

The Religious Consciousness of James Agee  
Reflected in Seven Characters From  
A Death in the Family

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I. Introduction: "This Breathing Joy Heavy On Us All"--

A Rare Legacy

James Agee lived, produced his works, and died in relative obscurity on the American literary scene. He dreamed of writing literary "symphonies"; that is, his characters would be introduced quietly, to recur in new lights with new verbal orchestrations, worked into counterpoint to create a monstrous grinding beauty.<sup>1</sup> At his death in 1955, Agee left one such symphony incompleted. This was his third novel, A Death in the Family. The book was published posthumously in 1957 and one year later received the Pulitzer Prize for literature. Its publication brought Agee's literary career to its climax.

Critic Peter Ohlin comments:

For although the book received the Pulitzer Prize and its prose was praised in glowing terms, many critics found it impossible to judge adequately a work which was never finished by its author and furthermore, wondered whether it was really a novel at all...the literary opinion found it difficult to accept Whitman as a model and demanded literary order, unity of themes, imagery, character, and action and structure. It was hardly conducive to the appreciative reception of a work which is in itself a fragment and which shrinks structure in favor of texture.<sup>2</sup>

The novel concerns itself with four days in the lives of the Follet family. On three consecutive days are related Jay Follet's last evening at home, his departure to visit the bedside of his ailing father, and his family's discovery and response to Jay's death in an automobile accident returning

home. A short but indeterminate length of time separates the final day of the novel which concerns the incidents surrounding Jay's burial.

In the last ten years, there has been a revival of James Agee's works, with many critics considering them as outstanding examples in Twentieth Century American Letters. Yet James Agee's appeal extends beyond his gifted literary talents. What Agee expresses concerning his growth in the experience of knowing God offers a valuable example of a man living through a traumatic spiritual development, struggling with the question of whether God really enters into a person's life. This question is one which everyman, who is at least aware of the possible existence of a God, must ask. That James Agee was searching for someone to fill the spiritual emptiness he sometimes felt is evident in his personal letters, in his short prose and poetry, and (providing the basis of this thesis) in his novel, A Death in the Family.

It is the main purpose of this thesis to show that one way James Agee expresses himself about a relationship with God is through A Death in the Family, particularly through the seven main characters of this novel and how they paralleled or opposed his feelings of faith. The characters' relationships with God range from near atheism to extreme piety, approaches and perspectives which are similar to Agee's views of God held at various times during his life.

It is also an important purpose of this thesis to demonstrate that what an author writes can have links to his personal life. However, it is also true that this premise cannot explain all of what an author writes, and that it would be dangerous to assume so. James Agee felt himself to be deeply a part of the world of his characters; and, as will be shown later, A Death in the Family is essentially autobiographical.

The major research sources used were the Letters of James Agee to Fr. Flye and the critical writings of Robert Phelps and Robert Fitzgerald. These three men were close friends of Agee's, the former as spiritual advisor and the latter two as companions in journalism and sometimes critics. They, who cherish his memory, have provided invaluable critical insights.

James Agee was a brooding, tender-minded craftsman of words. He experienced the frustrations and glories of the literary world, and left most of his works to be fully recognized for their greatness after his death. He was a man on a painful, universal search for a God; and this search was often diversely considered in his writings. It is hoped that by concentrating on his novel, A Death in the Family, more light can be shed on Agee's search; and, then the book and the man, James Agee, can be better appreciated.

## II. The Anarchist

James Agee was a Christian man. He was born an Anglo-Catholic, i.e., a High Church Episcopalian, which gave shape to the roots of his faith and his metaphysical background. However, the label "Episcopalian" is not adequate in describing Agee's religiosity, for he dropped this formal religion, for all practical purposes, by the time he was twenty-five years old. To attempt to describe James Agee's sense of religion is a complicated affair, for he was a sensitive, artistic person, lacking in self-confidence, and open to all those forces which would shake his "absolute" values acquired in his past religious formation; shake them so profoundly that he would never again embrace formal religion, and never clearly define for himself or others his own faith experience. Dwight Macdonald, a contemporary critic of Agee commented:

Although he was deeply religious, he had his own kind of religion, one that included irreverence, blasphemy, obscenity, and even Communism (of his own kind). By the late 40's a religio-conservative revival was underway, but Agee felt as out of place as ever: "if my shapeless comments can be of any interest or use," he characteristically began his contribution to a Partisan Review symposium on Religion and the Intellectual, "it will be because the amateur and the amphibian should be represented in such a discussion. By amphibian, I mean that I have a religious background and am 'pro-religious', though not on the whole delighted by this so-called revival. It is doubtful that I will return to religion!"<sup>1</sup>

To understand how Agee arrived at the position described by Macdonald, it would be best to get a perspective of his

experiences in living.

In the autumn of 1919, James Agee entered St. Andrew's Boarding School for boy's, near Sewanee, Tennessee, thus coming under the influence of the Episcopalian Monastic Order of the Holy Cross. Of particular importance is the friendship he began with Fr. James Flye, who lived and taught at the school. It seemed unlikely that these two different men could ever reach as deep a level of friendship as they did. Father Flye was a "quiet man of deep, committed, vigorous faith." Agee was a "passionate, exalted, intemperate and self-destructive young man...fully exposed to his generation's temptations, questionings and losses, and submerged in destructive elements of every kind,--emotional, ideological, moral, aesthetic."<sup>2</sup> Yet each man shared a prevailing instinct for reverence. Robert Phelps, in his introduction to the Letters of James Agee to Father Flye, gives this insight:

It was an altogether hearty reverence, unsolemn, joyous...a reverence for everything, for the whole created world, and for all their differences, that is what they shared. In both of them reverence was an inborn, inviolate instinct--neither a troubled conviction nor an act of faith, but simply an abounding, primary belief as absolute as Blake's "everything that is, is holy." (p. 19)

Because of this uncommon witness, both men had a profound effect on each other's spiritual beliefs. But it was especially Fr. Flye's patient and loving advice which James Agee relied upon, providing him with strength, and serving as one of the unifying influences throughout his troubled life.

In the autumn of 1928, Agee entered Harvard University's School of Journalism. He graduated with his degree in the spring of 1932 and immediately took a position at Fortune magazine. However stimulating Harvard might have been for his writing ability, four years there complicated out of recognition his Episcopalianism. Paradoxically, Agee hated "polite academic agnosticism to the bone," and in one editorial he wrote for the Harvard Advocate he even proposed Episcopalian Catholicism as being desirable for undergraduates.<sup>3</sup>

Agee spent his years at Harvard perfecting his sole love of creating through writing. However, as early as 1929, Agee himself was conscious of a religious atrophy settling over himself, as he describes in this portion of a letter to Fr. Flye, dated September 19, 1929:

I feel more and more a growth of mental balance and appreciation, and it hits me, I suppose about as puberty did. I experience the same almost sensuous joy in knowing that "I'm getting somewhere," growing up. At exactly the same time, I'm conscious of a gradual spiritual and ethical atrophy... I'm not wholly lost...yet at the same time, it's painful to feel as helpless about it as I do.

Two years after he began working in New York, Agee published a religious book of poems, Permit Me Voyage, on which close friend and biographer Robert Fitzgerald commented: "The reviewers ignored it. It was as if the interests and the times made it inaudible."<sup>5</sup> The "times" referred to by Fitzgerald was the Depression, "the economy of peace," Americans were



experiencing new life styles, shadowed by the spectres of anxiety, frustration and want; and, in 1932 this evil was just the beginning of worse evils to plague America for the next 15 years.

Of all this Agee wrote:

The epidemic of despair and weariness you [Fr. Flye] speak of is a terrible thing. The whole spiritual tone of this time seems the darkest and the saddest in centuries. I hardly know which it seems worse in--men or women. Very pitiable--and--very difficult in both. (August 18, 1932)<sup>6</sup>

Though he dropped his mantle of formal religion in the 1930's, his work took on new dimensions, becoming his religion. This was especially true of one particular aspect of his work. His friends remember that in the years 1936-1942 Agee was driven by a fierce desire to seek the truth, about events, things--most importantly about his own feelings and desires:

I care mainly about just two things...getting as near the truth and whole truth as is humanly possible, which means several sorts of truth mayby, but on the whole means spiritual life, integrity and growth; and setting this (near) truth out in the clearest and cleanest possible terms. (February 17, 1936)<sup>7</sup>

By "truth", Agee meant the real correspondence between that which is said and what is the case at the utmost peak of consciousness. His truth was not in the making of things, i.e., the "artistic truth." With himself, as artist, he often wrestled with this type of truth in trying to define his own actions and thoughts. He wanted to reach the essence of all that touched himself. This frustrating drive was the challenge that consumed him. It of course affected his ever-forming ethical

and spiritual values. Agee was able to reflect back into his past and discover how deeply the truth in awareness of the living God he had known as a child and a young man had affected him. The passion for truth had its relevance to everything, particularly to "church " and "christianity"; and, in the following passage, Agee reflects on "church" and "christianity" and their ability to handle "bare truth":

Truth goes much less far than falsehood; at every transition, more misunderstanding comes aboard; gradually becomes handleable by those too corrupted by falsehood to handle bare truth. Radium into lead.<sup>8</sup>

Agee believed that formal religions were not the keepers of the truth about God. He saw his Catholic faith as the "parent and wisdom and peace of his childhood." This religion was not for James Agee, the adult, because his life was the center of a storm and the religion offered him no shelter: as he describes it:

There is such a thing as learning enough when you're half drowned to come in out of the rain.<sup>9</sup>

However, James Agee never really came in out of the rain.

In one of his most profound reflections on formal Christianity, written in 1938, Agee states his position:

I am an anarchist, with the belief that the operations of human need and acquisitiveness in concentration on purely material necessities and half-necessities, and the structures of law through which these operations are canalized, restrained and governed, that all of this is tragic, mistaken and eccentric from the root up, and can not come to good; and that the effort to manipulate the good within such a framework, no matter how sincerely, can only

result in compromise...In other words, compromise could be permissible only if what was compromised were remembered as far more important to be striven towards than anything which had only in part been achieved; and over and over one is led completely to prefer the Absolutist, the person who regards only the literal, the nearest approach to the total. For instance, Francis Assisi seems to me violently to have restored ideas of Jesus; of complete disregard for the structures of the world or living as it was; but this was modified by his disciples ever during his lifetime so that it could exist in the world among people with less spiritual energy. I would say then that the full literal Christian idea has no regard for existence in the world as it is, but only for its own existence, and that it is of a sort which would destroy the structure of the world as it is, in proportion to how generally and how uncompromisingly it is followed. That it is utterly destructive to any contentment with the things of this world as they stand, and can find or approach contentment only within the purity of its own terms; and that any organization whether material or of belief which seeks to substantiate it in the "world as it is" and there make it amiable or acceptable can only result in betrayal of its essence. Hence I feel bound to be an anarchist in religion as well as "politics" and feel that the effort towards good in both is identical, and that a man who wants and intends good cannot afford to have the slightest respect for that which is willing to accept itself as it is, or be pleased with a successful compromise. (June 28, 1938) 10

Agee felt formal religion was somehow less spiritual, less effective than it should and could be. It was the result of a "successful compromise" of being in the world and out of the world. As far as Agee was concerned, formal religion was not true to the radical demands of Jesus, a "betrayal of its essence." As a man driven to find the truth in all things,

James Agee could not accept the frame of an "organization," despite its heritage, which he considered to be less than true in its essence. His answer? To cultivate his own "feelings for God."

During the next decade, the 1940's, Agee struggled to make clear for himself these feelings for God. Agee's world moved from the despairing years of the war, through the postwar years of relative peace. In 1943, the American race issue exploded in Detroit, with a violence that would be a sign of prophecy for the years to come. James Agee responded, searching his soul, basing his position on true Christian ethics:

All human beings are in all most essential ways equal, i.e., human, alive, for not long, and compounded of great and in many ways inextricable mixtures of elements and tendencies more or less possible to call good, and evil; all human beings are essentially equal in their mortal needs; they all bear, God knows in various and unequal degrees, the same equality in the potentiality of each, or its self-defeat, or its frustration from the outside... it seems at the basis of Christian understanding... a basis of equality which none of the million inequalities of temperament or endowment, all of which should be recognized, can touch. (May 21, 1945)<sup>11</sup>

During that same year, James Agee's good friend, Robert Fitzgerald, returned to the Roman Catholic faith. This was a tremendous jolt to Agee, for he was very close to Fitzgerald. They had gone to Harvard together, and while there and in later periods of life had served each other as critic, counselor and

comrade. They had even shared philosophies of life, until Fitzgerald had the radical conversion experience. As Fitzgerald describes:

We were never estranged, but never so close again either, as we had been before the war... Jim regarded my conversation with careful reserve. He saw an old friend ravaged and transported by the hour into precisely the same system of coordinates he had wrestled with in the 1930's. For, in my turn, I had reservations now about the quality of his old vision. It struck me that it must have been a matter of imagination and empathy, a profound and sacramental sense of the rational world, but only a notion of the uncommensurable overhead, the change of light and being that leaves a man no fulcrum by which to dislodge himself from his new place... at any rate, I now wanted to lead a kind of life Jim had rejected, and in his own and general opinion, outgrown.<sup>12</sup>

Throughout the remainder of 1945, Agee went into a deepening religious crisis. In a number of letters to Fr. Flye, Agee hinted that he felt it unlikely that he would ever become a church communicant again. However, he was grateful for the religious feelings he did have. In the following two sentences he summed up his faith of "doubt":

I have to doubt so much that at the same time I must trust: thoughts and realizations mixed with personal and historic memories and projections so fill me with tears, and with faith and certainty, that it seems incredible to me not to be a Christian and a Catholic in the simplest and the strictest sense of the words. But I am at once grateful for the emotions and doubtful of them. (1945)<sup>13</sup>

Some remarkable exchanges in 1948 between himself and Fr. Flye helped Agee to grab hold of his shapeless religiosity. In one

letter. Agee, who professed that he didn't even know most of the time whether he believed in God, asked Fr. Flye for some advice on his belief. Fr. Flye's response, with patience and gentle insights, described the "Christian" Agee:

You asked if I feel it perhaps somewhat incongruous to have you use such an expression as "God bless you." I certainly do not. You are naturally religious. Some people have a fundamental sense of reverence and of tenderness, basic qualities of religion and of such are you. There is a quotation which I can't identify, something like,

"We needs must care for the highest when we see it."

I certainly don't believe that as a generality. There are those who are bored by what is clean, sweet, beautiful, tender and reverent. As between the high and the low, they will choose the low. There are those who disapproved of Christ and those who laughed and jeered at him as he hung on the cross. I know that you are one of those who love the highest when they see it; "omnia naturaliter Christiana," as the expression was. As between Christ and those against him, there is no doubt to which side you are drawn. The way to make this allegiance open will become clearer to you. (April 4, 1948)<sup>14</sup>

Agee affirmed Fr. Flye's description of his religiousness, and over the next few years began to develop his testament of religious consciousness. He was beginning to see with more clarity now that his faith would never be a sacramental faith of any church. He was too weak in the true belief of any type of institution for that. Agee now had a burning faith in God, a piety that was deep and true, having been steeled by doubt and having weathered the dry seasons of his soul. However, as Fr. Flye had discovered, Agee's religious consciousness was as broad as the world he lived in, encompassing a God of this

world, one of love and of truth; one who was intimately tied to Agee's emotions and sense of artistry as a writer; one who had first been approached through the eyes of an Episcopalian, but who was too broad and too true to be found under this label; one who was at times close and at times far and distant; and, one who at times seemed to disappear altogether, leaving a sense of extreme self-doubt, which in turn strengthened Agee's longing for God.

In the years preceeding Agee's death in 1954, he acknowledged the cyclical nature of his religiosity. By now he was beginning to view himself as a religious person, who while not absolutely sure about his religion's origin or sustaining power, was at least content to live with that knowledge of himself. In one of his final letters to Fr. Flye, dated September 23, 1950, Agee considered his cycles:

I evidently move, as I imagine many people do, in a rough, not very predictable cycle, between feeling reluctantly uninvolved religiously and very much involved, though I'm not sure "religiously" is the right word for it; but, anyhow, a strong sense of being open, aware, concerned, in the ways which are rooted usually in religion or in the more serious kinds of poetry or music or just in a sense of existence--i.e., a relatively full and emotionally rich sense of it, as compared with the opposite side of the cycle. I'm evidently swinging into it again now. At times or moments I feel virtuously sure that nothing short of coming back to a formal religion (probably the one I was brought up in) will be nearly enough for me: at others, I feel sure that my own shapeless, personal religious sense, whatever that may be, is deepening and increasing: even the swings away are less far away from it: keep some kind of relations with it.<sup>15</sup>

### III. A Remembrance and a Memorial

James Agee died before he could apply the finishing touches to his novel, A Death in the Family, a book that has been called by his contemporary critics one of the most impressive novels of the 1950's. The novel was conceived, with a simplicity, control and grace that was the hallmark of Agee's style. He worked on this book for the last fifteen years of his life, in between assignments for Time and Life magazines and playscripts for Hollywood producers. He considered the book as his most cherished project, and wrote it with the intensity of poetry and the narrative strength of legendry, reminiscent of James Joyce.

Most critics consider A Death in the Family to be autobiographical in nature, and there is some evidence to support this view. On the surface, there are obvious parallels with the novel and Agee's life. Agee's middle name was Rufus, the main character's name in the novel; also, when Agee was six years old his father died in an automobile accident, essentially analogous to the controlling incident in the novel. However, more impressive than these are a number of quotations from Agee's letters and writings which implicitly and explicitly state that A Death in the Family was autobiographically conceived.

The first quotation comments on Agee's prose style, that is, what he would ultimately like his style to be. It is taken



from a letter Agee wrote to Fr. Flye while in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in November of 1930. In the letter, A Death in the Family was still a dream to be realized. However, indications are that Agee had a clear idea of what type of prose he wanted to create as an artist. The style and the intent of the planned piece of prose mentioned in this quotation were the beginnings of the reality of A Death in the Family:

Prose holds you down from the possibility of symphonies, and put into poetic drama, it could certainly be stillborn or worse. Besides much of what I want to get can't well be expressed in dialogue. It's got to be a narrative poetry but, the sort so far, I know has never been tried. In the sort I've read, the medium is too stiff to allow you to get exactly a finely shaded atmosphere... for instance--in brief, to get the effects that can be got in a short story or novel. I've thought of inventing a sort of amphibious style...prose that could run into poetry when the occasion demanded poetic expression. That maybe the solution, but I don't exactly like the idea. What I want to do is devise a poetic diction that will cover the whole range of events perfectly and as evenly as skin covers every organ, vital as well as trivial, of the human body. And this style can't--of course--be incongruous no matter what I'm writing about. For instance, I'm quite determined to include comedy in it--of a sort that would demand realistic slangy dialogue and description. (November 19, 1930)<sup>1</sup>

Eighteen years later, in another letter to Fr. Flye, Agee tells of his new project, ultimately to become A Death in the Family.

I think I'd better not talk much about the piece of writing. A novel, short but longer than I had foreseen or thought best for it, about my first six years, ending the day of my father's burial. I read you the little I had done on it. On the whole I feel hopeful about it, and I certainly need to feel hopeful. (March 2, 1948)<sup>2</sup>

Finally, there was a fragment of prose, found after Agee's death, which apparantly appears to be a beginning to the autobiographical novel. The short work is undated:

Now as awareness of how much of life is lost, and how little is left, becomes even more piercing, I feel also, and ever the more urgently the desire to restore, and to make a little less impermanent, such of my lost life as I can, beginning with the beginning and coming as farward as need be...I had hoped that I might make poetry of some of this material, and fiction of more of it, and during the past two years I have written a good deal of it as fiction, and a little of it as poetry. But now I believe that these two efforts were mistakes. This book is chiefly a remembrance of my childhood, and a memorial to my father: and I find that I value my childhood and my father as they were, as well as exactly as I can remember and represent them far beyond any transmutation of these matters which I have made, or might ever make, into poetry or fiction. I know that I am making this choice most dangerous to an artist, in valuing life above art; I know too that by a good use of fiction or poetry one can re-enter life life more deeply, and represent it more vividly, intimately, and truthfully, than by any such means of bold rrration as I propose...but... I shall...use such varieties of artfulness as seem appropriate.<sup>3</sup>

Agee's task was difficult--to produce a work of art, and yet represent and respect the value of life--his own life--in fiction. He skillfully accomplished this two-fold task by the level of control he held over his artistry. Agee used his talents in fiction to truthfully portray and celebrate this life that he loved.

#### IV. The Cycles Unwind

I veer between belief in God, non-belief, and a kind of neutrality. In all three forms of mind, I keep what I believe is meant by the religious consciousness.<sup>1</sup>

This very frank statement was a summation of James Agee's own beliefs, taken from a religious symposium, parts of which were published in the Partisan Review of 1950. The statement also provides the framework around which the major characters of A Death in the Family reflect Agee's religious consciousness. The inclusiveness of his religious values embrace his characters, from the pious, in the person of Mary, to the agnostic, depicted in Joel. In each of these persons' lives, religion, particularly expressed in a personal God, is either an important or an unknown force. Each character has a different relationship with God, representing different levels of belief. These levels of belief are sharply challenged by the controlling incident of the novel, the death of Jay Follet, Mary's husband. His apparently senseless death, and the aftermath of this tragedy, reveal the family's deepest felt religious convictions in their struggle to understand.

It is conceivable that one could gather from the very real differences between Mary and Jay that theirs was a marriage headed for disintegration. Differences in opinion loomed large and were often hotly contested over matters such as religious belief, attitude towards drink, and their family backgrounds. Yet Mary and Jay were drawn together in complimentary love,

compromising when necessary, which Agee considered to be "the fundamental ground of human society."<sup>2</sup>

Jay represented the reverent man, who found not only delight, but also his God-experience in the world, in the beautiful of nature. He saw no need to be verbal about his God experience. In fact, he and Mary exchanged as few words on this matter as possible; and because of this, Mary felt deeply disturbed by what she considered to be Jay's withdrawal from something that meant so much to her:

For she had never before so clearly put into words, into visible recognition, their religious differences, or the importance of the difference to her...it really was only that both of them said so very little, as if both took care to say very little. But that was just it. That a thing which meant so much to her, so much more, all the time, should be a thing that they could not share, or could not be open about...She felt sure she felt now of Andrew's anger and contempt, and none of her father's irony, but it was very clear, by his special quietness, when instances of it came up, that he was very far from it and from her. That he did not like it. His distance, and some kind of dignity, which she respected in him, much as it hurt her by this silence and withdrawal.<sup>3</sup>

Jay loved his God in his own way, with quiet dignity.

In a number of instances, Jay's situation, religiously speaking, was similar to Agee's. Jay's religion was an unsophisticated one: the basic values of respect for each man, fidelity (interpreted as love) to his wife and family, and a willingness to sacrifice were all important components. (An institutional church was not.) It is doubtful whether Jay

would ever admit a relationship with a "Christ." His religion was not a "Christian" religion, but more a religion of naturalism--it was the natural, good thing to do in this world. If ever Jay came close to any higher being it was in nature. This fact could have been a result of his upbringing--or because of some longed-for sense of well being that he found fulfilled in nature. Nature was an experience of the holy:

He knew that a very important part of his well being came of staying a few minutes away from home, very quietly in the dark, listening to the leaves if they moved, and looking at the stars...these realizations moved clearly through the senses, the memory, the feelings, the mere feelings of the place they paused at...and above them, the trembling laterns of the universe, seeming so near, so intimate, what when air stirred the leaves and their hair, it seemed to be the breathing, the whispering of the stars. (DF, p. 23)

The perfect expression of Jay's type of religion was a curious event that happened at his funeral, here narrated by Andrew to his nephew (and Jay's son), Rufus:

If anything ever makes me believe in God, or life after death...it'll be what happened this afternoon. There was a lot of clouds... but they were blowing fast, so there was alot of sunshine too. Right when they began to lower your father into the ground, into his grave, a cloud came over and there was a shadow just like iron, a perfectly magnificent butterfly settled on the --coffin, just rested there, right over the breast...he stayed there all the way down...he never stirred, except just to move his wings that way, until it grated against the bottom like a --rowboat. And just when it did, the sun came out just dazzling bright and he flew straight up out of that--hole in the ground, straight up into the sky, so high I couldn't even see him anymore...Don't you think that's wonderful,

Rufus?...If there are such a thing as miracles...then that's surely miraculous. (DF, p. 251)

The butterfly appeared not only as a symbol of the Resurrection, but as that part of nature that was holy for Jay. Here, a simple butterfly was miraculous. It was an unspoiled expression of Jay's religion as a simple reverence for life.

As was established earlier, Mary was quite different from her husband in her religious belief and worship. She had an orthodox piety, which on occasions bordered on being a refined defense mechanism.<sup>4</sup>

Mary felt close to God, who received her fervent prayers. She was determined not to let Jay's apparant apathy disrupt her duty of raising the children as Christian Catholics:

...because quiet and gentle as she could certainly try to be about it, they were going to be brought up as she knew she must bring them up, as Christian, Catholic children. (DF, p. 46)

God at times baffled Mary. Yet, she placed her entire person in his power. Her view of God was more sophisticated than Jay's, yet at the same time simplistic. God was a loving father who "dosen't want us to do bad things, but to know good from bad and be good of our own free choice." (DF, p. 49) He controlled all things, and men should love him. He could be harsh; and in a prophetic sense, Mary expressed these words about ultimate faith in his demands:

God--dosen't---believe---in---the---easy---way,---not for us, not for anything or anybody, not even for Himself. God wants us to come to Him,

to find Him, the best we can. (DF, p. 49)

Mary's piety was a quality she cherished. However, it also was a quality which concerned her relatives. For instance, Aunt Hannah was fearful that Mary could fall into an unearned triumph of too easy religiosity, something towards which Mary had a natural tendency.<sup>5</sup> Joel, Mary's father, on the night of Jay's death, counselled her against using religion as a cover-up:

Watching her eyes, he felt fear for her and said, "I imagine you're thinking about your religion."

"I am," she said, with a certain cool pride.

"Well, more power to you," he said, "I know you've got the kind of help I could never have. Only one thing: take the greatest kind of care you don't just---crawl into it like a hole and hide in it." (DF, p. 120)

Mary did not entirely withdraw into her religion to find consolation. However, she did use it as a defensive crutch in that she admitted enduring the death ordeal only because of her prayers to God. Instead of rising above the situation on the strength of prayer, Mary used prayer to intensify her emotional trauma. She did not learn to accept a new world. In the final scene, after reciting a long series of rather morbid prayers, this conversation occurs between Hannah and Mary:

Mary's voice choked. Aunt Hannah, with great quietness, spoke what she had been speaking from the beginning and continued it and brought it to a close. Then even more quietly, she said, "Mary, my dear, let's stop."

After a moment Catherine could hear her mother's voice, shaken and almost a queaking, "No, no; No, no; I asked you to, Aunt Hannah; I-I..."

And again, Aunt Hannah's voice: "Let's just stop it."

And her mother's: "Without this, I don't think I could bear it at all." (DF, p. 249)

Mary's orthodoxy was a type of religiosity that James Agee personally rejected. Unlike Mary, he had no God, as such to draw into and cover his head. His God was usually fleeing from him, not at his beck and call. The faith movements Agee experienced were enough to keep his visions and feelings of God alive; but surely not in any manner similar to Mary's piously religious attitude. Nevertheless, Agee could accept the fact in his own life that "God doesn't believe in the easy way," (DF, p. 49) Living was truly trying to find God in the best way one could.

Of the characters in the novel, Aunt Hannah appeared to be the person with the most balanced view of life in the face of enormous pressure. Hannah was the most significant person to affect Mary at Jay's death. Through Hannah's sympathetic understanding based on her own experiences in a similar tragedy thirty years earlier, the very Christian ideal of love for one another was manifested. Man's goodness was celebrated in Hannah. She was orthodox; but, not to the extreme that enveloped Mary. She felt close to her God, who was a definite and powerful source of strength to be relied upon. Yet, for Hannah, God's love was not limited. God could and did love man because man was his creation; a natural and good consequence of such a belief was that all men were able to receive God's love, regardless of whether they were members of any one, particular believing faith. As Hannah prayed



at Jay's death:

May the souls of everyone who has ever had to live and die, in the Faith or outside it, rest in peace...that's how I feel, and that's all there is to it. (DF, p. 158)

Again Hannah's tolerance and understanding became clearer in this quote concerning faith: "We just each believe what we're able." (DF, p. 148)

Although Hannah was a practicing Roman Catholic believer, her views concerning man's relations with God seem closest to Agee's own. While she would probably disagree with Agee's opinions on institutional religion, the essence of her insights, i.e., that God was above any labels of faith, and that man's goodness was not dependent on any label of faith, was precisely Agee's own situation.

Joel and Andrew were alike in many ways, besides the fact that they were father and son. Similarities extended even into the area of a jointly held non-belief in God. Both men were agnostics, bordering on atheism, with Joel the more extreme of the two. Despite this disbelief in God, they both led good, respectable lives, using, as Joel stated, "common sense" as their religion.

Joel had watched his daughter Mary marry a good man, produce two healthy children and live a stable, happy life with her family. He was completely unprepared for the tragedy that befell his daughter; and he reacted to this situation like the cynical humanist that he was. Accordingly, Joel viewed Jay's

death as inevitable--as all death was. The tragedy was one of those tests of fate, with the mercy of God uninvolved. Life was hard and cruel, and a man had to use his wits, to say nothing of his courage and pride, to survive happily. In the following intimate passage, Joel counsels Mary about how to handle the fates:

That's when you're going to need every ounce of common sense you've got...You've got to remember that things as bad as this and a hell of a lot worse have happened to millions of people before and that they've come through it and that you will too.. You'll bear it because there isn't any choice--except to go to pieces...All I want is to warn you that a lot worse is yet to come than you can imagine yet, so for God's sake brace yourself for it and try to hold yourself together. It's a kind of test, Mary, and its the only kind that amounts to anything. When something rotten like this happens. Then you have your choice--you start to really be alive, or you start to die. That's all.  
(DF, p. 119)

Joel was resigned to the fact that he could not and never would believe in a God whose existence could not be proven. Mary and Hannah's God concept was illogical and solved none of his problems. For Joel, why he did not have the gift of faith was a frustrating puzzle. Nevertheless, it was a hard and cold fact that he had to face life relying only on the person whom he knew existed, namely himself:

I know you've got a kind of help faith I could never have...but if I can't trust my own common sense--I know its nothing much... but its all I've got. If I can't trust that, what in hell can I trust!

God, you'n Hannah'd say. Far's I'm concerned,

it's out of the question.

God doesn't seem to embarrass your idea of common sense, or Poll's and for that matter I'm making no reflections. You've got plenty of gumption. But how you can reconcile the two, I can't see...

Faith's the one makes a mess of everything far's I'm concerned. Bounces up like a jack-in-the-box. Solves everything.

Well it doesn't solve anything for me, for I haven't got any.

Wouldn't hurt it if I had. Don't believe in it.

Not for me.

For you, for someone that can manage it, all right. More power to you. Might be glad if I could myself. But I can't.

I'm not exactly an atheist, you know, least I don't suppose I am. Seems as unfounded to me to say there isn't a God as to say there is. You can't prove it either way. But that's it: I've got to have proof. And on anything can't be proved, be damned if I'll jump either way. All I can say is. I hope you're wrong about faith, but I just don't know. (DP. p. 147-148)

Joel seemed able to manage his disbelief in God well enough. It was his trusting in faith to which he could not submit or find the answers. He could not even formulate the questions.

Andrew, Mary's brother, was a clumsy and tactless person, who wanted always to do "the right thing," but invariably failed. His clumsiness could also be applied to his relation with God. Andrew wanted to believe, but had no tangible experiences with God on which to base any belief. He simply didn't know if a God existed or not; but he had not yet hardened into hardshell agnosticism. His reactions to the tragedy demonstrated Andrew's confusion. Andrew desired revenge on the merciless God, if such a God existed. Yet, shortly, in another passage, he prayed that God comfort his sister and family.

Andrew actually fought belief. He could possibly call on God to help him in a specific instance. However, he could not rationalize his beliefs to sustain them:

I don't know if a God exists...but I hope it's so...I don't mean the whole business.. I don't know anything about that. I just mean tonight. (DF, p. 148)

Human experience had not given Andrew enough evidence of God to warrant belief. This fact remained essentially true until the end of the novel, when two conflicting incidents forced Andrew into an unresolved turmoil of faith and doubt.

The first incident, a butterfly's landing on Jay's coffin, was termed a miracle by Andrew. Here was concrete evidence that God was at work in the world. The butterfly's actions were unusual. There could very well be a God over all things and Andrew wanted to believe in him. Rufus was stunned by his uncle Andrew's words:

His uncle even spoke of believing in God or anyway, if anything could ever make him believe in God, and he had never before heard his uncle speak of God except if he disliked him, or anyway, dislike people who believed in him. (DF, p. 252)

However, this openness which Andrew expressed about a God, because of the butterfly, was shattered by the intensity of the hatred he felt for Fr. Jackson. Fr. Jackson had refused to read the complete burial service over Jay, as Jay was unbaptised. This infuriated Andrew, who condemned Jackson as the representative of Christianity, the Church, and most importantly God.

He Jackson said he was deeply sorry, but it was simply a rule of the Church...Some Church, and they all call themselves Christians. Bury a man who's a hundred times the man he'll [Jackson] ever be, in his stinking, swishing black petticoates, and a hundred times as good a man too, and "No, there are certain requests and recommendations I cannot make Almighty God for the repose of his soul, for he never stuck his head under a holy water-tap." 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. (DF, p. 253)

Rufus struggled with the confusion of his uncle's turnabout. The "butterfly" God was a creation and expression of love--yet, it was driven away by hate and Rufus couldn't understand why this was so.

His uncle talked about God, and Christians, and faith, with as much hatred as he had seemed a minute before, to talk with reverence or even with love. (DF, p. 254)

Andrew was left torn between his doubt and his willingness to believe. He had not solved his problem of faith,--but he had experienced deeply the pain of the tension:

But it was worse than that. It was when he [Andrew] was talking about everybody bowing and scraping and hocus-pocus and things like that, that Rufus began to realize that he was talking not just about Fr. Jackson but about all of them and that he hated all of them. He hates mother, he said to himself. He really honestly does hate her. Aunt Hannah, too. He hates them. They don't hate him at all. they love him, but he hates them. But he dosen't hate them, really, he thought. He could remember how many ways he had shown how fond he was of both of them, all kinds of ways: and most of all by how easy he was

with them when nothing was wrong and everybody was having a good time, and by how he had been with them in this time too. He doesn't hate them, he thought; he loves them, just as much as they love him. But he hates them too. He talked about them as if he'd like to spit in their faces. When he's with them he's nice to them, he even likes them, loves them. When he's away from them and thinks about them saying their prayers and things, he hates them. When he's with them, he just acts as if he likes them, but this is how he really feels, all the time. He told me about the butterfly and he wouldn't tell them because he hates them, but I don't hate them, I love them, and when he told me a secret he wouldn't tell them as if I hated them too. (DF, p. 254)

In Agee's swings away from God and religion, he might have approached near to the style of agnosticism exemplified in Joel and Andrew. However, since he abhorred atheism and agnosticism, Agee differed from his two characters in that he struggled to keep alive the connection with God, no matter how tenuous the connection might become. Agee knew through his own misery that he could not face life alone or merely by using common sense. He remarked in 1950:

I evidently move...in a rough...cycle between feeling relatively uninvolved religiously and very much involved... a strong sense of being open, aware, concerned, in the ways which are usually rooted in religion... But at all times, I feel sure that my own shapeless personal religious sense...is deepening and increasing...even the swings away are less far away from it: keep some kind of relations with it. (September 23, 1950)<sup>6</sup>

Fr. Jackson was a frigid, almost inhuman priest who began his ministry of consolation by lecturing to the anxious children, Rufus and Catherine, about staring at one's elders; and,

as was recounted earlier, infuriated Andrew by refusing to read the complete burial service at Jay's funeral. Fr. Jackson surely emerged as a figure of strength and support; nevertheless, his cold personality and business manner impressed everyone, except Hannah and Mary, of his unworthiness to be a minister of the sacraments. Despite this, he had a mysterious and ominous air about him that even the hostile children noticed:

They realized that there was something to which their mother and their great-aunt were devoted, something which gave their voices peculiar vitality and charm, which was big and outside of any love that was felt for them; and they felt that this meant even more to their mother and their great aunt than they did, or than anyone else in the world did. They realized, fairly clearly, that the object of this devotion was not this man whom they mistrusted, but they felt he was altogether too deeply involved in it. (DE, p. 224)

Little of the Savior's warmth was displayed by this priest. He was the prime symbol of the institutional Church, or as Andrew called it, the "private club." His ambiguous ministerial approach caused Fr. Jackson both to bring God to people like Hannah and Mary, and to drive God away from those like Andrew and Joel.

In his own life, Agee seemed to have reached a point of toleration in his personal religious views. This was demonstrated in a particular passage which the critic Ruoff cites, taken from Agee's response to the Partisan Review forum on institutionalism. Here Agee finds the institutionalism of Fr. Jackson as necessary as any other aspect of religion.<sup>8</sup>

Prophets, institutionalists and the neutral

mass are as mutually indispensable as they are inevitable. Christian values, social and otherwise, have endured (insofar as they have) thanks to the interaction upon them, and upon each other, of the three. (Partisan Review, 1950)

This does not mean that Agee would condone Fr. Jackson's unkindness or boorish manner. It seemed apparent from Agee's life that he would have viewed Fr. Jackson as basically unchristian and not the true bearer of Christ. Fr. Jackson represented and expressed the compromise of a "partial truth" which Agee could not accept in faith. The way to complete truth could not be found through Fr. Jackson and his institutional Church.

The plot of A Death in the Family began and ended with Rufus, the son of Mary and Jay,--with a certain emphasis on this child's experience. Rufus comprehended the world like a six year old boy. Because of this child-like view, the mysterious and the unknown were frightening for him. For example, Rufus was afraid of the dark, of the devils and goblins who lived there, unseen, grasping:

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

He saw the basin and that it was only itself, but its eye was wicked ice.

Even the sugar curtains were evil, a senselessly fumbling mouth; and the leaves wavering, stifled their treelike infestation.

Near the window, a stain on the wall paper, pale brown, a serpent shape.

Deadly, the opposite window returned his staring.

The cricket cherished what ovaricious secret;



patiently sculptured what effigy of dread?

The voices buzzed, pleased and oblivious as locust. They cared nothing for him.

He screamed for his father. (DF, p. 70)

God too was mysterious and unknown. He was someone Rufus prayed to, not knowing exactly who he was or what he was. Mother always spoke of God with love, as some force which she respected and filled her life, which made Rufus feel certain that praying to God must be a good thing. Aunt Hannah felt the same way as mother. However, Uncle Joel and Uncle Andrew did not really believe in God; and, if Fr. Jackson was really close to God, then Rufus could not possibly like God, for he hated Fr. Jackson. Rufus was bewildered by his father's death as the significance and meaning of death was virtually incomprehensible. This assertion could likewise apply to the meaning and significance of this "abstract" God in heaven to whom Rufus's mother prayed. However, his confusion was somewhat resolved, again in the butterfly incident. Through this experience, Rufus felt some stirrings of God that were truly his own. The butterfly became a symbol of God's spirit, and his father's death was made "all right" because of it:

It was not all right about his father because his father could never come back again, but it was better than it had been, anyway, and it was all right about his not being there, because now it was almost as if he had been there and seen it with his own eyes, and seen the butterfly, which showed that even for his father it was all right. (DF, p. 253)

Consequently, the sudden death of Jay, a good man who formally worshipped no God, and whose own God was found near

and glorious in his beloved nature, collapsed all semblance of order and understanding of the world for Rufus. Ironically, seemingly as a final gesture of love, Jay led his son to follow him, to grasp an awareness of his God, embodied in the butterfly, nature's "Rising Christ", her living symbol of resurrection and rebirth.

V. Conclusion: In Sure and Certain Hope

It took James Agee 46 years to die. Over this short span of days, hours and minutes, he developed a fullness--as an artist and as a person more intensely in touch with himself. His consuming passion for journalism, as he was a tireless and painstaking writer, brought his artistic writing skills to maturation quickly. He could pick up the pen and the lines would shimmer. However, his process of becoming more intensely aware of himself, especially in relation to his God, was jolting, painful and slow. "His purpose was to chart, to orient himself, by reference to the compass needle itself, his own independent power of perception, his own soul."<sup>1</sup>

God was important for Agee in his writing, and especially in the maturing of his soul. His relationship with God was often distant, rarely close. Agee's religious feelings could at times be insensible and frustrating; and at other times be as luminescent as any scene he might describe in his novels---these times determined by the "religious swings" he often referred to.

The writing of A Death in the Family had special meaning for Agee, because it was autobiographical in nature. He was more than ordinarily involved with the novel, as he tried to completely immerse himself in this work. He spent over 15 years of his life in the production.

The seven main characters of A Death in the Family demonstrate diverse views and examples of success and failure

in their relations with God. Their separate views often closely paralleled periods of Agee's personal religious consciousness of God: that God was confusion and wonder; that God could be close and personal (a reflection of the value of Agee's childhood experiences in coming to know God); that the inclusiveness of his tolerance embraced the belief that God was for all men to seek out and know, and God did not hide behind any institutional label; that God was love, and truth, and shared these with all men; that God could be found in beauty and in nature, and that there He was real and pure and calm; that God was often distant and even occasionally seemed to disappear, whose drawing away opened a gap left unfilled--and this gap was kept open as being good.

Agee felt his perception of God was increasing in intensity and depth. It could only be a guess as to how clear a view Agee had at his tragic, but not totally unexpected death in May of 1955.

In his final letter to Fr. Flye, Agee briefly described an idea he had been working on for a movie-plot. In the scene described, God speaks:

I do not regard myself as omnipotent. I gave that up when I gave men the Will to love me or to hate me, or merely to disregard me. So I can promise you nothing. What little I can tell you is neither encouraging nor discouraging... I ask only this: be yourselves, always faithfully, always in the knowledge of my love and regard.  
(May 11, 1955)

Truly, Agee's God promised nothing, and seemingly gave him

neither encouragement nor discouragement; moreover, their relationship was often stormy and distant. Yet, even if Agee found God to be elusive and frustrating, he continued faithfully the search to fill what he knew was missing from his life.

Perhaps God had finally spoken with clarity to James Agee through the quoted passage above. Perhaps God spoke tenderly to James Agee on that day in May which concluded forty-six years. Perhaps the confusion of facing God in life was made easier in dying. Perhaps, and hopefully, James Agee died exactly as he lived--"In Sure and Certain Hope."

## Footnotes

### I. Introduction: "This Breathing Joy Heavy on Us All"-- A Rare Legacy.

<sup>1</sup>James Agee, The Letters of James Agee to Fr. Flye, New York: George Braziller, 1962, p. 46.

<sup>2</sup>Peter Ohlin, Agee, New York: Ivan Obolensky, Inc. 1966, p. 7.

### II. The Anarchist

<sup>1</sup>Dwight MacDonald, "Death of a Poet," The New Yorker, November 16, 1957, p. 239.

<sup>2</sup>James Agee, The Letters of James Agee to Fr. Flye, New York: George Braziller, 1962, p. 8.

<sup>3</sup>Robert Fitzgerald (ed.), The Collected Short Prose of James Agee, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1968, p. 23.

<sup>4</sup>Agee, op. cit., p. 42.

<sup>5</sup>Fitzgerald, loc. cit.

<sup>6</sup>Agee, op. cit., p. 58.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>8</sup>Fitzgerald, loc. cit., pp. 31-32.

<sup>9</sup>Agee, op. cit., p. 123.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 98-101.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 145.

<sup>12</sup>Fitzgerald, loc. cit., p. 53.

<sup>13</sup>Agee, op. cit., p. 139.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 172.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 183.

### III. A Remembrance and A Memorial

<sup>1</sup>James Agee, The Letters of James Agee to Fr. Flye, New York: George Braziller, 1962, p. 48.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 170.

<sup>3</sup>Robert Fitzgerald (ed.) The Collected Short Prose of James Agee, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1968, pp. 125-126.

### IV. The Cycles Unwind

<sup>1</sup>James Agee, "Religion and Intellectuals", Partisan Review, XVII, February 1950, pp. 106-113.

<sup>2</sup>Gene W. Ruoff, "A Death in the Family, Agee's 'Unfinished' Novel", in The Fifties, (ed.) by Warren French, Oeland, Florida: Everett/Edwards, Inc., 1970, p. 29.

<sup>3</sup>James Agee, A Death in the Family, New York: Avon Books 1966, p. 46.

(NOTE: From this point on, all references to this novel shall be footnoted by the following abbreviation, DF, and the page number.)

<sup>4</sup>Peter Ohlin, Agee, New York: Ivan Obolensky, 1966, p. 195.

<sup>5</sup>Ruoff, op. cit., p. 128.

<sup>6</sup>James Agee, The Letters of James Agee to Fr. Flye, New York: George Braziller, 1962, p. 183.

<sup>7</sup>Ruoff, op. cit., p. 131.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 130.

### V. Conclusion: In Sure and Certain Hope

<sup>1</sup>Robert Fitzgerald, The Collected Short Prose of James Agee, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1968, p. 24.

<sup>2</sup>James Agee, The Letters of James Agee to Fr. Flye, New York: George Braziller, 1962, p. 230

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