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"Perversion of self-torture" | The role of conscience and guilt in James Agee's "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men"

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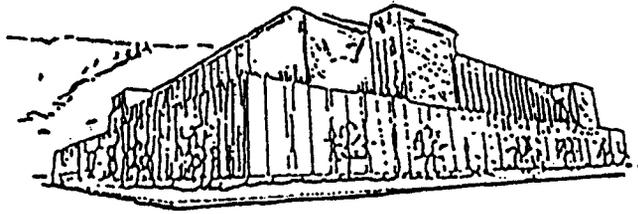
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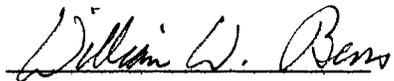
**"A perversion of self-torture":
The role of conscience and guilt in James Agee's
*Let Us Now Praise Famous Men***

by

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B.A. Villanova University, 1991

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"A perversion of self-torture": The role of conscience and guilt in James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*

Chair: William Bevis 

James Agee created the most famous of his "non-fiction" works, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, under the constraints of a troubled conscience, related to his family background and to the odd nature of the project itself. This essay examines the power of Agee's conscience in *Famous Men* as seen through his choice of style as author, his actions as main character, and his thoughts as narrator. The power of his conscience manifests itself throughout the book in his many admissions and exhibitions of guilt and in the way guilt permeates his technique.

I look here at the power of conscience and guilt in the process of Agee's artistic creation, particularly that of *Famous Men*, and raise the following questions: How does Agee's conscience affect his consciousness? How are conscience and guilt positive, constructive, creative forces, or negative, destructive, inhibitive forces for Agee in his process of artistic creation?

This essay examines the roles of guilt and conscience in *Famous Men* in three sections.

- "Agee as author" presents the stylistic decision-making demonstrated by Agee, particularly his use of radical subjectivity and the inclusion of himself in the narrative. This section also looks at some literary influences in relation to Agee's stylistic decisions.
- "Agee as character" presents Agee's actions throughout the narrative in which he demonstrates guilt for having intruded into these people's lives. It examines his behavior while in their private realms and his often self-indulgent actions, which result in greater feelings of guilt.
- "Agee as narrator" explores the role that guilt plays in the narrative voice, focusing primarily on Agee's self-questioning of the book's purpose and his purpose in writing it. The narration reveals his insecurities about the project, his questions about his own qualifications, and his sexual thoughts about the people around him, particularly his attraction to several women, including Emma and Annie Mae.

"A perversion of self-torture": The role of conscience and guilt in
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As he stated in a letter to his surrogate father, Father Flye, the month before he and Walker Evans went to live among three tenant families in Alabama, James Agee held great doubts about his ability to undertake the project set out before him. As in many of his journalistic pursuits, Agee felt a "terrific personal responsibility toward [the] story" (*Letters* 92). However, this assignment differed from all the others. It required living among those he was to write about and becoming a part of their lives. Although he did not hesitate to pursue and accept the assignment from, ironically, *Fortune* Magazine, the weight of the responsibility and the required intrusion into others' lives troubled his conscience. The guilt of his infringement on these people not only repelled him with a sickening intensity but also drove forward his will to create and his desire to capture in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* the lives of this "appallingly damaged group of human beings" (*Famous Men* 7).

Perhaps Agee's feeling of insecurity and doubt as to his ability to capture the true nature of these people in prose was well founded. As a young man in his late 20's, Agee had very little knowledge of the poor in the rural South. Much of the information he included in his study was based on intuition, speculation, and instinct. He centered the writing of this book on the expression of this unfortunate fact and the guilt he felt because of his lack of life experience. He knew next to nothing of those he was to represent, but his ignorance brought with it an open-mindedness that could be next to impossible for an "expert" on sharecropping and tenant farming in the American South. Throughout his account of this experience, Agee expresses his feelings of guilt and fear surrounding the project and his discontent with invading other's privacy. He feels guilty that he has

undertaken this project for "an association of human beings drawn together through need and chance and for profit into a company" (*Famous Men* 7). Agee created the most famous of his "non-fiction" works, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, under the constraints of a troubled conscience. This essay examines the power of Agee's conscience in *Famous Men* as seen through his choice of style as author, his actions as main character, and his thoughts as narrator. The power of his conscience manifests itself throughout the book in his many admissions and exhibitions of guilt and in the way guilt permeates his technique.

The human conscience and its resultant guilt are limits created by society and enforced by individuals upon themselves. Conscience allows society to control the actions of individuals, so as to maintain the safety and happiness of others in that society. Individuals accept and obey the rules and controls imposed on them by society, church, school, and family, to varying degrees, even when not under the gaze of those who impose the rules or limits. Every human being forces some type of control over himself/herself in order to live and function within a given society. The control of conscience can have myriad effects on human actions. I will look here at the power of conscience and guilt in the process of Agee's artistic creation, particularly that of *Famous Men*, and raise the following questions: How does the imposition of the limit of conscience affect his consciousness? Are conscience and guilt a positive, constructive, creative force or a negative, destructive, inhibitive force for Agee in his process of artistic creation and the final content and form of his artistic creation, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*?

By 1936, when Agee went to Alabama, modern thinkers were exploring the creative power of conscience, challenging the traditional notions of conscience and guilt functioning merely as limiting and restricting forces. Shakespeare comments on the restricting power of human conscience in *Richard III*, when the Duke of Clarence's two "murderers" discuss their course of action against him. The second murderer contemplates the limiting power of conscience:

I'll not meddle with it, it makes a man a coward. A man cannot steal, but it accuseth him; a man cannot swear, but it checks him; a man cannot lie with his neighbor's wife, but it detects him. 'Tis a blushing shame-fac'd spirit that mutinies in a man's bosom. It fills a man full of obstacles. It made me once restore a purse of gold that (by chance) I found. It beggars any man that keeps it. It is turn'd out of towns and cities for a dangerous thing, and every man that means to live well endeavors to trust to himself and live without it. (I.iv.134-44)

In the mind of the murderer, conscience is nothing but a negative, limiting force; in the collective mind of civilization, conscience creates the contrived safeguards necessary to keep control in society. In reaction to this traditional idea of conscience as merely a restriction, modern thought on conscience begins to recognize the creative potential in the limits of conscience.

Among these modern thinkers are Nietzsche and Freud, who from the 1870's to the 1930's confronted the subject of the role of conscience in society in their respective studies of human morality and unhappiness in "civilization." While both men see conscience as a potential source of creative power, they see the mechanics of conscience in creativity quite differently. Freud sees artistic creation as a sublimation of aggressive instincts, a transformation, while Nietzsche considers artistic creation a controlling or channeling of aggressive instincts. Agee wrote *Famous Men* in the late 1930's when both of these men and their theories had gained considerable popularity; indeed, Agee's deliberate inclusion of his guilt in the narrative followed, and was validated by, the work of Nietzsche and Freud.

Nietzsche's second essay of *On the Genealogy of Morals* explores the limiting factor of conscience in the human mind and the development of what he calls "bad conscience." He discusses both the control and power of conscience on the aggressive instincts of humans, and sees a creative potential within the constraints of conscience. Nietzsche entertains the possibility of creativity even in the face of intense self-criticism and disbelief in personal power, and he posits that humans create great works of art from within this troubled and painful world of conscience. In taking responsibility for their actions and internalizing guilt, individuals create bad conscience as they face the hostility

and cruelty which they turn on themselves. It is in this way that individuals harness creative instincts and use them toward positive ends.

In *Beyond Good & Evil* Nietzsche accounts for the achievement of "strength and freedom" in every language by "the metrical compulsion of rhyme and rhythm" (100). Freedom is, therefore, paradoxically achieved under the constraints of stringent form and controlled order in the use of language. By confining the use of language in the creation of poetry, for example, artists tend to focus their efforts on the language, its passion and expression. Working within these confines, they experiment with the limits to which they can push language. Nietzsche uses this analogy to better explain the creative force of conscience in peoples' lives. The control of conscience, therefore, like the control of form, focuses individual efforts to stretch creative potential. The artistic process can arise, according to Nietzsche, out of the individual conscience, as Agee demonstrates throughout *Famous Men*.

In *Civilization and Its Discontents* Freud discusses the instinct of aggression in human beings and the happiness involved in the satisfaction of one's desires and needs. He proposes that guilt and conscience develop as the result of individuals being forced to restrain their aggressive instincts. Over time, the force of restraint in a person's life no longer comes solely from outside the individual but soon arises primarily from within, within his/her conscience, or super-ego. Freud considers an individual's internalization of aggressive instincts, during the movement toward civilization, to be a destructive force in that human mind. He posits that the only outlet for creativity when under the constraints of conscience is through a sublimation of aggressive instincts, which thereby overcomes the power of conscience. Sublimation comes in the form of sports, artistic creation, and war, among others. Through organized, human activities, individuals can move, in a way, beyond the need for aggression against one another by substituting less destructive activities. Agee comments on the possibility of instinct sublimation in a 1938 letter to Father Flye when he states that every young man "capitulates all the same in madness or in

death; or just very occasionally through craft, talent or cruelty, bursts the trap: but if so, its marks are on him, forever" (106).

The human conscience, according to Freud, varies in strength among individuals and even according to situations in life. Unfortunate occurrences and troublesome situations can have a profound effect upon the activity of the conscience:

...ill-luck--that is, external frustration--so greatly enhances the power of the conscience in the super-ego. As long as things go well with a man, his conscience is lenient and lets the ego do all sorts of things; but when misfortune befalls him, he searches his soul, acknowledges his sinfulness, heightens the demands of conscience, imposes abstinences on himself and punishes himself with penances (87).

Agee went through just this pattern of self-torture as a child and adolescent. Soon after his father's death in a car accident, he began "to act aggressively," regularly getting in fights at school. It took his mother several years to realize that his father's death "had unleashed a torrent of guilt in the boy, who held himself responsible for the tragedy in some mysterious way" (Bergreen 23). The young Agee acted out this guilt in many ways, often questioning his mother's pious faith and the ways of God, as he portrays Rufus in *A Death in the Family* asking his mother, "Why does God let us do bad things?" (57). Agee carried his intense unhappiness and "bad conscience" into his adolescent and adult years. He permitted himself to be controlled throughout his life by what he called a "giant set of guilt reflexes" (Bergreen 29). At times Agee seemed to create *Famous Men* under the constraints of his conscience, consistent with the ideas of Nietzsche, and at other times he seemed to sublimate his aggressive instincts and avoid the power of his conscience, consistent with Freud. In both ways he demonstrated throughout the narrative, implicitly and explicitly, the powerful role played by his conscience in his writing of the book.

James Agee's upbringing at the hands of an extremely religious mother endowed him with an overactive conscience, capable of both driving his creative instincts and bringing them to an abrupt and uninspired halt. He suffered many years of painful writer's

block, much of which was due to intense self-criticism and alcoholism. However, this writing project in the years after his excursion to Alabama inspired him and helped him overcome these otherwise crippling deficiencies, at least temporarily. He worked within the limits of his troubled conscience and used that conscience to create what he labeled a "paradox" (more accurately, an oxymoron), that being "honest journalism" (*Famous Men* 7).

The element of guilt present in all of Agee's work, even the latest fiction, exemplifies his fear of change and his continual obsession throughout his life with his father's death. This guilt brought about creative impotence for long periods of his life, consistent with the theories of some other modern thinkers who see no place for guilt in artistic creation. For instance, Audre Lorde, the contemporary feminist thinker, describes guilt as causing powerlessness in the minds of even strong-willed people: "guilt is just another name for impotence, for defensiveness destructive of communication; it becomes a device to protect ignorance and the continuation of things the way they are, the ultimate protection for changelessness" (130). Her theory makes a strong challenge to the viability of the power of conscience in Agee's book, but she overlooks the creative potential that both Nietzsche and Freud see in the human conscience. For, when Agee found the necessary impetus to write, much of his power stemmed from the difficulties surrounding his guilt--for his father's death, his eccentric and excessive behavior, and his failed relationship with his mother.

Although it works its way into all of Agee's work, guilt plays its most prominent fictional role in his posthumous novel, *A Death in the Family*. Rather than express a pervading sense of guilt as in *Famous Men*, Agee here transfers his conscience to fictional characters. Conscience takes center stage in this novel, through the thoughts and actions of Rufus, Agee's fictional, autobiographical character. How autobiographical a character Rufus is remains subject to interpretation, but Laurence Bergreen, in his 1984 biography of Agee, suggests that the novel is "actually a memoir in its fidelity to fact" (17). Rufus is

Agee's middle name, and he signed many of his letters to Father Flye with it. In the novel Rufus's father dies in a sudden automobile accident, leaving a wife and two young children. His son, Rufus, feels tremendous guilt and shame in relation to the incident, always wishing he could have done things differently or better. Further, he develops a conscious awareness that his father can now see all of his actions and that no thought is hidden from him. Rufus's thoughts continually reflect his guilt and the brutal awareness of his father's watching soul.

He felt so uneasy, deep inside his stomach, that he could not think about it any more. He wished he hadn't done it... But if his father's soul was around, always, watching over them, then he knew. And that was worst of anything because there was no way to hide from a soul, and no way to talk to it, either. He just knows... (280)

Agee carried this feeling of constant surveillance into his adult life. His conscience predictably took over the role of watchdog. This feeling of being watched exists throughout *Famous Men* but particularly when Agee is left alone in the Gudger's house.

The issues of religion and the existence of God and their roles in human conscience play a crucial part in both the narrative and the psychological undertones of *A Death in the Family*. Rufus's father, Jay, is a non-believer married to a strict Catholic woman. Jay's father-in-law, strangely enough, is also an atheist. Now that his father is dead, Rufus is at the mercy of his mother's upbringing. His previous exposure to Catholic doctrine will be intensified. Rufus, however, has no need for intensification; he already suffers under the strong hand of self-imposed restrictions. The rest of the family is in large part religious, and there are constant questions about the fate of Jay's soul now that he is departed. The parish priest refuses to perform a Catholic funeral for Jay, even though his wife, Mary, is an active member of the church. Agee stresses the hypocrisy of this judgment and the blind faith of his mother as it intensifies through this entire ordeal. Agee includes a vibrancy and kindness in the two atheist characters that appear virtually nonexistent in the others. This

book is an outlet for Agee to stress his disdain for his hypocritical and guilt-ridden orthodox upbringing.

Agee's conscience plays a significant role in the construction of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and forms much of the book's content. He demonstrates a unique ability to incorporate into the actual text the guilt that drove much of its writing. He feels guilt in his relationships with many of the individuals he encounters, particularly the families and the other "poor" residents in the area. Women make him feel guilty; black people make him feel guilty; the poor make him feel guilty. Even the sight of Walker Evans' cameras draws out his profound sense of guilt: "When they saw the amount of equipment stowed in the back of our car, they showed that they felt they had been taken advantage of, but said nothing of it" (25). Agee's self-indulgence and subjectivity in decision-making in style (as author), in action (as character), and in thought (as narrator) play major roles in the book. As author of the book, Agee makes radical stylistic decisions that shape the book, creating a work with which he is not completely comfortable. He is uncomfortable with the possibility of misrepresenting these people, their thoughts, their feelings, and their way of life. Agee also assumes the role of main character, and it is in this role that he demands objective consideration. He demonstrates through his actions that he is driven by the power of his overactive conscience. Agee the narrator, however, presents the source of his guilt and articulates the workings of his conscience. He encounters guilt and reasons for his guilt in every direction he looks, commenting more on his involvement in the story than the story itself.

This essay examines the roles of guilt and conscience in *Famous Men* in three sections. "Agee as author" presents the stylistic decision-making demonstrated by Agee, particularly his use of radical subjectivity and the inclusion of himself in the narrative. This section also looks at some literary influences in relation to Agee's stylistic decisions. The next section, "Agee as character," presents Agee's actions throughout the narrative in

which he demonstrates guilt for having intruded into these people's lives. It examines his behavior while in their private realms and his often self-indulgent actions, which result in greater feelings of guilt. "Agee as narrator" explores the role that guilt plays in the narrative voice, focusing primarily on Agee's self-questioning of the book's purpose and his purpose in writing it. The narration reveals his insecurities about the project, his questions about his own qualifications, and his sexual thoughts about the people around him, particularly his attraction to several women, including Emma and Annie Mae.

Agee as Author

Agee is able to take his greatest risks while hiding behind his guise as author. He rarely uses direct narrative or straightforward description to make a statement about his subjects. Although he presents the book as non-fiction, his continual absorption in personal interpretation and subjective impression necessitates at times a countervailing, radically objective treatment of the subject. In the text Agee experiments with pushing the limits of radical subjectivity, popular among the Modernist writers of his time and exemplified by his fellow Southerner William Faulkner, in *The Sound and the Fury*. While he concentrates on presenting a subjective "truth" throughout the book and much of his biographical information proves essential to any analysis of *Famous Men*, too much comparison to his life could also lead one astray from the documentary actualities of the text.

Consistent with the Modernist theory of radical subjectivity, in which the only truth is that which is perceived through the senses of the observer, readers see these three families, the Gudgers, Ricketts, and Woods, through the senses of James Agee. The book affords no unbiased accounts of the tenant families, because according to Modern theory, there is no unbiased account. Journalism, therefore, is merely personal interpretation. Agee provides very little objective evidence, such as exact transcriptions of conversations between people or interpretations presented by other people. Only Walker Evans'

photographs provide another point of view, but even they are not the viewpoint of the people the two men have come to study. Agee and Evans, however, in all their subjectivity, present a picture that is, arguably, fair and open to actuality. In Agee's five most objective sections, which make up the bulk of "Part Two: Some Findings and Comments," he presents a clear picture of these people's homes, lives, and financial situations. Even in his most subjective interpretations, which include descriptions of the women and his sexual attraction to them, he further increases our understanding of them by portraying the sensuousness of their open lives even in such intense poverty.

Lying behind much of his guilt is Agee, in his role as author, struggling to present his closest approximation to "honest journalism." He involves himself in a desperate struggle to find the truth, not only about these people and their situation but also about himself and his needs and desires. His desire for unquestionable truth can have no other result than the inevitable, i.e. to cause him pain. Coming short at any time weighs heavily on his conscience, and therefore he is destined for personal failure by the nature of the inexact science he uses to portray his truth. Agee sees his realistic, "objective" descriptions of the homes and people, their clothes and food, indeed he sees literary description itself, as inadequate for presenting the lives of real people. "Still in the thrall of I.A. Richards, he wanted to take words a step further than description; he wanted them to embody the things they described--or to give the illusion of embodiment" (Bergreen 174). He wants to present to his readers "fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and excrement" to supplement Evans' photographs, which he sees as the greatest depiction of truth coming from their trip. But, the most appropriate and truthful representation of these people would not be a representation at all; it would be "a piece of the body torn out by the roots," a piece of sharecropper eucharist (*Famous Men* 13). So, when he realizes his inability to do this, to present reality, his intense guilt takes over, and he punishes himself for not arriving at the truth.

Also driving his feelings of guilt are Agee's own personal biases, assumptions, and preconceptions as they influence the outcome of the book and his portrayal of those involved. Agee was all too aware that he was as much a part of this project as any of the people he lived with and observed. The reality presented in the book, therefore, is only as he sees, hears, smells, feels, and perceives it. In the case of George Gudger, he states:

George Gudger is a man, et cetera. But obviously, in the effort to tell of him (by example) as truthfully as I can, I am limited. I know him only so far as I know him, and only in those terms in which I know him; and all of that depends as fully on who I am as on who he is (239).

In his struggle to find the right niche for himself in the narrative, Agee decides to include himself as the central character that he is. Although this may not be the typical journalistic solution and may be more of an artistic move, including himself forms the closest approximation to reality. He is not merely an unbiased observer, but rather, as Linda Wagner-Martin labels him, "the well-placed voyeuristic narrator, James Agee" (45). The narration and inclusion of detail parallels his field of vision, his interpretation of reality.

However, for all his inadequacies and shortcomings, Agee, in the midst of his hundreds of pages of personal musings, presents a solid account of sharecropping, more vivid and even possibly more truthful than had been presented by previous writers on this subject. Agee paints a picture of love, happiness, and tight family bonding in a world of financial subjection, societal disjunction, and unhappiness. Although these families suffer deplorable living conditions and find themselves caught in a never-ending pattern of debt, "under the lion's paw" of unfeeling landlords, they find solace and love in their families. This is particularly true of the Gudger family. He portrays different levels of subjection and a clear hierarchy in the tenant farming situation with the landlord holding power over the tenant farmer, or worse yet, sharecropper, who subsequently maintains unquestionable power over his wife and children. Black people are relegated to a place below all others. The homes are simple yet functional, and the dietary needs of the families appear to be met. The work of the sharecroppers is only rewarded to the degree that they may continue to

survive. The landlord maintains sufficient control so that the tenant or sharecropper may never gain enough capital to buy his own land and compete with the landlord. By denying the tenant the right to work outside the farm during the winter and extending a line of credit to feed the family, the landlord keeps his sharecroppers in a continual state of dependence.

At the end of *Famous Men*, Agee mentions several writers to refer to for further "details." Among those writers is the early twentieth century Georgia writer, Erskine Caldwell, who in his novel *Tobacco Road* portrays Southern sharecroppers in a shockingly burlesque manner. Caldwell's characters, although vividly portrayed, are grotesquely deformed physically, mentally, and morally. While Caldwell paints a colorful picture of the suffering in the lives of sharecroppers, Agee, using his combination of non-fictional techniques and narrative description, provides a much more realistic account. Additionally, Agee's work in *Famous Men* helps bring greater actuality to Caldwell's fiction and fills in many gaps about the daily existence of sharecroppers. Agee, however, sees Caldwell's fiction as a complement to his portrayal of these sharecropper families in Alabama. He is in no way attempting to represent all sharecroppers or tenant farmers in the South. He focuses on these few families with no hopes of achieving a universal portrait of this way of life and its problems.

In his portrayal of these families, Agee takes some radical liberties with style and shows his tendency toward self-indulgence. The most profound and common self-indulgence demonstrated in the text is not by Agee as character or narrator but in the various stylistic choices made by Agee as author. The book's originality arises from a combination of semi-journalistic subject matter and a high Modernist artistic style, in the tradition of Joyce, Faulkner, and Dos Passos. While he insists on reporting only the facts surrounding his experiences in Alabama and doing so without regard to art, Agee indulges himself far beyond mere journalism in using a flowing, poetic prose style. His narcissistic tendencies and self-reflexive overindulgence come across when he looks at himself for long periods of time, concentrating on his own actions and expressions rather than on those of

the people around him. Several passages drift off into "stream of consciousness" musings on the nature and brutality of life in a tenant farming situation. They stray far from the facts of these lives upon which he is reporting, but this proves to be the strength of the book. His non-journalistic, non-linear, disjunctive style brings a refreshing originality to the genre of journalistic essays. He recognizes that he is as important in this portrait as those who live here, because he influences their decisions and actions just by being different, being present, and being an observer. They are aware they are being watched and act differently because of it, and Agee knows that his presence must be factored into the situation.

Victor Kramer argues that Agee includes himself in the text primarily as an act of identification, a dual identification: "Agee wants to suggest his identification with these farmers; yet he also (at least unconsciously) wants to set up an identification between himself and the other 'intellectuals' who would read his text" (124). It is his impressions of the people that come across in the book, and he makes no excuse for presenting the material in that way. It appears that only by presenting his need for identification with these sharecroppers and the process of gaining that identification could he also make that identification possible for his readers. He knew the difficulty of this task but made the effort anyway to accomplish what he could of it, even in the midst of impending failure. Agee's impressions, therefore, create "the necessary framework" of the book, and "that presence is what finally makes this image of tenant farming accurate, and of lasting value" (Kramer 125).

The style of Agee's *Famous Men* demonstrates the profound influence exerted on him by the prominent Modernist writers of his age, many of whom he wished to emulate. He looked for inspiration not only among international Modernists including James Joyce and Franz Kafka, but he was also greatly indebted to the great southern novelists of his age, particularly William Faulkner and Thomas Wolfe. Agee mentions and credits all of these writers in the course of his book, beginning his "Notes and Appendices" with

suggestions for the reader, "Detail of gesture, landscape, costume, air, action, mystery, and incident throughout the writings of William Faulkner" and "Many passages in Mark Twain, Thomas Wolfe, and Erskine Caldwell" (449). In the book's preamble Agee lists those passionate human beings who have brought "fury" to the world. He does not want himself or the subjects of his book to be "castrated" by "official acceptance" as he believes these men have been: "The deadliest blow the enemy of the human soul can strike is to do fury honor. Swift, Blake, Beethoven, Christ, Joyce, Kafka, name me a one who has not been thus castrated" (15). Agee almost succeeds in castrating himself through the obsessive self-control in his actions, but these influences provide him with a sufficient background in content, form, and style to build the power he needs to create.

Published in 1929, seven years before Agee went to Alabama, Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* had a clear effect on Agee. Agee was certainly aware of the work's modernist technique and was influenced at least unconsciously by its innovative style. Agee's stylistic decisions reflect the wave of Modernist fervor that filled the international intelligentsia in the 1930's. Agee must have felt a further identification with and possibly even indebtedness to Faulkner because he was a fellow "Southerner." C. Vann Woodward comments on the influence of community, ancestry, and history on the conscience of "Southern novelists." He states in *The Burden of Southern History* that a

deeply embedded trait of the Southern novelists that has strong appeal to the historian is their way of treating man not as an individual alone with his conscience or his God, ...but as an inextricable part of a living history and community, attached and determined in a thousand ways by other wills and destinies of people he has only heard about (Woodward 37).

This was certainly true of both authors. Agee demonstrates this tendency in *A Death in the Family*. Faulkner maintained a fragile tie to an illusion of Southern gentility throughout his life. His obsession with the history of his family and community as well as his indebtedness to the reputation of his family and his southern heritage determined the content of most of his fiction.

Among numerous narrative styles in his many novels, Faulkner used the Modernist technique of achieving truthful narration through radical subjectivity. The first three sections of *The Sound and the Fury* are narrated by different members of the Compson family, each giving his/her single perspective. In the opening section, "April Seventh 1928," Benjy, the "idiot" son, acts as narrator, presenting all events from his perspective. Benjy takes all events and people at face value. He does not cast judgment on others or question the reason or existence of things. Although Agee, as narrator and character, continually demonstrates his biases toward people and events in the narrative, the style of *Famous Men* parallels the radical subjectivity of Benjy's narrative. However, Faulkner's style, although similar to Agee's, appears less self-indulgent, primarily because of his control of the direction and focus in the narrative. Benjy makes no move toward objectification. Faulkner maintains the narrator's focus and keeps control of his perspective at all times. However, he allows his characters to perform their own self-indulgent actions and to act out their guilt, not unlike James Agee, the character in *Famous Men*.

Agee as Character

Many of James Agee's actions as character are controlled by his conscience. He makes no effort to portray himself in the book as a character free of such limits. He often acts out his guilt without a thought as to why and, at other times, deliberates over its reasons and consequences. However, his intrusion into the lives of these families appears to be always on his mind and continually influencing his behavior. From Agee's account, both he and Evans appear much more comfortable interacting with the white people they encounter than they do with the black people. Although Agee understands the conditions of subjection suffered by blacks in rural Alabama at this time, he can only see their existence from his new, "Yankee" perspective. Each encounter with black people proves to be uncomfortable because he has difficulty accepting their fear of his white skin. He wants

different reactions out of them than will be possible and feels guilt in each meeting with them. Overly aware of the imposition he makes on those around him, Agee is unable to relax and deal with the situation as it is, one of subjection and inequality. He wants to treat each of them as an equal but overlooks the fear and loathing that he causes, making each situation a disappointment and a "perversion of self-torture."

Just as he feels guilt in relation to his father's death, Agee, as character in *Famous Men*, allows situations that are completely out of his control to weigh on his conscience with an overwhelming feeling of responsibility. At the conclusion of the section titled "Late Sunday Morning," the landlord of the white sharecroppers detains several black men on their way to church so that they might sing for Agee and Evans, "to show us what nigger music is like." The two visitors insist, "we had done all we felt we were able to spare them and ourselves this summons," but the landlord exercises his power. After the singing and the release of the black men, Agee describes his intense feeling of guilt:

Meanwhile, and during all this singing, I had been sick in the knowledge that they felt they were here at our demand, mine and Walker's, and that I could communicate nothing otherwise; and now, in a perversion of self-torture, I played my part through. I gave their leader fifty cents, trying at the same time, through my eyes, to communicate much more, and said I was sorry we had held them up and that I hoped they would not be late; and he thanked me for them in a dead voice, not looking me in the eye, and they went away, putting their white hats on their heads as they walked into the sunlight (31).

Agee's active conscience heightens his awareness of the situation, making him much more perceptive as to the minute details of the situation--the man's "dead voice" and his inability to look Agee "in the eye." The image of these singers and Agee's deplorable action, perpetuating the problem of condescension and subjection faced by these people, become imbedded in his consciousness.

However, amidst this guilt and its resultant action, Agee demonstrates the power of his creative energy that arises from feeling intense guilt. His description of these men and

their music is not to be surpassed in vitality throughout the book. He describes the music as "jagged, tortured, stony, accented as if by hammers and cold-chisels, full of a nearly paralyzing vitality and iteration of rhythm, the harmonies constantly splitting the nerves." The music then "tore itself like a dance of sped plants out of three young men who stood sunk to their throats in land" (29). Under the control of these guilty feelings, Agee achieves his highest level of perception and creative power.

A few pages later, Agee and Evans find themselves in another embarrassing predicament with a black couple who walk by while they are attempting to get into (or break into?) a black church in order to photograph it. Agee's bad conscience gets the best of him again. He is stung with guilty feelings and runs after the couple to ask them about the church. After inadvertently scaring them by running up from behind, he becomes overly apologetic and is struck by "the nakedness and depth and meaning of their fear, and of [his] horror and pity and self-hatred" (42). His conscience appears to function instinctually and uncontrollably.

It is interesting to compare Agee's reaction in dealing with black people with that of Quentin Compson, the son of a Southern landowner in *The Sound and the Fury*. While Agee acts out of guilt, Quentin, who is also a guilty fellow, remains open and honest in his thoughts and relations with the black people around him in Boston. His thoughts and attitudes are curiously radical for his time and place, i.e. "a nigger is not a person so much as a form of behavior." This is not a title given to someone by birth or race but rather by behavior. Quentin comes to his conclusion concerning blacks through a strangely open mind. He decides "that the best way to take all people, black or white, is to take them for what they think they are" (55). Agee is unable to see beyond his conception of black people to consider their point of view and their understanding of themselves and the present situation. Quentin tries to have a less provincial attitude toward black people now that he is in Boston, "to think of them as colored people not niggers," and he gets to practice in his relationship with the Deacon. Although friendly with the Deacon, Quentin is tremendously

condescending. He gives the Deacon a command, showing no respect for him. The Deacon, however, neither demands nor expects respect. The man plays his part and complies, asking only "You ain't playing a joke on the old nigger, is you?" (63).

Quentin's understanding of the behavior of people and how they see themselves helps him maintain more natural interactions, even while being self-conscious of his actions and expressions.

To a lesser extent than Agee in *Famous Men*, Quentin is a semi-autobiographical character who grapples with his conscience and attempts to deal with intense feelings of guilt. Quentin Compson is greatly influenced by his family and his past and other elements which lie completely beyond his control. Curiously distraught by what he perceives as a weak father, Quentin shares many of Agee's psychological weaknesses which relate to his lack of a father. Quentin's tumultuous mind, darting from time to time and place to place, confronting some of the most difficult experiences of his life, still manages to maintain some partial, conscious awareness of his present situation. His past life and his family haunt him with blinding intensity. Quentin is the eldest son in the family of a declining white landowner and has taken the weight of his family on his shoulders. They have sold off the family pasture, loved by his brother Benjy, to send Quentin to Harvard. He cannot face this responsibility and sees no easy way to escape the pain he feels because of it. Guilt controls his mind: "Let us sell Benjy's pasture so that Quentin may go to Harvard" and "I have sold Benjy's pasture" (110). The other primary obsession in his thoughts is an imagined and fantastical incestuous relationship with his sister, Caddy, and the shame surrounding this "forbidden love." Her recent marriage and his consequent loss of her fills him with such intense pain that he constantly dreams of killing her fiancé, Dalton Ames.

Quentin's conscience works much like Agee's in *Famous Men*. He feels guilt for situations and problems which lie beyond his control. Just as Agee feels immediate guilt when left alone in the Gudger's house, Quentin feels guilt for his family's action of selling Benjy's pasture. The decision to sell their land was not made by him. It was a move on

the part of his father to keep alive the family's hope and maintain their relative level of gentility. His strongest guilt, however, arises from imagined mistakes. Like Agee, who fantasizes about forbidden love affairs, such as that with Emma, Quentin indulges his fantasy with his sister Caddy. Quentin's thoughts are mired in guilt, and he takes all matters of conscience to their greatest extreme. His actions differ from Agee's in their extremity and their culmination: suicide.

Agee confronts other situations in which his "guilt reflexes" function seemingly without his control. When left alone in the Gudger home, Agee remembers an experience of being left alone in his "grandfather's large unsentined home" as a child. He glided throughout the house in "cold serpent restiveness," examining every detail of the house, even taking off all his clothes and laying "along the cold counterpanes of every bed," planting his "obscenities in the cold hearts of every mirror" (136-7). The imagery and the feelings related to this childhood incident suggest a type of "criminal" activity for which he feels "shame." Although he does not now feel or display the "open sexual desire" that came about in his grandfather's home, Agee, even in his present innocence, experiences "the keen guilt at the heart" that accompanies this situation of being alone in someone else's home. He repeats "the cold reptilian fury of the terror of lone desire" that once gripped him, but without the restiveness and despair. However, he maintains the feeling of stealth, and this time adds the shame of "being at work."

As the deified Gudger family, "pressed out of the hot earth gentle explosions of gold," "diminish" down the path from their home, leaving Agee alone, they walk as victims of some horrible deed being performed against them, "in leisured enfilade," as if they will soon be taken advantage of. Annie Mae Gudger remains frighteningly vulnerable with her children, wearing "the flowerlike beauty of the sunbonnet in which she is ashamed to appear" before Agee and Evans (135). Agee intrudes, with warlike maneuvers, on her home. He assumes the role of "cold-laboring spy," who calculates the time alone he will be granted and the "safe warning" he will get of their return as they come back over the hill.

As he moves beyond what they would trust him to do if they were at home, he touches their "most delicate wounds," their "most dedicated objects" (136). Although they have generously opened their home, their wounds, to him, Agee feels shame and guilt, particularly in seeing beauty in their pain. He is aware that he is overstepping his boundaries as a guest in their home, but rather than allowing his conscience to control him, he decides to invade and deal with his guilt later. He is "being made witness to matters no human being may see" (136). His aim is to not "dishonor" the house, which is a certain admission that he holds the honor of their home in his hands. He faces the empty house, which faces him "silent and undefended in the sun," as a powerless being soon to be invaded and defiled. He portrays this house as the "garment" worn by the Gudger family to protect them "against the hostilities of heaven," and he will now reveal the secrets that lie underneath. At this point Agee is not under the gaze of the family. He has complete freedom to look as he pleases, but he cannot escape the gaze of his conscience. He can only see wrongdoing in his behavior and thereby metaphorically demonizes himself.

Linda Wagner-Martin makes what seems to be an accurate assertion concerning Agee in *Famous Men* when she states that his intrusive movement from the public to the private sphere of life in the Gudger home is the reason for his guilt. It seems likely that the Gudger family considers any area inside of their home part of the private sphere and its surroundings the public sphere. Her argument becomes questionable when she discusses Agee's three "On the Porch" sections and challenges his assertion of the porch as part of the public sphere as false. She believes that the intimate atmosphere of the front porch in the American South makes it a part of the private sphere, to which they remain intruders. However, the attitude and behavior of the Gudger family throughout the narrative demonstrate quite the opposite as they open every room but the bedroom to these men. They invite Agee and Evans in to be a part of their lives and welcome them into their home and onto their porch. If the porch is an element of the private sphere from which they are not welcome, then so are the surrounding fields and the road leading into their hidden

existence. The porch becomes, therefore, a private place open to these two men. However, it is Agee and Evans, the men, not Agee and Evans, the journalists, whom they invite into their "private" sphere. The Gudgers cannot conceive of the exposure they will receive by inviting these men into their lives.

What then is the line between the public and private spheres of existence in the Gudger home? At what time and in what place is Agee's guilt justified? Although welcomed into the house by the family, Agee understands his sphere to be the porch and its environs. His feeling of intrusion comes from entering the house. It arises when the family is home but especially when they are away and leave him alone in the house. This is, as described earlier, when Agee feels the sharpest pangs of guilt but intrudes anyway. The porch, however, is neutral ground in the mind of Agee and is where he makes himself comfortable and less subject to the guilt associated with intrusion of their home and private existence. He sees the invasion of their private sphere as a necessary evil in his creative process; this provides the most profound basis for the guilt which drives the later writing of this account in the fiery "Inductions" section of the book (380). Robert MacLean, in his 1981 article "Narcissus and the Voyeur," posits a similar reason for Agee's guilt in this book and in all of his work, that being his voyeuristic tendencies. These tendencies manifest themselves when he invades the private sphere of life, particularly in the Gudger home. Rather than hiding himself away in typical voyeuristic fashion to perform his gazing, Agee stares and imagines while sitting with the people, right in front of them, and then later confesses his sin of spying. By acting comfortable and becoming, as Emma says, "like you was our own people and had always lived here with us," Agee can infiltrate the private sphere and observe from within. Voyeurism is inherent in Agee's style of journalism.

Occasionally, Agee's voyeurism leads to self-indulgent thoughts about these people, particularly the women, and sometimes his thoughts move beyond his mind, and he acts upon them. In the "Inductions" section, he breaks his introduction to the Gudger

home into two sections, titled "Introit" and "Second Introit." Agee orchestrates these pseudo-ecclesiastical experiences in which he becomes acquainted with this "holy family" of Alabama tenant farming. He controls the situations to fulfill his own agenda and desires concerning the Gudger family and goes so far as to get his car stuck (purposefully?) so that he may spend more time with them. After leaving their home in the first "Introit," Agee realizes that he really wishes to be back at the Gudger home, and he drives recklessly on a muddy road, drastically increasing his chances of getting stuck. He succeeds in doing so and then returns to their house just after they have all gone to bed. This act, which inconveniences the family and creates a situation in which Annie Mae has to get up and cook a meal for him, demonstrates Agee's impulsive self-indulgence that creates many of the most intriguing and creative passages in the book at the cost, or sacrifice, of other people.

Without harm to anyone else, Agee partakes in a self-indulgent experience with Louise, the ten year old daughter of George and Annie Mae Gudger. Soon after he first arrives at their house, he finds that she stares at him with an unnerving persistency. He overcomes his initial discomfort and arousal ("a sort of beating and ticklish vacuum at the solar plexus"(400)) and then begins to stare back into her eyes with an equally feverish intensity. After a few initial grins from Agee, neither of them smile but rather stare "coldly" and "expressionlessly" until she finally looks away. Agee continues to stare at her until she looks again. It is at this point he feels shame and guilt and asks her soundlessly with his eyes, "if I have caused you any harm in this, if I have started within you any harmful change, if I have so much as reached out to touch you in any way you should not be touched, forgive me if you can" (401). He seems uncertain as to whether he has overstepped his bounds and wishes for reassurance that he has not.

Agee as Narrator

A vast majority of *Famous Men* follows Agee's thoughts and musings as narrator. He includes not only many of his thoughts during his time in Alabama but also the time he spent writing the book after his return to New York. Most of these latter thoughts, however, are hidden as thoughts while among the sharecroppers in Alabama. It is in this role that Agee can articulate his guilt and show the reader the workings of his conscience. Most of his guilty feelings are not acted out, but rather remain the not-so-private secrets of Agee and the reader. The narration reveals his insecurities about the project, his questions about his own qualifications, and his sexual thoughts about the people around him. He maintains intense feelings of guilt about all of these and states these feelings in both direct and indirect ways. In these instances he does not act upon his feelings; he only allows them to direct his thoughts, trying to maintain an unaffected outward appearance.

A late section of the book entitled "Inductions" recounts Agee's first meetings with the Ricketts, Woods, and Gudgers. It details the families coming to Rickett's house to be photographed by Evans and Agee's subsequent first night at the Gudger house, his "introit" into their lives. The entire section centers around Agee's guilt in relation to these families and his expression of it. Much of this appears as a confession, more to relieve his conscience than to explain his actions or recount the experience. At the start of this section, Agee and Evans return home with Fred Ricketts to see his farm and family. Agee is "ashamed" that they are keeping the family from their dinner for an hour. This photo shoot, however, is an event for the family, an excitement they might have desired for a long time. Agee cannot see this excitement; he sees only the "terror" and "dread" in the eyes and actions of Mrs. Ricketts (Sadie) as she washes the faces of her children with rainwater and then clutches her dress while Evans takes pictures. He concentrates on her fear and the hatred he imagines she has for them because of their intrusion into the lives of her family. He attempts to see Evans' camera through her eyes:

...and Walker setting up the terrible structure of the tripod crested by the black square heavy head, dangerous as that of a hunchback, of the camera; stooping beneath cloak and cloud of wicked cloth, and twisting buttons; a witchcraft preparing, colder than keenest ice, and incalculably cruel (364)

While once again demonizing himself, and particularly Evans, Agee expresses his love for Mrs. Ricketts, "my dear, my love, my little crazy, terrified child" (364). The inappropriateness of addressing a forty-nine year old woman with seven children in such a demeaning manner seems inconsistent and even strange in the midst of his poetic confession of invasion and his accompanying feelings of guilt. He continues to imagine her thoughts and her possible reply to his plea that "we are your friends." He speculates that her reply to this statement might be that "if you are our friend, lift this weight and piercing from us, from my children" (365). Agee the narrator actually feels this guilt, but he rarely acts on it; he continues to act his part as spy, infiltrator, and voyeur. The guilt is something he can deal with later, for he has work to do at the moment.

Agee oddly follows this beautifully poetic passage with one of his many statements disparaging art and his stated aim not to "use these lives of yours for 'Art'." His tribute to Mrs. Ricketts comes amidst a beautiful display of alliteration and complicated metrical patterns, as seen in the "cloak and cloud of wicked cloth" and "colder than keenest ice, and incalculably cruel" of the long quote in the previous paragraph. It is as if he feels as though he must justify his previous statements or convince the reader that he/she has read something different than they actually have. Although the basic facts he presents may be as close to truth as he can remember, his observations and interpretation are consistently subjective. It appears uncertain whether he justifies his personal interpretation or the artistic form he uses.

As both artist and journalist, Agee proves to be most aware and creative in situations that cause him intense guilt and "self-torture," but he also finds inspiration at times when he permits himself to move beyond his bad conscience and live temporarily free of it. One of the most beautiful and moving sections of *Famous Men* involves Annie

Mae's younger sister Emma and Agee's love for her. Although he describes himself as "fond of Emma," his writing portrays an obvious sexual attraction. Agee maintains a strange "flirtation" with Emma, this "big" teenage wife. He describes an odd relationship of suppressed sexual desire and even hope that is shrouded in a dichotomous feeling of both "tenderness" and "cruelty." He is driven by a mixture of desire and guilt in his relationship with Emma, and he sees this relationship with her echoed by both George Gudger (her brother-in-law) and Walker Evans. She plays the part of voluptuous, Circean temptress in her relationship with all three men. Although he has grand plans in manifesting his sexual attraction to Emma, Agee remains trapped by his inner controls.

While he imagines and desires a grand sexual experience with Emma for George, Walker, and himself, a "gigantic good time in bed," he knows that their consciences would not allow it.

...yet not one of us would be capable of trusting ourselves to it unless beyond any doubt each knew all the others to be thus capable: and even then how crazily the conditioned and inferior parts of each of our beings would rush in, and take revenge (62).

Just when he thinks he has overcome the power of his conscience, Agee becomes aware once again that this power controls him and his actions. In this case it may have been for the best. He would certainly have crossed the line separating the public and private spheres, causing himself intense guilt, not to mention possible emotional damage to Emma. His fantasies in this instance involve very real desires for which he expresses a personal need later in the book: "I knew I very badly wanted, not to say needed, a piece of tail, and remembered the place ahead of me where we had talked with the whore" (375-6). He knows that exercising this desire in the Gudger home, with Annie Mae's younger sister, would certainly be overstepping his bounds. However, this realization still cannot help him and brings him no solace, for when Emma is leaving he states his regret for allowing his conscience to reign and wishes he had taken "her large body" in his arms (65).

This episode concerning Emma, her attraction to these three men, and their attraction to her is important in that it is the only time Agee takes a significant look at not only his conscience and guilt but that of the others around him. He sees that he is not the only one who would be affected by these actions, nor would he be the only cause of this guilt. He states in regard to the nature of human conscience that "even if he had no reason to fear his own poisons, he has those that are in others to fear, to assume and take care for, if he would not hurt both himself and that other person and the pure act itself beyond cure" (62). The "poisons" of the other person come into play, and for the first time Agee and Evans are not the only ones to loathe. Agee describes the act of control on the part of his conscience as "a minute specialization of a general brutal pity" (62). He sees all of these men, including himself, as maintaining a feeling of pity for Emma and her deplorable situation, and therefore their act of control arises naturally out of each conscience.

In addition to the guilt of other characters in *Famous Men*, does Agee try to impart guilt to his reader? Does he want the reader to feel bad for these people and their deplorable conditions of life? Agee appears to have no agenda for political or social reform based on a broad questioning of societal problems. He is certainly aware of the subjection faced by these individuals, calling them a "damaged group of people," and the system of sharecropping that keeps them in such a place, but he avoids any moralization or blame of those who may be responsible. He is unwilling to blame the primarily Northern reader. As he wrote this book at the close of the Depression, Agee knew his reader's awareness of the difficult conditions that faced people throughout the world, but the causes were so complex and varied that attempting to place blame at that point proved futile and pointless.

One of the only signs of Agee's alignment with Marxism, which was so popular among the literati of his time, is his quote from Marx at the opening of *Famous Men* ("Workers of the world, unite and fight. You have nothing to lose but your chains, and a world to win" (xix)). He implies very little, if any, Marxist doctrine throughout the book. He does not align himself with any political movement or direct blame and guilt toward any

political opponent. Thrown about in a world of depression, increased industrialization, and experiments with Marxism in the Northeast, Agee was most certainly also confronted and further confused with the excitement of the anti-industrial theories of the Southern Agrarians, who tried to maintain a lifestyle irrelevant to Agee's but which had sustained his ancestors in Tennessee. In the manifesto of the Agrarians, *I'll Take My Stand*, the authors at Vanderbilt University called in 1930 for a return to an agrarian lifestyle and a full-scale questioning of the direction the South was taking, i.e. toward the industrial capitalism of the North. It was a call for a return to a way of the past and an escape from the terrible subjection and inequality of the Southern farmer and sharecropper. Faulkner raised many of these issues critical of industrial capitalism throughout his work, including *The Sound and the Fury*. Agee had strong feelings about these sharecroppers and their situation, and he saw the desperation of their rolling debt and inevitable cycle of poverty. As the Depression came to a close during his writing of this book, he did not know where to place the blame for this inequality of opportunity. He was familiar with the variety of theories and people to blame, but he did not seem to place blame anywhere. This lack of a target for blame perhaps fed Agee's old cycle of self-blame and guilt.

In an attempt to justify his role in the book, Agee touches on the importance of the reader seeing him as another human being, the one through whom this story is interpreted. He honestly stresses his importance to the story and, as he believes, the resultant importance of the story itself: "every word I tell of him [the sharecropper] has inevitably a kind of immediacy, a kind of meaning" (12). Since the story is his interpretation, Agee unabashedly discusses his own desires and impulses in relation to these people, but he excludes those of the subjects he has gone to examine. His self-indulgence comes across more in thought than in action. The narration of *Famous Men* presents Agee as frustrated, excited, nervous, interested, disgusted, lustful, and sexually intrigued. However, he rarely extends the observation of himself that yields the realization of these inner qualities and feelings to the people he has come to observe. He cannot do so because surmising the

content of their thoughts and feelings would be untrue and a break from the theory of radical subjectivity as the closest approximation to truth. Most of his examination of these three families, therefore, consists of surface observation, and he usually limits his probing and speculation of individual thoughts to his own consciousness: "this text is replete with remembrances of Agee's childhood and experiences only obliquely related to the tenant material" (Kramer 117). An unavoidable question arises in reading this book: what are the thoughts and dreams of the people he came to discover and portray? Agee knows he is unable to answer any such question for these people. He can only present his perspective.

Although Agee gives consideration to the ideas and thoughts that drive the members of these families, he extends full consideration to his own thoughts. The self-centeredness can be seen particularly in his discussion of the women--Annie-Mae, Emma, Ivy Woods, and others. His sexuality and sexual attraction to them becomes a primary consideration in his discussion of each of them. His self-indulgence in sexual thoughts of Emma is more prominent than in relation to the other women. He explicitly states his sexual desire for her and regrets the power of his conscience in restraining him from acting on that desire. Although he restrains himself physically, he cannot hold back his imagination. After Emma tells Agee how much she likes him and Evans, he thinks, "What's the use trying to say what I felt," but then he proceeds to spell out his feelings and desires (64). Strangely enough, the feeling from which his desire stems is "pity." It leads to "something steadier than an 'impulse'," which drives his desire to "take her large body in [his] arms" (65).

Agee's desire for Annie Mae Gudger is much less seductive and sexual and more reproductive than for her sister, Emma. He concentrates on Annie Mae's role as mother but also the sensuousness of her shattered sexuality, devastated by years of hardship. He contrasts Annie Mae's body, "slender, and sharpened through with bone, that ten years past must have had such beauty, and now is veined at the breast, and the skin of the breast translucent, delicately shriveled," with that of the younger Emma, "strong, thick and wide, tall, the breasts set wide and high, shallow and round, not yet those of a full woman" (57).

He allows himself to imaginatively intrude upon their bodies, but more important than their bodies in his description is his desire for them:

But it is not only their bodies but their postures that I know, and their weight on the bed or on the floor, so that I lie down inside each one as if exhausted in a bed, and I become not my own shape and weight and self, but that of each of them, the whole of it, sunken in sleep like stones (58).

Exercising his imaginative self-indulgence proves to be one time he is free of guilt. He allows himself this personal exploration and desire to explore these women.

Agee, as the narrator of *Famous Men*, struggles with the issue of the classification of this book as a work of art or as a piece of journalism. Although he recognizes (and creates) its artistic content and form, he continually insists on "truth" and journalism: "I will be trying here to write of nothing whatever which did not in physical actuality or in the mind happen or appear" (242). His conscience bears heavily on this issue and mires the text in contradictions concerning its status as "art." Intense guilt surrounds the use of art in such circumstances for Agee. He wishes to provide only truth in his portrayal of these people and their lives and his involvement in their lives. The paradox of using poetry, or poetic prose, as is the case here, to portray, or describe, the reality of actual human lives perplexes Agee as narrator. However, he concludes that art is forced to use falsehood in order to better approximate truth, and art is, therefore, best suited to represent reality.

It seems very possibly true that art's superiority over science and over all other forms of human activity, and its inferiority to them, reside in the identical fact that art accepts the most dangerous and impossible of bargains and makes the best of it, becoming, as a result, both nearer the truth and farther from it than those things which, like science and scientific art, merely describe, and those things which, like human beings and their creations and the entire state of nature, merely are, the truth (238).

The nature of this contradiction best represents the state of Agee's mind and the confusion he experiences in the creation of such an unusual work. He crosses many lines in his creation of "scientific art," the dialectical opposition which he unifies in the book.

Why then does he continually show "antagonism toward art" (245)? If he believes that art can best represent truth, why does Agee deny its existence so often in the book? Much of his insistence on reality and the importance of truth and antagonism of art arises, as he says, from the existence of the photographs at the front of each printed copy. He believes photographs represent the greatest approximation of truth and reality, "like the phonograph record and like scientific instruments and unlike any other leverage of art, incapable of recording anything but absolute, dry truth" (234). He maintains some significant insecurities as to his ability to not equal but even approximate reality to the degree of Evans' photographs. He is also aware that the book's status as "art" will be continually called into question, and his conscience therefore grapples with its appropriateness in the realm of art, even though he believes art promises the greatest possibility of delineating truth.

A further facet of this problem concerning the book's status as art is the tremendous gap between Agee's subject and his audience. While he writes in a high Modernist style for an audience among the well-educated, intellectual elite, he feels a responsibility to his subjects who will be unable to comprehend his interpretation of their lives. His choice of style, however, limits the book's accessibility; his artful creation is in no way a 'literature for the people,' and even further from the possible comprehension of his mostly illiterate subject. Woods and his wife Ivy, Fred Ricketts, and Annie Mae Gudger all have basic reading skills, which keep their families functional. Their comprehension is certainly not up to the level presented by Agee in *Famous Men*. His awareness of this gap results in a feeling of responsibility and guilt for not meeting that responsibility and being more sensitive to that gap. However, he cannot avoid the temptation to write for an audience who would be more interested in the material, an audience for whom art has a stronger appeal than "objective" journalism.

Overlooking the work's goal and eventual status as "art" could be nothing short of denial, irony, or an attempt to mislead. Even taking into account only the most scientific or

journalistic passages in the book, such as "Clothing," readers can still find numerous descriptions that extend far beyond mere observation or fact. Agee's unwillingness to restrict himself to the observance of factual evidence presented to him can be seen in the final lines of this section as he imagines Annie Mae in her wedding dress, eleven years earlier, "her image slowly turned upon itself on blank floor and in a glass, she was such a poem as no human being shall touch" (286). Also, when discussing the educational opportunities afforded these people and describing the textbooks he finds in the Gudger home, he allows himself the liberty to insert sarcastic comments casting his judgment on the situation and the books: "In this book you will read (oh, I will, will I?)" (300). His attempts at objectivity are failures primarily because he presents everything from his radically subjective and relentlessly privileged perspective.

Mired in a world of self-debasement, Agee found comfort in the familiar constraints of his conscience and guilt. His description of himself walking at night, in a "complexion of guilt, stealth, and danger," parallels the feelings that surrounded this entire project for him (76). During his time spent in Alabama and his years of writing in New York following the trip, the strength of Agee's conscience proved unbearable, and he found a primary outlet in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. His guilt not only provided a basis from which to create a narrative about his experiences among these three families, but it also harnessed his creative potential, heightening his awareness and artistic power. He wished merely to disappear and lose those self-crippling feelings. He wanted to lose his body and all of its shame; Agee wanted to become Emerson's "transparent eyeball," though in his own style:

If I were not here; and I am alien; a bodyless eye; this would never have existence in human perception.

It has none. I do not make myself welcome here. My whole flesh; my whole being; is withdrawn upon nothingness (187).

But in losing his body and in losing its shame and guilt, he would have lost everything--his inspiration, his perception, and his subject.

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