribe and in spite of their silent walk "all the way home," Rufus is again lost. It will be more than thirty years until Rufus' double, the narrator of "Dream Sequence," decides to impart his history and fully regain his understanding of home.

## CHAPTER VI

### REALIZATION

Despite criticism for its subjectivity and unity due to the disappearance of Jay Agee's family throughout the course of the text, *A Death in the Family* stands as one of the most beautiful, heartfelt and therefore, memorable expressions of American Literature. Entering into the writing of the book, the author was plagued by feelings that he had betrayed his father through his lack of physical courage dating back to his childhood and by seeking to gain favor with the neighborhood boys by speaking to them of Jay's death. This is simply untrue; he loved his father in life and death as well as the rest of his family, in spite of his Uncle Hugh's venomous attack upon them. Feelings of guilt over perceived shortcomings and betrayals may linger but to hold ourselves accountable for our actions at age six or younger is difficult and potentially destructive. Although highly aesthetic and largely ineffectual for ameliorative purposes, most of Agee's earlier writing dealt with his feelings regarding his lost father, constituting a



memorial to him. Furthermore, he adhered to his father's thought about "getting back home" by having children of his own. James Agee had four children although he did not name either of his sons after himself or his father.

Although the perception that he betrayed his father is largely false, Agee's approach to writing *A Death in the Family* allowed him to feel he had atoned for this wrong by providing his father the memorial he deserved. George Toles describes Agee's attempt "to reconstruct his childhood home as his father would like it to be remembered...assign[ing] no impressions or perceptions to his own surrogate (Rufus) that would prove a barrier to his father's immediate recognition of him" (51). By fully exploring Rufus' cowardly "betrayal" of Jay the day after his death and his relationship with his father, Agee has done precisely that. The subjectivity he displayed in doing so was a "committed respect for reality...geared to celebrate and praise the world as it is" (Ohlin 227). To accurately represent home, and, therefore, produce a true memorial to his father, the aestheticism Agee strove for in his earlier works needed to be set aside. Again, no one can say with absolute certainty what Agee's final intentions for the book would have been. Lofaro's restoration of the text, however, removes any manipulations and transmutations found in Agee's earlier works, as well as in McDowell's edition, and allows for a truer memorial to his lost father. In his disordering of *A Death in the Family*, McDowell actually produced a regression into the aesthetic, largely deconstructing what Agee strove for.

According to Lofaro, "Agee became the victim of having been loved not wisely but too well. The people most responsible for creating his legacy were long-time friends who wanted to ensure that his work would receive the attention it deserved by

accentuating the ways it exemplified their views of contemporary aesthetic standards” (Lofaro ed. xii). McDowell, with his treatment of *A Death in the Family*, falls prey to this practice, one that is condemned by James Marino as the “defense or advancement” (72) of an author’s legacy in attempting to create a text that would somehow mirror an earlier work or fit better into the perceived literary requirements of a specific period. James Agee like William Shakespeare “can stand up for himself” (Marino 72). If scholars, critics and students are to study Agee accurately, coherently and effectively, they must do it with the most accurate, coherent and effective text possible: the restored edition. The restored version of the text allows for a progression of Agee’s legacy, a springboard from which even greater works may have sprung. To rely upon McDowell’s version of the text is to move in a circular pattern back toward the astounding, yet ultimately unsuccessful *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.

Lofaro, in his reconstruction of the text of *A Death in the Family* to the form Agee desired, provides this realistic accuracy. His inclusion of the true introduction of the book, “Dream Sequence,” with its confusing and horrifying portrayal of the modern world, followed by the honest and accurate description of the Agee household through chronological ordering of later versions of the manuscript, is what Agee had intended. The Lofaro edition of *A Death in the Family* is an evolution into simplicity; fifty years of critical distance from the stylized post-modern literary world allows for its acceptance. Although written through the subjective lens of one man’s experience, Agee’s condition is still universal. The study of his works, focusing upon a specific time, place and person, will allow for more “texts of experience,” such as Wolfe’s *Look Homeward, Angel* to be more widely studied and accepted in their full-length, less edited forms which the

authors' envisioned for their works. Kramer notes that "If the artist stops trying to make sense of the world and just responds to its mystery, it becomes possible to celebrate existence. In that way one does return home" (*James Agee* 149). Through the writing of *A Death in the Family*, Agee does just that. Even though his life and further creativity were tragically cut short, Agee should be celebrated and honored by including his envisioned masterwork into the canon of American Literature.

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