A Death in the Family Study Guide

A Death in the Family by James Agee

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

James Agee's novel *A Death in the Family* is a classic American story, chronicling just a few days in 1915 during which a husband and father is called out of town to be with his own father, who has had a heart attack, and while returning is killed in a car accident. Agee patterned the story closely after his own life, focusing on a boy who is the same age that he was when his father died. The narrative shifts from one perspective to another, including the young widow and her two children and her atheistic father and the dead man's alcoholic brother, to name just a few, in an attempt to capture the ways in which one person's loss immediately and powerfully affects everyone around.

The book was published in 1957 by McDowell, Obolensky, two years after Agee's death from heart failure at the age of 46, and was awarded the 1958 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. Although Agee had worked on it for almost a decade, he had not produced a definitive final draft, and so his publishers had to put the book together in a way that they believed would make the most sense. They have indicated places where they added materials that come from outside of the flow of the story, such as the opening section "Knoxville: Summer, 1915," which was first published in the 1940s. Critics agree that the end product is a consistent novel, one of the most moving works ever written about one of the most traumatic experiences a child could ever face.

Author Biography

James Rufus Agee was born on November 27, 1909, in Knoxville, Tennessee. As a boy, he was always called by his middle name, the name given to the main character in *A Death in the Family*. When he was six, Agee's father died in an automobile accident. Agee was sent to boarding school in his childhood, then to Philips Exeter Academy, which was to become a strong influence throughout his life. He then went to Harvard University, where he received an associate's degree in 1932. He married the first of his three wives the following year and went to work at *Fortune*, one of the country's preeminent business magazines. Though Agee's left-leaning politics disagreed with the magazine's focus on finance, his work there gave him the opportunity to work on his poetry.

In 1936, *Fortune* sent Agee and photographer Walker Evans to Alabama to report on the lives of tenant farmers. It was the middle of the Great Depression, and the suffering and dignity that Evans and Agee saw in their poor uneducated subjects impressed them so much that, when the magazine rejected their subsequent article, they expanded it to book length. The book, titled *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), was ignored by a reading public that was focused on America's coming involvement in World War II. Today, the book is considered to be one of the most important and moving documents available of that time.

While still working on the book, Agee branched out into another field of writing, that of movie reviewing. His reviews for *Time* and later for the *Nation* would in themselves have secured his place in the country's literary heritage, bringing an intellectual approach to reviewing just as film was gaining respect as an art form. His reviews, collected after his death in the two-volume collection *Agee on Film*, are as enjoyable as they are instructive.

In 1951, Agee published *The Morning Watch*, which gained only lukewarm critical response. He then combined his storytelling skills with his understanding of film and began writing screenplays. His first script was for *The African Queen*, starring Humphrey Bogart and Katherine Hepburn. It won Academy Award nominations for Agee and its director, John Huston. That same year, Agee suffered his first heart attack. Over the next few years, as he worked on *A Death in the Family* and his screenplay for the film *Night of the Hunter*, he suffered a series of heart attacks, eventually dying of heart failure on May 16, 1955.

Plot Summary

Knoxville: Summer, 1915

The segment titled "Knoxville: Summer, 1915" was originally published independently of *A Death in the Family*. In it, the speaker identifies himself as a grownup looking back on his childhood. He does not mention the characters who appear in the book: still, the quiet neighborhood evenings that Agee remembers in this section resemble ones experienced by young Rufus in the story that follows it.

Chapter 1

The first chapter focuses on the perspective of Rufus Follett, a six-year-old boy in Knoxville, Tennessee. Rufus and his father go to a Charlie Chaplin motion picture. On the way home, the father stops at a tavern, bragging about his son to the other people there. He tells Rufus to not tell his mother they stopped. In bed and falling asleep, Rufus hears his parents talking in the next room, vaguely understanding that his father is going somewhere.

Chapter 2

Jay Follet, the father of Rufus, receives a call late, around two in the morning, from his younger brother, Ralph. Ralph is drunk and explains, unclearly, that their father has had a heart attack. Jay is not able to tell just how serious it is but agrees to drive miles to the town where they live immediately.

He tells his wife, Mary, to stay in bed, that he can stop at a diner for something to eat, but she insists on making him a breakfast before his journey. In exchange, he makes the bed, as a surprise for her after he is gone. He tells her to think about something that she wants for her birthday that is coming up, and they share a happy, loving moment as he leaves into the darkness in the middle of the night.

Chapter 3

To cross the Powell river in his overnight car ride, Jay has to waken a man asleep at a ferry crossing. The man has Jay drive onto his boat, warning him that he will have to pay double fare to cover the boat's round-trip voyage, even though Jay himself is only going one way. When they reach the other side, though, they find a family in a horse-drawn wagon, waiting to take their produce to market. The ferryman says that he cannot fairly charge Jay the nighttime rate for a "dark crossing" since there is someone to pay for the boat's return trip.

Chapter 4

Before rising that morning, Mary lies in bed and thinks about her relationship with Jay. Though they have had difficult times, and his family has not been good to her, she prays to God that their future together will be peaceful.

Chapter 5

Mary explains to her children, Rufus and Catherine, that their father was called away and that he hopes to be home by the time they go to bed. In telling them that their grandfather might be dying, she discusses God and God's mysterious ways with them.

Chapter 6

Jay arrives at the family's house in LaFollette and finds that his father is not really in mortal danger. The narrative describes the events of the evening before from Ralph's point of view. Their father had suffered a worse heart attack than any he had suffered before, and the handyman called family and friends together. Distraught, Ralph had brought a bottle of liquor to the house with him and, as he drank through the night, had become increasingly angry and paranoid. He phoned Jay to make himself feel important.

Chapter 7

While Rufus's father is away, Hannah Lynch, Mary's aunt, stops by to take the boy shopping. They have a strong relationship and enjoy shopping together. At the end of the expedition, Aunt Hannah buys him a cap, which is something that he wanted but his parents refused him.

Chapter 7 finishes Part I of the book with an extended scene, from the young boy's point of view, of being frightened in the darkness of night and of being comforted by his father with songs and with a stuffed doll that he had lost when he was younger. He then remembers the mystery surrounding his mother's pregnancy with his sister and the process of finding out about it.

Chapter 8

Part II starts with Mary receiving a phone call saying that Jay has been in an accident. She calls her brother Andrew, who has his friend Walter Starr drive him to the site. While they are gone, Mary discusses her fears with Aunt Hannah, as she tries to hope that it might not be a very bad accident, although each passing minute makes it clear that something is terribly wrong.

Chapter 9

Mary's parents, Catherine and Joel, who stayed home when Andrew received the call, wait for word about Jay.

Chapter 10

Andrew returns and confirms Mary's fear that Jay is dead. In shock, Mary asks for all of the details, but he leaves them until their parents can arrive.

Chapter 11

With Mary's parents in the house, Andrew gives the details of how Jay died: a cotter pin fell out, and he was unable to control the car, hitting his chin on the steering wheel and dying instantly.

Chapter 12

All of the people in the house feel a strange presence, and they become convinced that it is Jay's spirit, come home one last time. Only Joel Lynch, Mary's father, is skeptical about whether they have experienced a true supernatural event. In the end, Andrew takes his parents home, leaving Aunt Hannah to stay with Mary and to care for the children when they awake.

Chapter 13

Mary's parents and brother walk home, and Mary and Hannah go to bed. The focus shifts to Rufus's memories. This section begins with his encounters with the older boys on the block who took interest in him, having him dance and sing, though he could tell that they were laughing at him. It ends with a long story about a trip that the family once took out into the country to visit the oldest Follet, Rufus's great-great grandmother, who was born in 1802. Though she could hardly talk, she recognized people and hugged Rufus.

Chapter 14

Rufus and Catherine wake in the morning, and their mother tells them that their father will not be coming home.

Chapter 15

Aunt Hannah tries to explain death to Rufus and Catherine, telling them that it is God's will. Catherine still asks when their father is coming home.

Chapter 16

After breakfast, Rufus wanders outside, amazed that he does not have to go to school. He encounters the children who have bullied him. Some mock his father, calling him a drunk, or the car for being cheap, but most are sympathetic and a little in awe of Rufus.

Chapter 17

Father Jackson comes to the house. He is stern with the children, lecturing them about manners. The children are visited by Walter Starr, who treats them well and expresses his respect for Jay.

Chapter 18

They go to the house of Mary's parents, where the body is laid out for viewing, and see Jay's corpse.

Chapter 19

Walter takes the children away, but he breaks the family's wishes and lets them watch the funeral procession from a hidden place because he thinks it is important for them.

Chapter 20

They return to their grandparents' house that evening. Feeling ignored, Catherine hides under the bed. Mary's brother Andrew takes Rufus for a walk and tells him an uplifting story about a butterfly that landed on the casket as it was lowered in the grave. His spiritual amazement gives way, however, to anger at Father Jackson, who has refused to give the full funeral prayer because Jay was never baptized. Rufus assumes that this anti-religious stance means that his uncle hates Mary.

Characters

George Bailey

George Bailey is the husband of Jay's sister Jessie.

Jessie Bailey

Jessie Bailey is the sister of Jay and Ralph.

The Ferryman

When he is traveling to LaFollette in the middle of the night, Jay Follet has to wake a Ferryman, whose job is to ride cars across the river on his flat ferryboat. The Ferryman is prepared to charge Jay a double rate but, finding a horse-drawn wagon of people going toward town and paying for the boat's return trip, can only fairly charge the single rate.

Catherine Follet

The young daughter of the Follet family, Catherine is frequently unaware of what is going on around her. She does not understand the full implications of her father's death and expects him to return to the family later. In the last chapter, as she moves around the house unnoticed, Catherine begins to understand the seriousness of what has happened.

James Follet

See Jay Follet

Jay Follet

Jay, also known as James Follet, is the man who dies in the novel. He is stable and reliable. He is shown to have been a favorite of his mother and his great-grandmother. Walter Starr, a family friend, is near tears as he tries to express to Jay's children his great admiration for Jay, who worked himself up from humble roots.

There are indications that Jay has not always been stable and reliable. After he leaves for his parents' house, his wife Mary reflects on the difficult times they have had as a couple, and on a "gulf" between them. His great aunt Sadie mentions sending a postcard to Jay and Mary in Panama, indicating that Jay has been a wanderer. Agee hints that Jay has had problems with alcohol in the past. Near the end of the first

section, recalling his childhood, Rufus remembers fights between his parents concerning whiskey, an idea supported by the facts that Jay asks Rufus to keep their visit to a tavern a secret and that the neighbor children assume that he died from driving drunk.

Mary Follet

Mary is the wife of Jay, and the mother of Rufus and Catherine. She is a devout Catholic, praying for her husband's safety when he leaves the house in the middle of the night to go to his ailing father, praying even more that God's will is merciful when she hears that he has been in an accident, and relying most heavily on her faith when she hears that he has died. Throughout the night of her sudden widowhood, Mary drinks more whiskey than she ever would have thought possible, feeling no effect from it. She is constantly surprised that she is able to cope with the whole ordeal as well as she is, though, when it comes time to leave for the funeral, her legs give out under her.

Ralph Follet

Ralph, Jay's brother, is an undertaker. He lives near his parents' house and is summoned over when his father has a heart attack. While relatives wait for the doctor to determine just how serious the danger is, Ralph, an alcoholic, sneaks outside to drink. His weak attempt to hide the fact that he is drinking fails, especially when he hits his head on the door, pretending to go to the outhouse, and returns bleeding. He is alternately humiliated and self-righteous, and both moods drive him to drink more. When he calls in the middle of the night, Jay can tell he is drunk, and his trouble obtaining reliable information is the reason he leaves Knoxville to drive to the family house. Ralph's alcoholism is so well-known that Mary refuses to talk to him when the news comes out that Jay is dead; her brother Andrew, who has had to tell Ralph that they are using an in-town undertaker, comes away explaining "Talking to that fool is like trying to put socks on an octopus."

Rufus Follet

The book is focused on six-year-old Rufus, particularly during the autobiographical sections that the publishers have added at the end of Parts I and II. In these sections, which take place before the death of his father, Rufus is becoming aware of his place in society. He observes the social patterns of his neighborhood in Knoxville, five generations of his father's family, and the behaviors of his peers. His family showers him with love and his father affords him protection from his childhood fears in these flashbacks. When dealing with other children, however, Rufus finds that he is for some reason ostracized. He believes their interest in them is honest, at first, but the suspicion that they are mocking him grows when he hears them repeating things he has said and laughing.

Before his father's death, Rufus is anxious to grow up and be treated like an adult. He feels that his parents treat him like a child, and so he makes a point of giving orders to his sister Catherine, who is younger than he. The death pushes him into adulthood in ways that he could not anticipate.

Rufus's response to his father's death is less emotional than one might expect. He understands the idea of death and is blunt about stating it. He is saddened, but he also is mystified by the social customs surrounding death: the people coming to the house; the fact that he is kept home from school; the genuine interest and even respect of the children who had made fun of him.

At the end of the book, Rufus is just starting to show anger over the situation. When his uncle Andrew curses about the priest's refusal to say certain prayers over Jay Follet, who was not baptized, Rufus does not agree with Andrew but instead silently accuses his uncle of hating his devout Christian mother, indicating that, in the future, Rufus might be less accepting, less curious, and more defensive.

Sally Follet

Sally is Ralph's wife. She is ashamed of Ralph's drinking, a fact that he is well aware of. In his mind, Ralph accuses Sally of wanting other men but then remembers that he is unfaithful himself.

Granmaw

The grandmother of Jay's father, Granmaw is roughly 103 years old when the family travels out into the unoccupied hills to visit her in a memory that Rufus has at the end of Part II. She does not seem to be aware of the people who have come before her, but she responds favorably when Rufus is sent forward to kiss her and talk to her.

Father Jackson

Father Jackson is a Catholic priest who has come from Chattanooga to officiate at the funeral of Jay Follet. He is a stern man who, when left alone with the children, does not console them but instead corrects them on their manners. Hannah is resentful that Father Jackson does not leave the room when Mary is preparing for the funeral and her knees falter. Mary's brother Andrew is livid with anger that Father Jackson refuses to read the complete funeral service for Jay because Jay was not baptized.

Aunt Kate

In the memory that Rufus has of staying with his father's family when he was young, Aunt Kate and her husband, Uncle Ted, come from Michigan to visit. Aunt Kate is the daughter of Rufus's grandmother's half sister.

Andrew Lynch

When a man from out of town phones Mary and asks her to send a male family member to the accident scene, she phones her brother Andrew. Andrew takes the situation in hand, making arrangements for the body when he finds Jay dead, instead of calling Mary. He holds the information about Jay's death until he can show up and tell Mary about it in person.

For most of the novel, Andrew is on the periphery of the action, waiting for ways that he can be helpful to his sister. At the end he takes his nephew Rufus for a walk to talk with him individually. He tells him about a butterfly that landed on the casket as it was lowered into the grave, an event so spiritually uplifting that Andrew feels that Rufus ought to know about it. His wonderment is quickly followed, though, with hatred for Father Jackson, who has refused to read the full funeral service over Jay because he was not baptized. Andrew's hatred for the Catholic church at that time makes Rufus assume that Andrew hates Mary, too.

Catherine Lynch

Catherine, Mary's mother, is hard of hearing. As a result, she and her husband Joel are asked to stay home while Mary waits for news of the crash in the middle of the night, because conversation with Catherine would mean shouting into the ear trumpet she uses to magnify sounds. When they do go to the house in the middle of the night, Catherine is often left out of conversations because family members are speaking in hushed tones. This isolation, though, supports the idea that Jay's spirit has come through the house: while the fact that the others talk about it might be dismissed as just a collective mood, the fact that Catherine had the same sensation independently makes the experience much more real.

Hannah Lynch

Hannah, Mary's maiden aunt, makes herself available to help around the household during the crisis. She enters the novel before Jay Follet's death, when he is just away to his parents' house. She takes Rufus shopping, showing a bond with the boy when she buys him a cap that he has wanted but that his parents would not allow him to have. When news comes that Jay has been in an accident, Mary asks Aunt Hannah to come to her house and wait with her; after it has been determined that Jay is dead, she asks Hannah to stay the night. Hannah watches over the children while Mary is rendered incapable by grief.

Joel Lynch

Mary's father Joel works with Jay, though the novel does not specify what their business is. When the family is gathered together on the night of Jay's death and talking about

spiritual matters, Joel is respectful, but he is open and honest about the fact that he cannot believe in God.

Thomas Oaks

Oaks is a handyman on the grandparents' ranch up in LaFollette.

Great Aunt Sadie

The sister of Jay's grandfather, she lives in a house out in the hills and tends to her own mother, who is referred to as "Granmaw." Sadie is an exacting woman, greatly angry with herself when she finds that she forgot Jay's family had sent her a notice of their new address. She feels that, with her aged mother to look after, she cannot afford to have any slips in her memory.

Walter Starr

Walter is a friend of the family who is glad to make himself available during the family's time of need. He has a car, and drives Andrew out to the accident site in the middle of the night. Later, he takes the children to his house during the funeral, but he breaks the family's wishes and lets them watch the funeral procession from a hidden place because he thinks it is important for them. He talks to them in a positive, uplifting way.

When he is left alone with the children at the funeral, Walter tells them of the tremendous respect that he had for their father: "Well, I thought the world of him, Rufus and Catherine. My own wife and son couldn't mean more to me I think." He goes on to describe himself as an ordinary man, noting that he thought Jay was one of the finest men who ever lived.

Uncle Ted

Rufus remembers Uncle Ted and his wife, Aunt Kate, visiting and going for a train ride into the Smoky Mountains with his family. Uncle Ted buys him a toy and is funny, but then he jokes that Rufus can make the cheese plate come to him by whistling for it. Rufus is too young to understand this as a joke, and his mother chastises Uncle Ted for taking advantage of the boy's trusting nature.

Victoria

Victoria is a midwife who helped Mary through her pregnancy with Rufus and, in Rufus's memory, returns to help deliver his sister Catherine. She is the first black person that Rufus has ever met, and his parents insist that he treat her with respect, which is not a problem because he has a genuine fondness for her.

Themes

Vulnerability

In a way, *A Death in the Family* stands as an extended meditation on human vulnerability. The story's figure of strength is the father, Jay Follet, a man who, it is revealed, has lived a hard life, raised himself up from humble beginnings in a log cabin, overcome problems with alcohol and marital instability and come out better for them all. When they find out that he is dead, his children immediately wonder how anybody could hurt him. Jay's death in a car accident could have been rendered as a bloody and violent, but Agee makes a point of noting frequently in the story that it actually takes very little to kill him: it is not the car careening up an embankment and flipping over on its back that does Jay in, but a mild little bump on the chin, causing a nearly imperceptible mark. Agee's point seems to be that, despite the sturdiness of the human body and its capacity to withstand a lifetime of pain and suffering, life can be cut short by just about any unexpected action.

Similarly, the family organism is vulnerable to unexpected loss. At the moment when Jay is torn away, his relationship with Mary is on the verge of a new beginning that she finds surprising. Their relationship up to then had been colder: his thoughtfulness about her coming birthday and the sweet gesture of his preparing her bed come as pleasant surprises to Mary. By putting Jay's death at a point where their love is growing, not fading or staying the same, Agee emphasizes the fact that life is fragile, and that not even love matters to death's approach.

The most vulnerable character, though, is Rufus, who is six years old when his father dies. Several factors make this loss particularly powerful to him. His sister Catherine, though younger, cannot fully understand the situation the way Rufus can, as Agee shows clearly when their mother first tells them about the accident: Catherine still waits for her father to return, but Rufus cuts through the delicate language about God calling Jay home to ask, "Is daddy *dead*?" Another reason that Rufus is particularly vulnerable is that, as a son, he has had a strong bond with his male parent, which Agee stresses by opening the novel with father and son attending a movie and walking home together. Although the book looks at the situation from various perspectives, most readers and critics remember it as Rufus's story, because he is the most vulnerable character, most sorely affected by Jay Follet's death.

Consolation and Comfort

Although this story is about human vulnerability, it is also about the ways that humans bond together to help make that vulnerability bearable. Part II, in particular, focuses on Mary's relatives coming together at her house on the night of the death, doing what they can to ease her suffering. For her brother Andrew and family friend Walter Starr, this means action: they are the ones who go to the scene of the accident, so that Mary will

not have to face the gruesome details of Jay's death. For Mary's Aunt Hannah, the best way to comfort Mary, as she thinks several times throughout the night, is suppressing her own ideas, so that Mary can discover the things that she needs to experience about grief as she is ready for them. Her father waits until they are alone to quietly tell Mary that he will take care of the financial details so she need not bother herself with worldly concerns, and her mother, isolated by her own deafness, allows the conversation to go on around her, despite her frustration, rather than ask people to repeat things that Mary might find upsetting. Collectively, they bend their own values to the situation, as indicated by the fact that they allow Mary to drink too much if that is what she feels like doing, knowing that her comfort is more important than their own skepticism about alcohol.

In general, the adults in this story do little to comfort the children. Mary, when she is with them, tries to make their burden more bearable, but her own grief is so overwhelming that she is kept too busy just truing to convince herself that she is going to cope. When she does talk with them, it is in terms of abstract Catholic theology that is meaningless to them. Aunt Hannah, also, is too busy with practical considerations to be much consolation, despite the fact that Agee establishes a strong personal bond between her and Rufus. The figures most comforting to Rufus are the two male figures closest in age to his departed father, Walter Starr and Andrew. Walter, who is himself a father, speaks directly to Rufus and Catherine about what a good man Jay was, which is just the sort of thing they need to hear; later, he lets them view the funeral procession because he decides that it is what they need. Andrew takes Rufus into his confidence, conferring on him the adulthood that he has been struggling with. This has positive implications, when he talks of the butterfly at the gravesite and Rufus realizes that this is something Andrew would tell to no one but him, but it also brings the burden of responsibility when Andrew rails against religion, detracting from what might have been one possible source of consolation for the boy.

Catholicism

It would be difficult to discuss *A Death in the Family* without looking at the role religion and particularly Catholicism plays in this traumatic episode in the characters' lives. There is no denying that the novel has a distinct spiritual vein, and that a belief in the supernatural helps to make Jay Follet's death bearable. In Chapter 12, the assembled members of Mary's family feel a presence that they cannot explain in any other way except to say that it is Jay's spirit walking among them, and Andrew, in the end, observes a butterfly at the casket that he feels sure is a sign of Jay's continuing on in the afterlife.

Agee is less clear in his portrayal of organized religion. On the one hand, it is shown to be a force for good, in that prayer gives Mary a way of coping with her life, which she feels is being torn apart by a "gulf" and a "widening" even before she suffers her devastating loss. On the other hand, Catholicism is represented in this novel by Father Jackson, a cold man who is shown first badgering the children at the time of their loss because of his focus on "manners" and then denying Mary the full prayer service

because Jay, who was not baptized, is not strictly eligible. Father Jackson may carry the weight of the Catholic church, but he is clearly the least admirable character in the novel.

Agee's own religious belief is reflected best in the skepticism of Mary's father. When surrounded by the faith of others, Joel Lynch is respectful, and even a little jealous, because he cannot find within himself the faith that supports them. He is not opposed to faith□he says that it would not hurt him to have some, and in fact might do him some good□but he finds himself without any understanding of anything beyond the experience of his senses.

Style

Point of View

Some novels maintain a consistent point of view, that is, they tell their story from the perspective of one character. In *A Death in the Family*, however, Agee has chosen to alternate points of view. The novel is told at different times from the perspectives of each of the members of the main family discussed (Rufus, Jay, Mary and Catherine), as well as from the viewpoints of such secondary characters as Aunt Hannah, Ralph, Andrew, and Mary's mother and father. With this approach to the material, Agee is able to make this the story of a *whole* family, and not just the story of any one particular character.

Symbolism

In literature, a symbol is something that has both specific and general meaning: it fits into the story, but also indicates a meaning beyond its own place. Agee uses symbols in *A Death in the Family* that have personal, cultural, and spiritual meanings.

The cap that Rufus receives from his Aunt Hannah, for instance, has a symbolic meaning for him that other characters in the story do not recognize. To his parents, the cap is a foolish desire, a frivolous and unnecessary expense. To Rufus, though, the cap symbolizes a level of maturity that others do not yet see in him. Its symbolic meaning is so strong to him that he focuses on it throughout the night, anxious to show it to his father as a mark of achievement.

Readers might not think much of the Ferryman who carries Jay across the river in Chapter 3, unless they are aware of classical Greek literature. In Greek myth, the souls of the dead are ferried across the river Styx by Charon, the silent old boatman in charge of bringing new souls from the world of the living into Hades. While the Ferryman fits comfortably into the book, and would not be out of place in Tennessee in 1915, the use of a figure from antiquity foreshadows, for those familiar with the myth, the fact that Jay will never return from the far bank of the river.

The most poignant symbol, however, is the butterfly in the story that Andrew tells Rufus about his father's burial. The reader does not need any outside understanding of what the butterfly symbolizes because Andrew explains its significance to his nephew, telling him that he thinks it is as much a miracle as anything he has ever seen. He makes the event miraculous for Rufus by sharing the story with Rufus when he would not share it with anyone else in the family. In this way, the meaning Andrew sees in the butterfly, Jay's soul being released, becomes real precisely because he has found meaning in it.

Historical Context

One aspect of the novel that is notably different than the way life is in contemporary America is the closeness of extended families, with adult children frequently living with or near their parents. When Jay's father is stricken with a heart attack, his son Ralph and daughter Jessie and their spouses are available to be at his bedside; when Jay dies, his wife's brother, her aunt, and her parents are within walking distance; and Great Aunt Sadie, a woman who is herself in her eighties, has responsibility for the well-being of her mother. In rural societies, as Tennessee was in the early part of the twentieth century, it is more common to find extended families supporting each other than it is in urban areas. Traditionally, populations of rural areas have been determined by the need for help: before industrialization, parents on family farms tended to have more children based on their need for helping hands.

By the time the book was written, though, there had been several dramatic shifts in the American population that weakened the family structure. For one thing, the country became overwhelmingly city-oriented during the first half of the century. In 1910, there had been 46 million people counted as rural residents and only two thirds that, or 30 million, were rural. By 1950, the percentages were more than reversed: 54 million people were rural, and 96 million were urban. This population shift is seen even more dramatically when it is realized that, a decade later, the rural population had stayed constant at 54 million, but the urban population had jumped to 125 million. In part, this population shift was caused by younger people leaving rural areas and going to the cities in search of work, especially during the Great Depression, which spanned from the stock market crash of 1929 until America's entry into World War II in 1941.

City life was, almost by definition, less oriented around the family than the rural life that had dominated American culture in earlier centuries. Without the family structure to support them, millions of citizens, especially those who were older and less able to work, were faced with poverty. In 1935, during the height of the Depression, President Franklin Roosevelt signed the Social Security Act, to provide financial support for citizens who otherwise would be destitute. The support that this Act gave to elderly citizens who were on their own made older relatives less dependent on their younger relatives for simple subsistence.

When Agee was working on this book in the 1950s, the family was also being weakened by the distractions that come from a leisure-oriented society. Television, in particular, became a mass-medium in the fifties, bringing the outside world into homes more vividly than radio ever could. The world that Agee describes in "Knoxville: Summer, 1915," a world of families gathering together on front lawns, playing with each other and mingling with the neighbors, was fragmented, as television offered a reason to stay isolated. Family discussion, once a focal point in households, became viewed as a distraction. As the family drifted apart, the fifties bred a youth culture, with teenagers seeking to develop identities distinct from those of their parents and of earlier generations.

Critical Overview

Assessments of *A Death in the Family* at the time of its publication indicate that reviewers were not just out to honor the memory of a good writer who had died, but that they saw the qualities of the novel that have made it an American classic. Dwight MacDonald, writing in *The New Yorker*, noted that even though Agee died before final editing, the book "reads like a finished work□brilliant, moving, and written with an objectivity and a control he had not achieved before." Most reviews, like that written by Melvin Maddocks in *The Christian Science Monitor*, were generally pleased with the book while still recognizing its weaknesses. Examining how difficult it is to write convincingly from a child's perspective, Maddocks notes that "James Agee's posthumous novel is proof that the job can sometimes be managed accurately as well as fondly, vividly as well as indulgently." Maddocks goes on to list faults: "It can be merely rhetorical as well as eloquent. The words that click and shuttle to weave a vivid sensory pattern can also produce cotton wool. . . . Furthermore, it is doubtful that the novel was as completely finished as its publishers indicate." The fact that it was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction is an indication of the esteem held for this novel by critics of its time.

As the years have passed, *A Death in the Family* has come to be seen as James Agee's legacy, the lasting achievement of a writer who was mostly known in his day for his transitory magazine writing. Though it is uneven and very personal, the novel approaches one of life's most moving experiences with a poetic sensibility that speaks to readers across the generations. As Victor A. Kramer, a critic who has written extensively about Agee's life and career, wrote it in his essay "Urban and Rural Balance in *A Death in the Family*,"

The text for Agee's unfinished *A Death in the Family* is . . . a book that functions on several levels at once: it is Agee's memorial; it is his examination of self; it is a picture of a particular era when urban and rural were blended; it is an archetypal rendering of what all persons learn, live, and love.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Kelly is an instructor of literature and creative writing at two colleges in Illinois. In this essay, Kelly looks at Agee's use of geographical space.

James Agee's novel *A Death in the Family* is primarily, as its straightforward title indicates, about an emotional moment in a closed family unit including its surrounding relations. Agee's narrative travels from one point-of-view to another, giving his readers a range of perspectives, all used to show the void the death of Jay Follet, husband and father, creates. The book also travels through time, though that might not be a mark of Agee's artistry as much as it is the work of the editors who, after his death, wove outside material into the book. The story of Jay's death takes place across the span of just a few days, ranging from the night before it to a few days after, at his funeral; the included material, though, goes back to a time when Jay's son Rufus, a major character, was barely old enough to understand his surroundings. Adding these out-of-sequence episodes to the ends of Part I and Part II, plus the multi-page prose poem "Knoxville: Summer, 1915" rounds out young Rufus's experience in a way that a strictly chronological telling would miss.

It is the story's geographical breadth, even more so than its chronological depth, however, that adds the most to its effectiveness. This is a story about emotions, but the way that those emotions are most strongly presented is through Agee's use of places. He shows where people are in relation to one another in the world, as well as in their hearts. Any story has to take place somewhere, but the movement across physical space in this particular novel shows more about the inner lives of its characters, and in particular young Rufus, than the story conveys through just dialog and action alone.

Though every location in the book is important, it helps, for the sake of understanding their significance, to divide locations into three general categories. One of these categories is homes: since "family" is such an important part of the social dynamic that Agee is examining, it makes sense that this book would be dominated by variations on what family members call home. Another category would be locations that are passed in transition, by characters on the move from one place to another. Throughout the book, Rufus takes several walks with older relatives that radiate significance about what his life has been and what it is going to be, and Jay's fatal trip across the Tennessee countryside is certainly significant. Symbolically, these two ideas, home and beyond, meet at the corner of the block where the Follets live, which is where the boy becomes a part of the world outside of his family.

The one setting where most of the book takes place is, appropriately, the Follet house. This is a story about a family, after all, and it makes sense that the book should center around the place where the family gathers. Readers do not see this house as a place of comfort, though. Most of the time, it is the middle of the night, and the house is dark and quiet. Readers get to know Jay when he is preparing to leave for his parents' ranch out in the country in the dark. The bulk of the novel, the whole middle third, follows Mary's reactions from the time she is woken by the call to tell her of Jay's accident to her

attempt to go to sleep at first light. There are other scenes in the house, but they are themselves shaded, either by actual night (as when Rufus, as an infant, has trouble sleeping because he fears the shadows in his room) or by the knowledge of Jay's death. The house is important to the family identity, but Agee does not allow readers to see it in happy times.

There are also homes of other family members presented. One of them, the house of Jay's parents, is a mirror image of the way his house is presented in Part II of the novel, with family and friends sitting the night out, offering comfort in the face of death (though in this case they are braced against a death that never comes). Readers' view of this home is obscured by the fact that this scene is told through the eyes of Jay's brother Ralph, who, due to alcohol and insecurity, renders a view of those around him that is skewed at best. Ralph is so self-absorbed, so focused on hiding his drinking problem that readers get little sense of Jay's mother, Jessie and George Bailey, Thomas Oaks or Sally Follet, who are there with him. As with the other house, this one is the focus of family solidarity, but it is shown in the novel as a dark and foreboding place.

The home that does seem comforting, even inviting, is the "great, square-logged gray cabin" where Jay's 103-year-old relative lives. Agee describes the house in mythical terms (for instance, the word "great" is used several times in the short descriptive passage, conveying a sense of grandeur). Everything about this ancestral home is shrouded in myth, from the trip there, which is guided by half-forgotten memories, to the unimaginable details of the old woman's life (born before Abraham Lincoln) to the woman herself, who seems incapable of understanding what is happening until young Rufus kisses her, at which point she reaches out to him, as if waking from an ancient sleep. Agee clearly wants to emphasize this cabin as a trip back in time for Rufus and for Jay, who is later said to have been born in a log cabin. It is a return home for Jay's father, too, and for his brother. This obscure cabin out in the sunshine is home to all of them, a home that they have traveled from in the varied courses of their lives.

Although homes as places of comfort is a theme in this novel, the next most frequent place for staging events in this novel is in transit, with characters who are passing through the space they inhabit. Three times throughout the novel, Rufus goes walking with adult family members. The first is in the opening chapter, when he and his father walk home from the movies. During this walk there are signs of Jay's unrooted nature and his looking backward, from his searching in the tavern for people from "back home" in the Powell River Valley (which in itself foreshadows "Powell Station," the place a man calls from to tell Mary of Jay's accident) to the comfort he derives from in the big rock they stop by, which offers him a piece of nature in the middle of the city. Jay takes Rufus into his confidence on the way home, telling him to not mention the saloon to his mother, making this walk a rite of passage for the boy as he is treated, in one thing at least, as his father's peer.

The walk that begins the novel is counterbalanced with the walk that Rufus takes at the end, with his uncle Andrew. Their man-to-man talk reflects the way Jay and his son shared a secret, as Andrew tells Rufus about the butterfly at the grave, which, Agee makes clear, he would not tell anyone else. This walk ends with Rufus saddled with

even more adult responsibility as he witnesses Andrew, enraged about Father Jackson, losing his temper, giving him the unusual sight of an adult out of control of his emotions.

Within the story, before Jay's death, Rufus walks downtown with his mother's aunt Hannah to go shopping. This trip, like the other, presents Rufus away from home but safely under the guardianship of an adult relative. His trip with Hannah is particularly significant because their comfortable relationship is to become an important element of Rufus's life, as Hannah will undoubtedly have a central role in helping Mary raise her children.

The one other significant location in the novel is the corner of the block where the Follet family lives. This is the place where Rufus is seen without adult supervision. It is here that he grows up socially and develops his own unique personality.

The corner is first introduced into the story as the place where Rufus, when he was younger, watched daily as his father "waved for the last time and disappeared," and where he watched each afternoon for his father's return. Gradually, Rufus went to the corner on his own, and there encountered children who were not as nurturing as his family members had been, mocking him and confusing him with their ill-natured hostility. In full view of his house, waiting while his father is in transit between the outside world and home, he does whatever he can to join that world of outsiders, even though he knows that he is making a fool of himself.

After his father's death, he is accepted by a few of the other children, at least by the those who pity him and those who defer to his status as a boy who has gone through the unimaginable, magic process of orphan hood. While the novel is mainly about the way family members come together at a time of tragedy, the street corner represents the beginning of the natural growth process of splintering off from the family. The journey of life begins.

The street corner is also where Walter Starr stops his car to let the Rufus and his sister watch Jay's casket loaded into the hearse and taken away. It shows a tremendous measure of respect on Walter's part, trusting them to be cope with the sight that no other adults in their lives trusts them to see. Their view from the corner represents both of the main themes present in this novel's geography: home, and going away from it.

The event that disrupts the Follet family in *A Death in the Family* is traumatic in itself, especially to a boy Rufus's age. Still, Agee showed good artistic sense when he avoided telling the story through action and dialog, which could easily tilt the writing toward over-sentimentality. People in this novel behave as if in a daze, shrouded by the dark still of the night or by the sheer weight of sorrow. The significance of this situation is not shown entirely through character interaction, so Agee fills in the missing elements about Jay and Rufus and their personalities by implying a great deal with the setting of each scene. This story is centered around home, in its many various forms, but when there is a death in the family, home is only the beginning.

Source: David Kelly, Critical Essay on *A Death in the Family*, in *Novels for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Adaptations

A Death in the Family was adapted to the stage as the play *All the Way Home* in 1960; a film version of the play was made in 1963.

On March 25, 2002, PBS broadcast an adaptation of *A Death in the Family* directed by Gil Cates and starring Annabeth Gish and James Cromwell, as part of its *Masterpiece Theatre* series. It was written by Robert W. Lenski. The series was later released on VHS from Public Broadcasting System.

Topics for Further Study

Research various funerary rites of different cultures and report on what each would have to offer the Follet family in a situation like the one presented in the book.

The cabin that Rufus's Great Great Grandmother and his Great Aunt Sadie live in is back in the woods, away from civilization. Write a narrative describing what you think a day in the lives of these old women might be like.

In the first chapter, Mary Follet refers to the actor Charlie Chaplin as "that horrid little man." Read a description of Chaplin from one of the film historians who think that he was one of the great geniuses of film comedy; then, watch a Chaplin silent movie from 1915 or before. Stage a debate between a Chaplin supporter and an opponent.

Recall a death in your own family and describe how specific family members behaved; then, explain which members of the Follet or Lynch families you think those people you described were most like, and why.

Compare and Contrast

1915: The Ford Model T, or "Tin Lizzy," revolutionizes transportation by offering affordable, mass-produced transportation to middle-class families.

1950s: The automobile is an icon of the age, as materials and products that were unavailable during the Great Depression and World War II allow car makers to build their products bigger and faster.

Today: Many drivers insist on sport utility vehicles because they want to feel safe, while others find the big, fortress-like vehicles to be a waste of fossil fuels.

1915: It is not unusual for a family like the Follets to have a black nurse like Victoria, though southern states like Tennessee are strictly segregated.

1950s: The Civil Rights movement is on the rise to destroy institutional racism.

Today: Legal penalties are in place to punish racism, but blacks and whites in America still have vastly different outlooks and viewpoints.

1915: The "ear trumpet" used by Mary's mother to augment her hearing is a relic, dating back to the 1800s. Electronic hearing aids are available, though not common.

1950s: Transistor technology has made possible hearing aids that are small enough to be carried in a shirt pocket.

Today: Hearing aids are powerful and small enough to be worn unnoticed within the ear canal.

1915: Funeral parlors are in existence, but are only popular in urban areas. In a relatively small town like Knoxville, it is still common to hold wakes and funerals in the house of the deceased or a loved one.

1950s: Americans are accustomed to their last viewing of deceased loved ones happening at a local funeral parlor owned by a member of the community.

Today: Like much else in society, the funeral business is increasingly run by corporations, while consumers have an expanding variety of methods of self-expression in funerary arrangements that have become commonly accepted.

1915: Long distance telephone service makes it possible to place a cross-continent call between New York and San Francisco.

1950s: Telephone usage is common□there are about 55 million phones in the United States□but still expensive. Long distance calls are often placed through an operator.

Today: Wireless phones have made it possible and affordable to call to anywhere, from anywhere.

What Do I Read Next?

Agee's only other novel, *The Morning Watch* (1950), is about a boy at a boarding school in the mountains of Tennessee who has a religious reaction to the natural world that surrounds him.

Agee was sent away to school at age nine to St. Andrew's, a small Episcopalian school. While there, he began a lifelong relationship with Father James Harold Flye. Agee's correspondences with Flye over the next thirty years, concerning his innermost considerations of moral and spiritual matters, his thoughts on art and alcoholism, and the trials of living, are collected in *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye* (1962).

A Death in the Family is concerned with the process of coping with death, which is the subject of Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's groundbreaking psychology text *On Death and Dying* (1969). Kubler-Ross was the person who first charted the five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.

One of the great achievements of this novel is the way it evokes the mood of death and mourning throughout. James Joyce, one of the masters of English literature, was expert at evoking the feeling of life burdened by the knowledge of mortality, especially in the short story "The Dead," which is considered one of the greatest stories ever written. It is a part of Joyce's collection *Dubliners* (1914).

Because of his intense poetic sensibilities and early death, Agee has been treated as a cult figure by some readers. His life is examined in minute detail in Laurence Bergreen's biography *James Agee: A Life* (1984), which captures Agee's magnetic allure while not failing to examine the less admirable aspects of the writer's life.

Further Study

Doty, Mark, *Tell Me Who I Am: James Agee's Search for Selfhood*, Louisiana State University Press, 1981.

One of the most psychologically intensive studies of Agee's life, this book draws heavily off his letters and the writings of those who knew him.

Kramer, Victor A., "Remembrance of Childhood," in *James Agee*, Twayne's United States Authors Series, No. 252, Twayne Publishers, 1975, pp. 142—55.

This section of a standard overview of Agee's life and work focuses on *A Death in the Family* and how it joined the end of Agee's life with his first memories.

Lowe, James, *The Creative Process of James Agee*, Louisiana State University Press, 1994.

Lowe's general theme is "disparateness" throughout Agee's works: the ways in which his writings in different genres tended to draw in different directions.

Madden, David, ed., *Remembering James Agee*, Louisiana State University Press, 1974.

Madden provides a collection of essays by people who knew Agee, including Father James H. Flye, Robert Fitzgerald, Dwight Macdonald, and Whittaker Chambers.

Moreau, Geneviève, *The Restless Journey of James Agee*, William Morrow, 1977.

This book gives equal attention to Agee's life and his work, claiming not to be a biography but a literary examination of the ways he drew from the familiar for his writing.

Spiegel, Alan, *James Agee and the Legend of Himself*, University of Mississippi Press, 1998.

Spiegel organizes his book around ancient mythic motifs, examining how Agee's writings built a mythic personality for the author.

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Kramer, Victor A., "Urban and Rural Balance in *A Death in the Family*," in *James Agee: Reconsiderations*, edited by Michael A. Lofaro, University of Tennessee Press, 1992, pp. 104—18.

MacDonald, Dwight, Review of *A Death in the Family*, in the *New Yorker*, November 16, 1957, p. 224.

Maddocks, Melvin, Review of *A Death in the Family*, in the *Christian Science Monitor*, November 14, 1957, p. 7.