

AGEE AND SHAME

AGEE AND SHAME: A PSYCHOANALYTICAL READING OF THE
AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL FICTION

By

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the autobiographical fiction of James Agee from the perspective of Kohut's self psychology and shame studies. Chapter One provides an outline of these psychological theories and draws connections between Kohut's narcissistic personality disorder and shame, makes reference to other scholars such as Joseph Adamson, J. Brooks Bouson and Barbara Ann Schapiro who have employed these theories with such effectiveness to other authors, and discusses Agee within these contexts. Chapter Two focuses on A Death in the Family and examines how Agee's autobiographical persona suffers from a narcissistic injury and excessive shame that precedes his father's death, and explores how other family members suffer from similar disturbances. Chapter Three examines Agee's first novel, The Morning Watch, and discusses the shame dynamics that underlie Agee's ambiguous presentation of religion. Chapter Four explores Agee's short autobiographical fiction from the 1940's and discusses how Agee's response to the modern world plays an integral role in his examination of the self and interpersonal conflicts.

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Chapter One: Introduction

James Agee, Narcissistic Injury and Shame

When James Agee died of a heart attack in 1955 at the age of forty-five, he judged his life and literary works as failures. Despite a varied career in a multitude of media – poetry, journalism, fiction and screenwriting – his talents were largely unknown at the time of his death. Not until the posthumous publication of A Death in the Family (ADF) did interest in his other works begin to flourish and his contribution to American literature begin to be recognized. Given the fact that Agee only attained the recognition he craved after his death, his self-assessment may seem justifiable. On the other hand, while he was alive his work garnered favorable opinions from those who, arguably, must have meant much to him. For instance, Agee's film reviews for The Nation won respect from W. H. Auden whom Agee considered the greatest living poet. For Auden, Agee's weekly column

[i]s the most remarkable regular event in American journalism today. What he says is of such profound interest, expressed with such extraordinary wit and felicity, and so transcends its ostensible – to me, rather unimportant – subject, that his articles belong to that very select class – the music critiques of Berlioz and Shaw are the only members I know – of newspaper work which has permanent literary value. (Auden xix)

Similarly, Agee's impassioned defense of Chaplin's film Monsieur Verdoux initiated a friendship with his childhood hero, just as the favorable reviews of John Huston's films culminated in Agee writing the screenplay for the academy award winning The African Queen. The question that begs to be answered, then, is how could someone who had

attracted the favorable notice of such prestigious company judge his talents so harshly?
There was much more value to James Agee than he knew.

Even if Agee had lived to see A Death in the Family win the Pulitzer prize for fiction in 1957, it is likely that he would have remained skeptical of his abilities. In all his work, there is the looming presence of a personality which although essentially a humanist – most vividly testified to in his impassioned record of life during the Depression in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men – is at odds with itself and ultimately self-destructive. For many critics it is this iconoclastic work which captures both aspects of his personality, and because of this it is often viewed as his most lasting contribution to American letters. Interestingly, as Alan Spiegel points out, the attention this and some of Agee's more experimental works garner is as much an interest in the personality which forged them.

Indeed, Agee has become a minor cult figure and the merit attributed to his more idiosyncratic works is based, in part, on the degree to which he was an anti-conformist and can be viewed as a tragic American writer. As Spiegel observes, Agee is either lauded as the "Sacrificial Lamb" whose destruction was brought about through hack-journalism under the auspices of Henry Luce, or as the "Dark Angel" who suffered from "the churning of a self destructive pathology" (11). To some extent, however, both myths are true and, because of the highly personal nature of his work, bear some weight. What is important about the fiction in this light, and what makes it so lasting on more serious levels, is how we are given the troubled, enigmatic man behind the myth who tried to understand his indulgences in as objective a form as possible.

What is even more remarkable, though, is how criticism of the fiction has avoided in-depth psychoanalytical readings. The autobiographical nature of the works and their emphasis on the inner lives of the characters inevitably force any analysis to venture into some sort of psychologically-based position. In fact, the outright repudiation of a psychoanalytic approach by some critics is, given their professions, impossible to fathom. What might explain this trend, however, is the beauty of Agee's prose, his ability to vividly recapture universal moments in childhood and evoke nostalgia for an idealized time in America's past. Indeed, it could be argued that the reason *A Death in the Family* has remained in print for nearly half a century is because it presents a slice of Americana in the safe form of domestic fiction. Certainly this is how the publishers often promote it.¹ One need only consider the descriptions on the back of the Bantam paperback or Vintage edition to see this trend. For instance, the Bantam edition reads:

James Agee's Pulitzer Prize-winning *A Death in the Family* is the powerful, moving story of a universal human situation. It tells of a loving and closely-knit family – and of their great courage when tragedy changes senselessly and suddenly the lives of those who are left behind.

At the same time, as Alan Spiegel notes, the Bantam edition also offers a description of Agee's life that will appeal to those who like their authors, especially American authors, tragic. Moreover, in an obvious marketing ploy, Agee is linked to Thomas Wolfe, that other Southern writer who turned the stuff of his life into fiction:

James Agee, author of the Pulitzer prize winning *A Death in the Family* was the most prodigiously talented writer of his generation and one of the most tragic figures of our time. He had three wives and four children. He drank too much. He drove himself beyond the endurance of any human being. He was torn by guilt and self-doubt. He was haunted by the idea of suicide and obsessed with achieving greatness. His death at age forty-five

was probably the greatest blow to American literature since the passing of Thomas Wolfe.

A Death in the Family is not, despite the similarities between Agee's and Wolfe's excesses, comparable to the latter's rambling, self-mythologizing novels. A Death in the Family and Agee's other autobiographical fiction exist somewhere in-between the simplistic formulations of publishers and devotees. From within Agee's fiction emerges a troubled individual looking back, attempting through autobiographical personas to understand the forces which shaped his personality, one plagued with guilt, excessive shame and suffering from what self psychologist Heinz Kohut would see as a narcissistic disorder.

Of all the critics of Agee's fiction to miss its full psychological implications, perhaps none is more surprising than the Harvard psychiatrist Robert Coles. Coles almost vehemently asserts that any criticism of A Death in the Family which views the marital tensions between Jay and Mary Follet as having a negative, pathological impact on Agee's autobiographical protagonist Rufus is misguided. He flatly asserts:

The Follet home is not a disturbed one. It is a home about to be singled out for a premature disaster, but one has to be a rather determined psychopathologist (who can, of course, always notice something anywhere) to turn a basically sound marriage – indeed, one glowing in the presence of two fine children – into a tangle of disorder and disturbance.
(64)

In a similar way, but by no means unanimously, criticism of Agee's first novel The Morning Watch (MW) often argues that its autobiographical protagonist undergoes a genuine religious conversion that frees him from a self-punishing, vainglorious

commitment to religion and troubled relationships with others. But what is particularly revealing about the criticism of these two novels is how the discrepancies that are claimed to exist between Agee's life and its fictional counterparts are inconsistent. Coles, for instance, is immediately drawn to Agee's fiction because of what may be the original opening to A Death in the Family, "Dream Sequence," in which the Agee persona attempts to come to terms with the belief that his father was ashamed of him (Doty 115). Similarly, William J. Rewak who argues that The Morning Watch offers a resolution to Agee's self doubt in a way which could not be attained in life, attempts to back his argument by saying that Agee's "1928 Story" better reflects Agee's actual feelings about his life. Inevitably, as Rewak's position demonstrates, Agee's personal history and his thoughts about that history documented in letters and working notes complicate such arguments. The essential problem is that each work of fiction with an autobiographical narrator shares Agee's history, and in terms of strict textual analysis, Rufus Follet's. Indeed, as we shall see, the protagonist of The Morning Watch, and the narrator of "Dream Sequence" are older versions of Rufus and suffer from the same narcissistic, shame-based anxieties from internal and external sources.

Psychoanalytic criticism has only recently begun to examine literary works from the perspective of narcissism and shame. While many critics and scholars have continued to find novel ways of employing Freud's theories, albeit in radically modified forms, a number of other scholars have turned to different psychoanalytic sources. At the same time, Lacan has superseded Freud in literary studies because of the vogue of post-structuralism, and I would argue, an unwillingness to move too far away from a Freudian

model of the self. Nevertheless, a number of critics have turned to the work of Heinz Kohut, among others, for new models that have proved fruitful. Books such as The Empathic Reader and Narcissism and the Text examine a variety of English and European works from Kohut's model of the self and narcissism and offer vital, immediate readings of such well-mined authors as Kafka and Dostoevsky. Similarly, Melville, Shame and the Evil Eye and a number of the essays in Scenes of Shame utilize Kohut's theories and employ developments in shame psychology which have, in varying degrees, developed from and have affinities with Kohut's pioneering work. The vitality of these new psychoanalytical approaches to literature can, in part, be attributed to the direct engagement with emotional life that Kohut's writing offers through his departure from Freud.

Kohut's divergence from Freud was not immediate, but when made, decisive. For Kohut, his questioning of Freud's theories began with the realization that many of his patients were not benefiting from traditional psychoanalytic methods: "it became clear that the essence of the disturbance from which these patients suffered could not be adequately explained within the framework of classical drive-and-defense psychology" (Kohut and Wolf 413-414). A new method was needed because with these patients, therapy "reactivated certain specific narcissistic needs [. . .]" (413), the distinguishing feature of their distress, which Kohut refers to as narcissistic personality disorder.

In Restoration of the Self Kohut makes his opposition to Freud abundantly clear with the distinction between Guilty Man and Tragic Man, both of whom suffer from narcissistic disorder. Guilty Man refers to the Freudian conception of the psyche, beset

with libidinal drives that are repressed in accordance with social norms and with guilt that stems from the frustrated Oedipal wish. In contrast, Tragic Man suffers from narcissistic problems which are not sexually specific, that in fact predate the Oedipal conflict, and so cannot be explained in terms of drive-theory. Fundamentally, Tragic Man, or narcissistic personality disorder, results from failures in the formation of the self through relation to others.

For Kohut, the self is bipolar; this bipolarity increases as children experience natural challenges to their original feelings of narcissistic wholeness:

The equilibrium of primary narcissism is disturbed by the unavoidable shortcomings of maternal care, but the child replaces the previous perfection (a) by establishing a grandiose and exhibitionistic image of the self: the grandiose self; and (b) by giving over the previous perfection to an admired, omnipotent (transitional) self-object: the idealized parent imago. (Kohut 25)

Within the grandiose and exhibitionist parts of the self, a child harbors feelings of centrality and believes that its pleasure in self-expression will be validated by its caregivers. Kohut puts it this way: “The terms ‘grandiose’ and ‘exhibitionistic’ refer to a broad spectrum of phenomena, ranging from the child’s solipsistic world view and his undisguised pleasure in being admired [. . .]” (25). On the other hand, the idealized selfobject or idealized parent imago describes that part of the self which identifies with a caregiver, that part which “idealizes” a caregiver because they offer support in times of helplessness and confusion. Kohut refers to this relationship between the bipolar self and a caregiver as the self-selfobject relationship. A parent or caregiver is referred to as a

selfobject because a child does not distinguish between itself and the caregiver; for the child they are one in the same. Kohut explains that

Selfobjects are objects which we experience as part of our self; the expected control over them is, therefore, closer to the concept of the control which a grown-up expects to have over his own body and mind than to the concept of the control which he expects to have over others. (Kohut and Wolf 414)

Put in more direct language, the process illustrated above functions as follows: “The embryonic grandiose self is reflected ‘in the radiance of the mother’s eyes’; its own grandiosity shares in the omnipotence of its selfobject. The two are fused, yet take the form of a differentiated whole” (Susske 3).

Healthy development only occurs within this dynamic through empathic parenting. The process of transforming this relationship into an internal structure of the self that will be independent of selfobjects is what Kohut calls transmuting internalization. If a parent offers the proper responsiveness to a child, the child will ultimately develop a cohesive sense of self, where the two poles of the self offer a sense of autonomy and self-direction. The grandiose and exhibitionist self will now provide “the instinctual fuel for our ego-syntonic ambitions and purposes, for the enjoyment of our activities and for important aspects of our self-esteem” (Kohut 27-28). At the same time, the idealized parent imago will be “integrated into the adult personality. Introjected as our idealized super ego, it becomes an important component of our psychic organization by holding up to us the guiding leadership of its ideals” (28). Ultimately, a “firm self” is

made up of three major constituents: (1) one pole from which emanate the basic strivings for power and success; (2) another pole that harbors the basic idealized goals; and (3) an intermediate area of basic talents and skills that are activated by the tension-arc that establishes itself between ambitions and ideals. (Kohut and Wolf 414)

If empathic mirroring does not occur, however, because of a parent's inability to respond to a child's needs on either pole, a structural deficit in the self – a narcissistic injury – can take place. Parents who are either distant, or suffer from psychological problems of their own which infect the child/parent interaction, can unwittingly inflict such injuries. And as a result, an individual will lack a "firm self" and be dominated by the archaic needs of one or both poles of the self. As Brooks Bouson makes clear

Individuals who suffer from such empathic deprivations may as a consequence, be dominated throughout their lives by the regressive needs of the archaic grandiose self (which perceives itself as omnipotent, the center of attention, and in control of others) and/or the archaic idealizing self (which feels empty and powerless unless merged with an all-powerful other). (16)

The crisis for Tragic Man, then, is a search for a cohesive self which will be empowering and autonomous.² Individuals who suffer from narcissistic personality disorder either try to win approval from others through the self-displays of the grandiose self, convincing themselves that they have power that they implicitly believe they lack, or try to merge with all-powerful, idealized parental surrogates. For such individuals, others remain selfobjects and this brings with it a variety of destructive behavior patterns.³

It is the examination of literary characters within this model specifically – and how certain characters can be seen to seek wholeness and fulfillment through maladaptive expressions of the grandiose and/or idealizing poles of their selves – that

have proved so illuminating in new psychoanalytical readings of literature. For example, Bouson's essay on Kafka demonstrates how Gregor Samsa's distant family inflicts a narcissistic injury on him, resulting in his transformation into an insect which is, metaphorically, his attempt to win their favor through expressions of the grandiose pole of the self. As Bouson makes clear, in order "to restore his defective self, he acts out his repressed grandiose needs as he tries to capture the attention of family members and extract from them the approval he needs to confirm his worth and reality" (Bouson 193). Similarly, in Adamson's study of Melville, Ahab's hatred and pursuit of Moby Dick can be viewed as an expression of his grandiose self, fueled by narcissistic rage which results from the humiliation of not being validated by others. Adamson persuasively argues that Ahab's

feeling of humiliated fury or shame-anger (or, as Kohut calls it, narcissistic rage) is akin to the feeling that one has been betrayed; there is the same overwhelming sense of helplessness, of impotency and utter lack of control in the face of the noncompliance of one's human or physical environment. (76)

Gregor Samsa and Ahab are, of course, grotesque human extremes – one literally is an insect – but Kohut's model can illuminate our understanding of more quotidian characters, such as those in Agee's fiction. In fact, the major dilemma of the Agee character, especially his autobiographical personas, is how to achieve a sense of a cohesive self free from self-punishing behavior that stems from a sense of defectiveness.

That this is Agee's central concern in his fiction is no surprise when we consider his personal history. Indeed, it is precisely because Agee's fiction is predominantly autobiographical – offering us as fiction his childhood, adolescence, maturity and the

perspective of various adult narrators on his youth – that the childhood events that shaped his life need to be considered. Above all, for Agee, the quest for a cohesive self governs how the incidents in his fiction are told. As Mark Doty suggests in his aptly titled Tell Me Who I Am: James Agee's Search for Selfhood,

Agee's search for selfhood framed his life and lent order to the art that mirrored it. James Agee's life, like the lives of his personae, was grounded – however tortuously – in active, questioning introspection [. . .]. Yet behind literary projects begun and not finished, three marriages and two divorces, and endless bouts with tobacco, alcohol, and depression, there is a pattern: a need to bring the disparate elements into harmony, a rage to discover why, even as Rufus Follet wonders why, those whom he loved could “not now, not ever [. . .] not ever tell me who I am.” (xii)

Doty's comments are illuminating, not only because of his insistence on the importance for the search of self-knowledge in Agee's life and work but also because he terms this desire as “rage,” which can be cast in terms of the narcissistic rage that results from selfobject failure and chronic shame. Perceptively, Doty links Agee's artistic ambitions and the subject of his work back to his earliest childhood and the unmistakable signs of narcissistic injury.

The central event in Agee's life, which is the subject of A Death in the Family, was the death of his father in a car accident in 1916. But for a work that centers on this pivotal event, one is struck by how little space is given over to a direct examination of the impact of the death on Agee's autobiographical protagonist Rufus Follet. Instead, Agee is more concerned with the psychological lives of his characters before Jay Follet's death and the well-being within the immediate and extended family. As a result, the experiences Agee retells and the way in which he does so positions the father's death as a

traumatic event that is subsidiary to Rufus's earlier narcissistic injuries, which we shall see further validates a Kohutian reading of Agee's fiction as a whole. Indeed, the propensity of characters in A Death in the Family, The Morning Watch and the short fiction who suffer psychological disturbances similar to Melville's characters, can be explained by a common psychological history that both authors share. What Adamson claims about Melville applies equally to Agee.

The traumatic event of his father's death, given the particularly mortifying circumstances that attended it, when Herman was twelve and entering adolescence – a particularly vulnerable period in the development of a cohesive sense of self – would have reactivated and reinforced Melville's earlier sense of rejection and disappointment in his narcissistically disturbed parents. (26)

Like Melville's work, then, Agee's can be seen as the distillation of a personality. This is, of course, Freud's argument that all works reflect their author's psychological concerns, and what is significant in Melville and Agee is the consistency of the problems their characters endure and the irresolution of these problems. And even though Agee's fiction is most often filtered through the perspective of his autobiographical heroes, he explores with equal depth the same psychological concerns in his periphery characters. Some are as damaged as the protagonists themselves, while others face far less grave circumstances. But because the autobiographical hero is at the center of each work, some characters serve, by extension, as potential models of what the protagonists might become, or reinforce the dynamics of the narcissistic injuries that they endure. Above all, what is central to the behavior of the majority of his characters is the ways in which shame plagues their interactions with others and themselves, and how their shame

defenses are often maladaptive, reinforcing their narcissistic injuries or making them shaming agents of others.

The link between Kohut's model of narcissistic injury and excessive shame is, as a number of theorists argue, very strong.⁴ Most recently, for example, Benjamin

Kilborne explains:

For Kohut, the absence of the expected response in the mother or parent triggers in the infant a wish to hide his needs, to be ashamed of wanting them gratified. As a result, the child becomes ashamed also of the inadequacy of his parents as well as of his own needs, leading to depression. (99)

In a similar vein, Leon Wurmser demonstrates how the sense of defectiveness that is at the core of narcissistic personality disorder is fundamental to shame in its most drastic manifestations. For Wurmser, the overarching belief for those who suffer from chronic, incapacitating shame is that the self is unlovable because it is "weak, dirty and defective" (189). Often, the origin of these beliefs which make up the overarching belief that one is unlovable can be traced back to a developmental phase corresponding to Kohut's pre-Oedipal moment of selfobject failure. Shame at this stage, Wurmser argues, "becomes confluent with very archaic forms of guilt, disgust, and panic" (191). Significantly, the inner conflict which these archaic emotions generate is, in Wurmser's view, contemporaneous with the Kohutian arrest of the self, and can be located within two poles of the self which conform to Kohut's grandiose self and idealized parent imago.

Wurmser says:

This basic conflict has been mentioned as the polarity between the wish for total union with the omnipotent object and its opposite, the protodefensive attempt to find the omnipotent self in separateness,

ultimately in absolute isolation. Both drives are unfulfillable; both separation from the symbiotic object, experienced as icy coldness, and the feeling of self-loss and fragmentation when merging with the other result in furious and devastating rage. (191)

What Wurmser refers to as “drives,” are modified versions of the two poles of the Kohutian bipolar self. The grandiose self corresponds to what Wurmser calls the delophilic drive, while the idealized selfobject is called the theatophilic drive. For Wurmser, as the quotation above suggests, the two poles of the self can be reconfigured as modes of expression and perception, the frustration of which generates shame. If one’s desire to merge with others and gain power from them is obstructed, the response is “an archaic form of shame anxiety – to be petrified by the look of the object” (165). On the other hand, if the desire to impress another through forms of expression is “thwarted, there ensue contempt against the object and shame (as self-contempt), culminating in the same archaic shame anxiety under the first axis.” Shame anxiety, in the context of rejection from either pole is, simply put “*that type of anxiety evoked by sudden exposure and signaling the danger of contemptuous rejection*” (53). The anxiety that accompanies shame is that the individual who is rejected – regardless of whether this rejection is real or imagined – will be excluded and isolated indefinitely.

In Agee’s fiction this anxiety is the central fear that plagues many of his characters. Rufus Follet, for example, fears that he will remain permanently excluded from his father and the masculine world he represents whenever he senses his father’s disapproval or distance, a fear which tragically comes true with his father’s death. Similarly, Richard in The Morning Watch fears that he will be a permanent outcast from

the other boys at his school because of his commitment to religion or will be rejected by Christ and his mother for trying to win the favor of his peers. For narcissistically disturbed people such as these, for whom expression and perception have a heightened investment, shame anxiety is extremely painful because any unsuccessful mergers with others confirm a sense of inadequacy, that the self is fundamentally unlovable. Moreover, since those who suffer from narcissistic disorders act out in maladaptive ways, they do much to confirm their inherent belief that they are ineluctably flawed.

Another group of shame theorists who have provided invaluable insight into the dynamics of shame are those who have followed Silvan Tomkins, the founder of affect theory. There is, however, some disagreement between the sort of shame we have been discussing in terms of Kohut's self psychology and what we find in affect theory. Donald Nathanson, an affect theorist, argues that the Freudian and Kohutian theories of development can obscure the full range of how shame operates

Within either of these highly regarded views of shame it would be unthinkable to consider shame as an innate affect, a physiological mechanism that limits the expression of interest-excitement and enjoyment joy. Both philosophies ignore the fact that newborn infants show all the facial and bodily manifestations of shame. (Shame and Pride 196)

As can be gathered from Nathanson's comments, shame as an "innate affect" is not simply the product of psychological disturbances. It is, like the nine other affects Tomkins identifies, part of a biological mechanism that is activated through neural firing, and which generates specific emotional and physical (primarily facial) responses. The stimulus for the neural firing can either be internal or external, and Nathanson explains that the affect which results "unfolds according to its own precisely written program.

Each one lasts a strictly determined period of time, ranging from a few hundredths of a second to a couple of seconds” (49). Out of the nine affects, only two are positive (Interest-Excitement and Enjoyment-Joy) and one is neutral (Surprise-Startle) because it resets the affective system. The negative affects are as follows: distress-anguish, fear-terror, anger-rage, shame-humiliation, dissmell and disgust. Shame affect, however, occupies a unique place as an affect. Like the other negative affects it is a necessary part of our makeup – it serves a positive function. Shame, like the other affects, is part of

a biological system by which the organism controls its affective output so that it will not remain interested or content when it may not be safe to do so, or so that it will not remain in affective resonance with an organism that fails to match patterns stored in memory. (140)

At the same time, though, the painful experience of shame is universal, regardless of whether we are healthy or disturbed. Whenever we experience shame, our self-conception is always called into question. It is, as Gershen Kaufman puts it, “the affect of inferiority” (17).

Even though Nathanson and other affect theorists emphasize that shame affect should not be strictly associated with pathological states, they do agree that the sort of empathic failure Kohut describes can generate “shame-bound” selves. Gershen Kaufman, another prominent affect theorist, discusses how chronic shame can be manifested within narcissistic disturbances. What is more, Wurmser’s observations about how expression and perception play an integral role in such dynamics is evoked in Kaufman’s discussion about how toxic shame develops in child/parent interactions. Kaufman suggests that in the early stages of a child’s relationship with his parents that a

bond is created that is similar to the self selfobject relationship. Through empathic mirroring, which takes place on an expressive and perceptual plane, a child will experience a narcissistic wholeness with its caregivers, largely through looking, while physical needs are being met.

The mother's smiling face is like a magnet, drawing the infant into her inviting eyes. Through the eyes we can experientially enter one another. By gazing in mutual enjoyment into one another's eyes, we actually merge into one another and, however briefly, experience ourselves become *one*. (32)

The person the child bonds with through these moments of intense looking does not need to be the mother, though. As *A Death in the Family* illustrates, the infant Rufus initially bonds with the Black midwife Victoria through such visual connection, which significantly is not presented between mother and son, foreshadowing the conflicts between them. When Rufus meets Victoria again, his memory of their closeness demonstrates that it was established in the way Kaufman specifies.

[A]ll of a sudden as he looked into the vast shining planes of her smiling face and at the gold spectacles which perched there as gaily as a dragonfly, there was something that he did remember, a glisten of gold and a warm movement of affection, and before he knew it he had flung his arms around her and she whooped with astonished joy. (ADF 96)

In addition, such bonds through visual merging are not sexually specific, and this is suggested by Rufus's prolonged gazing at "*his father's huge face*" (ADF 82) when his father comes to comfort him in the night. Agee was, as Laurence Bergreen suggests, highly skeptical of the Oedipus complex, and one reason why Kohut's and Kaufman's points about visual merging are so applicable to Agee is that they refute Freud's model of

the overtly sexualized self that originates in oral auto-eroticism: "It is not oral gratification that is primary, but rather, the visual scene of union – identification – and its accompanying affect – enjoyment – that instead govern development" (Kaufman 33).

In the main, then, Kohut and Kaufman agree that the childhood self, however differently they may conceive it, develops primarily through interactions with parents in ways that are not primarily sexual, and that healthy development is contingent upon the proper empathic responses from parents. Under optimal circumstances, an interpersonal bridge forms out of reciprocal interest and shared experiences of trust. "Trusting," argues Kaufman, "must be matched by the parent behaving in a trustworthy fashion. Consistency (not perfection) and predictability (not rigidity) are crucial to building an interpersonal bridge, whether with a child, friend, or client" (33). For Kaufman, however, breaks in the interpersonal bridge and the shame which follows are not necessarily evidence of poor parenting; rather, like Kohut, he sees such "betrayals" of imagined narcissistic wholeness as part of the normal development of a child's burgeoning independence. In fact, Kaufman's position is that throughout the life cycle the interpersonal bridges we form are transformed according to the demands each successive stage of life brings with it, provided reconciliation with others continues to occur. It is only in families, such as the ones in Agee's fiction, where the interpersonal bridge is severed through habitual forms of rejection – in effect arresting self-development – that shame can be magnified and internalized. Kaufman states that "While breaking the interpersonal bridge activates shame, the experience of shame itself,

particularly when repetitive or prolonged over time, further severs the bridge, creating a gradually widening gulf' (37).

The extreme result of such empathic failures within families can result in what Kaufman refers to as a shame-based identity, which has strong affinities with Kohut's definition of narcissistic personality disorder. For Kaufman, a shame-based identity is the culmination of a complex process of internal self-division in which shame and other negative affects bind together and are magnified. The end result is a personality which, we shall see, is one that the reader of Agee's fiction knows intimately. His autobiographical personas, and especially the character of Ralph Follet in A Death in the Family, conform to Kaufman's definition in a startling way. For such people,

Defeats, failures, or rejections need no longer be actual, only perceived as such. The internal shame process has become magnified beyond what the basic affect of shame itself might produce as an amplifier, whether in the form of shyness, embarrassment, or guilt. The internalization and further magnification of shame have created an identity, a distinctive pattern of relating to oneself, that continuously absorbs, maintains, and spreads shame. The self has become shame-bound. (112)

What is of particular interest, though, is how this personality type displays the same sort of frustrated narcissistic needs that Kohut's Tragic Man does. When Kaufman describes narcissism within the development of a shame-based self, Kohut's bipolar self is evoked, but in terms of affect. Grandiosity, idealization and rage which figure so prominently in Kohut's model do so here as well. Grandiosity, or in Kohut's terminology, the excessive expression of the grandiose self, results in the following way: "when disgust and dissmell remain directed outward, employed largely as defending scripts (strategies of external protection and reaction), an exaggeration of the self's importance can occur" (Kaufman

147). The desire for fusion with idealized others which indicates narcissistic injury occurs when the same negative affects are turned against the self. Finally, narcissistic rage “is the shame-based individual’s secondary reaction to shame that has become magnified to the point of intolerability.”

Not only, then, can the two poles of the self be seen as the place where narcissism and debilitating shame originate, but their expression is often the way through which shame is defended. In the succeeding chapters, we will see how Kohut’s model of the bipolar self provides a useful understanding of Agee’s fiction and how a variety of shame defenses along these axes reveal much that has previously been ignored or misconstrued about his life and work.

Notes

1 Kenneth Seib makes an interesting comment about A Death in the Family in this context. Seib points out how the novel differs from other serious fiction of the early 1950's by Mailer, Salinger, Bellow and Tennessee Williams. Unlike their fiction, Seib maintains, Agee's does not describe the "alienation of modern man and the abnormalities of human nature" (74). Although I disagree with this reading of the novel, Seib offers an important point when he compares A Death in the Family to the popular fiction of the period. Seib says:

Agee was at work on a novel affirming the virtues of the American small town, and the faith and love of simple people. Such affirmation was, of course, being made – by writers of Book-of-the-Month Club best-sellers – but the work was invariably sentimental tripe. Agee's triumph lay in the fact that he was able to affirm without becoming maudlin and without falsifying his vision of human experience. (74)

2 J. Brooks Bouson makes an important distinction when she says that Kohut's self is not a reified structure. Bouson states:

While Kohut has been accused of reifying his concept of the "self" – for he talks of the self as being "strong," "enfeebled," or "depleted," or as "cohesive," "broken" or "fragmented" – the self is not, for him, "a thing or an entity" but rather "a symbolic abstraction from the developmental process" and an experiential construct. It is "the uniqueness that separates the experiences of the individual from those of all others while at the same time conferring a sense of cohesion and continuity on the disparate experiences of that individual [. . .]" (Basch, "The Concept of 'Self'" 53). (The Empathic Reader 15)

Barbara Ann Schapiro in her recent psychoanalytical studies of D.H. Lawrence makes a similar point about how we might conceive of the self. For those who object to the notion of a structural deficit in the self, Schapiro cites Stephen Mitchell's Hope and Dread in Psychoanalysis for a viable alternative which is complimentary with Kohut's assertions. In D.H. Lawrence and the Paradoxes of Psychic Life, Schapiro frames her discussion of the self in the following way. She says that Mitchell "suggests that we think about the self in temporal rather than spatial terms, as a matter of experience in time rather than of reified structures" (4). See also Barbara Schapiro "The Dread and Repulsiveness of the Wild': D. H. Lawrence and Shame," Scenes of Shame: Psychoanalysis, Shame, and Writing eds. Joseph Adamson and Hilary Clark (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999) 147-166. Here Schapiro uses a Kohutian framework and refers to Mitchell's notion of the self.

3 See Kohut and Wolf.

4 See also Andrew Morrison "The Eye Turned Inward: Shame and the Self," The Many Faces of Shame (New York: The Guilford Press, 1987) 271-291.

Chapter Two

“Tell Me Who I Am”: A Death in the Family

i

Mary Follet

A Death in the Family is Agee’s best-known and most successful work of fiction.

Yet one of the obstacles for any critic is its lack of completion. David McDowell, Agee’s editor, omitted significant portions occurring outside the time span of the twenty chapters which portray the evening before Jay Follet’s death, the funeral preparations and his burial. Instead, McDowell decided to include only some of this “outside” material in the three italics sections of the published text, and the prologue, “Knoxville: Summer 1915.” Much of this material, along with Agee’s working notes for the novel, have since been published in scholarly journals and critical studies. What is important about this material is how it suggests the importance of the marital difficulties between Jay and Mary, and substantiates the arguments of the few critics who claim that the marriage has negative consequences for the family within the published text.

Nevertheless, the majority of critics support Robert Coles’s view that the Follet’s marriage is successful despite Jay and Mary’s differences. As a result, critics typically minimize the degree to which each parent is committed to their contrasting values and desires, or offer novel, all-encompassing thematic closures to the marital tensions that Agee portrays with such irresolution. Victor Kramer, for example, who has written

extensively on Agee, argues throughout his criticism that Jay and Mary have “experienced a tension in their marriage, a ‘gulf’ which had only recently begun to close. But the marriage was growing into a strong bond which was apparently beneficial to all the family members” (sic) (Agee and Actuality 138). This “gulf,” however, which Mary refers to in chapter four, remains unresolved and is a source of shame for herself, Jay, and ultimately Rufus. What creates this disharmony are the conflicts between Mary’s staunch Catholicism and Jay’s atheism, his drinking and, as Kramer suggests, his rural background. For Rufus, as for the rest of the family, it is these tensions which permeate their inner lives; even the periphery characters such as Ralph Follet and Andrew Lynch reflect and inform the shame dynamics the immediate family and Rufus experience as a result of the marital conflicts.

Interestingly, most of the unhappiness that results from Jay and Mary’s differences is only revealed from her perspective. There are a number of possible explanations for this. First, Agee clearly idealizes his father; Mary’s faith is presented in a negative light because of its impact on her, on other family members and especially on Rufus, foreshadowing what occurs with Richard in The Morning Watch. In addition, for most of the novel Jay is absent. But the degree to which Mary Follet is unhappy in her marriage should be enough to make even her harshest critic pause and consider how effective the marriage really is and sympathize with her wish to make it as ideal as some critics view it. Indeed, even as Agee condemns the destructiveness that results from her religious devotion, he presents a woman who, like all the family members, struggles to understand her motivations with as much honesty as she can. And – as with all the

characters whose consciousness Agee explores in fine detail – he only calls into question the veracity of her interior monologues by means of intrusions of his objective, narrator’s voice or the contrary experience of other characters. Much of what Mary Follet reveals about her marriage is to be believed, then, even as she attempts to hide from or is incapable of knowing her own complicity in its troubles.

Mary is certain that her religious devotion alienates Jay, even though he has none of her brother’s “anger and contempt, and none of her father’s irony” for it (ADF 51). As a result, Mary fears that the gulf will widen because the children are being raised in the Catholic faith. In her view, Jay’s opposition to her faith is “bound to come into the home, quite as much as in church. It was bound in some ways, unless he changed [. . .]” (sic). But Mary, for her part, cannot change: “she must as a Christian woman, as a Catholic, bring up her children thoroughly and devoutly in the Faith, and [. . .] it was also her task, more than her husband’s, that the family remain one, that the gulf be closed” (ADF 52).

At the same time, however, as Mary reveals throughout chapter four, it is her dislike of Jay’s family and her belief that they do not accept her, as much as Jay’s atheism, which causes a rift in the marriage. In chapter four, Agee explores Mary’s inner turmoil about her negative feelings for her in-laws, and the self-deceptions she engages in as a result. First, we learn about the division between Mary and Jay’s father, and so by extension, between Mary and Jay themselves. Indeed, Jay’s own thoughts on how Mary views his father in chapter two – “He’s not your father, and besides you’ve always looked down at him” – concurs with what her thoughts reveal (ADF 27). As she considers the weak condition of Jay’s father, her conscience is in conflict with her true feelings:

she could not bring herself to feel as deeply about it as she felt that she should, for her husband's sake. She realized that if the situation were reversed, and it was her own father who was dying, Jay would feel much as she felt now, and that she could not blame either him or herself, but that did her no good. For she knew that at the bottom of it the trouble was, simply, that she had never really liked the old man. (ADF 47)

Here, we are given evidence of Mary's dislike of Jay's father, but of equal importance is how she attempts to qualify this and her other negative feelings because of the shame they bring her. Wurmser observes that the primary way in which shame occurs, regardless whether it is moderate or of the more pathological variety, is by the discrepancies between what he refers to as the ideal self and the experienced self (75). Underlying Mary's efforts to minimize her negative thoughts and feelings is the desire to conform to her ideal self, a proper Christian wife and mother. Wurmser explains:

In shame, it is the imago of a whole person with ideal features that we use as a yardstick to measure the delimited aspects of ourselves of which we may feel ashamed. It is not necessary – though it often occurs – that we compare in shame the whole experienced self with this ideal image; we may also measure parts of the real self against the ideal self. (74)

Mary, however, cannot reconcile her ideal self with her experienced self; to do so would be to discount her genuine emotions, and, in effect, rupture her self-concept altogether. Because of this, her wish to neither “blame” Jay or herself for how they feel “does her no good.” As she continues to contemplate her relationship with his family, each of her successive thoughts has a more negative connotation than the one before, and each thought remains meaningful to her. Her good intentions are undercut; each thought stands in ironic counterpoint to the next, exposing her qualifications for what they are – rationalizations. Jay, as Mary contends, may in fact harbour ill feelings for her father,

Joel, but we never learn this from Jay himself. Mary's attempt, then, to project her feelings for Jay's father onto Jay's feelings for her father is really an insidious form of rationalization, an expression of her need to sanitize her own feelings in order to avoid the shame of falling short of her idealized self.

Mary's dislike of Jay's father runs deep and is multifaceted; she cannot censure the flow of unresolved feelings about how she thinks Jay's relatives view her, nor can she resist enumerating their shortcomings. From her perspective, Jay's father, and indeed all of Jay's relatives, disapprove of her. Jay's father, she believes, accepts her conditionally, only because she is "Jay's woman." Also, Jay's other relatives, she suspects, have engaged in "envious, hostile, contemptuous talking about her" (ADF 48). As a result, Mary feels alienated from Jay's family and dislikes them, particularly Jay's father. She refers to him as "the one barrier" between her and Jay, "the one stubborn unresolved, avoided thing, in their complete mutual understanding of Jay's people, his 'background'" (ADF 49). For a moment, she even hopes that his illness will be fatal so "he'll no longer stand between me and Jay" (ADF 49-50). Yet, how exactly Jay's father exists as a "barrier" is not specified – perhaps it is enough that such a conviction so clearly undermines the unity of her marriage. What Mary explicitly dislikes about Jay's father, though, is given to us in some detail and ultimately reflects back on Mary's own marriage to Jay.

Mary dislikes "the special kind of basic weakness" about Jay's father "for it was a kind of weakness which took advantage, and heaped disadvantage and burden on others, and it was not even ashamed of itself, not even aware" (ADF 49). Also, Mary has "a

resentment, almost dislike, of Jay's mother, which she knew was both unjust and untrue to her actual feelings [. . .]" (ADF 48). What prompts this "resentment," though, may not be, as Mary claims, her views about Jay's mother per se, but rather a more lasting resentment about how their marriages mirror one another. Mary resents Jay's father because he does not realize the effect his "generosity" to others has on his family, and that his family constantly forgives him for this behaviour. Similarly, Mary cannot tolerate Jay's mother for "her perfect patience with him, as if she didn't even know it was a burden or that he was taking advantage. It was this unconsciousness in both of them that she could not abide [. . .]."

Ironically, this same sort of "unconsciousness" permeates Jay and Mary's marriage. Mary clearly objects to this aspect of her in-laws' marriage; yet at the same time, Mary's behaviour supports the avoidance of the numerous unresolved conflicts in her marriage. For example, in the excised fragment which Kramer has labelled "Premonition," the dislike Mary believes Jay's family has for her, and her own sense of alienation from them, is carefully concealed by her. In "Premonition," Jay's family has expressed an objection to Jay purchasing an automobile. Mary, trying to support Jay's position, suggests how the car will enable him to have closer contact with his parents. Mary – or Laura, as she is called in this excerpt – does what she perceives is her duty as a wife in order to preserve family unity. Yet, throughout their conversation, her unspoken sense of separation from her in-laws is ever present. Mary says to Jay:

'She's a very fine, wonderful woman and I know you think the world of her.'

He looked at her carefully, with particular love. 'You two really do take to one another, don't you.'

‘I certainly take to her, Jay, and – ’
 ‘Well I can promise you she likes you. Don’t you ever doubt that.’
 ‘Thank you, Jay. No, I don’t doubt it. Not one bit.’ (qtd. in Kramer,
 “Premonition of Disaster” 87)

Criticism of the marriage by Jay’s relatives, or at least Mary’s belief that it has taken place, is matched by the scepticism her relatives express about the marriage. For example, in chapter eight, when Aunt Hannah and Mary discuss her marriage from the standpoint of Mary’s family, Mary tries to convince her that “‘In these past few months, Aunt Hannah, we’ve come to a — kind of harmoniousness that — that,’ she began to shake her head” (ADF 117). Mary’s halting speech, though, suggests her deep misgivings, and for a moment she turns to Aunt Hannah in an effort to avoid feeling the shame that she has failed in her marriage. She asks:

‘I was more right than Papa, wasn’t I? It wasn’t a *mistake*. Papa was right there’d be trouble — more than he’ll ever know or any of you — but it *wasn’t* a mistake. Was it?’
 Don’t *ask* me, child, *tell* me, Hannah thought. (ADF 117)

If Mary is unable to admit her own feelings to Jay and seeks confirmation that her marriage is successful from outside sources, it is because of the degree to which she recognizes Jay’s unwillingness to address their conflicts openly. The level of Mary’s anger over Jay’s silence is a key aspect to the marriage. Yet only Ward’s observation about the role of uncommunicativeness in the marriage, and Mark Doty’s assertion that unused scenes “do point to genuine marital tensions between husband and wife and the families from which they came” (92), offer any account of how strained the conversations between Jay and Mary are. Doty provides an excerpt pertaining to the marriage, deleted

from the first italics sequence. After Jay comforts Rufus about his nightmare, the following conversation takes place.

‘Jay [. . .] I just can’t stand always to be shut out like that. I’m just simply not going to stand for it. It isn’t right.’

‘Like what?’

‘You must know perfectly well what I mean. When I asked you what you were thinking about and you – just answered me in a way that absolutely shut me out in the cold. That’s all.’

He lay silent remembering it and trying to figure out what to say.

‘Do you hear me Jay?’

‘Sure I hear you.’

‘Well answer me then. For goodness sake say something.’

‘Nothing to say.’

‘What do you mean there’s nothing. This is serious Jay.’ (qtd. in Doty 91)

Here, Jay’s behaviour mirrors Mary’s elsewhere: both are unable to address marital conflicts openly because they fear exacerbating the conflict. Looking back to chapter four, and Mary’s dislike of the “unconsciousness” of Jay’s parents’ marriage, we discover that it is this act of concealment which Mary objects to because, on some level, she knows that she and Jay engage in the same behaviour. When Mary considers whether or not the “gulf” in her marriage is truly widening, she says to herself: “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 be open about” (ADF 51).

Jay's Rural Background

This same destructive tendency of “unconsciousness” or evasion is present with the other issues in the marriage – Jay’s rural background and his drinking – and it has the same degenerative force. In Agee and Actuality Kramer considers Jay’s rural background, but he fails to see how it creates a serious division in their relationship. For Mary, Jay’s attachment to his roots poses a threat to the marriage. Kramer focuses on Mary’s preparation of Jay’s breakfast in chapter two, before Jay leaves to check on his father’s condition. Kramer, however, approaches this scene with too unreflective an eye; for him, Mary prepares this meal like a mountain woman simply because she “senses that Jay feels most comfortable in the country [. . .]” (145). What Kramer misses, though, is Mary’s motivation here. Secretly she wants to erase the conflict between herself and Jay’s relatives so that the shame she feels about this division remains hidden from Jay and ultimately herself.

She was pleased. Not more than half consciously, she had done this because within a few hours he would doubtless eat again, at home. For the same reason she had made the coffee unusually strong. And for the same reason she felt pleasure in standing at the stove while he ate, as mountain women did. (ADF 31)

Jay’s drinking is a much more potent issue in the marriage. We do learn from Rufus, however, after he listens to his parents sing together in the first italics sequence, that the issue has been addressed: “he overheard them arguing. Whiskey” (ADF 92). Nevertheless, despite the fact that Jay and Mary have discussed his drinking, Jay’s

craving for alcohol remains active and Agee suggests that this is due to Jay's unhappiness and lack of fulfilment in his marriage. For instance, in chapter one, after Jay and Rufus have gone to the bar, we find that Jay "reflected, without particular concern that Life Savers were not quite life saver enough; he had better play very tired tonight, and turn away the minute they got in bed" (ADF 16). Moreover, after Jay has sung Rufus to sleep in the first italics sequence, he recalls his childhood and that the same songs were sung to him. This remembrance awakens a sadness in him, not only on an existential level for how "you can never go home again" as many critics maintain, but also on a personal, psychological level.² Jay attempts to reassure himself – that he has been "lucky" by being married and is "thankful" for it – yet "once in a while, once in a long time, you remembered, and knew how far you were away, and it hit you hard enough, that little while it lasted, to break your heart" (ADF 87). Jay's response to this homesickness is a sudden compulsion to get drunk "and images of stealthiness and deceit, of openness, anger and pride, immediately possessed him, and immediately he fought them off." Jay then makes the promise to himself that if he ever gets drunk again he will kill himself. What connects his drinking to Mary, though, becomes explicit a few moments later when she enters the bedroom and Jay's same emotions are activated once more: "he was caught by a spasm of rage and alarm, then of shame for these emotions" (ADF 88).

On some level Mary is aware of Jay's tenuous control over his drinking. In chapter twelve, when she feels guilty that she was angry about Jay missing dinner on the night he was killed, she questions whether he may have been driving drunk. She thinks "there he was, all that day, with Ralph. He must have. Well he probably did. That was

no part of the promise. But not really drunk” (ADF 168). Once again, however, her attempt to compose herself properly – “No I won’t even dishonour his dear memory by asking” – is overshadowed by her doubts in a way which reveals her half-conscious knowledge of why Jay drinks in the first place. Mary “thought with such exactness and with such love of her husband’s face, and of his voice, and of his hands, and of his way of smiling so warmly *even though his eyes almost never lost their sadness*, that she succeeded in driving the other thought from her mind” (emphasis added). Her desire, then, to ward off the truth about Jay’s feelings about his life in Knoxville may shield her but for us it only underscores what we learn from Jay himself.

iii

Ralph Follet

If Jay’s drinking has, in the past, provided an escape from his marital conflicts but also exacerbated them, the extent to which shame can be masked by alcohol abuse takes on greater significance with his brother, Ralph Follet. Agee devotes all of chapter six to Ralph, but critics have not conclusively discussed why he does this. Robert Coles, for instance, immediately identifies the sort of pathology Ralph suffers from, saying that “we need only call him the names: depressed, a borderline personality, an alcoholic, maybe even a psychotic” (99). What Coles does not do, however, is fully explore his description of Ralph’s psychology or effectively connect him to other characters in the novel, thereby explaining why Agee gives over an entire chapter to him. On the one hand, Coles links Ralph to Mary Follet and her failures with Rufus and Catherine in the preceding chapter: he is “simply a weak and occasionally stupid man who – we are back to Rufus and

Catherine and their mother – feels he has never been loved enough by his mother, respected enough by his father” (73). At the same time, Coles contrasts Ralph “the baby” (ADF 66) to Rufus’s rather grown up self-assertiveness in chapter seven during his shopping expedition with Aunt Hannah, but he only sees this as an opportunity to praise Agee’s artistry. In chapter seven, Coles maintains, Rufus’s “unfailing good sense is not turned into an overworked foil, a means of showing how ironic things are: full-grown infants, like Ralph, and adults scarcely more than half a decade old, like Rufus” (74-75).

Neither of Coles’s explanations offers us anything definitive, even though he does recognize Ralph’s dilemma as shame without labeling it as such. What can be more revealing, though, is to consider Ralph in relation to Jay and Rufus. Jay clearly can empathize with Ralph because of his own drinking history. Jay, like Ralph, understands how intoxication can give one a sense of control, however spurious. Agee tells us that “Jay could imagine how much Ralph had needed to feel useful, to take charge. He couldn’t think very well of him, but he was sorry for him. *He felt he understood very well how it had happened*” (ADF 57; emphasis added). More importantly, though, Ralph is linked to Rufus because he is the only other male “baby” in the family, and clearly suffers from the same sort of excessive shame. In this way, Ralph can be considered as a possible model of what Rufus might become, and the reader who knows of Agee’s legendary drinking wonders how much of the author’s own struggles with alcohol inform his insights into Ralph. More concretely, however, Ralph’s attempts to defend against exposure of his shame through grandiose and idealizing gestures set the precedent for how Rufus copes with his shame, but also for Richard and Father Whitman in The

Morning Watch, Irvine in “1928 Story” and the narrator in “Dream Sequence.” For our purposes, then, Ralph requires a more thorough investigation than he typically receives even though he does not interact with Rufus directly.

Much has been written on the relationship between shame and alcoholism. Ronald T. Potter-Efron, for example, provides a useful, in-depth examination of shame and alcoholism in the context of Kohut’s narcissism and Nathanson and Kaufman’s writings on shame and its defenses. What is of particular interest with Ralph Follet is how Potter-Efron identifies alcoholic drinking within self-perpetuating shame patterns – what he refers to as shame waves, shame cycles and shame spirals (30). The differences between these three shame reactions are primarily in their duration. The shame wave is the shortest, but repeated experiences of this reaction can severely limit one’s ability to function. It is an overwhelming experience of shame that lasts only a few minutes but is so intense that a person might experience feelings of acute anxiety, even panic. The other two reactions last much longer, up to weeks or months, and they can form habitual behavior patterns that are just as debilitating as the chronic experience of shame waves. What typifies these types of shame, and makes them relevant to the psychology of Ralph Follet, is the cognitive component that accompanies them. Ralph’s “iterations of ‘I’m no good,’” (ADF 63) is characteristic of someone caught in one of these shame dynamics.

Someone

may begin to call himself names (“coward,” “imbecile”) and remember many previous incidents when he backed away from conflict. Each new recollection triggers more shame, making it harder and harder for him to seek comfort from others. He might isolate himself from those who could help him because he cannot tell them about what happened. His self-concept plunges and he sees no escape from his pain. (Potter-Efron 32)

It is when all other shame defenses fail, when a person who is prone to an addiction “sees no escape from his pain,” that the addiction will be indulged in. Moreover, Kohut’s idea of self-arrest takes on a new dimension with an addict because the desire for self-escape originates from the self-deficit and reinforces it. The inherent problem with addiction Potter-Efron explains, is that it will only “provide temporary relief from shame and the alienated self. Unfortunately, the cost of such behavior is that the true self does not develop fully; it remains incomplete, leading the individual back toward shame and eventually to more compulsivity” (31).

Chapter six functions like a cinematic flashback, covering two time periods in a circular motion within Ralph’s, and momentarily Jay’s, minds. The chapter begins in the present, shortly after Jay has arrived at his parent’s cabin, with Ralph isolated from the other family members. We then move to the recent past, to the time Ralph learns of his father’s illness, before returning to the present. In the present, Ralph is still foundering in the after affects of a shame wave, initially triggered because he has exaggerated his father’s condition and turned to alcohol to cope with the prospect of his father’s death. At this point, Ralph still feels alienated from his family and is clearly experiencing Wurmser’s “shame anxiety,” the fear that he cannot reconnect with family members: “Now he was very much ashamed of himself, though still very defensive, and everyone, including Jay, tried to assure him that he had done the right thing” (ADF 57). Ralph, however, is convinced that he cannot be forgiven either for exaggerating his father’s condition or for the fact that he has been drinking.

What perpetuates his shame anxiety, then, is the grandiose and exhibitionistic behavior that has motivated his drinking, his call to Jay in Knoxville, and his dealings with friends and family while they have waited for the doctor. Such behavior, of course, can indicate narcissistic injury, and Potter-Efron demonstrates how grandiosity and exhibitionism also function as shame defenses. For Potter-Efron, however, there is a fundamental difference between these two similar defenses. People who favor grandiosity seldom recognize their behavior for what it is, whereas someone who is more exhibitionistic “is completely aware of his behavior” (49). Potter-Efron refers directly to Kohut in his discussion about exhibitionism, and implicitly evokes Wurmser’s reworking of Kohut’s bipolar self in terms of perception, expression and shame. With exhibitionism, Potter-Efron suggests, “[s]hame develops from this tension between the need to be seen and the danger that, when seen, one will be attacked.” The way people like Ralph resolve this conflict, though, is paradoxical and only gets them “caught in a narcissistic mire.” “The exhibitionist,” Potter-Efron argues, “resolves this crisis in a particular manner. This person seems to have decided, generally at an unconscious level, that he is only safe when at the very center of attention. His greatest fear is to be ignored by others and so he does all he can to ensure that he will always be seen.” Throughout the flashback, Ralph acts in this manner because underlying this defense strategy is the fundamental shame-belief that he is unlovable. All of Ralph’s attempts to be the center of attention by competing for the position of new head of the family – by being the first son at his father’s bedside, the first son to comfort his mother and by appearing of more

use than either Thomas Oaks or George Bailey – mask his desire to win his mother’s love.

Indeed, because Ralph’s exhibitionist tendencies are marked by a competitive edge, another important aspect of how his shame functions is revealed. Ralph’s desire to be viewed by others as the best son, either because he is the first one to take responsibility for his parents’s situation, or because he drives “a better class of auto and a more expensive one than his brother’s” (ADF 58), suggests how thoroughly exhibition and competition in him are intertwined. Donald Nathanson, for instance, suggests how comparison and competition are one of the primary ways in which people establish their self-concept. However,

shame stemming from some perceived but irremediable deficiency of the self can be mitigated by shifting attention toward the pride and status achieved when one wins at something. Directly proportional to the amount of energy devoted to competition is always the degree of chronic shame linked to a persistently lowered self-image. (351)

In this view, then, the excessiveness of Ralph’s efforts to impress others by appearing better than them indicates the degree to which he holds himself in contempt, both in his eyes and as imagined in the eyes of others.

Ultimately, though, Ralph’s ploys fail. His mother draws away from his condolences and embraces (which are intended to announce his authority as the new man of the family rather than to offer her comfort and support), and as a result he sees this as evidence of a far deeper rejection. “What perplexed him in her voice was its remoteness. He began to realize that he was bringing her no comfort, that she was not leaning on him. He redoubled his efforts to soothe her and to be strong for her. The harder he tried, the

more remote her voice became” (ADF 59). Yet it is not only the shame associated with this rejection that is so painful to him, but also the fact that others are witnesses to it, that they can see through his attempts to hide it. As a result, his overt gestures with which he tries to elevate himself backfire, and he has no defenses left – his unlovability is exposed for all to see and confirmed.

Once Ralph believes that his defectiveness has been exposed, and his efforts to hide this have been exposed, his last shame defense is alcohol. After his mother has not responded to his attempts to comfort her, and his attempt to humiliate Thomas Oaks fails, Ralph “began to think he would burn up and die if he didn’t have another drink” (ADF 61). The ineffectiveness of Ralph’s exhibitionist behavior, then, generates his craving for alcohol, but drinking only worsens his situation. Potter-Efron points out that alcoholics who engage in the exhibitionist shame defense alienate themselves further once they begin to drink because “[a]lcohol is a disinhibitor. Physiologically it lessens the normal inhibitory mechanisms that keep individuals from displaying themselves too openly” (50). At the same time, as in Ralph’s case, intoxication incurs its own shame, which can, in an alcoholic, increase the desire for more alcohol. Once Ralph realizes that he is drunk he

[w]as bitterly ashamed of himself, drunk at this time, at his father’s very deathbed, when his mother needed him so bad as never before, and when he knew, for he had learned by now to take people’s word for it, that he was really good for nothing when he was drunk. And then to feel so thirsty on top of that (ADF 62).

But this is not all; Ralph oscillates between shame about his drinking and fantasies of false empowerment under its influence. Even as he makes every effort to hide the fact

that he is sneaking outside for a drink, he also has the impulse to “take out the bottle and wave it at them.” Nevertheless, this strategy to gain attention is yet another way of appearing shameless to himself through the imagined perspective others. As Potter-Efron suggests, such behavior indicates an “individual who uses the intoxicated state to excuse his insulting behavior toward others [and who] makes a claim that because he is inebriated he can safely disregard social guidelines that protect our privacy and boundaries” (50). For Ralph, however, this sort of shamelessness associated with intoxication does not last for long. Every time he acts out, his shame is compounded and his thirst returns with greater force. For instance, when he tries to revel in his power and minimize his thirst as “merely like the bite under a punch bar [. . .],” he soon discovers that “within a short while the thirst returned even more fiercely as irresistible pain” (ADF 62).

Agee demonstrates that Ralph’s alcoholism results from the core shame belief that the self is inherently defective and that his exhibitionist strategy to hide this belief only adds to his drinking. Ralph’s behavior also conveys Kohut’s narcissistic model through this acting out in a grandiose/exhibitionist way. Agee clearly suggests that Ralph’s behavior stems from an empathic failure on the part of his mother. Even though his mother’s remoteness is understandable in light of Ralph’s behavior, Agee suggests that there might be an element of truth to Ralph’s belief that her rejection of him is not limited to the present circumstances. The last time Ralph ventures outside for a drink his shame is unbearable, and Agee reveals the root cause: “The instant he was outside he felt nothing in the world except the ferocity of his thirst. He leaned against the cabin wall,

uncorked the bottle, wrapped his mouth over its mouth as ravenously as a famished baby takes the nipple, and tited it straight up” (ADF 63).

Ralph is indeed “the baby” of the family, as he claims at the end of the chapter, but his self-arrest is not simply a sign of his own moral weakness. Indeed, although Ralph’s contemptible behavior may obscure the signs of selfobject failure, Agee’s portrait of Ralph does evoke Kohut’s model with this final description of his drinking. Moreover, Ralph’s relationship with his mother further suggests narcissistic injury because within his exhibitionistic displays we can also see the strivings of the idealized self. Kohut, we will remember, says that in cases of narcissistic injury a person may act out archaic needs from both poles of the self simultaneously, and Ralph’s desire to win his mother’s approval by a demonstration of his strength is also a covert way of drawing strength from her. Once Ralph’s paranoid fears about how others perceive him begin to subside, he is able to assess the forces which motivate him, and through this degree of honesty and objectivity he realizes and reveals much about his idealizing needs. He admits:

[h]e always needed to be near. He always needed to feel their support, their company, very near him. He always lived almost from day to day in the hope that by staying near, by always being on hand if he was needed, by always showing how much he loved them, he might at last be sure he had won their approval, their respect. (ADF 64)

Ralph is the most visible example of someone suffering from narcissistic injury and debilitating shame in *A Death in the Family*. Nevertheless, Agee implicitly suggests that Ralph’s predicament originates from and has effects on the family as a whole.

Towards the end of chapter six, Agee reveals how Ralph’s behavior has had

consequences on his immediate family – that shame can be a generational affliction. Ralph’s wife, Sally, is afraid of him, and his son, Jim-Wilson, bears his legacy of shame just as Rufus ultimately bears Jay’s. Ralph reveals that his sense of inner defectiveness and the fear of having it exposed has been passed to Jim-Wilson who, “already showed the weakness, with his poor little washed-out eyes, his clinging to Sally, his terror of his father when his father was drunk or even teased him, his readiness to cry” (65). Turning to Rufus, Jay and Mary, we see similar, yet less overt manifestations of the same family dynamics. The marital tensions that exist because of Jay’s past drinking effect his marriage and his relationship to Rufus in much the same way, despite Jay’s more balanced personality and the complexity of Mary’s religiosity.

iv

Agee and Contemporary Psychology

Even though Agee presents an extreme version of familial conflict with the brief description of Ralph Follet’s family, it is how such family dynamics emerge, particularly between Jay and Mary, and how they effect Rufus, and to a lesser extent his sister Catherine, which is Agee’s primary focus in the novel. In A Death in the Family, the emphasis on strained communication that Ward observes plays a significant role; not only does it affect Jay and Mary’s relationship but also their relationship with their children. Agee, despite Coles’s assertions to the contrary, is interested in how such interpersonal conflicts interfere with the fundamental development of one’s identity. This comes as no surprise when we consider Agee’s interest in psychology. Agee, Mark Doty tells us, at one point considered becoming an analyst (Doty 61). But even though he did not pursue

this, his commitment to psychology and his belief that it was relevant to his personal situation remained strong. As early as 1935, when he composed “Knoxville: 1915,” Agee read and reread Freud, Frances Wickes’s The Inner World of Childhood and Proust – whose stream of consciousness technique clearly influenced him. Even more important, was Agee’s therapy with Wickes a decade later in 1947, despite his initial fears that she was nothing more than “some Jung-disciple (female)” (qtd. in Bergreen 152). “Quickly grasping his profound, unresolved grief over his father’s death, Dr. Wickes offered a choice: ‘You can either work this out in analysis or write it out.’ True to his indecisive nature, Agee elected both options. He entered an on-again, off-again analysis that would last for three years” (298).

Although Wickes’s Jungian approach naturally differs from the one we are taking, there are similarities which, according to Laurence Bergreen, were most relevant to Agee: “Her emphasis on religion, myth, and symbol held strong appeal for Agee. Even more to the point, she applied her techniques to children, devoting much space to the way a child comes to terms with death” (153). But Wickes does not limit her discussion to the effects the death of a parent has on children. One of her primary concerns is the effect concealed issues in a marriage have on a child’s development. In her chapter “Influence Of Parental Difficulties Upon The Unconscious Of The Child,” she states that the goal of successful parenting “is to help in the creation of a free individual, one who has found a way of life of his own [. . .]” (16). Yet this process, she argues, can be interrupted if tensions in a marriage are dealt with in a covert fashion by the parents. For Wickes, parents need to bring whatever issues there are in a marriage “into the light of our conscious and attempt

to relate it fearlessly to the conduct of our own lives” (23). If this is done, the “child then intuits the strength, courage, and honesty that come from a real attempt at understanding”; yet if this is not done the parents are guilty of “placing on him a heavier burden, that of vague fear and mistrust of life which his own unconscious intuits from theirs.”

Wickes’s comments here are startlingly similar to Kohut’s about how narcissistic injury occurs. Like Wickes, Kohut argues that children are shaped by the inherent strength, honesty and openness of their parents or caregivers. The formation of a firm self, Kohut argues

will be less influenced by those responses of the selfobjects that are shaped by their philosophy of child rearing than by those that express the state of their own nuclear self. In other words, it is not so much what parents do that will influence the character of the child’s self, but what the parents are. (Kohut and Wolf 417).

Moreover, Kohut argues that it is the consistency of the parent’s behaviour that determines a child’s self-development. A consistency which is beneficial will, of course, only be optimal if the sort of honesty Wickes speaks of is present. The lack of such honesty will, however, result in a habitual experience of inconsistency – one in which a child’s experience of trust will never be fully established. As a result, the inevitable moments in which this trust is shattered which might otherwise be a part of natural growth take on a new significance. Instances such as parent not acknowledging a child’s wish to relate an accomplishment or a parent not conveying information about themselves when a child seeks their guidance, can be damaging when such behavior is indicative of what Kohut calls a “*chronic attitude*” (418). As Kohut explains: “Put differently, they

would not emerge at critical junctures of a selfobject transference if they has occurred as the consequence of a parent's unavoidable *occasional* failure.”

Such behavior can result in Kohut's notion of self-arrest, and in Kaufman's terminology can interfere with the construction of interpersonal bridges in which healthy selves are formed. Like Wickes and Kohut, Kaufman stresses the need for honesty because it is what a parent is, not simply what they attempt to be, that forges the child/parent bond for good or ill. Moreover, he argues that each parent must have an individual bond with his or her child.

The child needs to feel convinced that each parent truly wants their individual relationship. A distinct, evolving relationship needs to be experienced by each child, separately with father and with mother [. . .]. A relationship must be genuine and honest. It must be genuinely desired by the parent for this particular child, this real, flesh and blood, actual person, and not for some imagined or hoped-for image of a son or daughter. Wanting a relationship must also be overtly expressed in word and in action. It must be verbalized when genuinely felt and it must be lived out consistently. Parents must behave in ways that convince a child of being loved as a unique self and truly wanted. (33-34)

Behavior which habitually goes against this ideal, however, generates and perpetuates shame. The reason that Mary and Jay's inability to communicate freely is so damaging for each other and their children, then, is how it reinforces the tensions in the marriage and the shame each parent experiences about their contrary positions. Rufus does have a particular relationship with each parent, but neither one is secure because each is founded in opposition to each other.

Within Wickes's framework, Rufus's unconscious is effected indirectly by the repressed tensions in the marriage – evidenced by his night terrors, his frequent loss of

bladder control at the age of six and his need for someone to “tell me who I am” (ADF 7). Jay’s bond with Rufus is defined in opposition to Rufus’s relationship with Mary. For Jay, his relationship with Rufus is based on Mary’s absence, his freedom to be himself, and on some level Rufus is aware of this fact. Jay’s decision to go to the Charlie Chaplin movie at the beginning of the novel is indicative of this.

A routine, somewhat staged argument between Mary and Jay ensues, but Rufus is aware that to some extent it is a genuine conflict. Mary objects to Chaplin’s “nasty little cane; hooking up skirts and things, and that nasty little walk” (ADF 11). Jay laughs, and Rufus’s reaction to this laughter is telling: “His father laughed, as he always did, and Rufus felt that it had become rather an empty joke; but as always the laughter also cheered him; he felt that the laughter enclosed him with his father.” Rufus senses that this conflict is not entirely staged – the joke is “empty.” Moreover, because Rufus only feels enclosed with Jay through a moment of laughter, a more permanent state of division appears to exist. Furthermore, by Rufus sharing this laughter with Jay, he is divided from Mary.

This process of enclosure which suggests Rufus’s separation from Jay – and results in Rufus’s separation from Mary – is also evident in Rufus’s response to the predicament of Charlie Chaplin on-screen. Chaplin sits on a bag of eggs which he has put in the seat of his pants, and Rufus identifies with the hapless tramp. For Rufus, the eggs must feel

as queer and awful as that time in the white pekay suit, when it ran down out of the pants-leg and showed all over your stockings and you had to walk home that way with people looking; and Rufus’ father nearly tore his

head off laughing and so did everybody else, and Rufus was sorry for Charlie, having been so recently in a similar predicament [. . .]. (ADF 13)

Rufus's response indicates where he sees his father in relation to Chaplin's mishaps and his own. Clearly, Rufus believes that his father will laugh at him if he wets himself. At the same time, though, Rufus soon succumbs to the "contagion of laughter" and is once more "enclosed" with his father, but by doing so is put into opposition with Mary who would not approve of him laughing at someone else's expense.

An even more revealing example which presents these dynamics between Mary, Jay and Rufus is an excised fragment where Rufus and Jay are reprimanded by Mary for spitting into the fireplace. This fragment highlights both the unresolved conflicts between Jay's rural background and Mary's urban background – and also that Jay's bond to Rufus is founded in secret on this opposition.

Sometimes daddy leaned over and spit into the fireplace. When there was a fire it made a fine strong noise.

Once he leaned over and spit there and his mamma said why Rufus! and then much more seriously, Jay!

Daddy turned dark red.

A fine example, she said.

Then he looked mad as if he would say something but he didn't say anything.

I'm sorry Jay but really! she said after a minute.

Just let up on it Laura, he said.

I just meant I was sorry I embarrassed you dear, I mean specially in front of: her voice trailed off and she nodded toward him.

All right, Don't be sorry, I deserved it. But just let it go will you?

Of course Jay, she said very quietly. After that the air between them was stiff and they stayed quiet. Then after a while daddy looked at her and said I am sorry Laura. So am I dear, she said, and they both smiled warmly.

It was then that he realized that daddy never did it except when they were alone. So he took care that they were alone the next time he did it and his daddy let out the most surprising laugh and suddenly mussed up

his hair but, still smiling, shook his head and said uh'uh. Your mama's right, he said. You musn't do that. Me neither.

It's all right up in the country, he said. But in town people don't like it and we live in town.

He said me neither but sometimes he still did it all the same.

But only if they were by themselves. Hard to teach an old dog new tricks, he said. (qtd. in Agee and Actuality 119)

Rufus understands that his bond to Jay is of a secret nature, yet the reasons why it is and how this effects him are beyond his grasp. Not only is there an opposition between what is rural and urban but also between what is masculine and what is feminine. For Rufus, the spitting is a masculine activity, and as such, is against his mother's genteel ways.

After Jay and Rufus leave the movie theatre, Jay decides to go for a drink. The ensuing scene is emblematic of their relationship. Jay uses his evening out with Rufus as an opportunity to drink without Mary knowing, while Rufus becomes convinced that Jay is ashamed of him. Passing the store windows on Gay Street, Rufus is attentive to the world before him: the passersby and mannequins inside a store window. Of particular interest for Rufus is a mannequin of a little boy. Rufus observes that "there was even a little boy, with short, straight pants, bare knees and high socks, obviously a sissy: but he wore a cap, all the same, not like a baby" (ADF 14). For Rufus, this cap is a symbol of masculinity and since he does not have one it is he – and not the mannequin boy in the window – that he concludes must really be the sissy.

Rufus then congratulates himself on his ability to read the store signs and say "Sterchi's" properly. However, Rufus suddenly remembers that Jay has said "Don't you brag," and Agee develops Rufus's sense of deficiency. Rufus considers the implications of bragging anew: "What was bragging? It was bad," and when Rufus and Jay sit at the

bar Rufus begins to equate the badness of bragging with his lack of masculinity. Ironically, Jay brags to the men at the bar about Rufus. Jay announces that at six Rufus “can already read like I couldn’t read when I was twice his age” (16). Rufus questions Jay’s sincerity, however, and recoils in “the anguish of shame” at being labelled smart in front of the men. From Rufus’s perspective, he feels “a sudden hollowness in his [Jay’s] voice, and all along the bar, and in his own heart. But how does he fight, he thought. You don’t brag about smartness if your son is brave.” Jay and Rufus leave the bar, and shortly afterwards, Rufus feels “gratitude in this silent trust” – of sharing the lifesaver with Jay and keeping the drinking a secret – but this gratitude also indicates his sense of shame, his hope that Jay accepts him. Above all, whatever assurance Rufus feels here is fleeting. He concludes: “If I could fight [. . .]. If I were brave; he would never brag how I could read: Brag. Of course, ‘Don’t you brag.’ That was it. What it meant. Don’t brag you’re smart if you’re not brave. You’ve got nothing to brag about. Don’t you brag” (ADF 17).

The following scene in which Jay and Rufus sit on the outcropping of limestone is Agee’s most explicit meditation on the relationship between Rufus and Jay. It has, therefore, received the most attention from critics and has often been the only point of consideration. Nevertheless, critics have failed to consider the context of this scene and to submit it to a more detailed analysis. On the whole, they discount the legitimacy of Rufus’s sense of alienation from Jay. Recently, for instance, Alan Spiegel claims: “In spite of Rufus’s awareness of minor strains of tension and slippage in the home, he also feels ‘that there was really no division, no estrangement, or none so strong, anyhow, that

it could mean much, by comparison with the unity that was so firm and assured, here” (ADF 19; Spiegel 251). This is an oversimplification, however. Such views commonly stem from a critic missing the perspective of the narrator, the qualifications which occur, and the significance of this scene for Rufus’s relationship to Jay as a whole.

The perspective here – as it has been for all of chapter one – is Rufus’s. Rufus intuits more than he knows, and if we consider that whenever he feels reconciled to Jay that it is always of the moment, and always qualified – the laughter or the lifesaver he shares with Jay – then this episode at the outcropping seems no different: it is simply another temporary and tenuous meeting between father and son set against a more general division. Rufus and Jay both look forward to these stops because each experiences a “particular kind of contentment, here, unlike any other, and that their kinds of contentment were much alike, and depended on each other” (sic) (ADF 18). But Rufus’s “quiet kind of anticipation” for these stops expresses his desire to be accepted by Jay, which suggests his more constant feeling of being unaccepted. When we consider that this scene is narrated to us from Rufus’s point of view and that he longs for Jay’s approval, we can understand the benefit Rufus anticipates on each journey to the rock: “He [Jay] was just not in a hurry to get home, Rufus realized; and, far more important, it was clear that he liked to spend a few minutes with Rufus.” Who it is “far more important” to here is Rufus, and this illustrates his need for assurance that Jay accepts him.

The Pathology of Religious Belief

In contrast to the sparse critical attention paid to the deficiencies in Jay's relationship with Rufus, critics are quick to identify how Mary's faith is detrimental to her relationship with her children. Robert Coles, for example, argues that Mary's faith is excessive, and claims "I carry Mary Follet too far, extrapolate the quality of her religious faith to the point of caricature; but so does the author, in his gentle but occasionally impatient way" (62). Agee's portrait of his mother, though extreme, is much darker and more complex than a mere caricature. (As we shall see when we turn to The Morning Watch, Agee's relationship to his mother's religion shaped his personality as much as the death of his father, above all because it provided a context in which his father's death is viewed.) According to Coles, the primary shortcoming of Mary's faith is false pride. Moreover, he rightly views it in contrast to Aunt Hannah's "less personal" devotion, and suggests that Aunt Hannah's reaction to Mary's religiosity – that she is "made uncomfortable by her niece's outbursts of proclaimed piety" – provides an objective, accurate assessment. Furthermore, Coles observes: "Pride works in many ways; devotion can conceal a self-centred, demanding streak of possessiveness: I will give you my all, but hear it, see it, take notice of it – me, me, me." Interestingly, Coles's comments here suggest that Mary's faith can be construed in terms of meeting the archaic needs of her grandiose self. Certainly the infantile strain that Coles conveys is present in Mary's devotion, and Agee takes special care throughout the novel to emphasize this. Both Mary's father and Aunt Hannah, for example, express concern about Mary's devotion

and Aunt Hannah in particular views it in terms of maturation. In chapter eight, for instance, when Mary and Hannah wait for news of Jay's condition, Hannah "felt as if a prodigious page were being silently turned" (ADF119) and that as a result Mary's "soul is beginning to come of age [. . .]." Mary, however, does not attain such immediate or lasting spiritual growth. In chapter eighteen, where she believes "that she had grown up almost overnight" (ADF 279), Agee undercuts this belief, just as he does in chapter six with Ralph Follet's belief that he is able to fully understand himself by being honest about his dependence on his family, thereby attaining, for some critics, a level of self-knowledge.³

Indeed, it is useful to turn back to Ralph for a moment because he, like Mary, is often rescued from a fully negative interpretation by critics with the argument that he develops in a positive way. Ralph's self-appraisal at the end of chapter six, however, remains laden with excessive shame. Even as Agee uses certain elements of Ralph's thoughts about himself to offer an objective picture of his situation, Agee's touch is so deft that he never forgoes his character's limited personal perspective in his interior monologues. At the end of the chapter, for instance, Ralph clearly views himself from the dimension of shame. He says: "People are fair to me and more than fair. More than fair, if ever they knew me for what I really am" (ADF 66). What is more, at the beginning of the chapter Agee demonstrates how Ralph's self-knowledge will do nothing to change his situation. Typically, when Agee exposes the inner workings of his characters' minds, the reader attains greater knowledge of the characters than they themselves possess even though it is they who offer it to us. In some cases, however,

such as with Ralph and Mary, Agee reinforces this process with subtle intrusions of a detached narrator's voice. In reference to Jay and Ralph's ability to grasp the latter's situation, the narrator states: "Actually, he [Jay] understood only a little about it, and Ralph understood very little more" (ADF 57). In chapter eighteen, when dealing with Mary, Agee prefaces the chapter in the same fashion, although much more overtly: "When grief and shock surpass endurance there occur phases of exhaustion, of anesthesia in which relatively little is left and one has the illusion of recognizing, and understanding, a good deal" (ADF 278). Mary's devotion, then, clearly does not develop throughout the novel. Moreover, Kohut's argument that narcissistic tendencies in parents can instill the same sort of self-arrest in children has some bearing in terms of how Mary's infantile relationship to religion ultimately affects her children.

In chapter five, for example, when Rufus and Catherine question Mary about the possibility of their Grandfather's death, Mary's commitment to her religion frustrates each child's search for knowledge. As Ward points out, Mary's evasiveness, which plays such an important role in her marriage, plays an equally important role in her effectiveness as a mother.

The mother, who resists the child's pleas for coherence through sentimental evasions, is herself exposed as sentimental and evasive, and her clear discomfort leads her to assume the more comfortable role of one who gives commands. Most of the commands are on the order of keeping quiet (children – and husbands as well – dutifully eating breakfast cannot talk). (601)

But what matters here is not simply that Mary is evasive but what she is evasive about. Through Rufus's insistent questioning, Agee offers us in miniature the difficulty of

reconciling an omnipotent, omniscient God with evil and death. The question Rufus wants answered is simple yet confusing: If God is all-powerful, then why do bad things happen? In response, Mary says that whatever happens is a part of God's plan, and that this plan might only be understood in the afterlife, but until then "We just have to be sure that God knows best" (ADF 54). This answer, however, offers Rufus no concrete ideal or value for him to follow and this is what he requires in order to make sense of why his cat Oliver died and why dogs raided the family's rabbit pen. At the same time, though, even as he questions what his mother has told him, he tries to win her approval by casting God in the most positive light. He "eagerly" offers, "I bet they sneaked in when He wasn't looking," but Mary cannot allow Rufus to believe this. As a last resort, she outlines her religious scheme which could potentially offer a phase-appropriate answer for Rufus by locating evil in Satan. "God is everywhere," she says, "and knows everything and nothing can happen without His knowing. But the Devil is everywhere too – everywhere except Heaven that is – and he is always tempting us. When we do what he tempts us to do, then God lets us do it."

Rufus, perceptive as he is, realizes that underlying this explanation is the paradox of original sin, even though he cannot identify it as such. Rufus now asks Mary why God will allow the Devil to tempt people into doing "bad things" (ADF 55). Mary's answer, and the subsequent shame which Rufus feels as he attempts to understand this answer, results in a scene which contains one of the primary issues in A Death in the Family and The Morning Watch – how religious devotion instills shame which can only be beneficial if the devotion is not excessive, masking other psychological disturbances. In her

response, Mary details the concept of original sin, the idea that man is inherently flawed which is, of course, the core belief in any shame reaction. And, if we remove the religious framework from the concept itself, what Mary essentially tells her children is that their ability to love properly is deficient. Mary explains that “He loves us and wants us to love Him, but if He just *made* us be good, we couldn’t really love Him enough. You can’t love to do what you are *made* to do, and you couldn’t love God if He *made* you.”

Rufus understands the covert message within Mary’s definition and what follows is his attempt to prove his love of God to his mother – and by extension his love of her as well. What makes Mary’s definition so potent, however, is not simply the implication that the self is defective, i.e. that it cannot love properly, but that the inability to do so is an affront to someone else who loves you despite your flaws; essentially, Mary says: God loves you. Do you repay his love properly? If not, then you should be ashamed of yourself. What is remarkable about the rest of the chapter is how Agee blends and enacts this religious scenario of shame with what occurs between Mary, Rufus and Catherine. There is an inescapable irony here. As Coles puts it “[a] discussion that revolved around the issue of violence ends with a kind of violence. The mother gets her son off to school, but he is full of anger at his sister and jealous of her because she has obtained their mother’s sympathy if not favor” (72). What initiates this violence is Rufus’s attempt to demonstrate to his mother that he has the appropriate attitude towards God and that he has learned that God does not let things happen arbitrarily. Only moments before, with his idea that the dogs could have sneaked into the rabbit pen without God seeing, he has

offered an explanation of God's will similar to Catherine's suggestion that finding God is like "hide-and-go-seek" (ADF 55). Rufus's strong objection to Catherine's position, then, is not simply an attempt to undermine her. Instead, it expresses Rufus's need to shine in the eyes of an idealized other, to gain his mother's approval. He says "'Aw, it isn't a bit like hide-and-seek, is it Mama?'" Rufus cut in. "Hidenseek's just a game, just a game. God doesn't fool around playing games, does He, Mama! Does He! Does He!" Mary, however, cannot see Rufus's behavior for what it is, and as a result fulfills her role as a God-like figure: "'Shame on you, Rufus,'" his mother said warmly, and not without relief. "Why, shame on you!"

The most overt criticism of Mary's faith, however, comes through the example of Father Jackson, who like Mary, uses religion to instill shame in others. They are very different characters, though. While the shaming effects of Mary's devotion are not perpetrated out of malice, but rather a product of her naïve, childish conformity, Father Jackson, on the other hand, takes an almost sadistic pleasure in his power to shame others. Agee's portrayal of Jackson is excessive; he is a real villain. As Mark Doty indicates, Agee may have exaggerated Jackson's behavior from that of his real-life counterpart, Father Robertson, but Agee clearly resented this man. As Agee puts it in one of his working notes for the novel, "I realized faintly that he was the boss of this occasion, and obscurely resented his bossiness and intrusion his sureness of his right to be there" (qtd. in Doty 104).

Indeed, as *A Death in the Family* illustrates, Father Jackson's arrival at the Follet home is an intrusion, and as Ohlin notes, he is "a threat who has come to take the place of

the dead father: he appears ‘almost as tall as Daddy,’ and he sits in Jay’s chair” (Ohlin 195). What is particularly interesting about Jackson in terms of shame is how perception and expression, or in Wurmser’s terminology, the theatophilic and delophilic drives, play an important role in the activation of shame through visual contact. Father Jackson’s shaming of Rufus and Catherine is initiated by their prolonged looking at him, which generates a feeling of self-consciousness in him – a mild form of shame affect. Such prolonged gazing between individuals can, as Joseph Adamson’s work on Melville and Hawthorne demonstrates, create an arena of interpersonal shame conflict. Jackson, we can assume, like certain characters in Melville and Hawthorne, is adept at exerting his control over others by fixing them with his “evil eye.”⁴ What characterizes this sort of looking is that it is a form of penetration which transgresses interpersonal boundaries in an effort to expose the deficiencies of others but often conceals the shamer’s own fears of being exposed in the same fashion. Catherine and Rufus’s gaze makes Father Jackson feel that his authority is threatened, but it also makes us aware of his hope to exert it.

He looked at both of them, feeling that their rude staring was undermining his gaze and his silence, by which he had intended to impress them into a sufficiently solemn and receptive state for things he intended to say to them; and wondering whether or not he should reprimand them. Surely, he decided, if they lack manners even at such a time as this, this is the time to speak of it. (ADF 267)

The reprimand he delivers to the children is inappropriate and has nothing to do with Rufus and Catherine lacking manners on the occasion of Jay’s death. Jackson engages in what Nathanson refers to as the attack other mode of shame defense, which is a reaction to one’s own perceived shaming by others. Jackson displays an inhuman

coldness in his short interaction with Rufus, hardly fitting for a man of the cloth, and Agee links this to his religious devotion. Again, this is signaled through visual relations. When Jackson first enters the home he does not make eye contact with Rufus or Catherine; instead “his gaze came to rest on some point above and beyond the heads of the children” (266), a picture of Christ. Rather than acknowledging these children and offering them comfort in a time of need, Jackson is more concerned with announcing his authority, and Agee suggests that this lack of warmth is inextricably bound up with his faith: the only positive emotion that Jackson exhibits is his smile when he looks at the picture of Christ. Moreover, the degree to which his religious devotion is connected to the exertion of his perverse influence is conveyed further by the prayer he leads with Mary and Hannah shortly after his interactions with Rufus and Catherine. In a scathing indictment of religion offered through the perspective of Rufus and Catherine while they listen at the Mary’s bedroom door, Agee makes clear the destructive role religion plays in the family. Mary’s and Aunt Hannah’s

voices were more tender, more alive, and more inhuman, than they had ever heard them before; and this remoteness from humanity troubled them. 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 beyond and outside any love that was felt for them; and they felt that this meant even more to their mother and 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 that he was altogether too deeply involved in it. And they felt that although everything was better for their mother than it had been a few minutes before, it was far worse in one way. For before, she had at least been questioning, however gently. But now she was wholly defeated and entranced, and the transition to prayer was the moment and mark of her surrender. (ADF 272)

vi

Rufus

There are, however, moments in which Rufus does seem to experience a level of ease in his parents' presence and the differences between Jay and Mary appear to exist in the "harmoniousness" that Mary describes to Aunt Hannah. In "Knoxville: 1915" and the first italics sequence – when Rufus fears the dark and Jay comforts him and when Rufus listens to his parents sing – there are times in which Rufus seems to fully benefit from his parents' nurturing and some empathic mirroring takes place. However, as we have seen, each of these episodes ends with either doubt or shame on Rufus's part about the effectiveness of his parents' relationship and his place within its dynamics. In "Knoxville: 1915" Rufus realizes that he needs someone to "tell me who I am;" when Jay sings to him Rufus senses his father's loneliness and estrangement from the family; and when his parents sing to him this is followed by him overhearing an argument about Jay's drinking.

The reason that these idealized passages about the marriage occur is, I think, twofold. First, as a number of critics maintain, they offer in a concrete fashion the impact Jay's loss will have on Rufus. To be deprived of Jay is to lose the apparent family stability and a feeling of trust and safety in the universe; it is to lose, in essence, a feeling of narcissistic wholeness. Indeed, what characterizes each of the passages in which Rufus feels at one with his parents is a sense of oneness with the universe. At the same time, however, even as Rufus proclaims his faith in the security of his world, a

foreboding that it might not last is present. Towards the end of “Knoxville: 1915,” for example, Rufus says

The stars are wide and alive, they seem each like a smile of great sweetness, and they seem very near. All my people are larger bodies than mine, quiet, with voices gentle and meaningless like the voices of sleeping birds. One is an artist, he is living at home. One is a musician, she is living at home. One is my mother who is good to me. One is my father who is good to me. By some chance, here they are, all on this earth; and who shall ever tell the sorrow of being on this earth, lying, on quilts, on the grass, in a summer evening, among the sounds of night. (ADF 7)

Mixed with Rufus’s feelings of security, then, is a sense of impermanence, of “sorrow.” In addition, the simplicity with which he views his family members – that his father and mother are simply “good to me” – stands in stark contrast to how they are represented in the rest of the novel. When we compare such definitive characterizations to the more complex reality that Agee offers through his stream of consciousness technique, one wonders if Agee is not treating Rufus’s infantile assessments of his family members in an ironic fashion. To interpret these episodes in this way, however, compromises the view that the events in A Death in the Family have a “universal” resonance because the specificity of each character is what generates the irony. Moreover, that Agee thought of the story in universal terms is evident, and to present idealized versions of his relationship with his family is an effective way of showing the disruptive impact of his father’s death.

Indeed, Jay’s death fractures any trust Rufus might experience in the benevolence of the universe, any sense that he is ultimately safe. Significantly, the darkness which is clearly an embodiment of death from a child’s sensitive, half-realized feeling loses its

power when Jay comes to Rufus in the night. What Agee demonstrates, however, is that this trust in the universe, as much as the belief that his parents are perfect, is a belief common to childhood, before one has genuine knowledge of death. Significantly, with Jay's death, the darkness triumphs and this is explicitly evoked at the end of chapter sixteen when Rufus returns to the house after confronting the neighborhood children. Rufus turns to his father's empty morse chair and is conscious of the loss of his father. Rufus finds no signs of his father and in the end he realizes that the darkness has triumphed.

He thought of the ash tray on its weighted strap on the arm; it was empty. He ran his finger inside it; there was only a dim smudge of ash. There was nothing like enough to keep in his pocket or wrap up in a paper. He looked at his finger for a moment and licked it; his tongue tasted of darkness. (ADF 256)

From this view, then, it can be argued that Agee tries to accomplish two ends with A Death in the Family; on the one hand he tries to investigate his own psychological history and at the same time how his father's death was a traumatic event for him. These two conflicting impulses in the novel – his idealization of his parents and his enumeration of their shortcomings – can also be explained in terms of shame. A response, which is consistent with the complex shame dynamics in the novel, is that Agee idealizes his parents in an effort to mask a feeling of shame about their marriage and portraying its conflicts.³ In one of the working notes for the novel, Agee is clearly concerned about the possibility of desecrating his father's memory by turning it into fiction. He says:

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 and as exactly as I can remember and represent them, far

beyond any transmutation of these matters I have made, or might ever make, into poetry or fiction. I know that I am making the choice most dangerous to an artist, in valuing life above art [. . .]. (qtd. in Bergreen 307)

In another working note, however, Agee clearly wants to emphasize that there are problems in his parents' marriage and that Rufus does not come to the sort of happy end that some critics claim he does. What is interesting, though, is that in this note Agee sees his youthful protagonist as the dividing force in the marriage, which is clearly a distorted shame reaction, an effort to hide the defects in his parents' marriage by attributing them to himself. Agee outlines the novel as follows:

A soft and somewhat precocious child. A middle-class religious mother. A father of country background. Two sets of relatives: hers middle class, northern born, more or less cultivated; his, of the deep mountain country.

Begin with the complete security and the simple pleasures and sensations.

Develop: the deficiency in the child which puts them at odds: the increasing need of the child for the father's approval.

Interrupt with the father's sudden death. Here either the whole family is involved, or it is told in terms of the child.

At end: the child is in a sense & degree doomed, to religion & to the middle class. The mother: to religiosity. New strains develop, or are hinted between her & her family. (qtd. in Agee and Actuality 118-119)

Clearly, then, there are strains between Agee's complex, critical portrait of his parents and his wish to idealize them, especially his father. Such idealization, though, as Kilborne remarks, indicates the shame that results from a child's isolation within a family. Moreover, as with Ralph Follet, Rufus's isolation activates shame anxiety which ultimately points to the belief that there is a greater personal defect which cannot be overcome.

Rufus's feeling of inner defectiveness is also connected to the problems in his parents' marriage because he feels rejected as a result of their marital tensions. Kilborne's concept of Oedipal shame, which differs greatly from Freud's sexualized interpretation of the myth, is a shame which begins with this feeling of rejection from the parents and results in a person trying to hide this rejection from himself and others by idealizing his parents.⁵ To have their imperfections exposed is to have the child's own faults exposed, and this, in Kilborne's reading, is why Oedipus puts out his eyes. Moreover, to be abandoned by one's parents is to be a self-less individual, and this internal lack is the cause for more shame. This is the significance of Rufus's feeling of not having been told who he is, and what is remarkable is that Kilborne's definition of families in which this Oedipal shame takes place conforms so closely to what we have seen with the Follets.

Oedipal shame grows in dysfunctional families where conflicts between parents and children are avoided rather than recognized, where conflicts themselves are often felt to be shameful and humiliating, where the child's shame for parental failures contributes to secrecy and to the child's omnipotent fantasizes of protecting his parents, and where parental responsibilities become confused and compromised. In such families children come to repeat unconsciously patterns of defeat and humiliation. (119-120)

Agee's idealization of his parents at certain moments, therefore, can be viewed as a shame defense against what is presented throughout most of the novel.

Indeed, A Death in the Family, as a whole, does not offer a sentimental portrait of Jay and Mary, and, because of this, Jay's legacy for Rufus is not positive. Rufus does not become the idealized version of his father that critics such as Seib maintain he does. The tensions in the marriage are not resolved within Rufus by Jay's death taking on a

universal significance in which all fathers are reborn in their sons; nor does this form of resurrection offer an aesthetic closure to the religious strains in the marriage. Instead, Jay's death has far greater psychological implications for Rufus than the loss of childish faith in the world's beneficence. Jay's death only reinforces the impact of the marital tensions on Rufus. With Jay gone, whatever possibility that existed for Rufus to feel reconciled to him is lost, and he comes under the full, oppressive sway of Mary's faith. Yet even as Rufus is "doomed, to religion & the middle class," his dilemma is more complex than this because he continues to strive towards the archaic, ideal and grandiose needs that are bound up with Jay, which put him into opposition with Mary and all she represents for him. It is because this striving cannot be met – since Jay cannot now offer Rufus the empathic responses he craves – that Jay's legacy for Rufus is one of lasting shame. The essential problem for Rufus pertains to his identity. From Jay he has learned that masculinity is in opposition to and constrained by the feminine and religious world of his home. But to conform to one ideal is to fail at the other and incur shame, so he inevitably loses on both ends. This is what the final chapters of A Death in the Family present, and it is through Rufus's experiences with the neighborhood children who bully him and his walk with his Uncle Andrew that Agee dramatizes this dynamic and suggests that it will continue to plague Rufus's search for identity.

Rufus's encounters with the neighborhood bullies on their way to school in the second italics sequence and in chapter sixteen convey that Jay's legacy for him is a sense of inadequacy, guilt and shame, primarily around the issue of his bravery. While Jay is alive, we witness Rufus's public shaming in the second italics sequence. Here, Rufus is

the hapless victim of the cruelty and contempt of other children. They tease him about his name – it is a “nigger’s name” – and delight in exposing him to public ridicule by tricking him into saying it and singing his “I’m a little busy bee” song. Rufus’s “gullibility” spurs them on as does his inability to stand up for himself. The bullies have an “astonished contempt for his complete lack of spirit to strike out against his tormentors, his lack of ability, even, for real solid anger” (ADF 205).

This deficiency, however, is linked directly to his relationship with his parents. As we have already seen in the discussion of chapter five, Mary will brook no expression of anger in Rufus, nor does it seem will Jay. As a result, Rufus’s inability to express anger with the bullies suggests what Kaufman refers to as an affect-shame bind. Shame can be internalized and debilitating when it becomes linked, or “bound,” to the expression of other affects such as rage. “Shaming any expression of anger affect,” Kaufman explains, “whether verbal or behavioral, will cause anger to be experienced as shameful. That affect may become either partially or completely inhibited” (62). Furthermore, Kaufman suggests, “Shame need no longer be directly activated. The particular affect itself becomes bound by shame, its expression constricted.”

Rufus’s “gullibility” can also be explained by the influence of his parents, by the conflicting messages he receives from them about how much trust he ought to invest in others. In the episode with Aunt Kate and Uncle Ted, we learn how Rufus’s responses to teasing are expected to be different from his sister’s and how the parents align themselves with a particular child because of their opposing views. During the train ride, Mary teases Catherine for being sleepy and disinterested, like Aunt Kate, in the Smoky

Mountains. Everyone laughs except Catherine, who pouts. As a result, Mary and Jay are at odds with each other. Mary says: “*Mercy, child, you’ve got to learn to take a joke*” (ADF 220). Jay, on the other hand, supports Catherine: “*Doesn’t anybody like to be laughed at [. . .].*” That night at supper, however, when Rufus is the butt of Uncle Ted’s joke – he tells Rufus that the cheese will jump to him if he whistles for it – Jay does not come to Rufus’s defense. Instead, it is Mary who defends Rufus, while Jay remains aligned with Ted and Kate, who claim that Rufus must learn some “*common sense*” (ADF 222). Yet Jay’s silence is a moment of empathic failure for his son because it is he that Rufus turns to, asking, “*Why won’t it jump to me, Daddy?*”

Jay’s silence is intended to be an object lesson in masculinity. As J. Douglas Perry points out, Jay “is quite willing to protect his daughter, even as he protects Mary. Women are to be shielded from adversity. But he wants his son to grow up, and that involves allowing Rufus to find things out for himself” (238). Jay’s silence here, however, isolates Rufus and like all his silences is a way of avoiding open conflict. What is also disastrous in this move, though, is that Jay’s silence allows Mary’s message to take precedence when it is excessive and does interfere with Rufus developing the common sense not to trust everyone equally.

‘He’s got plenty of common sense,’ his mother flashed. ‘He’s a very bright child indeed, if you must know. But he’s been brought up to trust older people when they tell him something. Not be suspicious of everybody. And so he trusted you. Because he likes you, Ted. Doesn’t that make you ashamed?’ (ADF 222)

As Perry notes, “Mary can protect Rufus here, in this isolated position, but teaching him to believe in elders, or superiors, is giving him a dangerous rule to live by” (238). In

addition, Mary's stance conveys to Rufus that others will come to his defense and manage his shame reactions for him. What Mary does here is make the shamer, Ted, feel shame himself, just as Father Jackson does with Rufus and Catherine. What is different in this context, however, is that Rufus does not learn to use a shame defense for himself that might be beneficial, that would be a way of erecting and guarding interpersonal boundaries which are essential to a fully defined and healthy self-concept. As a result, Mary's behavior sets him up to suffer from the sort of chronic shame and overt sensitivity that will, ironically, make him "suspicious of everybody," much like his Uncle Ralph.

Chapter sixteen illustrates Rufus's inability to stand his own ground with the bullies and the destructive impact his opposing allegiance to each parent has on him. On the morning following his father's death, Rufus decides that he will follow his father's command that he should not shrink from the other children. In order to gain status with them, however, he believes that the best way to do so is to brag about Jay's death. Like Ralph, then, Rufus elects to master his sense of inner defectiveness in the presence of others through a grandiose, exhibitionist act. For Rufus, as for Ralph, the motivation is to prove one's masculinity, or more precisely, to forge an identity that conforms to attributes and values ascribed to a traditional form of masculinity such as bravery. In both cases, what is really expressed is an archaic grandiose need. Indeed, Rufus's decision to impress his shamers with the news of Jay's death is an extension of his thwarted attempt to win Jay's approval with the grandiose display of the cap he purchases in chapter seven.

As noted earlier, a cap is a symbol of masculinity for Rufus. And Agee, in a note, explains this.

He is drawn always more deeply into his mother's orbit, always the more wishing he could be in his father's. Every opportunity to do what he thinks his father would approve, meant much to him. A cap is just an example [. . .]. The child...is sure this will make him more masculine and that his father will be pleased. (qtd. in Doty 105)

In addition, the cap Rufus chooses with Aunt Hannah conveys how inextricably grandiosity and masculinity are bound together for him. According to Aunt Hannah, the cap is "a thunderous fleecy check in jade green, canary yellow, black and white, which stuck out inches to either side above his ears and had a great scoop of visor beneath which his face was all but lost" (ADF 73). Perceptively, though, Hannah realizes that she must let Rufus make his own choice about which cap to buy since for Rufus it represents a mode of self-identification that is in danger of being curtailed. At the beginning of chapter seven, when Mary disregards what Rufus might be doing so that he can go shopping with Hannah, "Hannah, in a flicker of anger, was tempted to tell her not to make up children's minds for them [. . .]" (ADF 67). And when the first cap Rufus chooses is a "painfully conservative choice" (ADF 73), Hannah senses Mary's controlling influence: "she smelled the fear and hypocrisy behind it." Furthermore, Hannah intuitively, if not fully understands, what the checked cap means in terms of Rufus's self-development within the family dynamics. She is sure that "Mary would have conniption fits; Jay wouldn't mind, but she was afraid for Rufus's sake that he would laugh."

We never have the opportunity to see what Jay's reaction to the cap might be, but it is clear that Rufus sees it as an opportunity in which his grandiose needs might be met. At the beginning of chapter fourteen, shortly before he learns of Jay's death and ventures out to the street corner, the first thing he does is look for Jay to display his new cap.

[H]is lungs stretching full with anticipation and pride, he put his hand into the crisp tissue paper with a small smashing noise and took out the cap. There was plenty of light to see the colors well; he quickly turned it around and over, and smelled of the new cloth and of the new leather band. He put it on and yanked the bill down firmly and pelted down the hallway calling "Daddy! Daddy!," and burst through the open door into their bedroom; then brought up short in dismay, for his father was not there. (ADF 225)

Uncharacteristically, however, Rufus expresses rage when Mary tells him that Jay is not home: "Where *is* he, then!" he demanded, in angry disappointment [. . .]" (ADF 226). This anger can be explained in a couple of ways. First, as Mark Doty argues, "Rufus's reaction at not finding his father is psychologically in accord with the grief reaction [. . .], the common, feverish desire among orphaned children to find the lost, loved object" (Doty 101). Indeed, as Doty maintains, Rufus's anger can be viewed in terms of parental loss, even though Rufus is not yet aware that his father is dead.⁶ At the beginning of the chapter, Agee suggests that Rufus has some intuitive sense that his father has died: "When he woke it was already clear daylight and the sparrows were making a great racket and his first disappointed thought was that he was too late, though he could not yet think what it was he was too late for" (ADF 225). Moreover, Doty continues, Rufus's anger is "born of the desire to 'get back' or 'get even' with the offending party, Jay, to make him pay for the anguish and suffering brought upon them,

the innocent victims” (Doty 102). At the same time, however, Rufus does not actually know that his father is dead when he questions Mary about his whereabouts and his half-conscious intuition that he is “too late” is replaced by the more immediate task of displaying his new cap to Jay. Rufus’s anger, therefore, can be understood in terms of shame and narcissistic rage. Even as his expressions of anger are habitually constrained by the affect bind discussed earlier, this is not to say that he is incapable of either having or expressing anger in particular situations such as this, where he feels a deeper shame that stems from his need for archaic grandiose mirroring. As Andrew Morrison explains,

Kohut viewed shame as a response of the self overwhelmed by unmirrored grandiosity; he considered rage to be the self’s response to a lack of absolute control over an archaic environment (Kohut, 1972). Thus, outpourings of narcissistic rage reflect the experience of empathic failure by selfobjects or by the environment in meeting the self’s needs for responsiveness or acceptance. (Morrison 281)

Rufus’s anger, then, originates from his inability to have his father present in order to gain the empathic response he desires, of not being able to show Jay that he meets his expectations. Frustrated by Jay’s absence, Rufus confronts the children as a covert way of still winning his approval, but in the end he is convinced that this is something he shall never achieve.

In chapter sixteen, as the boys approach Rufus, his certainty that they know about Jay’s death – that they have “the realization that something had happened to him that had not happened to any other boy in town, and that now at last they were bound to think well of him [. . .]” (ADF 244) – is clearly a shame defense. Because he believes this, he is able to endure the long wait and the prolonged visual contact that ordinarily overwhelms

him with shame, his desire “to go back into the alley and not be seen by them or by anybody else [. . .].” Two things go wrong, however, with Rufus’s plan to impress the children with Jay’s death. First, some of the boys question Rufus’s account of the death; one boy’s father has read in the newspaper that Jay may have been driving drunk and was crushed under the car rather than being thrown to the side. Rufus’s authority and power as the centre of attention is thus compromised and as a result he does not win admittance to the group; later, he tries to convince himself that a few of the boys “really did pay him attention, though” (ADF 254).

The second thing that goes wrong is Rufus’s encounter with the man on the street before the bullies arrive. Rufus tells the man that Jay is dead, and the man says: “How would your daddy like it, you out here telling strangers how he’s dead?” (ADF 243). The man’s reaction confuses Rufus. According to his simple logic, Rufus tells the boys that Jay is dead in order to win their approval as Jay would want him to, but the man on the street suggests that Jay would disapprove of his actions. Rufus’s problem, then, is which male authority should he believe – his father or the man on the street?

Rufus’s attempt to solve this issue is one of the saddest moments in the book. With great skill, Agee reveals a new development of guilt and shame in Rufus’s psyche through stream of consciousness. The voices of the boys, the man on the street, Jay and Rufus’s conscience fight for dominance as Rufus’s mind tries to come to a resolution. In the end, Rufus conflates what the man on the street has said with his own conclusion in chapter one that Jay will only respect him if he fights and that this is all he should brag about.

How would your daddy like it?
 Like what?
 Going out in the street like that when he is dead.
 Out in the street like what?
 Showing off to people because he is dead.
 He wants me to get along with them.
 So I tell them he is dead and they look up to me, they don't tease me.
 Showing off because he's dead, that's all you can show off about. Any other
 thing they'd tease me and I wouldn't fight back.
 How would your daddy like it?
 But he likes me to get along with them. That's why I – went out – showed off.
 (ADF 255)

Rufus's actions, then, like Ralph's, lead him into the shame he has tried so
 diligently to avoid. What is distinct and tragic about his situation, though, is that his
 belief that his offence and estrangement from Jay can never be rectified is proven true by
 Jay's death. Never again will Rufus be able to sit in his father's presence at the limestone
 outcropping looking for signs of love and acceptance, nor will Jay ever have the
 opportunity to fully realize his son's great need or offer him the empathic responses
 which will assuage it. Rufus longs for Jay's forgiveness, but this is, of course, impossible.
 "He wished his father could know about it and tell him that yes he was bad but it was all
 right he didn't mean to be bad." Suddenly, though, there is a shift. Rufus feels so
 ashamed of himself that he is glad Jay cannot know what he has done, that his shame can
 remain hidden. Yet if Jay is now a soul, Rufus realizes, Jay does know what he has done.
 Rufus recognizes that "there was no way to hide from a soul, and no way to talk to it
 either. He just knows, and it couldn't say anything to him, and he couldn't say anything
 to it. It couldn't whip him either, but it could sit and look at him and be ashamed of
 him." Rufus's guilt and shame, therefore, can now extend indefinitely, which further

conveys the destructive impact Mary's religious influence has on him. Rufus only conceptualizes his father's soul in the way he does because of the shame dynamics inherent in her variety of religion. At the same time, however, Jay's opposition to religion does not allow Rufus to resolve the reality of his death in religious terms.

At the end of the novel, Rufus is forced to negotiate the conflict that has existed between Jay and Mary and the difficulty of coping with Jay's death through the influence of Uncle Andrew. Andrew, as Alan Spiegel points out "represents the antitype" of Ralph Follet, which demonstrates how fully the opposition between Jay and Mary pervades the content and structure of the novel and also explains why Agee "digresses" in chapter six. Spiegel argues: "Just as one uncle reveals the perils of a total repudiation of the maternal orbit, a vengeful pride that reveals one frozen in a kind of rictus of self-regard, so too does the other uncle reveal the dangers of total dependency upon the domestic nest" (257). Andrew, then, is more like Jay than Ralph, and Rufus idealizes him for this reason. Andrew is a double for Jay, and as Spiegel remarks "This fourth and final walk is of course meant to be compared with the first, just as Andrew is meant to be compared with Jay [. . .]" (254). Spiegel also observes that Rufus's need for Andrew is based on his need for Jay's approval: "If 'courage and mastery,' both the example and acquisition of them, matter to Rufus – and of course, they do – then Andrew matters too. And coming upon his recent sense of estrangement from his only living parent, Rufus is especially pleased to accept his uncle's invitation [. . .]." But Andrew strengthens Rufus's division from Mary and her faith which began with Jay. It is Rufus's need to obtain "courage and mastery" that makes Andrew important to him, and because Rufus has learned from Jay

that these traits can only be acquired through a rejection of Mary and her religiosity, Andrew's rejection of religion sets Rufus up for more humiliation, defeat and shame – in effect, Andrew finishes what Jay began.

When Andrew invites Rufus for the walk, Rufus believes a special bond may form between them. Rufus realizes that “Andrew had never invited him to take a walk with him before, and he felt honored, and worked hard to keep up with him” (ADF 304). Rufus may at last be accepted by an adult male, and may also learn about Jay's funeral, which will give him a better understanding of death. Yet Rufus immediately realizes that something is wrong. When he takes Andrew's hand, “Andrew took his primly, but did not press it or look down at him.” This lack of warmth makes Rufus question whether or not he has done something wrong, and this is never truly resolved for him. At first Rufus wonders if Andrew has brought him out “to give me a talking-to and not raise a fuss about it” at home, but Andrew remains silent, and one naturally wonders if Rufus's expectation here suggests that such episodes have occurred between Jay and Rufus during their habitual walks. This suggestion becomes even more explicit as Andrew's silence, like Jay's, is interpreted by Rufus as a rejection for something more fundamental about himself.

Rufus is calmed, though, as Andrew tells him about the butterfly which landed on Jay's coffin at the funeral and Rufus's belief that a bond is developing between him and Andrew reasserts itself: “And suddenly he began to realize that his uncle told it to him, out of everyone he might have told it to, and he breathed in a deep breath of pride and love” (ADF 307). But Andrew's anger with Father Jackson – who would not read “the

complete burial service” for Jay because he was not baptized – fractures Rufus’s sense of allegiance with Andrew irrevocably. Andrew praises Jay for being “a hundred times the man” Jackson will ever be, and does so with great vehemence; as a result, Jay is elevated even further above Rufus because his worth is predicated on his opposition to religious people which includes Mary, Aunt Hannah and Rufus himself. For Rufus, Andrew’s defense of Jay represents a way of speaking for him. And this connection is established further by the fact that Andrew’s disclosure to Rufus is a secret, just as Jay’s drinking is during the walk at the beginning of the novel. For Rufus, then, the secret nature of Andrew’s hatred for Jackson becomes a covert criticism of his mother but also something he must keep to himself in order to win masculine acceptance, which entails his rejection of his mother.

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 he told me a secret he wouldn’t tell them as if I hated them too. (ADF 309)

The image of the butterfly, though, potentially offers a resolution to the larger crisis that Andrew’s criticisms are about: Jay’s immortality. As Doty and Seib note, it is “the Christian symbol of immortality” (Doty 113), and through this Rufus might be able to conceive of his father’s death in Christian terms. Indeed, as Seib notes, Rufus’s vision of the butterfly as Andrew describes it can, on one level be seen as “the culmination of Rufus’ quest for maturity, [which] causes him to see that life is not meaningless and that death is not defeat [. . .]” (84). Nevertheless, Rufus’s knowledge that his father was not religious only undermines this sort of resolution. As a result, Rufus’s walk with Andrew

only exacerbates his conflicted allegiance with each parent. As Barson notes, “The contentment Rufus experiences as he is drawn into the companionship with his uncle and which obliterates his fear of death and fear for his father’s loneliness is, in fact, an illusion” (155).

Rufus’ self-conception and self-worth are mediated by the tensions in his parents’ marriage. The adversarial allegiances he must maintain and his failure to meet the expectations and standards of one by striving for the other are the basis of his narcissistic injury and chronic shame. Indeed, as the novel unfolds we can see the scope and influence of the two contrasting orbits which make up his psychic world.

Moreover, the idealization of Jay through the butterfly, with the implied Christian motif of the father’s rebirth in the son, reflects the degree to which Rufus must find a resolution to his father’s life and death. Indeed, as we turn to The Morning Watch, we shall see how the overt religious context, structure, allusions and symbols of that novel illustrate further the impact of the marital tensions and their interplay in the shame dynamics Agee explores.

Notes

1 J.A. Ward is one critic who sees the underlying tensions in this scene. "This scene," Ward explains, "is marked by deep feeling and the gestures of love, but it also suggests some defect in the marriage through the inability of husband and wife to speak to each other" (599).

2 Milner is one critic whose reading of the relationships between characters in the novel has affinities with existentialism. For Milner, even though the characters are essentially alone or "autonomous" they seek and attain momentary "communion" (105) with each other. In his view, however, such moments "are only brief representations of the possible and are frequently resolved by a return to separateness" (105).

3 Coles maintains that Ralph is a sympathetic character because he fully understands his predicament:

The power he has over the reader's sympathy and imagination comes from the shrewdness about himself his mind commands. Through him Aagee can portray the not uncommon plight of the man who knows what ails him but has not the will to change things and can only make feeble vows, soon enough revealed for the illusions they are. (91)

4 See Joseph Adamson "Guardian of the 'Inmost Me': Hawthorne and Shame" 61-70 Scenes of Shame: Psychoanalysis, Shame, and Writing eds. Joseph Adamson and Hilary Clark (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999) 61-70. Here Adamson discusses the relationship between the penetrating gaze and shame with Chillingworth in The Scarlet Letter. See also Chapter Seven "The Evil Eye" 257-293 from Melville, Shame, and the Evil Eye.

5 Benjamin Kilborne suggests how such idealization can indicate the shame that results from not having idealizing needs met. Kilborne's definition of idealization, although he does not refer directly to Kohut's bipolar self, is similar. Idealization in Kilborne's definition, consists of "the inventions and fantasies of parent and child [which] lay the groundwork for feelings of ideals of beauty, order, and well-being" (4). Shame can play a distinct role in this process: "Shame can motivate children to idealize their parents, and shame can result if they cannot do so (i.e. by making parents better than they are)."

6 Doty also suggests how Catherine expresses a similar grief reaction. When she learns about Jay's death her "lack of comprehension and anger ring psychologically true" (8). Like Rufus, she insists on Jay's presence: "but why wasn't he right here now where she wanted him to be, and why didn't he come home? Ever any more. He won't come again ever. But he will, though, because it's home. But why's he not here?" (qtd. in Doty 8)

Chapter Three

Vainglory and Shame in The Morning Watch

i

Agee at St. Andrews

Although published six years before A Death in the Family, the autobiographical events recorded in The Morning Watch occur after those in A Death in the Family. Agee's persona is now called Richard, but he shares the same history and psychological troubles as Rufus Follet. The Morning Watch is an even more meditative work than A Death in the Family, but rather than revealing a number of characters' inner monologues, The Morning Watch is told entirely from Richard's perspective, except for two opening passages which were either deleted by Agee or his editor. The novel recounts Agee's immersion into the religion of his mother, which is foreshadowed at the end of A Death in the Family. It is therefore important to consider in some detail the historical events that correspond to what occurs in The Morning Watch and Agee's response to these events.

After his father's death, Agee's mother became even more devout. The family continued to live in Knoxville for two years supported by relatives before moving to the Cumberland Plateau in south-central Tennessee, where Agee attended St. Andrew's, a school administered by the Monastic Order of the Holy Cross, which is the model for the school Richard attends in the novel. Agee's time at St. Andrew's was difficult for him, and the life-long friendship he established with Father Flye was unquestionably the most

positive part of his experience there.¹ Agee's mother chose St. Andrew's because she feared that Agee had become too wayward: he frequently came home after being in fights. St. Andrew's strict, male supervision appeared to be just what he needed.

Although she was pleased by his newfound devotion to religion prior to their move to Saint Andrew's, she appears to have been at a loss as to how best to help her son or to realize the impact her religiosity was having on him. As Laurence Bergreen reveals:

His mother could not even begin to understand his overpowering anger. She failed to sense that Jay's death had unleashed a torrent of guilt in the boy, who held himself responsible for the tragedy in some mysterious way. Her constant emphasis on right and wrong fed the fires of his inner turmoil and reinforced his unconscious guilt. As a result, the shy and sensitive lad of six had metamorphosed into the savage of eight. (23)

Moreover, her decision to have him circumcised at eight, drove an inexorable wedge between them, and only amplified his shame about his masculine identity. A short, venomous poem captures his feelings about this action and his relationship to his mother in general:

*Mumsy you were so genteel
That you made your son a heel.
Sunnybunch must now reclaim
From the sewerpipe of his shame
Any little coin he can
To reassure him he's a man.* (qtd. in Bergreen 23)

At St. Andrew's, the rift between Agee and his mother deepened, and he was torn between conforming to the school's religious regimen and rebelling from it.

Compounding the problem was the fact that Agee's mother, like Richard's, lived in a cottage on the grounds and forbade him to visit her, while Agee was forced to live in "a barrackslike dormitory swarming with foulmouthed farmers' sons," with whom he had

little in common (25). As a result, Agee adhered to religion with a fervor but did so in an attempt to rectify his deep shame about his relationship with his father, his inability to win his mother's favor and his lack of success in obtaining a place among the other children, which is the central conflict of the novel. Indeed, so extreme was Agee's attempt to be pious that he, like Richard, even fantasized about being crucified. Even his mother, wholly unaware of this fantasy, sensed that his piety was tinged by an unhealthy pride, the very problem we witnessed with Mary in A Death in the Family.

Most critics recognize the impact that one or more of these psychological tensions play in Richard's devotion. However, the general consensus is that Richard's problematic relationship to the memory of his father, his mother and the students at St. Andrew's are resolved by a new religious awareness. This interpretation, though, misses Agee's ambivalent stance towards religion during the time the fictionalized events occur and during his composition of the novel. As Laurence Bergreen makes clear, Agee's experiences at St. Andrew's left him with deep psychological scars, which culminated in his rejection of religion after the Maundy Thursday vigil remembered in the novel:

He was, as he would later tell a friend, 'finally through with religion but still carrying a deep load of it, some of it benign, much of it poisonous.' At the same time, he was left with a 'gravitation towards death,' a 'giant set of guilt reflexes,' and an 'extreme masochism and sense of guilt which that kind of religion – Roman or in that case Anglo-Catholic – is liable to poison you with if you become religiously infected at all.' (29-30)

At the same time, even as Agee would refer to his religious upbringing as a disease, he continued to flirt with a reaffirmation of his faith throughout his life.² Shortly before composing The Morning Watch, he took part in a symposium for Partisan Review

in 1950 called “Religion and the Intellectuals.” Participants were asked to consider what the editors labeled as “[o]ne of the most significant tendencies in our time [. . .] the new turn toward religion among intellectuals and the growing disfavor with which secular attitudes and perspectives are now regarded in not a few circles that lay claim to the leadership of our culture” (103).

Throughout his response, Agee considers the shortcomings of secular culture, religious devotion and conversion in a highly personal way. As he discusses the larger cultural forces at work in the new trend towards religion, he argues that the qualities of this religious revival gain importance from, and must be validated within, individual experience: “The only thing relevant to the validity of the revival is the validity of each conversion [. . .]” (113). Moreover, he emphatically states that the validity of faith is “super-rational” (110); it is opposed to the rationalism prized by secular culture, which is often irrational with its “doctrines relating to penis-envy, or the withering away of the State [. . .].” Nevertheless, Agee concludes that there is an irreconcilable division between religious and rationalistic faith: “The latter is belief in the supposedly credible and is open to question and change. The former requires belief in the incredible, in matters beyond the corroboration of reason or the senses.” If religious belief is “super-rational,” this is not to say, Agee maintains, that it does not have some practical benefits. For instance, despite his feelings that religion had imposed “a giant set of guilt reflexes in him,” he suggests that religion can offer a beneficial understanding of guilt, in contrast to modern, secular society.

Obedient to the classical psychoanalysts, most intellectuals forbid themselves (and others) a sense of guilt – except over having a sense of

guilt. Thus proscribed, the sense of guilt and one's entire being are bound to become greatly diseased. The only prospect of healing: discovering one's right and obligation to admit and discriminate one's guilt. (108)

The sort of guilt Agee refers to here is, of course, not intended to be the incapacitating variety which plagued him or plagues Richard. Indeed, it reflects a commitment to a higher, more useful set of values. In a period which Agee referred to as being characterized by "enough pragmatism and moral relativism" (108), the desire for "moral absolutes" which religion satisfies, is both understandable and necessary on the individual level. Agee believes that religion can be vital for an individual because it "is rare to find a non-religious person who recognizes that, granted extenuating circumstances, every person is crucially responsible for his thoughts and actions" (108). Agee's stance, however, is potentially disastrous for someone who, like himself and Richard, experiences shame because of his failure to conform to strict religious principles. Indeed, his insistence on personal responsibility over a notion of "global" responsibility that is "a sort of playing-at-God" demonstrates the vestiges of his religious shame. Agee offers no practical solution to the excessive guilt and shame he experienced as a result of his religious upbringing. What he does do instead, however, is discuss how the quality of any given religious conversion is difficult to assess, which offers an important context for Richard's apparent religious development. Agee says

I doubt that anyone short of God can judge [. . .] [a religious conversion] [. . .] anywhere near correctly, and suggest that there is probably no apparent cause, however trivial or suspect, which may not bring a genuine conversion, and no conversion, however well-arrived at it may appear, which may not be spurious. (113)

Religious Ambiguity in The Morning Watch

The Morning Watch demonstrates Agee's suspicion about the validity of any religious conversion from a rational perspective, but many critics claim that he forgoes these suspicions and his own shame-based relationship to religion by investing Richard's experiences with a "super-rational" quality and outcome. Criticism of the novel falls roughly into two complimentary camps. John S. Phillipson, Roger Ramsey, Peter H. Ohlin and William J. Rewak argue that Richard undergoes a genuine conversion in the midst of his vainglorious attempts to identify with Christ; while Kramer, Kenneth Seib, and Barson claim that Richard's vigil serves as a process of maturation and self-awareness through religious experience. Only Jeffery Folks offers a reading of the novel in terms of the protagonist's excessive guilt, linking it back to Agee's childhood, albeit without acknowledging Agee's ambivalent commitment to religion and the overt religious structure and symbolism of the book. But before turning to a discussion of how shame operates in the various social and religious facets of Richard's experience, it is important to outline a typical redemptive reading of the novel because the novel's very structure implies a religious awakening.

Roger Ramsey's article, "The Double Structure of The Morning Watch" is probably the most emphatic reading of the novel in terms of its redemptive, religious context. Ramsey argues that The Morning Watch has the structure of a triptych, and there is evidence that Agee had this narrative device in mind as early as 1937. In his application for a Guggenheim Fellowship that year, one of the works he plans to pursue

suggests The Morning Watch: “Portraiture. Notes. The Triptych” (qtd. in Ramsey 494). For Ramsey, this triptych structure has thematic significance; “the subject matter for this triptych is the Crucifixion, with the two thieves flanking the Christ on the Cross.” From this view, then, the actions and experiences of the characters develop this theme by corresponding to the Biblical story. Ramsey maintains that in section II, where Richard’s thoughts explore a variety of subjects, that the Crucifixion is the point where they converge, which appropriately, is the center of the traditional triptych altarpiece often associated with Good Friday. Part II is where, in Ramsey’s view, Richard first realizes that he can be redeemed through Christ and does so through his identification with the Penitent Thief: “he can now identify not with Christ but with humankind; he can see himself as a poor sinner redeemed by the Crucifixion” (501). In addition, Ramsey suggests that what occurs in parts I and III can only be properly understood in relation to the middle section: “The side panels not only flank and balance the set of three; they are designed to fold over the middle one, just as the concerns of Richard in parts I and III find their common center in part II” (500).

Essentially, what Ramsey suggests is that like Joyce’s use of The Odyssey in Ulysses, the Biblical events surrounding Christ’s Crucifixion and Resurrection inform what occurs in The Morning Watch. And in light of this, Richard’s complex shame can be understood as the emergence of humble piety. Ramsey’s argument is well supported by a close reading of the text within this framework. But what he, and others who claim that Richard develops in a positive way miss, is that the reservations Agee had about

religion are not resolved in the novel and that Richard's shame qualifies a strictly religious interpretation.

Indeed, Agee's use of the triptych structure oscillates between frustrating ambiguity and outright irony. If Agee had long considered using the triptych as an organizing principle for The Morning Watch, then his notes as he was writing the novel demonstrate how fully occupied he was with the quality of Richard's psychological well-being. In the notes, Agee provides a summary of his central concerns in the novel and how the true value of Richard's religious experience is predicated on his subjective being. The overarching triptych structure provides a context for Richard's devotion, but does not supersede Richard's private struggles, nor does it offer Agee a straightforward, didactic path. The issues Agee raises in Partisan Review, especially his skepticism towards religious conversion and the need for faith to be assessed within an individual's private sphere, are in the forefront, along with the artistic problems these pose:

What really am I after in this story, and is it worth doing? Religion at its deepest intensity or clarity of childhood faith and emotions; plus beginnings of a skeptical intellect and set of senses; how the senses themselves, and sexuality, feed the skeptical or non-religious or esthetic intellect; efforts at self-discipline. Religious-esthetic-biological experiences carrying with them above all, religious experience of an unusually fine kind, and the innocent certainty that it is doomed. To be done in terms of: the watching in the chapel; wanderings of the mind and efforts at prayer; memories of the dead father; imaginations of sex and sport; workings of guilt; excesses of religious intention and complications of guilt and pride; the excitement of [. . .] dawn [. . .] the locust hull; [. . .] the snake. Is [the snake] too obvious a symbol, and the locust? They seem so. (qtd. in Kramer "James Agee's Unpublished Manuscript" 161)

Clearly, then, Agee wants to explore the failure of Richard's religious experience. And if we consider Agee's outline carefully, we discover that it conforms to the novel: the

religious sense is doomed through a synthesis of various scenes in which Richard experiences intense shame.

iii

Father Whitman

The first indication in the novel of Agee's ambivalent, even ironical, treatment of religion comes not with Richard, however, but with an excised portion concerning Father Whitman. In this introductory section, Father Whitman experiences the same sort of religious doubt and consequent shame that Richard does later in the novel. As Kramer points out, Father Whitman's inability to be as pious as he believes he should foreshadows Richard's struggle and illustrates one of the areas Agee wants to develop, the "beginnings of a skeptical intellect and set of senses" (161). For Kramer, this is Agee's primary concern, how Richard's religious crisis is generated by the onset of maturity which brings with it a more complex understanding of the world and his place in it. Of course, in the working note quoted above, maturity as the forging of skepticism is only one area Agee wants to explore and nowhere does he state that the validity of religious faith is always complicated and qualified by maturity. Nevertheless, Kramer makes clear in his discussion of Father Whitman that Agee presents religion ironically and that Whitman reflects Richard's position: "If a priest who has been trying for decades cannot focus his attention on the mystery of God's coming and sacrifice, how then can a young person, with a mind wonderfully active, do so?" (162) What Kramer does not emphasize, though, is how "Richard's kinship with Father Whitman" is based on the

shame of religious failure. Like Jay, Ralph and Andrew in A Death in the Family, Whitman offers a model of what Agee's autobiographical persona might become.

Father Whitman experiences shame because he fails to live up to, in Wurmser's terminology, his "ideal image." As we have already seen, this is what plagues Mary, Jay, Ralph and Rufus in A Death in the Family. For Whitman, his task of waking the boys for their early morning vigil is an empty obligation, an attitude which conflicts with his vocation as a priest. Despite his disinterestedness, though, Whitman has performed this duty for a number of years because he is aware that this is what is expected of him, and by extension, what he expects of himself: "It was felt that no layman among the teachers should be imposed on and the next year one of the monks, Father Whitman, volunteered; and because nobody else wanted the job, any more than he did, it became assumed from that year on that he would do it" (163). Whitman performs this task to avoid public ridicule, even though others clearly share his reluctance. Agee suggests an atmosphere of silent protocols, which if openly acknowledged or breached could bring shame upon the individual who transgresses them. But Whitman's position is more precarious than it might be for others such as Father Fish who tells Richard that he should not take scripture literally. For Whitman, his reluctance to perform his duties is evidence of his failure as a priest. As a result, he engages in the attack self response to shame, and Agee makes it abundantly clear that this strategy is often integral to religious devotion. Indeed, what is so damaging about Whitman's predicament is that he cannot choose an alternative way of managing his shame which might offer a more cohesive sense of personal integrity without incurring more shame from internal and external sources.

In an ingenious way which blurs the distinction between what is internal and what is external in Whitman's shame response, Agee uses the ticking of Whitman's alarm clock to make his shame a felt experience for the reader. Whitman cannot avoid the sound of the clock that forces him to be conscious of his failures. He may be able to present the appearance of proper religious devotion to others in order to avoid their public censure, but he cannot do so with himself. Throughout the night Whitman is unable to sleep because of his inner conflict. Initially, he tries to deny that he dislikes the proceedings, but he soon becomes conscious of this denial. The ticking alarm clock, which makes Whitman aware that he is unable to use "the wakefulness well"—that he cannot keep his attention focused on religious matters—cannot be ignored. For him, the sound echoes throughout the dormitory and his consciousness, in the process becoming the vehicle for a moral lesson directed against the self. So powerful is his religious devotion that he cannot ignore his failure or the realization that he desires to ignore his failure: In his mind, the clock torments him "like the effort, he reflected, to stifle conscience; he tried to make that the subject for meditation" (163).

What is significant about Whitman, then, is how religion exacerbates a nature already prone to shame and negates other ways he might redirect his affective response. Indeed, if we recall Father Jackson in A Death in the Family, we can see how his censure of Rufus and Catherine in the attack other mode is amplified by and intimately connected to religion just as Father Whitman's attack self mode is. Significantly, however, Whitman does attempt a mild form of the attack other mode through momentary defiance, but this too is subsumed into the attack self form of self-defense. Suffering from shame anxiety,

Whitman characterizes the incessant ticking of the clock as ruthless, and he attempts to take an equally ruthless stance against what it represents – anticipated public ridicule that cannot be defeated. Yet in the end, this attempt to *turn the tables* is nullified by his overwhelming sense of personal inadequacy. The ticking “had sounded like a wild beast at a night waterhole, drinking insatiably in stealthy but complete security; and he had thought of the beast as the Devil and had been as much tempted towards his wild, predatory supremacy, as drawn to God” (163). The moral absolutes and demand for constant vigilance that his religious calling entails cannot allow Whitman to displace his guilt and shame. Any effort to do so makes him a sinner in league with the Devil.

It is important to realize, however, that Whitman’s sense of religious failure is not simply a loss of self-esteem. As Wurmser makes clear: “A mere falling short of ego standards or even of the postulates of the ego ideal does not evoke shame. What is necessary in addition is that the inner wishful image of the self be “betrayed” and that certain self-critical, self-punishing, and reparative processes be set in motion” (73). The two “reparative processes” Whitman attempts, though, of denial and defiance, only disguise his shame and whatever potential these strategies might possess for him to establish a better relationship with himself and others is lost because of his religious devotion.³ In the end, these two forms of defense are integrated into and perpetuate a form of self-punishment. What is particularly painful about Whitman’s struggle is that, like Richard’s, shame is produced by the randomness of thought itself, by the inability to remain focused on the appropriate concerns and maintain the appropriate attitude towards these concerns.

He lay trying to pray, now formally and now extemporaneously, and to conduct a useful meditation, and to control the sinful and frivolous, fantastic straying of his mind, and most earnestly of all, to realize the solemnity of the event which was even now repeating itself; but however clearly he realized it in his dull, tired mind, he could not realize it in his heart. (163)

This is not to say, however, that Whitman's shame does not exist without amplification from an outside source. Ironically, and even appropriately if we keep in mind Agee's hostility towards his mother, the only instance of externally imposed shame comes not from other priests but Richard's mother. In his most overt attempt at a "reparative" gesture, Whitman "confesses" to her his religious dilemma, his inability to experience religious conviction "in his heart."

He remembered how the mother of one of the boys on the place, a widow who lived just off the grounds, had spoken once of that kind of reward, as rare, but wonderful, and compensating for all, and to be relied on, and how he had told her that in twenty years of hoping, it had never once happened to him.

Inadvertently, Richard's mother confirms Whitman's belief that he is a failure; and her inability to offer any sort of support for him suggests Agee's feelings about his relationship to his mother, and as we shall see, Richard's. Moreover, the castigation implicit in Whitman's encounter with Richard's mother is conveyed further by the child-like tone his inner dialogue suddenly takes: "I only want to be a religious, he told himself quietly. I haven't got it in me to be, and in twenty years of trying, none of that has changed." In the end, Whitman is convinced of his unworthiness. In an attempt at absolution he prays for the ability to carry out his duties as he ought, regardless of whether or not his heart is ever rewarded. This act of conventional, religious selflessness,

though, masks and perpetuates a severe feeling of shame, which is expressed by his striking “his breast three times” in an act of self-disgust.

iii

Richard

Even though Whitman’s predicament foreshadows Richard’s, Richard’s is much more complex. Richard believes that he must serve a variety of masters which can be grouped into the two opposing influences introduced in the discussion of A Death in the Family: religious devotion and secular, predominantly masculine acceptance. There is, however, much overlap between these conflicting forces in Richard’s mind and in how he unsuccessfully tries to curb their destructive influences. In terms of gaining masculine acceptance, Richard, like Rufus, must negotiate his relationships with the other boys at Saint Andrew’s, and, ultimately, the memory of his father. From the outset of the novel we discover that Richard is alienated from Hobe and Jimmy – he is referred to as “Crazy kid” and “Sockerteens” (MW 70) – and has learned that any sort of exposure is potentially dangerous. As the three boys exit the dormitory, Richard says to himself that he “was glad he had learned hardly even to think of saying anything. If Jimmy told Hobie to shut up and quit cussing Hobie would take it off of him, they were buddies; but by now he knew enough to keep *his* mouth shut” (MW12). Richard, then, demonstrates an awareness that Rufus struggles to develop: he has learned that avoidance through silence, rather than physical retreat, is a way to protect himself from incurring shame and ridicule, but, as a result, he lives in a habitual state of shame anxiety, similar to the sort that we saw Ralph Follet suffering from. And in order to avoid the shame he anticipates

experiencing in these relationships, his behavior clearly demonstrates what Nathanson says about how avoidance works in such situations:

For that segment of shame which derives from discovery there are three basic tactical approaches: We can protect ourselves by guarding the perimeters of our personal world; by making sure there is nothing within them that will embarrass us; or by distracting people so that they will forget that they were interested in what may lie within. (339)

In order to avoid shame, then, Richard has become adept at self-effacement. Although such an action is prudent in certain situations, the degree of Richard's self-censorship is paralyzing – it keeps him from establishing any sort of merger with others. Moreover, what is at issue here is his fear of presenting an authentic version of himself expressed through spontaneous actions; to limit spontaneity is to limit exposure and suggests the sense of self-defectiveness integral to shame. At the end of Part I, the way in which Richard's shame anxiety imprisons him is made clear. Rather than joining in with Jimmy and Hobe as they throw gravel at an oak tree, Richard congratulates himself on not taking part in this activity: "It had not occurred to Richard to pick up gravel and now he was glad, for he was sure he would have missed as often as hit" (13).

In Part II, Richard's shame-bound relationship with the boys is developed further, and he demonstrates other typical shame-defense strategies. Above all, Richard tries to regain a sense of inner sovereignty through grandiose behavior. What complicates his actions, though, is how he tries to use religious devotion to do so. As suggested above, Richard's sense of inadequacy centers on his insecurity about his masculine identity, which has its roots in his troubled relationship with his father. And this conflict is heightened by Richard's religious devotion which he identifies as inherently feminine.

Richard's ideal self is never fully formed and brings with it shame about his inability to reconcile these various ideals that he feels he must meet. Richard is, as Wurmser points out, someone who is caught in "the conflict between strongly contradictory and not integrated ideal selves. Loyalty to one ideal thus may mean betrayal of another [. . .]. No matter how the child behaves, [. . .] [he] miserably fails one ideal image and inevitably incurs shame" (74). At the same time, Richard attempts to resolve his shame about his masculinity through religion, but in the highly competitive terms with which masculine status is gained. In Part I, his avoidance tactics are used because he believes he will not say the appropriate thing or demonstrate the requisite skill he believes he must have by hitting the oak tree with gravel "expertly," thus losing any standing with Hobe and Jimmy.

Part II also demonstrates how Richard's desire to conform to a masculine ideal depends upon his physical prowess. In particular, Richard attempts to emulate "the great athlete Willard Rivenburg" (20). Through this, we can see how Richard tries to reconcile religion with masculinity in a way which wins favor from others. Nevertheless, Richard cannot resolve these two influences. Willard Rivenburg is the example Richard believes he should emulate because Rivenburg is so popular, and this becomes problematic for Richard precisely because Rivenburg's popularity rests in his flouting of the school's religious conformity. Indeed, Richard's characterization of Willard suggests that it is this rebelliousness which epitomizes him and makes him so attractive. Richard has observed that when Willard has taken "his turn serving Mass or swinging the Censer or carrying the Crucifix he was never exactly irreverent yet he always looked as if secretly he might

be chewing tobacco; it looked as odd and out of place, somehow, as watching a horse dressed up in cassock and cotta and doing these things” (MW 20-21). What is of particular importance here, is that Willard’s unconventional behavior is not, for Richard, an action which is premeditated or disingenuous; rather it is integral to his very being and because of this gives him worth, the kind that Richard believes he inherently lacks. In an abstract way, then, Richard does not merely want to emulate Willard, but rather to *be* him, and whatever makes Richard unique is evidence of his defectiveness. We learn, for example, that Willard knows a few words of German and that this instantly sends Richard into doubt about his own predilection for French. Once Richard hears Willard speak German, he “felt ashamed of himself, and resolved to learn German, which seemed to him a much more virile language” (MW 23).

In fact, Richard’s idealization of Willard is so pronounced that it indicates the lack of Kohut’s “firm self.” In connection with this, Richard’s efforts to emulate Willard are clearly a shame defense – of an attempt to hide his unique and flawed self.

“Whenever he had done anything physically creditable, Richard carried his head low, let his mouth hang open, and tried to hump his back, scarcely knowing of it any more; and so, though it was not generally realized, did many other boys in this school” (MW 23-24). Such behavior, as the narrator suggests, is typical of adolescents, but Richard is overly invested in this activity. Before the vigil, Richard notices “with sly and particular interest the hump between Willard’s heavy shoulders, which he had often wondered about but never yet had the chance to examine so privately” (MW 23). What emerges from this observation, though, is an instance in which Richard senses that he falls short from this

physical characteristic. Momentarily, he speculates that the hump may be a physical deformity, but he quickly dispels this conclusion because Willard's status is inviolate. For Richard, this hump can only indicate Willard's superiority. Richard concludes, "yet if he were deformed, he could not have such ability and strength."

These aspects of Willard's greatness, his "ability and strength," do not simply represent his physical being, but rather, like the concepts of "courage and mastery" for Rufus, express an essential part of the ideal masculine identity. In other words, the physical is an expression of the self, and by which the self can be judged, hence Richard's conviction that Willard's hump must be a muscle. Richard feels between his own shoulders to see if he has a similar hump but comes up short: "there wasn't even the beginning of a muscle there; just bone." Bone is not muscle, and thus Richard cannot be as good as Willard, and by the end of his comparison, we can see the subtlety with which his sense of deficiency operates. Bone on Willard, Richard concludes "would be a deformity; and on Willard, more than any other thing, it was what made him unique among others, and marked his all but superhuman powers."

Aspiring to Willard's example is clearly a way for Richard to hide his shame about his defective self, but, like all shame defenses, it is also motivated by the wish to establish an equal relation with others. When Lee Allen calls Richard, Hobe and Jimmy to their places in the chapel, Hobe cries "Jesus!;" and Richard's behavior in the ensuing conflict conveys the extent to which his emulation of Willard is a covert way of gaining acceptance from the other boys. Lee Allen, angry at Hobe's blasphemy, reprimands him: "I sure would hate to have to report anyone for cussn right in Chapel, and on Good

Friday, too” (MW 24). Hobe, unlike Richard, is immediately defiant. His eyes, Richard notices “turned Indian,” and he looks “with pride towards Willard,” thereby declaring his kinship with Willard and claiming an analogous position with the younger boys. And like Willard, whose amused silence evokes his masculine power, Hobe says nothing. George Fitzgerald, however, tries to diffuse the situation and says to Lee that Hobe “just wasn’t thinking,” but Lee maintains his position saying, “You just watch your mouth, Hobie.” Richard, sensing that the hierarchy among the boys is being declared, tries to align himself with Hobe and Willard by adding his voice to the argument, breaking his shame-based silence. But he soon regrets this decision because his attempt to gain new ground with the other boys is clear for all to see: “and even before everyone looked at him and said nothing, he was miserable.” Richard, then, does not gain new status and his failure in this competitive move brings an intense feeling of shame and the desire to erase his presence once more. George tells the boys to put on their shoes and Richard welcomes this – “with relief Richard sank his hot face over his shoelaces” – but he cannot hide from his inner shame and self-castigation. Moreover, Richard’s shame reaction here conveys how the sense of social failure and the desire for it to be rectified cannot be resolved through religious observance, how it conflicts with and amplifies the shame he equates with religious failure.

They felt contempt for him, he was sure, and he felt contempt for himself. Willard thought better of Hobe for cussing than of him for standing up for him, and so he. Lee jumped on Hobie because Willard’s cackling about it bothered him and he couldn’t jump on Willard. If it hadn’t been Good Friday and Richard had spoken up like that he knew what somebody would have said coldly, ‘Well look who’s talking.’ Keep your mouth shut, he kept whispering within himself intensely. Just keep your fool mouth shut. And as they left the room he tried to exorcise the feelings of

injustice, self-pity and pain by crossing himself quickly and surreptitiously. Fine time to go worrying about yourself, he sneered at himself. (MW 24-25)

For Richard, as for Rufus, attempting to gain ground in the social, masculine arena within the microcosm of his classmates inevitably produces shame from the part of him which is overly committed to strict religiosity and judges that social world as profane. Yet he is inextricably bound to each orbit as the preceding shame reaction shows. Religion remains equated with the feminine, while the social with the masculine, and the inability for one to be reconciled by or within the other is the focus for the rest of Part II. Fresh from the humiliation he suffers in the conflict between Lee and Hobe, Richard's mind resists prayer because he, like Rufus, has failed his father's injunction to win a place among other boys. As a result, when he attempts to consider spiritual matters appropriate to the vigil, "the words broke within him, upon each other, God: Death; so that the two were one," and the memory of his father's death comes unbidden into his consciousness. But because his father was opposed to religion, religion cannot offer a resolution to his death in Richard's mind; in fact it exacerbates the conflict:

Dead, the word came again, and shutting his eyes he prayed swiftly for his father the prayer of all his childhood, God bless daddy and keep him close to Thee and may light perpetual shine upon him, Amen; and casually, obliviously, as a trout into shadow, the image and memory vanished. It is Our Lord's death today, he said to himself, but at this moment he could see neither face, that of his father, or that Lord; only the words returned, God: Death. (MW 28)

Clearly, Richard cannot appease his father's memory by asking God to "keep him close to Thee," and it is significant that at the conclusion of this prayer he conceives of

God and his father separately and that the feeling he associates with each fades. Yet at the beginning of the prayer, there is the sense that the father is equated with Christ in Richard's mind. As Rewak states:

In trying to grasp emotionally the death of Christ, he automatically recalls the only death he has ever experienced, his father's. This transference is accurate, psychologically, for the emotional frustrations of loss, of sorrow and loneliness, which Richard wants to make his own by contemplating the death of Christ, are experienced only by reference to his father's curiously unreal, 'waxen' death. The self-conscious Richard realizes this identification, however, says a prayer for his father, and turns to the business of the hour [. . .]. (26)

Richard does not move on, however; his father remains ever present in the background as Richard at one moment identifies him with Christ, and the next identifies himself with Christ, Peter and Judas. Rather than offering us simple analogies that definitively equate particular characters to Biblical counterparts, Agee evokes connections between certain attributes in order to reveal the psychological complexity of Richard's character and how a genuine religious conversion is inherently problematic because of this. The governing principle behind the connections that Agee draws, then, can be seen as shame.

Jeffery Folks offers an important insight about the tension between faith and rationality in the novel. Folks maintains that Richard's faith is in conflict with any attempt to understand it rationally, precisely because he must also maintain a faith in his father's memory: "Agee rightly identifies 'mind' as the 'betrayal' of faith, not only in the sense of religious belief but in his more important commitment to remain under the emotional control of his father" (74). This point offers, in a sense, a closure to the opposition between the sacred and profane dialectic in terms of shame. In Folks's

opinion, for Agee and Richard to question the concept of faith with its dual meaning “might alleviate some of his ‘deserved’ punishment [. . .].” For Folks, this is why at the end of Part II, Richard’s vigil ends with the image of the “dry chalice” (MW 87).

he was empty and idle, in some way he had failed. Yet he was also filled to overflowing with a reverent and marvelling peace and thankfulness. My cup runneth over, something whispered within him, yet what he saw in his mind’s eye was a dry chalice, an empty Grail. No more I could do, he reflected, if I stayed all night. (MW 87)

Folks suggests that Richard’s equation of his father’s death to Christ’s explains why the chalice is dry because it is his “mind’s eye,” his rational mind, that “understands the ritual enactment of the father’s death as a step backward toward further dependence,” (74) while his heart remains committed to his dual faith. The problem with Folks’s argument, though, despite its psychological acuity, is that Richard’s concept of faith specifically refers to religious devotion and that it is cast in adversarial terms to what his father represents. Faith in God, despite Richard’s attempts to conflate the two, remains distinct from his devotion to his father.

What is, perhaps, more important in terms of narcissistic injury and shame, though, is the emptiness that Richard experiences when he cannot summon images of his father and God to his mind at the beginning of the watch, and the emptiness he feels – “the empty Grail” – even as he experiences a “peace and thankfulness” which can be seen as the after-effects of his religious fervor. In her introduction to The Empathic Reader, J. Brooks Bouson describes the different variants of narcissistic personality disorder outlined by Kohut and Wolf, and paraphrases their definition of the *understimulated self*, saying that it is characterized by “a feeling of deadness and empty depression” (17). This

“deadness and empty depression” Kohut and Wolf maintain, “is a chronic or recurrent condition of the self, the propensity to which arises in consequence of prolonged lack of stimulating responsiveness from the side of the selfobjects in childhood” (418). From this view, Richard’s overt religious and social needs can be seen as mutually exclusive ways “to create a pseudo-excitement in order to ward off the painful feeling of deadness that tends to overtake them.”

This deadness, then, which originates from the selfobject failure of his parents and is expressed through his contrary adherence to what each one represents for him is the basis of his crisis. Turning back to the beginning of Part II, we can see how the dichotomy between his father’s world and his mother’s world generates excessive shame. As soon as Richard is motioned by one of the older boys to begin his prayer, he responds: “I be damned if I will,” Richard thought, and caught himself; he shut his eyes tightly and in despairing shame tucked down his chin” (MW 29). Richard’s religious shame, though, cannot counter his impulse to turn to the memory of his father. Once he begins to pray he immediately thinks of it in terms that evoke the masculine world, “Home stretch, Richard said to himself, and quickly begged forgiveness for an irreverence which had not been premeditated but spontaneous” (MW 29-30). The spontaneity of this “irreverence” conveys the degree to which Richard’s memory of his father needs to be resolved, and this is made even more explicit a few moments later when he begins to pray with renewed determination. At the end of this prayer, however, there is one phrase which habitually makes him think of his father and how the meaning he ascribes to the word is distinct from religious matters: “He braced his mind. Blood of Christ inebriate

me” (MW 31). Richard tries to gloss over the meaning of the word “inebriate” which is antithetical to what he senses is the proper, religious meaning of the word by offering an empty prayer, just as Father Whitman follows his duties in order to feel appropriately religious. After Richard has looked the word up in the dictionary,

the correct and disconcerting meanings had been indelible, and that part of the prayer had become thin ice. He could only get past it without irreverent or skeptical thoughts by saying it so fast or so shallowly that it was impossible to bear its meaning in mind, and that was no way to pray. (MW 32)

Nothing Richard can do can break the associations the word has for him, not even Father Fish’s advice not to take the word too literally, because the word evokes his father. As Folks rightly puts it “Clearly, Richard has been carrying out a shadow existence since his father’s death, one designed to preserve his relationship to his father, and one which he desperately needs to transcend” (74).

Yet Richard cannot “transcend” his father’s legacy because, as we saw with Rufus, he is convinced that he has failed his father. In Richard’s mind, inebriate means “just plain drunken, or meant a drunken person, especially habitual drunkard, and as it was used here, it meant to make drunk, to intoxicate” (MW 32). Moreover, the phrase “Good ole whisky” reverberates in his mind. It brings together his memories of Knoxville boys imitating drunkenness with “sodapop,” and suggests events in A Death in the Family. Even Richard’s realization that it is the blood of Christ and not whisky that is supposed to intoxicate him cannot quiet these intrusive associations and memories. Immediately, Richard remembers his Uncle – clearly Uncle Andrew from A Death in the Family – and his comments about the blood of Christ. The scorn in his Uncle’s voice,

when he says “there is a pudding filled with blood,” brings to Richard’s mind the same response Rufus has to Andrew’s final comments at the end of A Death in the Family:

And his uncle had said it with a kind of hatred which included much more than the hymn: all of religion, and everybody who was religious, even his own sister, Richard’s mother, and his Aunt Patty, and him, Richard, and his own sister. Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us, he prayed, and pushed the matter out of his mind. He does like us all the same, he reflected, same as grandpa does. They just don’t like the Church. (MW 33-34)

Importantly, there is some development in Richard’s response to his Uncle’s comments from that of Rufus’s. Richard, unlike Rufus, is able to make a distinction between his Uncle’s feelings for family members and religion. But even as Richard does this, another comment the Uncle has made which directly questions Christ’s death and resurrection makes Richard question why he is following the vigil. The Uncle says “Well who asked him to die for me? I didn’t. He needn’t try and collect on the debt,’ he had said, ‘because there’s no debt, far’s I’m concerned” (MW 81). For Richard, this outburst only strengthens his idealizing allegiance to males who are set against religion: “Nearly always when he thought of this Richard was shocked almost into awe of such blasphemy [. . .].” In contrast to his father, the boys and his Uncle, Christ can only be thought of in terms of weakness and femininity; at one point he thinks of “all the most insipid and effeminate, simpering faces of Jesus that he had ever seen in pictures” (MW 35). Because of this, prayer itself is cast as a feminine activity, especially the proper way of holding one’s hands with fingers extended and the right thumb crossed over the left which “seemed sissy” (MW 74).

Nevertheless, Richard remains committed to religion and tries to resolve his inner conflicts through grandiose acts. Folks reveals that this is the crux of his dilemma, even though he does not discuss this in terms of Kohut's narcissistic injury, as an example of trying to repair the *understimulated self*, or in terms of shame:

In comparing himself to his classmates, Richard invariably finds himself unworthy, lacking in some crucial respect, and he compensates by the performance of grandiose feats, more often imaginative rather than actual, designed to win respect from others and approval from himself. (73)

The most overt example of this tendency is Richard's imagined self-crucifixion. Significantly, it is during his memory of this fantasy, which he has first contemplated a year before, where Richard refers to himself as "the Penitent Thief" (MW 46), but this does not keep him from "ensnaring himself afresh" (MW 51) in its appeal. On the one hand the crucifixion is a direct response to his mother's coldness and rejection – evidenced, as already mentioned, by her refusal to let Richard visit her. Richard experiences both anger and a desire to win her affection which is manifested in his conflicting feelings about religion, and Agee underscores the importance of this dynamic by referring to Richard's frustrated attempts to see her as a "watch." What occurs in Richard's Easter watch is inextricably linked with this other watch. Richard's reaction to his mother's explanation of why he cannot visit her is, like Agee's, a painful mixture of contempt and need. When she tells him why she avoids his presence – that he must be in the company of other males – and that he will one day thank her for this, we witness Richard's complex reaction:

Thank her! his heart sneered now, in bitter paroxysm. And for a moment so brief that the realization did not stay with him, he felt hatred and

contempt for his mother, for her belief in submissiveness and for her telling him, on certain infuriating occasions, that it is only through submitting bravely and cheerfully to unhappiness that we can learn God's Will, and how most truly to be good. God's will, he thought now: I bet it isn't just for people to be unhappy! Who wants to be *good*! *I* do, he answered himself. But not like that. (MW 42)

The crucifixion, then, reflects Richard's need to be responded to by her by being properly religious while at the same time "not like that." The problem, though, is not so straightforward. He also needs to rectify the "kind of vanity" she says is "mixed up in his extreme piety." For Richard, any feeling of religious accomplishment he gains thus complicates his religious aspirations. It is, as we have seen, the feelings of pride, power and recognition that Richard believes he must demonstrate with other boys which generates shame from the part of him which is committed to religion, but it is these qualities themselves which he believes he must condemn because they indicate the "sin" of pride. The dilemma for Richard is that to prove he is properly religious inevitably incurs shame because it involves self-congratulation. Yet Richard's need for self-acceptance and empathic responses from others are inherently connected to and expressed by archaic grandiosity and to judge these needs as shameful only keeps him imprisoned within himself. As a result, his efforts take a masochistic turn.

Masochism, as Nathanson makes clear, is the "dark side to the system of attack self, for some people are so willing to accept shame in order to guarantee the stability of their link to others that they become quite masochistic" (Shame and Pride 332).

Richard's eating of worms, his nearly tasting his own excrement and the self-crucifixion can be explained quite clearly as a way to win his mother's love and respect. These acts,

at the same time, also reflect Richard's fundamental belief that he is unlovable because of his mother's rejection. Nathanson also observes:

people involved in such activities are far less concerned about the pain brought by their masochism than about the profoundly secret shame that causes them even more distress. Furthermore, the attack self mode is undertaken in order to prevent the helplessness of abandonment and isolation. (333)

Richard's desire to establish a covert connection with his mother through masochism is only one facet of his crucifixion. The other impulse here is to turn the tables on all his shamers – his mother, the monks, teachers and students. "Crucifixion is" as Nathanson points out, "one epitome of public humiliation" (319), and so Richard's inverted crucifixion suggests how exposed he feels to the slights and contempt of others. Moreover, the grandiosity of this shame defense also reflects why Richard's identification with Christ is so convenient and meaningful for him. It is Christ's power, as much as his Crucifixion, that Richard responds to. Nathanson, following Kohut, says "the basic aim of exhibitionism is to fascinate and thereby to regain the mantle of omnipotence" (152). Richard's proclamation to the onlookers – "there is nothing you can do that won't be to the greater glory of God and so I forgive you" (MW 49) – is a way of sharing in God's omnipotence. By granting himself the ability to forgive, Richard shares in God's power. Yet this forgiveness is clearly a way to orchestrate and control the responses of others, a way to elicit their contrition, shame and awe in his presence that he so often experiences in theirs. Suspended on the cross, Richard imagines that "[t]he prior, abashed withdrew," and that his mother finally expresses the empathy and emotional acknowledgment that he craves: "His mother pled with him to come down; she

was even crying.” With the football coach Braden Bennet, who “had so often sneered at his music lessons,” Richard is able to look “straight back into those bullying eyes, with such quiet fortitude and forgiveness that the scorn and wonder deepened, the wonder even more than the scorn.” Similarly, Rivenburg’s “deep jaw hung open” (MW 50) and he whispers to Bennet “Jesus that kid’s got guts,” and with Hobe and the other boys Richard “realized, he would never be last again, when they chose up sides”

iv

Religious Symbols in Part III

Part III of The Morning Watch is very different from the two preceding sections. Here, Agee considers Richard’s conflict between the religious and social through an overt reliance on symbols as much as an exploration of Richard’s consciousness. In the working note quoted earlier, we can see Agee’s hesitancy about this course : “Is [the snake] too obvious a symbol, and the locust?” Indeed, the biblical symbols and references Agee employs in Part III have garnered the harshest criticism, even though the multitude of interpretations testify to the fact that the meanings are anything but “too obvious” as Agee feared. Yet on the whole, for critics who argue that Richard begins a transformation in Part II, Part III offers a resolution to this through Richard’s similarity to St. Peter, his discovery of the locust shell, his baptismal-like dive in the Sand Cut pool and his killing of the snake with Hobe and Jimmy. Ultimately, though, the social and religious conflicts that cause Richard such severe shame reactions are not resolved through these allusions and loaded symbols.

Richard can be identified with Peter as the boys leave the chapel in the early morning and three roosters cry. For Phillipson, Seib and Ramsey, this signals Richard's new standing with Hobe and Jimmy, and in the end, with Christ and mankind. Phillipson argues that "For the moment, both as leader and as sinner, he [Richard] has assumed the role of Peter" (363). Richard's role as leader, however, is questionable, despite the religious connections Agee draws. Richard's defiance, his "sin," is in not returning to the dormitory immediately after the vigil and this "betrayal" suggests a connection to Peter's renunciation of Christ. Initially Hobe yells at Richard "Can't even pray, what the f - - *kin* ye do!" (92) Uncharacteristically, though, this does not elicit shame from Richard. Instead, he is preoccupied with his "sin," which in its subsuming of social interests suggests the overall prevalence of the religious structure of the novel, and at this moment, his similarity to Peter.

Nevertheless, Richard is not the leader of this group, and his defiance is as much a way for him to gain favor with Jimmy and Hobe here, as elsewhere. Richard does not suggest that they go to the Sand Cut, as the majority of critics mistakenly claim; rather, he says that they should get "the rackets" and this idea is met with silence, the same sort of silence that greeted his comments at the beginning of Part II. It is Hobe who decides that they will go to the Sand Cut and Richard says "Come on," (MW 92) ever the conformist looking for acceptance. Indeed, Richard immediately questions the validity of the new power he has exerted by speaking up as he leads the way to the Sand Cut. He realizes that his power is conditional, that "I'm scared of both of them [. . .], specially Hobe, and they know it whenever they want to" (MW 93). And as a result, Richard

engages in the same self-shaming behavior that he has demonstrated before.

Characteristically, he quickly condemns as a religious failure the momentary pride he takes in the discovery that he can have a voice among the other boys.

Identifying Richard with St. Peter, then, is highly problematic. If this identification is fixed, as Phillipson argues, by his leadership among the other boys and his sin of pride, then he is clearly not a leader from the perspective of Hobe and Jimmy, nor in his own estimation. Richard does, however, rebel against the proper rules of observance, and because of this is, broadly speaking, denying Christ. However, as Seib notes, this is in no way a wholesale renunciation of Christ: “But what is being renounced in Agee’s story? It is certainly not Richard’s religious faith, for he becomes more ‘religious’ by the end of the story. More likely it is his childish past that this cock is crowing an end to” (71). Neither of these answers is satisfactory, though. Surely Richard’s self-disgust is not an indication of growth; as Kramer and others maintain, he remains essentially static throughout the novel. If we are to conceive of Richard’s renewed adherence to religion as a genuine awakening by its beneficial impact, of the sort that Agee specifies in Partisan Review, then what occurs is really the opposite – a further immersion into religious self-punishment and shame. The only way Richard’s religiosity can be construed in a positive light is if we minimize his negative experiences of it. Moreover, the only way the novel can be seen to offer an orthodox religious resolution to his psychological and social troubles is to argue that his intense inner shame is necessary. Nowhere is this more evident than in Ramsey’s reading of the strong connection between Richard and Peter. Peter, Ramsey argues, is the one

who denied Christ at his death time and the Saint who built His Church [. . .]. Like Peter, Richard now feels the inescapable guilt of mankind [. . .]. In spite of this guilt, and because of it, Richard-Peter-mankind must share the agony of the Cross. All that remains for Richard in his development is to perceive the harmony that the paradox demands. (501-501)

Ramsey maintains that Richard realizes this paradox. But to claim this is to discount the problematic narrative focus that permeates all of Part III. For instance, during the boys' walk through the forest, there is the sense that a literal rebirth that equates all of nature with Christ's resurrection is taking place.

Some of the twigs looked still as dark and fragile as in the middle of winter, many were knobbed and pimped and swollen as if they were about to break open and bleed, and many were the colour of bronze and some were the color of blood; on some there were little buds like the nubbins of young deer [. . .]. (MW 96-97)

Upon close scrutiny, however, we realize that this appears so because an omniscient narrator declares that the boys are experiencing the rebirth of nature with overt religious connotations from a shared, hence objective, point of view. From this perspective, the meanings the symbols have appear to exist beyond the subjective state of any one character, even as their unified consciousness appears to intuit what the events comprising the symbols might mean. At the same time, however, Agee is primarily concerned with Richard's consciousness, and in particular his religious strivings which look for religious signs and connections everywhere, so we are forced to question whether these symbols have any meaning which subsumes the limitations of his consciousness. The problem, then, is whether the symbols reflect a unified state of consciousness, a single consciousness, or if they are narrative devices Agee imposes to

point to a larger reality or truth that they may or may not be able to apprehend.

Ultimately, though, what disables any straightforward religious resolution to the novel is that Richard's consciousness is the place in which the religious conversion must take place and where what new perspectives he gains must be proved beneficial.

The locust shell, in the main, appears as a strictly positive symbol which suggests that Richard is in the process of discovering larger spiritual forces than himself. For most critics what Richard learns through the locust shell is a new acceptance of suffering, either that it is integral to a mature vision of the world which signals his renunciation of childish things or that Christ's and mankind's suffering is necessary in order for Christian salvation to occur. Only Folks argues that it has a negative, secular connotation, that it is "symbolic of his father's sudden but painful metamorphosis from sensuous life to death" (78). Indeed, when Richard picks the shell off the tree at the end of the novel and holds "the bodiless shell which rested against his heart," it appears that the shell is to be equated with his father because he has suddenly been reminded of his mother's explanation of his father's death. Moreover, because he decides to take the shell as a talisman, rather than the dead snake that evokes the memory of his father, supports Folks's point. At the same time, however, the lyrical description of nature that precedes Richard's discovery of the shell seems to suggest that it has a universal significance. As Rewak observes, "[t]his locust shell, Agee insists, is not just a material fact [. . .]. In the torn shell, he sees the beginning of creation" (30). With the locust shell, therefore, it is possible to argue that Richard does, conceivably, equate his father's death with Christ's and that he accepts the Christian paradox of rebirth through death.

Nevertheless, as Richard's "baptismal" dive in the Sand cut pool demonstrates, the psychological problems he faces pervert the religious implications that the dive suggests. In an abstract way, the dive represents the literal carrying out of Richard's fancied crucifixion. And like the self-crucifixion, the dive is a willful act of self-mortification that is very different from Christ's, which of course, was not self-inflicted. Most critics, however, claim that the dive serves as a death and rebirth for Richard – evidenced by his momentary pleasure in the day once he resurfaces from the pool – but this view is questionable. Seib, for instance, claims that Richard is "No longer half in love with easeful martyrdom, [. . .] [he] has come to realize the beauty of being alive" (72). Barson, however, rightly questions the value of Richard's dive and suggests how a destructive "martyrdom" remains intact. He claims "Richard is not simply reborn by his swim. Rather, his physical excitation leads him to desire to take his own life, perverting his intention to suffer with Christ into an act of idolatry" (160).

Indeed, Richard's prayer as he swims towards the bottom of the pool reveals the extent to which self-destruction is tied to this devotional act. Richard says within himself "O Lord let me suffer with Thee this day, he prayed, his lungs about to burst; and took hold more firmly" (MW 103). Moreover, his final impulse to swim back to the surface reveals how inextricably shame and religious self-punishment have governed his motivations. Richard only saves himself in order to remain properly pious and to claim that he actually learns that there is anything beyond his own troubled psyche seems entirely implausible. As he swims to the surface he says "*I didn't have the nerve!* and,

Anyhow I tried, meaning at once that he had tried to stay down too long as an act of devotion and that he had tried to save himself from the deadliest of sins” (MW 104).

It might be argued, however, that because Richard’s devotion ultimately makes him choose life that he has gained self-esteem, but the final events of Part III illustrate how whatever self-esteem he gains is surely fleeting. It is the snake, more than any other symbol, which demonstrates the tensions in the narrative perspective and how Richard’s apparent move beyond his religious and social shame is problematic. The snake, as most critics claim, appears to be paradoxically equated with Christ as much as with the serpent in the Garden of Eden. And what establishes this connection between the snake and Christ is that “it was clear that he had just struggled out of his old skin” (MW 107), and as Seib claims, that “the snake undergoes the same agonies as Christ on the same day of his suffering, Good Friday” (72). By extension, in Ramsey’s reading of the novel, the snake can be equated with Christ so that Richard learns a right relation to Him. By killing the snake and choosing to not wash its blood from his hands, “Richard comes to realize that to share Christ’s suffering is to share in His murder, and so Richard does not wash away the blood” (497). “At this point,” Ramsey continues, “Richard has discovered the paradoxical cruelty and necessity of Christ’s suffering. The awful death struggle of the snake continues, in Richard’s mind, ‘until sundown’ an obvious parallel to the Crucifixion” (498).

The difficulty with how we are to interpret the death of the snake/Christ is implicit in the subtle, yet important contrast between Seib’s and Ramsey’s description of what this means for Richard. Seib claims that the snake shares the same agonies of

Christ and that this is a literal fact, whereas Ramsey carefully specifies that the meaning of the snake's death takes place in Richard's mind. What remains to be seen, however, is if the connections Richard appears to make are in fact a resolution to his crisis. In the end, Ramsey's point becomes suspect because for Richard to believe that the sufferings of Christ and the snake are similar is another example of the dangerous literalness with which he approaches all things religious, which as we have seen, Father Fish warns him about in Part II. More concretely, though, the snake does not offer Richard a new understanding of himself in relation to the world, which is testified to in his relationship with Hobe and Jimmy at the end of the novel.

Even if we construe Richard's killing of the snake in terms of maturation through a religious experience that is fleeting, where he is by the end of the novel is not, in essence, any different than from where he began – he remains polarized between religion and the masculine world represented by his classmates and father. Seib maintains that by killing the snake, “he has had a visible and memorable experience of suffering that has made him more human” (73), and that he has also won “self-respect and the acceptance of his companions.” Ohlin, in roughly the same manner, declares that Richard becomes more human and gains self-respect from a renunciation of the demands of Hobe and Jimmy: “Richard's new maturity involves, among other things, a realization of the uniqueness and loneliness of the individual over and against the society to which he belongs” (190).

To some extent, both interpretations are correct. Richard does, at least in his mind, momentarily gain new status with Hobe and Jimmy. At the same time, when he

refuses to take the snake he believes that he has lost “a considerable portion of their esteem, though not all of it” (MW 115). Whether Richard actually gains their esteem, and whether after refusing the snake he is “still regarded as the hero of this occasion and [. . .] still one of them in a way he had never been before,” is difficult to determine. Before the boys dive into the pool, there is yet another masculine competition in which Richard is caught between the demands of religion and winning masculine acceptance. After the boys undress, Richard compares the size of their genitals and who has the most pubic hair, which will literally determine who ranks first in the pecking order. In the end, though, it is not who most shows the signs of physical maturity that determines this but who is most comfortable in their nakedness, who, it turns out, is the least subject to shame which can be associated with religious adherence. Not surprisingly, the winner of this contest is Hobe. Both Jimmy and Richard avoid eye contact with each other and look at the other’s nakedness “with even less candor than they would have at any other time” to “honor Good Friday,” and “Richard the more uneasily crossed and uncrossed his hands in front of himself” (MW 101-102). Hobe, however, occupies an entirely different place and, significantly, is the first one to plunge into the icy water.

Only Hobe, of any boy Richard knew, never concealed his own body or his interest in another, and even now, Good Friday seemed to mean nothing to him. He looked at them, and watched them look at him, with coolness which seemed almost amused. He urinated a few drops on to his belly and rubbed it in with the palm of his hand, against cramps. He made no gesture of covering himself and grabbed his testicles with one hand only at the instant he grabbed his nose with the other to leap with a spangling splash into the water. (MW 102)

It is during the killing of the snake, though, when Richard delivers the fatal blows with a rock that he does gain some new ground with Hobe and Jimmy. Richard's assessment of what this means appears to be accurate: "in putting his bare hand within range of that clever head and in killing so recklessly and with such brutality, he had lost their contempt and could belong among them if he wanted to" (MW 110). Indeed, the killing of the snake is an act of physical bravery, provided, of course, that the snake is in fact poisonous. As Richard puts it: "If it had not been poisonous he had not been brave; and if it had not been poisonous he was sorry he had killed it or even fool enough to yell so the others would see it and so automatically kill it, for he had felt that the harmless ones ought to be let alone, as few people let them alone" (MW 111). For Richard, then, killing the snake represents his possible ascension in the eyes of Hobe and Jimmy, and this is what motivates his actions. The snake, as most commentators agree, also has phallic associations, and this is certainly so for Richard. What motivates Hobe and Jimmy's attack is not revealed; it appears that they simply love the sport of the kill. Richard's motivations are more complex because the snake initially dazzles him with its splendor: "Richard saw perfected before him, royally dangerous and to be adored and to be feared, all that is alien in nature and in beauty: and stood becharmed" (MW 107-108). Despite his ambivalence about the snake's character, though, Richard clearly views it as one of the "harmless ones" and identifies it with himself.

It is this identification, it seems, which motivates his actions here. When Hobe is about to strike the initial blow to the snake with a rock, Richard who is standing behind him reaches out for the rock Hobe holds over his head. Hobe does not see this, but

Jimmy does and Richard becomes aware of “Jimmy’s astounded eye on him, and thus became aware of what he was doing and caught himself, realizing that they would never understand why he did it, that they would be angry with him and rightly so and might even be mad enough to jump on him [. . .]” (MW 108-109). Jimmy’s piercing look shames Richard, and this look is mirrored by the snake’s “one remaining eye entering his own eye like a needle [. . .]” (MW 110) once Richard has begun to attack it. Richard’s participation in the killing of the snake, therefore, can be seen as a final attempt to eliminate the accusing eyes of his shamers, while also as a renunciation of his own weakness and as a way to gain admittance to their group. And it is precisely the “defiance” which marks one’s standing among the boys which is the object of Richard’s shame fury in killing the snake. The question “*is he poison?*” that reverberates through his consciousness is a secondary consideration for him, even though he will use it to measure himself by moments later; Richard “cared only for one thing, to put as quick an end as he could to all the terrible, ruined, futile writhing and unkillable defiance [. . .].”

Part III ends with Richard carrying the locust shell in his left hand next to his heart, while his right is still covered with the snake’s blood and hangs “with a feeling of subtle enlargement at his thigh” (MW 120). This effect on his right hand conveys a newfound assuredness in his masculinity, at least for the moment, because immediately after the snake is dead Richard notices that “the veins stood out on his forearm almost like a man” (MW 112). Thus, in Richard’s mind at least, he has moved closer to attaining his masculine ideal, which is confirmed to some extent by his defiance of Hobe. The problem that remains, though, is what we are to make of Richard’s sudden memory

of his father's death with the snake's. Why does the memory occur? Hasn't Richard finally won his father's approval? The answer, I think, is that for Richard the only way for him to cope with the reality of death is to posit a spiritual after-life. Hobe throws what remains of the snake into the hog pen, and Richard is reminded of the most important death he has yet experienced.

This is, finally, the motivating force behind the religious connections his mind imposes on the world around him. The essential problem remains: can he resolve his father's death within a religious framework which is so antithetical to everything he represents for his son? The final words, excised from the last sentence of the novel, clearly suggest that Richard has aligned himself with Jimmy and Hobe and can look squarely at the religious shame this incites in him. But is this enough? At the very end Richard may be able to see Father Whitman's eyes – "eyes to be afraid of and ashamed before," and instead feel that "it was not so very hard to meet them after all" (qtd. in Kramer 80) – yet it seems doubtful that this defiance will last for long once Richard is back in his mother's world. Because Richard's self-assurance here is not tested – we do not see, for example, how he reacts to his actual punishment – suggests that the pressures of living in the world at large are likely to entail more negotiations with shame through interpersonal conflict and his own self-concept. Indeed, it is likely that Richard's fate is foreshadowed by Agee's other autobiographical protagonists in his short fiction from the 1940s.

Notes

1 Doty provides a valuable discussion of Agee's relationship to Father Flye. Doty argues that Flye was a surrogate father for Agee but in a way which exposes his religious dilemma. Via interviews with David McDowell and Dwight MacDonald Doty points out how Agee's letters to Flye avoid such profane topics as sexuality and music that are replete in Agee's correspondences with them and Walker Evans. Moreover, Doty quotes Macdonald who says that Agee refrained from "his esoteric jesting in his letters to Flye" (qtd. in Doty 12). Doty's conclusion about Agee's correspondence with Flye is apt:

James Agee, in short, was circumspect in his correspondence with the priest: anxious not to offend, yet equally desirous to confess the indiscretions that ultimately broke his health. Far from the flamboyant, faintly scandalous note to his peers, Agee's letters to Father Flye are distinguished for their "confessional desire to relieve his own guilt" on a level that is serious, if not solemn, by comparison. (13)

2 See James Agee, "To Father Flye," 20 September 1950, Letters of James Agee to Father Flye. (New York: George Braziller, 1962) 182-184. In this letter composed shortly after "Religion and the Intellectuals" we can see Agee's ambivalence towards religious doctrine and the confessional quality in his correspondence with Flye suggested in the previous note. Agee says:

I evidently move, as I imagine many people do, in a rough not very predictable cycle, between feeling relatively uninvolved religiously and very much involved: though I'm not sure that 'religiously' is the right word for it....I wish I were with you and could talk about this, but even if I were I doubt there would actually be much to say about it. (184)

3 What Whitman engages in here is clearly what Kaufman refers to as a denial script. Indeed, Whitman's behavior fits Kaufman's definition to a startling degree:

Denial scripts operate directly at the level of perception. When all attempts to escape from or avoid shame become blocked, thwarted, or defeated, the next line of defense is denial at the level of perception itself. Denial is a final line of defense when action strategies fail. Denial functions just like other scripts, guarding the boundary between self and environment. Denial scripts attempt to exclude shame from awareness by denying its perception, or by denying the perception of anything that might arouse shame. (103)

Chapter Four

Beyond the Self and Back: Social Contexts for Autobiography

i

Agee and the Modern World

The emphasis on shame in Agee's autobiographical fiction, although staged in interpersonal relations and within the self, reflects in part, his social concerns. Much of what spurred on his renewed interest in religious matters during the late 1940s and early 1950s was the threat of nuclear annihilation. As Laurence Bergreen makes clear, when America dropped the atomic bomb on Japan, Agee felt complicit in this action "Indeed, the bomb made him feel personally implicated in the slaughter of thousands of innocent victims. Rather than celebrate victory, the United States ought to writhe in shame at vicious death-dealing" (295).¹ For Agee, then, as the Partisan Review article conveys, religion might offer the individual recourse from the crassness and immorality of American society, but more importantly might save mankind from extinction with its power to inculcate humanistic values.² As Bergreen puts it: "Convinced that the United States should never have entered the war in the first place, he now envisioned a "petulant and feathered" American populace deaf to the groans of the dying, a populace "incurable through pity, love, guilt, fear" (295).

The extent to which the Bomb influenced Agee's renewed interest in autobiographical fiction cannot be underestimated. As Bergreen explains, the Bomb became an obsession for Agee that coincided with his turning to therapy with

Dr. Wickes. Moreover, as Barson notes, in a letter to Father Flye Agee mentions that he has started “a draft of a story [. . .] about the atomic bomb,” and in the same breath, “a short novel about adolescence in the 1920s” (129), which may refer to The Morning Watch, but more likely to the semi-autobiographical “1928 Story.” Fearful about nuclear disaster, Agee became more reflective about his career and how badly he had fallen short of his personal and artistic ideals. What added to his ruminations, however, was the fact he was nearing his thirty-sixth birthday, the age at which Jay Agee was killed. Agee felt doomed to an untimely end, and he considered what an artist on the verge of his own death might offer a world which appeared to fare no better. As Barson states, “Under these and other pressures he was hearing ‘Time’s winged chariot’ and felt the urgency to finally make something of his life as an artist. Surviving would be simply avoiding nuclear holocaust. Integrity, on the other hand, would be to affirm the values of his forbears [. . .]” (130).

Encapsulated within these concerns we can see the thematic tensions that resonate throughout A Death in the Family and The Morning Watch. In A Death in the Family, Agee’s idealization of his parents is, as we have seen, a shame defense, but it also reflects an effort to discover and portray a set of values and concerns at odds with the rush of the modern world. Similarly, in The Morning Watch, Agee seems determined to have Richard undergo a “religious experience of an unusually fine kind” but with the “innocent certainty that it is doomed,” which reflects the more global concerns raised in the Partisan Review. But as in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, “integrity” for Agee

demands a highly speculative personal approach, which translates into his fiction with the primacy of his characters's psychological lives.

Nevertheless, Agee's tendency to idealize his parents in *A Death in the Family*, not only reflects a shame defense for his wounded narcissism, but also larger, social concerns. Indeed, Jay's rural background, with which Agee associates his independence and his masculine authority, his "heroism" in his son's eyes, inform his criticisms of modern society. As Kramer puts it

When Agee wrote this autobiographical novel he attempted to catch the flavor of the time when his family was in a state of tension with ties to both the rural past and the urban future. Interestingly, the novel reflects distrust of and affection for both country and city. Agee evokes a moment in America's history when it was poised between knowledge of a simpler past (or one which appeared to be) and the more demanding future. (*Agee and Actuality* 136)

Yet in the autobiographical fiction Agee never veers too far away from the internal experience of his characters. As we have seen in *A Death in the Family*, Jay's rural background is a central element which sparks the marital tensions – it is not at any time a didactic device for social reform. However, as Ward and to a lesser extent Kramer suggest, telephones, automobiles, streetcars and railroad cars all interfere with communication in the Follet home, which suggest how Jay's rural background and Mary's urban one are at odds.³ For instance, as Kramer notes, when "A streetcar passed; Catherine cried" (qtd. in Kramer 147). In this way, then, we can see how intimately connected Agee's social criticisms are to his autobiographical fiction. In fact, a selection of short works and fragments from this period – "1928 Story," "Dedication Day", "Give Him Air" and especially "Dream Sequence" – demonstrate how inextricably the social

and the personal are combined and how they function within the shame dynamics we have been investigating.

ii

“1928 Story”

“1928 Story” reveals Agee’s views about the state of modern society, yet links this to his personal disturbances and his feeling of having failed as an artist. The story reflects, in part, an imagined writer’s loss of youthful confidence in his work and his memory of one summer when the confidence could not be shaken. Irvine, the writer, who is clearly an Agee persona, details the shame about his failure in a way which connects it to the postwar world. Implicit in Irvine’s self-narrative is the belief that his former artistic confidence, while exemplary in its commitment to an imagined, and so deeper engagement with life, was in fact naïve. What is interesting, though, is how Agee blends this loss of innocence to the nation’s within Irvine’s mind. Irvine says that

now, the middle, the last half, of the nineteen forties. Only the meanness, and fatness, and insanity seemed to survive, as it had also survived the Depression; and in whatever ways these had changed, they seemed to have changed for the worse. There had been a kind of innocence in everything about the old years, that gave some sort of charm even to the worst of it. In a way, of course, the innocence had survived everything too. But it seemed a kind of innocence, now, that has no business of being so innocent. (242)

Irvine’s castigation of the country’s loss of innocence, however, parallels his own attitude towards his artistic endeavors. As we see so often in Agee, Irvine’s mind begins a process of self-realization and disclosure but without a resolution of the issues raised. His mind moves from a consideration of America and narrows the focus to the

personality which considers it. Irvine turns from his country's loss of innocence to a more universal loss inherent in the human condition, that it is "a matter simply of his having been young during certain years, older during certain other years." In the end, however, he realizes that this is really an expression of his wounded narcissism, "that he as infantile, to use a word out of a vocabulary which sickened him; that he had never really grown up, whatever that might mean, or even wanted."

This revelation, however, just as Ralph Follet's self-knowledge in A Death in the Family, does not resolve his feelings. Irvine is convinced that his personal decline is part of a larger one, which clearly evokes Kohut's notion of the prevalence of "Tragic Man."

It was a stupefied country, and evidently a stupefied world, and as stupefied as anything else was his sense of universal mistrust and of hopeless regret, his dependence on mere taste, his pleasure in the sensuous, his miserable reluctance to live in the world as it was, and to discard the pleasures of recall.

Clearly, Irvine experiences profound shame and self-disgust at his inability to produce the work he believes he should have, which mirrors Agee's own frustration with his initial efforts to turn his own life into fiction, "his inability," as Laurence Bergreen puts it, "to produce a masterpiece the moment he set pencil to paper" (152). This desire for artistic perfection, and Agee and Irvine's belief that they have cheapened their talents by "pleasure in the sensuous," suggests not only the search for excessive stimulation characteristic of an *understimulated self* but also an unsuccessful attempt to mask inner shame. Art for Irvine, as for Agee, clearly offers recourse from his shame about his defective self. As Nathanson suggests

If my generalized sense of shame stems from a childhood decision to accept the overarching concept of a defective self, then I can reduce this self-inflicted noxious feeling only by improving myself. Adults who grew up in an unloving, unempathic home often mount a relentless search for specific personal defects that can be overcome as if the achievement of perfection in the present might erase the bad old days of the past. (Shame and Pride 341)

For Irvine, however, such behavior has only prolonged the “bad old days” because the practice of art itself brings its own shame – “his miserable reluctance to live in the world as it was, and to discard the pleasures of recall.” This suggests Agee’s own doubts about his autobiographical fiction, his fear that in writing about his life he would dishonor his parents. As Barson makes clear, in the episode where Irvine shares his enthusiasm for music with his parents, they reject his artistic vision. Barson argues that Irvine’s response to music is an extension of what he and Agee try to accomplish through art. Irvine’s “ability to recall the excellence of the music is analogous to his ability to recall or reexperience or, finally, to represent the actual intensity of any emotion” (139). Significantly, though, Irvine’s parents shame him for his artistic pretensions. As Barson puts it, Irvine’s “mother and father’s patronizing bemusement had led him to self-recriminations for ever having tried to share his feelings with them,” (140) which he responds to with “silence, exile and cunning” (qtd. in Barson).

Agee’s imagined response of his parents through Irvine is congruent with the shaming Rufus feels in the presence of Jay and Mary separately. As we have already seen in A Death in the Family, Rufus’s mother curtails any expression of negative affect, particularly anger, and in The Morning Watch her rejection of Richard is an effort to limit this still further by keeping in the company of religious men. Moreover, one wonders if

Agee is not referring to the disgust his mother expressed for “the explicitly sexual passages of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men” (Doty 14). In terms of the father, we have seen him make smartness a topic of ridicule in the bar early in A Death in the Family. And Rufus’s sense that his father’s ghost is ashamed of his trying to brag inappropriately is also a censure on creative expression. But above all, it is his distance in life as in death which confirms this for Rufus and Agee alike. Jay’s corpse – which figures so prominently in “Dream Sequence” – marked only by the fatal blow to his chin in A Death in the Family censures Rufus in death as he does Irvine in life. When Rufus sees Jay’s corpse, he “had never seen him so indifferent; and the instant he saw him, he knew that he would never see him otherwise” (ADF 281).

iii

“Dedication Day”

In the discussion of The Morning Watch we explored how Agee’s ambivalent, ironic, even contradictory stance toward religion by how it fuels Richard’s shame because of his conflicted allegiance to each parent. At the same time, as the structure of the book and the symbols in Part III demonstrate (as well as Agee’s comments in the Partisan Review), religion remained an influential factor in his thinking. The essential humanist tenets of religion had a lasting appeal for him, in part, because he saw these at odds with mainstream society. In “Popular Religion,” an unpublished article for Time, we can see how Agee’s concern shifts to how religion can be perverted to serve the more commercial aspects of the modern world. Agee states this quite clearly when he says

how the majority of people would respond to the dictum “Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof” (225)

If every man in the Christian world were asked whether he believed these lines, it is probable that a surprisingly large minority would say, and sincerely mean, that they did. If everyone who said and meant that he believed these lines were asked in what degree he put, or even tried to put, his belief into practise, the affirmative minority would, judging by contemporary evidence, be infinitesimal.

Moreover, Agee links this moral hypocrisy to the Post-War world and what he labels as “popular” sentiment about religious practice:

That the war brought on a profound and widespread religious revival, which is still deepening and broadening. That it is deep and broad enough to save mankind. That religion is 1) essential to our daily life, private, public and international; 2) non-essential, and indeed unemployable, but a good thing all the same. (226)

Another story from the late 1940’s, “Dedication Day,” overtly illustrates Agee’s concern with the discrepancies between organized religion and the individual’s adherence to its principles in the Nuclear Age. “Dedication Day” appears to be all that survives of the fiction on the atomic bomb that Agee refers to in his letter to Father Flye, but it has strong affinities to the autobiographical “Dream Sequence” because it is concerned with personal integrity: In a sense, it offers the psychological implications of Agee’s autobiographical works writ large. The work is a satire, a genre which Agee indulged in from time to time over his career and is a mode of writing that occupies a middle ground between his journalism and autobiographical works because it allows him to wield his cynical edge on mass culture.

In brief, “Dedication Day” recounts a celebration in honor of the splitting of the atom after the bombing of Japan with the unveiling of “the heroic new Arch which was for all time to come to memorialize the “greatest of human achievements” (104). Agee, with a deft touch, satirizes the entire proceedings and castigates a public all too ready to let the news media and entertainment world sway their opinions. What is of particular interest, though, in terms of Agee’s ambivalence toward religion, is how he criticizes various denominations and faiths for their complicity in these proceedings. In an event which celebrates the potential destruction of mankind and betrays the indifference of the American public to the suffering of Japanese survivors, the religious leaders are blind to this folly. Agee describes how “four ravenous Cardinals raced towards the Consecration in all but perfect unison, their voices blended with that of the Pontifical Benediction, relayed from Rome” (105) and goes on to describe how “eminent Protestant clergymen,” and “the most prominent and progressive of American Reformist Rabbis” follow suit and are accompanied by “the twenty best Allied marksmen of the Second World War [who] presented their rifles [. . .].” It is only when a scientist who has helped develop the Bomb decides that he must atone for this action by committing suicide that the day’s festivities are spoiled. Agee praises the scientist’s penitence:

For misguided and altogether regrettable though his last days were – a sad warning indeed to those who turn aside from the dictates of reason, and accept human progress reluctantly – he was nevertheless, perhaps, our last link with a not-too- distant past in which such conceptions as those of “atonement,” and “guilt,” and “individual responsibility,” still had significance. (117)

But even as Agee praises the scientist's decision, his adherence to spiritual principles which in an insane world cost him his life, Agee condemns how the sermons of clergymen will use the scientist's suicide to offer the sort of inhuman, unempathetic moral lesson that Father Jackson offers Rufus and Catherine in A Death in the Family by claiming that the scientist's personal adherence to humanistic values is misplaced:

And clergymen of all denominations, united in agreement perhaps more firmly than ever before, are determined to preach next Sunday (and, if need be, on the following Sunday as well), using this tragic incident by no means unsympathetically yet sternly, and with controlled ridicule, as an object-lesson, and grave admonition, to such in their spiritual charge as find themselves for any reason of pride, or a thirst for undue publicity, liable to the grievous error of exaggerated scrupulousness. "Some things are best left to Jesus Christ," will be the burden of their argument; the text will be, *Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's.* (116)

iv

"Give Him Air" and "Dream Sequence"

In "Dream Sequence," Agee combines the cultural satire of "Dedication Day" with the self-introspection of "1928 Story" in a way which combines the psychological histories of Rufus and Richard, the role of the artist, and his more socially oriented concerns. Indeed, as Mark Doty notes, the critique of mass society in "Dream Sequence" is founded on Agee's psychology in a profound and complex way. Immediately, what links "Dedication Day" to "Dream Sequence" is the mass of unsympathetic onlookers. In "Dedication Day" Agee parodies their hypocrisy, cruelty and ability to shame others with their false values but underlying this is a more personal motive which is clearly a shame defense. As Doty says about "Dream Sequence," "the emphasis on being watched and

the resentment that the bystanders produce in the persona is reminiscent of Agee's notes about his father's funeral" (109). Doty explains that when the family was brought in to view Jay's body that "the writer remembered the mourners's eyes upon the family: 'I was most appalled by and interested in the feeling that everybody was looking at us.'"

Agee's feeling of being exposed here is, of course, integral to any shame reaction, but his discomfort may not simply have been limited to the stares directed against him, but also against his father's powerless corpse. If we remember that Agee, like Rufus, had by this point already had his version of the car accident questioned by the neighborhood children with the implication that his father had died because of his drinking, then we can see Agee's reaction here as his fear about his father's memory being slighted further.

Indeed, in a fragment called "Give Him Air," Agee's dislike of unsympathetic onlookers can be tied to this central psychic event. The narrator reports the reaction of a crowd to a man seriously injured in a car crash, in a condition that Agee's father might have been in if his "ole Tin Lizzie" (ADF 246) had in fact fell on him.⁴ Interestingly, the first signs of the accident that the narrator sees correspond to the only mark on Jay Follet's corpse – the blueblack bruise on his chin. "All I remember is the long blueblack gash made in the asphalt by the dragged axle, which led forty feet right into the hind legs of the mob, and, after I had fought my way through the mob, the man they were looking at" (122). The narrator describes the man's condition in gruesome detail, and the crowd's inability to respond to his injuries appropriately. For instance, the narrator says that "[h]is whole [word omitted: face?] was snatched off as neatly as a wig off a head, and somebody was wiping the blood and glass away, mainly to give him a chance to breathe,

but also apparently in some idiotic hope that he might be able to see; and care if he could.” The crowd, however, is not only unable to do anything effective for the man but also takes a perverse curiosity in the man’s suffering. The narrator describes the man’s “snoring” and each labored breath that “sucked the blood down till the holes were visible and blew out like tobacco juice,” making a “rasping flutter of a rubber farting-whistle.” The crowd and in particular one woman notice this and can barely contain their laughter. Everyone feels a degree of shame and self-reproach about their behavior, but Agee stresses that this laughter stems from their inability to view the man’s dying as a real event. The narrator stresses that the woman laughs only because she makes the comparison to the “farting-whistle:” “I think it was this rather than hysterics because I noticed that as she was breaking down and that horrid farting continued, quite a number of men around her had a very hard time, and a very self-ashamed one, keeping their faces straight.” So keen is the crowd’s curiosity that they will not back away and give him air, even as they “sincerely” say that this is what he needs. In the end, the man’s death is reduced to just another curiosity for a fickle public. The man is carried off in an ambulance “still snoring like a comic-strip, and the newspapers said he never regained consciousness, and died on the way to the hospital” (123).

“Dream Sequence” begins in almost the same fashion as this fragment. In a dream, the narrator, who once again shares Agee’s history, comes upon a crowd who has attacked and killed a man:

by the time he was half a block away, the crowd was releasing like a fist undoing, and the hunched men in shirt sleeves and in undershirts were moving away, and now he could see the man they had attacked, naked

across the sidewalk, and even before he came up to him he knew that he was dead. (262-263)

This crowd, which consists of “The damned scum. The Common Man,” evokes the neighborhood bullies that Rufus encounters with the description “Cowardly bullying bastards” (264) but also the crowd from “Dedication Day” by referring to them in the context of recent world events. The narrator thinks “of Mussolini and his girl, hung up like hogs at the filling station, and the falsely libertarian faces, goggling, he would have loved to have spit in.” But the narrator also immediately recognizes the dead man as John the Baptist and ultimately his father.

That the corpse is John the Baptist is significant because, like the scientist in “Dedication Day,” John stands in opposition to the worldly. And it is John’s rural association that links him to Agee’s father. Indeed, the connections here are appropriate because they evoke what we learn of John in Mark 1:4: “John did baptize in the wilderness, and preach the baptism of repentance for the remission of sin” (882). Yet as Mark Doty notes, the narrator is ambivalent about John’s role; he refers to him as the “old loudmouth” and the “old ranter” but “with affection” (263). For Doty, this “sets up a characteristic Agee duality. It may well be a comment on his own ambivalent responses to the Church, but is more likely made in response to his dead father” (Doty 107). There is a duality here, but Agee’s “ambivalent responses to the Church” are in the forefront too. The narrator has an investment in John’s message and teachings: “His most hopeful belief had been the belief for which John had died, and echoes of that hope and devotion returned to him now, quite hopelessly, as echoes of religious faith still

haunted him” (263). Indeed, the narrator’s commitment to religion remains pronounced, and the dichotomy between faith in religion and faith in the father becomes more pronounced with the narrator exhibiting the same religious self-castigation about his failure to reconcile the two as Richard in The Morning Watch. Once the narrator no longer feels threatened by the crowd, he begins to exhibit the same grandiose forgiveness that Richard does, but his lack of selflessness here incurs the same sort of religious shame that Richard experiences. The narrator says, “He began to feel almost kindly towards their innocence, and suddenly he became aware that in all this while since he had begun to carry him, he had been thinking only of himself and of the others, not of John at all” (266). At the same time, however, as Doty maintains, the idealized father is clearly evoked with his rural background; his message is “from way back. Way back in the country, and in time, and in the human race.”

Shame functions within the dynamics we have seen in the novels, but with the added context of social responsibility. The narrator undergoes shame about his betrayal of his father’s world just as Rufus and Richard do yet sees this from a larger frame of reference. The narrator believes that he has betrayed his Southern roots and that this makes him the object of scorn for the Knoxville citizens. “He was both happy to be home, and wary, for he liked the Southerners who had never gone North but he knew if they knew his mind they would hate him” (262). At the same time, though, the Knoxville of his youth was not the Deep South of his father’s family and since then it has become more a part of the modern world. At one point the narrator observes: “The town had certainly changed. It wasn’t as he remembered it from childhood, nor did he like its

looks as well as his memories of it, nor was it as he remembered it from the middle thirties; he didn't like its looks even as well as that; it was a blend of the two" (268).

The narrator also experiences shame about his status as a "neutral," which for him indicates his separation from his rural background. Unlike John the Baptist, his idealized vision of his father and the scientist in "Dedication Day," the narrator's neutrality marks his failure to oppose modern society, and like Irvine, his failure as an artist. This neutrality is a form of hiding, where the defense against a more archaic form of shame only incurs more of the same. We have seen this phenomenon in most of Agee's characters, and it is what Wurmser refers to as "the two layered nature of shame" (55).

Wurmser explains:

[a]n important phenomenological aspect of shame is that it may affect either the *functions* of self-exposure or looking or merely a particular *content* that is exposed. This happens because exposure, and to a lesser degree perception also, occurs on two logical levels: on the level of the function itself and on the level of its content (55-56)

The narrator feels shame about his neutrality, then, precisely because it is an inappropriate form of exposure, because it does not fit with his ideal self and because it garners such hostility from others. Part of its ineffectiveness, therefore, is that it does not offer the narrator the safety he craves from the potential exposure of the defective self, but also that such safety is illusory in the modern world. He says: "Neutrals can die too, he reminded himself; caught in the crossfire from all the convinced ones; they are despised by all the convinced ones, and by each other, and by themselves; and sooner or later that will happen" (263).

Under the hostile gaze of the crowd and because of his own self-disgust, the narrator attempts to take a qualified stand – acting for the greater good but moving cautiously to avoid a physical conflict with the crowd. He decides to take John’s body to a proper burial site “where you can lie out in the open, but in honor and in state” (264). And yet for all the narrator’s caution, this decision offers him the inner reserve to battle his shamers through visual attack. “He straightened up and looked coolly around into one pair of eyes and then the next and at all of them, and they were all watching him and waiting for what he might do, and he did not lower his eyes or even blink [. . .].” This changes, however, once John begins to take on the characteristics of Agee’s father which is begun with the narrator’s decision to take him to the vacant lot where Rufus and Jay spent their last intimate moments together.

Once John’s transformation into the father begins, the narrator loses some of his self-assuredness and expects greater retaliation from the crowd. Moreover, the narrator’s fear associated with the exposure of his inner defectiveness, which by extension implies the defamation of his father’s character, becomes more overt. But like Rufus, the narrator uses his father’s death, here in the literal form of his corpse, to shield his inner defectiveness which is pointed to by his neutrality. The narrator says, “very likely his neutrality stuck out all over him; possibly even the corpse they had made was a shield behind which he was hiding” (265). This action, like Rufus’s, makes the crowd more amenable to him but because of this reveals that the narrator must also preserve the sanctity of his father’s image for himself: “he continued to look coolly into the eyes which met his, eyes of strangers to the action and to the meaning of what he was doing.

There was clearly no further danger. His concern now was guardianship. To guard this violated man and to guard the meaning of both of them” (266).

Doty offers a number of valuable points about how the narrator’s relationship to the corpse changes as it transforms into his father. For instance, Doty identifies the narrator’s inability to carry his father’s body as a metaphor for the burden of carrying his legacy. The narrator is “filled with shame. He found the body had sagged clumsily during his carelessness, and he readjusted his hold, to carry it more decently.” Very significantly, though, the statement “he was filled with shame” is the same sentence at the end of the passage quoted earlier about his self-chastisement for not thinking of John; because of this, it refers equally to his failure to be appropriately pious, and as Doty claims, “the boy’s feeling ‘deficient’ about holding his [father’s love]” (109). Also relevant is Doty’s interpretation about why the narrator must put the corpse down when they reach the vacant lot. Once they reach the lot, “the spot which expressed Rufus’ father’s nature, the psychic burden, the body, becomes too heavy and has to be put down.”

Doty, as has been discussed earlier, views Agee’s ambivalent stance towards his father as unresolved anger about his death which effect children who lose a parent at an early age. Doty’s argument is sound, insofar as it goes, but misses the full scope of Agee’s shame by limiting it to this context. For Doty, the narrator of “Dream Sequence” “can’t free himself of the responsibility to be the dutiful, promising son – to ‘make up’ for the life his father could not live.” Yet as A Death in the Family shows, the Agee persona’s desire to be “the dutiful, promising son” and his belief that he fails to do so

predates his father's death. This becomes clear in the different, but ultimately complimentary ways in which Doty and I read the scene where the narrator first arrives at the lot.

He looked ahead to see how far they might still go, not far, he could remember, and sure enough he could see it, with a flinching deep within him of tenderness and joy and melancholy and great loneliness, he could see it, the very corner, the same outcrop of wrinkled limestone, like a lump of dirty laundry, the same tree even, and the tree had not even grown an inch. So shabby and sad; it had been waiting there all this time, and it had never changed, not a bit. So patient, and aloofly welcoming. Well. So you came back. His cold heart lifted in love [. . .]. (269)

Doty aptly refers to the tree as “a personification of Rufus's own mixed feelings – of loyalty to his father [. . .]” (110). But Doty's argument that the narrator also experiences “anger at his suddenly leaving him” does not fully capture the depression and numbness which can be viewed as the *understimulated self* in “Well. So you came back.” Moreover, he misses the fact that this may not be the narrator's thoughts as his reading implies but rather an imagined response of the dead father, which suggests the son's feeling of inadequacy and of shameful rejection. Narcissistic injury appears throughout “Dream Sequence” through the narrator's grandiose defiance of the crowd, and alternately by his fantasy of forgiving them, which is so similar to Richard's. Indeed, when this emotion reaches its pinnacle in his mind – where he claims that “this could only happen in Alexandria!” (269) – it is disturbingly similar to Richard's self-crucifixion. What this suggests, then, is that the same dichotomies between the father's masculine independence and the mother's genteel religiosity which are the crux of the

self-arrest in Agee's autobiographical personas is still active even in, and as the motivation behind, the narrator's equation of his father to John the Baptist.

This is what the conclusion of "Dream Sequence" conveys – yet another failed attempt by the Agee persona to reconcile the father's absence and rejection through religion. Like A Death in the Family and The Morning Watch, religious images and symbols are evoked, but in the end they only underscore the degree to which Agee's father is not like John the Baptist, how his opposition to religion cannot enable the narrator to resolve the reality of his death nor the belief that he has failed him in life. As Doty observes, the corpse's head, which detaches from the body and rolls in the gutter "is radically different from the head of John the Baptist, ceremoniously displayed on a platter" (111). Moreover, the description of the head "curling swiftly upon itself like a jellyfish, an armadillo, with a shape roughly like a catcher's mitt" (270) is imagery which is in conflict with more religious symbols.

Indeed, as Doty perceptively points out, the head "is not even the embodiment of the Christian symbol of the fish, but a pretended emblem, 'a jellyfish'" (111). Even more revealing, though, is that when the narrator holds it "as if it were a Grail" (270) – an image which recalls the empty grail in The Morning Watch – it is also "counterfeit: the dreamer is denied truth – as Agee was prevented from learning his own life's riddle by Jay's sudden death – when the 'Chalice' quickly decomposes" (111). But it is the final description of the head itself that offers nothing but perpetual shame for the narrator, which is most disturbing because it suggests not only the decomposition of his father's corpse, but also the damnation of his unbaptized soul.

By its withdrawal into itself it was no longer a head. It was a heavy
 rondure of tough jelly and of hair and beard and the hair sprang wild and
 radiant from his center where, meeting his eye, was one again, so
 disfigured that it was impossible to know whether it was a bloody glaring
 eye, or a mutely roaring mouth. (270)

After this horrible image, the narrator wakes from his dream but cannot fully understand its significance or what the religious imagery may imply. He says “So I suppose I’m Christ, he thought with self-loathing. But which was John?” The narrator’s self-disgust about his identification with Christ, of course, recalls Richard’s dilemma in The Morning Watch. The narrator’s inability to know which role his father plays only underscores the sense that he has “betrayed” him by failing to conform to his example. By remaining committed to the religious practices which his father opposed and which ultimately rejected him through Father Jackson in A Death in the Family, the narrator knows that their separation is irrevocable.

I’ve betrayed my father, he realized. Or myself. Or both of us.
 How?

He thought of his father in his grave, over seven hundred miles away, and how many years. If he could only talk with him. But he knew that even if they could talk, they could never come at it between them, what the betrayal was.

Within these few short lines, Agee captures the central dynamic which informs his autobiographical fiction, and what is particularly revealing is how the same irresolution that occurs at the end of A Death in the Family and in The Morning Watch reoccurs here. The narrator realizes the nature of his relationship to his father and articulates it in a way that Rufus and Richard never can when he recognizes that

All his life, as he had begun during recent years to realize, had been shaped above all else by his father and his father's absence. All his life he had fiercely loathed authority and had as fiercely loved courage and mastery. In every older man, constantly, he had looked for a father, or fought him, or both.

Notes

1 See James Agee, "Victory: The Peace," James Agee: Selected Journalism, ed. Paul Ashdown (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1985) 160-161. In this article originally printed in Time, August 20, 1945, Agee argues that the atomic bomb has brought mankind into a "new age" (161):

With the controlled splitting of the atom, humanity, already profoundly perplexed and disunified, was brought inescapably into a new age in which all thoughts and things were split – and far from controlled. As most men realized, the first atomic bomb was a merely pregnant threat, a merely infinitesimal promise.

Agee's renewed interest in religion is also foreshadowed at the end of this article, but so too is the tension between rationality and conversion that occurs later in "Religion and the Intellectuals": "Man's fate has forever been shaped between the hands of reason and spirit, now in collaboration, again in conflict. Now reason and spirit meet on final ground. If either or anything is to survive, they must find a way to create an indissoluble partnership. (161)

2 Agee makes explicit reference to the threat of nuclear war in "Religion and the Intellectuals." He sees it as a contributing factor for religious conversion:

"The Bomb." Is it possible to overestimate the depth, and the variety of ways, in which this must have disturbed millions of people, of all levels of intellect? Which significances or reactions may be invalid cannot be discussed here; so far as conversion is concerned, the most important thing is the deep turning of the soil. (108)

3 See also Milner. Milner offers a particularly evocative description of the streetcar in "Knoxville: Summer 1915" and suggests how it signals the divisions between the family members: "The streetcar which grinds its way through many of the high moments of the family's life serves as the most dramatic motif of this separated state...Its tracked singularity is noisily announced to the family at moments of painful separation" (110).

4 See also "Run Over (A note, undated, among others handwritten)," The Collected Short Prose of James Agee, ed. Robert Fitzgerald (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1968) 121-122. In this fragment a crowd gathers around a cat that has been struck by a car. There is the same grisly description of the cat's injuries that occurs in "Give Him Air." At the end of this fragment, though, Agee's outrage with the crowd seems mixed with his outrage with death itself: "there was now and then a murmur about putting him out of his misery which no voice was raised against, nobody ventured to interfere with the wonderful processes of nature. (Things like this are happening somewhere on the earth every second.)" (122)

Conclusion

Any critic of Agee's autobiographical fiction faces the daunting task of evaluating the works in the shadow of Agee's enigmatic personality. Since these works are so personal, any interpretation entails an investigation into Agee's history and his response to these events. Moreover, the existence of Agee's draft material and working notes, while providing essential insights into the composition of the novels and what Agee hoped to achieve, complicate the process of a fair critique. The danger is always to place the texts second and the supplementary material first.

A Death in the Family is the work most subject to this critical error. Agee wrote the novel for two purposes. First he hoped to record the traumatic loss of his father's death with the hope that it would have a universal resonance for others. Second, he wished to discover and explore what that loss meant for him in personal, psychological terms. But even as Agee took an interest in Jung and Freud – which to some extent explains his dual motivation – he was never fully aligned with either; instead, he trusted the power of artistic recreation to arrive at some qualified measure of truth. Both motivations permeate the novel. But in the end, as I have maintained throughout this thesis, all of Agee's autobiographical fiction demonstrates that he was more concerned with exploring issues about self-formation and interpersonal relationships beyond the influence of these models.

Indeed, as the preceding discussions about The Morning Watch and the short fiction demonstrate, even as more social concerns such as religious revival, mass culture

and nuclear war occupied his attention, he remained committed to exploring the personal impact these issues had on him in relation to his father's death. Agee's best literary works display this tension. Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, for instance, is not simply a piece of self-reflexive journalism that exposes the hypocritical role of the journalist or a study of the social conditions of three tenant families; rather, as Barson claims, it is an exploration of the "mystery" (134) of the farmers themselves.

Interestingly, the extent to which Agee's social concerns can be located within the autobiographical fiction anticipates the prominence of current interests in shame. Emergence of shame studies is concomitant with the changes from a rural culture to an urban one which has taken place within cities like Agee's Knoxville. "Culture," Kaufman explains "is in the grips of a profound transition, and the breakdown of traditional forms of family and interpersonal relations has further intensified the experience of shame, bringing it into new and wider forms" (4).

At the same time, Agee's autobiographical fiction demonstrates that shame is something inherent in the human condition. In A Death in the Family, even as the extended family and friends surround the two Follet homes offering love and support, most of the characters are forced to negotiate the impact of shame, either their own or that of someone else. And what Agee demonstrates so well is how shame can either be a strictly internal judgement on the self, an external one through interpersonal relations, or a combination of the two. Kohut's model of the bipolar self is so applicable to this novel because characters like Rufus and Ralph demonstrate such grandiose and idealizing behavior. Moreover, the degree to which others can appear as selfobjects to them is

suggested by how inextricably the absence of empathic responses affects their self-concept. Indeed, we will remember that in Kohut's schema others are viewed as not fully independent objects; rather, it is their ability to offer empathic mirroring for the grandiose and idealizing needs which issue from the self which is so vital. As we have seen, Rufus's need for someone to "Tell me who I am," his narcissistic rage at his father's sudden absence and Ralph's infantile behavior with alcohol clearly suggest self-arrest. And it is because of this that Rufus and Ralph are particularly vulnerable to intense shame experiences. As Morrison suggests: "A selfobject unresponsive to the self's needs for mirroring or idealized merger fosters instead the development of narcissistic shame-vulnerability. Thus, shame within the framework of Kohut's writings is neither social nor interpersonal, but a manifestation of deficits of the self" (279)

But, as we have seen, Agee's characters need not be confined to this one theory. The experiences of all the characters we have discussed demonstrate how shame operates in social and interpersonal contexts largely through visual conflict. The social embarrassment and humiliation that Rufus, Richard and other characters experience through situations of interpersonal conflict primarily through comparison and competition demonstrate how shame is not confined to an internal relationship with the self even though the self is directly affected. Indeed, it is a testament to Agee's artistry that his characters point to the complimentary nature of various shame theories, which is so in keeping with the spirit of exchange that exists between the theorists we have explored.

In contrast to such theoretical harmony, however, are the psychological dramas of Agee's autobiographical personas. The adversarial commitments that his personas face between father and mother, independence and religion, masculinity and femininity fracture any hope of a cohesive self. In particular, it is Agee's religious sense and the weighty symbolism he clothes it in that is so problematic. At one moment he appears to offer a potential resolution to his protagonists' sufferings, while in the next shows how religious commitment entails more suffering. As a result, nothing is resolved for Agee's characters and that is their tragedy – and that of their creator.

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