Therne and Technique in James Agee's *A Death in the Family*

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It is commonly recognized today that James Agee was a writer who did not fully realize his potentialities. He drove himself hard in many pursuits, journalism, film and book reviewing, script and fiction writing, never quite finding the leisure required to reach the lofty level of creative achievement that was his ambition as a young man.[1] He split himself, perhaps, between too many activities, or, possibly, his native talent did not quite warrant the ambitious goals he set for himself. Still he did produce at least two works of a lasting value, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men (1941), an admired imaginative and poetic documentary of the plight of Southern tenant farmers during the Depression, and the autobiographical novel *A* Death in the *Family*, which gained him a posthumous Pulitzer Prize on its publication in 1957.

This is a novel that has not yet come into its own as a minor masterpiece in American prose fiction in the nineteen fifties. Some critical attention has been given to it, but nothing that can compare, for instance, with the flood of critical articles devoted to Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye. Part of the reason for this may be that *A* Death *in* the Family has been looked upon as a simple and conventional book that needed no close critical scrutiny.[2] However, significant aspects of the novel's craft and intention have been dealt with in critical articles by Michael M. Roe, Jr. and James J. Sosnoski as well as in books on Agee by Peter H. Ohlin and Kenneth Seib.[3]

James Sosnoski has made the point that Agee, being one of America's earliest and most brilliant film critics, understood the desire of average American movie-goers for domestic melodrama with plots of a certain kind. *A* Death in the Family, he declares, could be said to be 'an incisive, intensely realistic examination of death and the human condition, masterfully disguised as domestic melodrama' (p. 180). It seems reasonable to assume that Agee's experience as a film critic made him realize that there might be

a good market for a novel with some of the same characteristics as the 'family movies' he had been reviewing so often. However, a calculation of the literary marketplace was not the main reason why he started writing in the late nineteen fourties. 'I think I'd better not talk much about the piece of writing,' he wrote to his friend and mentor Father James Harold Flye in a letter. 'A novel, short but longer than I had foreseen or thought best for it, about my first 6 years, ending the day of *my* Father's *burial.*'[4] In writing *A Death in the Family*, Agee wanted to reexperience and recreate in artistic form the shattering event of his childhood years, the sudden death of his father, Hugh James Agee, on May 16, 1916. He wanted to describe what the sudden loss of a beloved father had meant to a sensitive six-year-old boy and to the other members of the dead man's family. We should not forget that as a boy James Agee was nicknamed Rufus, the name of the novel's childish protagonist.[5]

First I want to consider the problem of whether *A Death in the Family* has a real plot. In its simplest terms the novel describes a series of incidents beginning when Jay (James) Follet, a Knoxville businessman in his early middle age, takes his son Rufus to a picture show on a summer evening in 1915. When father and son have returned from the movie, the whole family go to bed. Deep in the night Jay and his wife Mary wake up when the telephone starts ringing. The caller is Jay's brother Ralph, who informs him that their father is seriously ill and asks him to come to the old man's deathbed. At the family farm he finds the situation less serious than he thought it might be: his father has suffered a severe and painful heart attack, but is not at death's door.

Jay decides to stay the day at the farm and return home in the evening. Being impatient to get back to his wife, he drives too fast in the dusk. Suddenly the steering mechanism breaks down, the vehicle swerves and hits a loose rock with one of the front wheels, throwing its driver forward so abruptly that he strikes his chin one hard blow against the steering wheel. The resulting concussion of the brain causes instant death. From this moment we observe Jay's grief-stricken family members, see their reactions when the terrible truth of his death is revealed to them, sympathize with them as they do what they can to offer the widow consolation, and follow them through three long days and nights till the body is finally put to rest. Of particular importance in this context is the situation of Jay's and Mary's two small children who are naturally unable to grasp, at the outset, the full implications of what has happened.

The series of events outlined above forms a consistent pattern, moving from a beginning through a logically related sequence to a natural and logical outcome. This is certainly one of the three requirements often made of a fiction plot. It seems to me that *A Death in the Family* meets the second requirement as well: that the various incidents should be selected and arranged according to *a* preconceived purpose. Thirdly, the incidents should be ordered and related to each other as the result of the interplay of one force upon another; a plot should have some sort of conflict. This requirement the novel does not satisfy at all. There is no opposition of forces, be they physical or spiritual, that is of vital importance in deciding the direction that the events take. Thus there is an argument in support of the view that the novel does not have a real plot, in the accepted sense of the term. The order of incidents, however, is intimately related to the revelation of the qualities of the important characters and of their mutal relationships. The work may, therefore, be labelled as 'a novel of character,' an expression first introduced by Edwin Muir. In novels of this type the situations are 'typical or general, and designed primarily to tell us more about the characters, or to introduce new characters.'[6]

A Death *in the Family* falls into three parts that Kenneth Seib names 'The Follet Family: Knoxville, 1915' (chs. I—VII), 'Jay Follet's Death' (VIII— XIII), and 'Jay Follet's Resurrection' (XIV—XX). Interspersed throughout these chapters are six interludes, set off by italics, that Seib rightly characterizes as some of the best writing in the novel (p. 79). Agee apparently wanted these interludes to belong within the body of the novel, while the short opening section, 'Knoxville: Summer 1915' —also in italics — was not a part of the manuscript he left, but was added to it by the editors. Seib and Sosnoski discover a musical structure in the novel and the former a dramatic structure as well, both of which will be dealt with below.

As the title indicates, the significant fact is that all the most important characters in the novel are members of one family. Not only do we meet the four members of the kernel family unit, Jay and Mary Follet and their children, but grandparents, aunt and uncles, great-aunts —even a great-great-grandmother —as well. Most of the incidents and the intimate little details of everyday life in the first part and in the six interludes are meant to help the reader understand what a family means. Sosnoski mentions as examples the trip to the clothes store, the birth of Rufus's sister

Catherine, the boy's fear of the dark, and the visit to the Chaplin film (p. 181). Only when the reader knows this, can he later understand what a death in the family is.

The fact that the importance of the family unit is made so much of in the novel does not mean that individual traits are played down or tensions that may separate the family members from each other glossed over. People like Jay and Ralph are shown to have their weaknesses, the former having once been too fond of the whiskey bottle for his own good, the latter being unreliable, unintelligent, maudlin, and weak, and treated with tacit forbearance by his kith and kin for this reason. Roe points out that the major conflicts in *A Death in the Family* are traceable along familial, or even ancestral lines, seeing the marriage of Mary and Joe as 'a marriage of opposing forces, of the city and the country, of the conscious and the unconscious, of the peaceful and the violent—or, more clearly, it is a marriage of the civilized and the primordial' (p. 149). Mary feels that their religious differences must set Jay apart from her and from the children. But we are also made to feel that the distance between him and her is not merely a matter of her Catholic religion but due, also, to Jay's lonely aloofness. Another contributing factor is Mary's prim respectability which appears, for instance, in her dislike of Chaplin, whom both Rufus and Jay enjoy.

Sosnoski has called attention to the way in which Agee designs his narrative technique to convey the distances between the voices in the novel and the manner in which they are bridged (p. 178). There is, for instance, Rufus' inner reflections standing with his father in front of a clothing store. Inside there is a cap that he has coveted for a long time:

> Plaster people, in ennobled postures, stiffly wore untouchably new clothes; there was even a little boy, with short, straight pants, bare knees and high socks, obviously a sissy: but he wore a cap, all the same, not a hat like a baby. Rufus' whole insides lifted and sank as he looked at the cap and he looked up at his father; but his father did not notice; his face was wrapped in good humor, the memory of Charlie. Remembering his rebuff of a year ago, even though it had been his mother, Rufus was afraid to speak of it. His father wouldn't mind, but she wouldn't want him to have a cap, yet. If he asked his father now, his father would say no, Charlie Chaplin was enough.[7]

In this imagined 'internal dialogue' Rufus suggests the distance between himself and his father, the voice of the latter functioning as what Sosnoski calls an assumed 'anti-voice' to Rufus' voice (p. 178). The imagined 'internal dialogue' also indicates the distance

between the little boy and his mother. Agee uses this device effectively to reveal the states of mind of his characters—especially Rufus—and their attitudes to each other.

The human tensions in the novel, however, serve to bring out its central message: that a feeling of identity and love can bridge the distances between people. The family members have a great affection for each other. All, even the most unworthy, are within the wide circle of family love. To feel left out of the family circle, to fear losing their respect and approval, as does Ralph, is essentially a tragic situation, for in Agee's world the individual cannot lead a meaningful existence without the love, support, and encouragement of his family. The dominant theme of family unity is reflected time and again in the novel: in Jay's musing over memories of his own childhood, in the love of his children for their parents, in his and Mary's mutual tenderness and loyalty, which leads Seib to the conclusion 'that not all relationships in the twentieth century are sordid, that deep and binding love between husband and wife is still possible' (p. 95).

This sense of unity and coherence has affected the lives of one generation of Follets after another, indicating the existence through time immemorial of what many people in the western world have tended to regard as meaningful in terms of individual short-term existence only. Family love is, in other words, looked upon as a life force, a continuum that gives meaning to the existence of successive generations and relates them to each other in a common experience. Only through the supreme act of love, bringing a new human being into existence, can the individual integrate himself in the biological continuity, the awareness of which gives life meaning and joy. The human spirit is for ever being created again in new generations, as, for instance, when Jay dies and is reborn in his son Rufus.

The theme of finding an identity within the family roots, Roe observes, is brought out whenever Jay approaches the country from which he emerged (p. 150). I have found an example of this in his rustic manner of speaking in the interlude where he, along with the rest of the Follets, goes to visit Rufus's great-great-grandmother. The boy's meeting the incredibly old lady is a comic scene with a ring of pathos, but it illustrates the theme of the continuity of family love through the generations. Old Grandmaw apparently recognizes a few of her kinsfolk as they come up to greet her, but is unable or unwilling to say one word to any of them. But suddenly,

as Little Rufus kisses her paper mouth, she starts giggling and smiling, and in a moment there is 'water crawling along the dust from under her chair' (p. 180), a humorous and poignant expression of the family pride and love, of the joy in seeing life revived in the very young.[8]

The interlude also suggests a national and historical continuity, for the great-great-grandmother, born not later than 1812 (p. 174), is almost as old as the nation. She had seen the pioneering days when bears and wildcats were roaming about the mountains, the distant time when Abraham Lincoln was only a little boy in a log cabin in Kentucky. Thus we are reminded of the relative youth of the United States. This historical perspective is set within a continuity of a much greater duration, that of the landscape itself.

When part I has given the reader an understanding of what a family means, he is properly prepared for parts II and III, where he learns how the sudden death of one of its members may affect it. Jay's unexpected death is the focal point of the plot; it decides, in fact, all the events subsequently occurring in the novel. A number of details that cluster around the accident, are exploited symbolically for their thematic value. For instance, in the light of his later fate Jay's crossing the river on the ferry can be interpreted as a passing from life to death, a traditional and very obvious symbol familiar to readers of Homer, Vergil, and Dante. Sosnoski finds that the cotterpin that worked loose from the steering mechanism under Jay's car and fell out, and the blow on the chin that killed him, 'symbolize the role of chance or fate or providence in death, depending on which character considers the details' (p. 177). Since we are told that the man who found Jay saw him travel terribly fast and even thought that he might be drunk (p. 123), however, there is an element of uncertainty: Jay's accident might be of his own making.

It is fascinating to speculate to what extent Agee saw in Jay's death a reflection of his own possible death. He was married three times and had four children to support, which suggests that after his first attacks of coronary thrombosis in 1951 he must have been worrying about the future situation of his dependents and may even have pictured their sorrow in his mind should his heart stop working. His awareness of death had been strong since childhood, and we know that he did not expect to become an old man. He even related his own anticipated death to the brief lives of deceased ancestors whom he wanted to honor in an autobiographical novel.[9]

External circumstances such as these rather than evidence one can find in *A Death in the Family* itself make it reasonable to assume that Agee, knowing death to be an immediate possibility at the time he was working on the novel, shaped Jay's fate in anticipation of his own.

What makes Jay's accident important is the fact that it releases the debate on the meaning of death that fills much of the novel. We know that Agee wanted to give his work a musical quality,[10] and Sosnoski thinks of *A Death in the Family* as being constructed somewhat like a jazz composition where the lead figures improvise on a theme within a recognizable framework, for instance a rondo form (p. 177), while Seib discovers in it 'an almost symphonic arrangement... a set of variations on the themes of love and death' (p. 78). The musical analogy is well chosen because it points to the central position of the death theme in the last two parts of the novel and the dramatic manner in which it is presented.

To all the members of his family Jay's death means a grave personal loss; their lives have been impoverished, for they recognize his true worth and realize what he has meant to one and all. In this situation there is only one question that fills their minds: How does this make sense? Thus the various characters become voices in a debate, where each both does his best to communicate his feelings to his listeners, and, for his own benefit, impose some kind of meaning on an event that must, after all, seem meaningless to most people. As Sosnoski points out, the drama is of the mind (p. 177), and this impression is strengthened by the fact that the not too numerous descriptive passages focus on a portrayal of states of mind.

The voices most frequently heard belong to Mary, her brother Andrew, her aunt Hannah (Lynch), her parents Joel and Catherine (Lynch), and the children Rufus and Catherine. To Sosnoski's ear these voices begin separately and distinctly, but merge as the distance between them closes (p. 179). While the voices may be distinguished as variations and counterstatements on the same theme, I cannot see that they merge into a final unity of thematic statement. Mary and her rationalist father are, for instance, as far apart as to the metaphysical implications of Jay's death at the end of the novel as they are when the debate begins. To a large extent it is such disagreement that lies behind whatever interpersonal tension there is in parts II and III of the novel. The inconclusive discussion brings out how strongly individual responses to sud-

den misfortune may vary, depending on the value systems, temperaments, and other characteristics of the persons involved. It also demonstrates how impossible it is for human beings to grasp the meaning of a fatal accident such as Jay's. But, in the course of the debate we get a moving impression of how such an accident can elicit responses of love and affection in family members in their effort to comfort each other.

One interesting aspect of the discussion is the evidence it gives of the consolation to be found in a personal religious faith. Mary's ardent belief in God positively helps her in her distress, not least because it becomes—to her and to aunt Hannah as well—a means of bridging the distance separating them from the dead husband. Suddenly both women—and Andrew as well as Mary's mother—seem to hear Jay's footsteps in the house. Touchingly, Mary even tries to speak to him and comfort him. Some may agree with Sosnoski who finds the incident lacking in realism, and see it as a hallucination that only a firm faith could produce (p. 181). Its basis would obviously be a belief in the continued existence of the spiritual part of man after death. To others it may illustrate the overwrought state of the four people involved. Leaving the question open, Agee neither excludes the possibility of communicating with the dead, nor does he affirm it.[11] The incident functions primarily to reveal character, but it is also possible to see it with Roe as an indication that the effects of death, like its causes, are working unconsciously and irrationally (p. 153). It does, at least, effectively contrast sceptics and believers within the family circle.

The incident of the butterfly flying up from a position on the coffin right above Jay's breast may also invite different responses. To the believing it may signify that death is meaningful after all, while people like old Joel may interpret it as just another natural event. It is a rather obvious, traditional symbol that may be taken to mean that our lives here and now are linked somehow to a metaphysical reality, a view that Seib seems to share (p. 84). Andrew relates the incident to his little nephew in a manner to indicate that a principle of love and beauty is holding both worlds together.

To Andrew—and, implicitly, to the author himself—this principle is the essence of the Christian religion. This becomes particularly apparent in the severe judgment passed upon the Catholic spiritual adviser Father Jackson, a hard, smug, and dogmatically rigid priest who fails to give Mary real comfort and is only willing to read part of the funeral service because Jay has not been bap-

tized. Jackson emphasizes the goodness and love of the Follets through his own mechanical performance of official duty.

While standing apart from Father Jackson, Agee is very close to Mary and Rufus in revealing what Jay's death means to them. To her it becomes a lesson in human endurance:

> She thought: this is simply what living is; I never realized before what it is. She thought: now I am more nearly a grown member of the human race; bearing children, which had seemed so much, was just so much apprenticeship. She thought that she had never before had a chance to realize the strength that human beings have, to endure; she loved and revered those who had ever suffered, even those who had failed to endure. (p. 229)

Mary herself has the notion that she has gained in maturity thanks to the experience of her husband's death, and this impression is confirmed by her thoughts, words, and action toward the end of the novel. Adversity has not embittered her or made her narrow; she is, on the contrary, more sympathetically understanding of other human beings than ever before.

The exact effect of his father's death on Rufus is one of the more controversial aspects of the novel. Roe feels that thematically it has its most important effect upon the boy. It becomes 'an actuating force' of his potentialities, turning him into a more reflective person than before (pp. 152-153). This critic seems to agree with Seib, who expresses this growth in awareness and maturity in strong terms: 'He has come to understand what death is, and, through this understanding, what life is' (p. 77). Ohlin, on the other hand, categorically denies that Rufus or any other character matures or becomes any wiser after the accident (p. 211). Roe and Seib come closer to the truth than Ohlin because the text itself clearly indicates the boy's growth in maturity. It is tacitly recognized by Andrew, when the latter confides his bitter feelings concerning Father Jackson and all family members whom he suspects of being Christians more in name than in actual fact. And, what is more important, the boy is able to grasp the ambivalent love-hatred behind his uncle's vehement accusations. We also learn that, while his father's death makes no sense to him to begin with, the story of the butterfly on the coffin helps him to see that 'it was good for his father and that lying there in the darkness did not matter so much' (p. 252). Thus Jay's passing destroys his peaceful existence but also gives Rufus a new, but limited insight that marks his first step on the road to manhood.

This new maturity is an important reason for regarding Rufus as the main figure in *A Death in the Family*.[12] Agee makes Rufus the central awareness of the novel; it is his experience of Jay's death the reader follows most consistently. The hopes of the future are centered in him; he is the figure that more than anyone else realizes the novel's major theme of death and resurrection, as pointed out by Seib (pp. 93-94).

Roe has called attention to a series of subdued polarities that exist within and about the boy. His father's death makes them visible and causes his latent personality to appear. These polarities can be traced in the family. There is, for instance, a conflict between what Mary wishes for her son, subjection to her will and her religion, and the influence of Jay. Here, Roe explains, the gaudy cap becomes important as a symbol of the independence that distinguishes man from boy, an independence that Mary does not want Rufus to have. To the boy the cap is a sign of manhood and individuality, so that when he insists on having it and Aunt Hannah gives it to him, he takes an important step forward in developing a personality and spirit like his father's (p. 152).

It is difficult to find a more striking example than the one cited above of the penetrating psychological insight which Agee manifests in portraying the children of the novel. He fills the pages with the whole gamut of observations on how they think, feel, and behave in all sorts of situations, most frequently centered on Rufus. We see his need for Jay's attention and love, his need, even, for close physical contact with his father, when sitting with him in the dark on a rock in the vacant lot. The dependence of small children on their parents for a feeling of security is one of the important motives, apparent, for instance, in the moving scene where Jay goes to comfort little Rufus, who is terrorized by nightmares and screaming for his father to come and help him.

The little people of *A Death in the Family* are depicted with great psychological insight and verisimilitude all the way through with a few exceptions. I am referring to the episode where Catherine and Rufus overhear the conversation between their mother, Aunt Hannah, and the loathsome Father Jackson. Here these ingenuous reflectors may understand a little more from the intonations of the speakers than one would normally expect children to do. Ohlin rightly feels that 'the long lyrical section describing Rufus's fear of the dark goes so far beyond anything that could possibly be characterized as the child's awareness that it becomes, in effect,

more expressive of Agee's effort to move inside the experience than of the experience itself. . .' (p. 201).

Agee nourished no illusions as to the existence of a native goodness in children; he knew that they can be terribly cruel to each other, just as he was aware that shyness may prevent many of them from expressing their true feelings to others. All of this he reveals in *A Death in the Family*.[13] Compared to his children the adult figures seem rather pale, two-dimensional, and static. Part of the reason for this may be that there is not much of a plot conflict for them to act in. There is one notable exception, Aunt Hannah, whose forceful and colorful personality stands out among the rest. While most of the other characters are flat, she is threedimensional. However, flat characters may be very useful, particularly in a novel like this, where the interrelationships of characters, as seen in a situation of great emotional strain, mean more than an exploration in depth of the individual psyche.

The fact that he did see the Follets mainly as members of a tightly knit group, the family, did not prevent the author from bringing out individual character traits through an effective use of psychological contrast, as in the instance of Jay who is set against his brother Ralph in quite a striking manner. Character traits are also revealed to us through direct description, action, and, most importantly, dialogue. When direct description occurs, it is most often presented in the form of observations by the various characters on people they have been in contact with. This is a further device by which Agee is able to maintain the direct, dramatic manner of presentation.

Although he is mainly concerned with the inner feelings and basic traits of his characters, Agee is also alive to their physical appearance and in some instances projects accurate and sensuous images of their looks, smells, sounds, and tactile qualities. External appearances may shed light on inner feelings as in the rendering of Rufus's meeting with his great-great-grandmother, a notable instance of psycho-physical parallelism.

The point of view in the novel is that of the omniscient author. Frequently Agee reveals the states of mind of his figures through the use of interior monologue. There is no direct authorial intrusion in the novel proper; this does not apply, however, to the lyrical introductory sketch, 'Knoxville: Summer 1915', where Agee, speaking in his own voice, gives a personal tone to descriptive passages of a rich emotional content, reminding us at the same time of the

autobiographical background of his novel. Although he is personally present in only one brief section of the novel, he sets the tone and establishes the moral values in the rest of the work so that the perceptive reader may easily recognize his position in relation to the characters. This consistent authorial attitude behind the characters and incidents is an important factor accounting for the satisfaction the novel gives us.

Another source of aesthetic satisfaction is its harmonious tripartite structure, beginning with the night when Jay goes to visit his father, coming to its climax in the following night of his death, and ending on the day of his funeral. The auto accident is, as pointed out by Sosnoski, the exact center of the novel. Everything else that happens either leads up to or away from that crucial event (p. 176). There are other structuring elements as well, though none as significant as the accident: its main parts (the chapters printed in book type) form a narrative whole characterized by unity of time and action. A second unifying principle, also mentioned by Sosnoski, is the fact that its many voices form a family: 'The three leading voices are the heart of the family, all others radiate outward in relation to their kinship to this center' (p. 181).

Of the structuring factors the time element deserves a closer scrutiny. There is a double time scheme in *A Death in the Family:* an objective chronological one and a subjective inner one related to Rufus' personal experiences. The events ordered in terms of the former take place within a span of four days, from the night when Jay leaves to see his ailing father to the day of his funeral. It is also necessary to consider the five italicized interludes that take us back to events in Rufus's life from a time earlier than that of the main part of the novel. Presenting the more mature boy's memories of earlier experiences, mostly from the time immediately before his sister was born, these interludes expand the novel's time scheme considerably.

Some of them leave the feeling that incidents that may be fairly brief when measured by clock time, for instance his dreams, are of a much longer duration from the point of view of Rufus' inner sense of time, owing to the intense emotional experiences they contain. A tension is produced between the two levels of time as memories of the past are seen to impinge on the present, helping to clarify the boy's feelings in the main part of the novel and to reveal some of his important traits. Seen as a totality, they are indispensable to our understanding of his development from a childish to a more

mature comprehension of the world. They also indicate that events fairly distant in time may be very close to the present self.

Of a thematic importance equal with the time element is the novel's setting. Roe, who has given its symbolic meaning an exhaustive treatment, explains that the two main themes of death and. identity are reflected in the settings in the first part. Sets of images —for instance trees, leaves, and darkness—recur with a consistency to assume a symbolic importance. Particular attention is given to the dark-light metaphors, the former being a conventional symbol of death, the latter (in the form of starlight) a symbol of truth and (as artificial lamp-light) 'representative of any influence which might rob man of his identity, identity as found in the recognition of oneness with one's past roots and future death' (p. 151). On a simpler level, it seems natural to assume that the light metaphors function symbolically within the novel's basic death-life polarity in opposition to darkness. Agee did not utilize the symbolic devices haphazardly, Roe concludes; they harmonize with the life situations of the characters (p. 152).

Thus the theme of finding an identity within the family is brought out by the description of Jay's old family home, which becomes a metaphor expressing the sturdy strength of his ancestral line:

> It was a great, square-logged gray cabin closed by a breezeway, with a frame second floor, and an enormous oak plunging from the packed dirt in front of it, and a great iron ring, the rim of a wagon wheel, hung by a chain from a branch of the oak which had drunk the chains into itself, and in the shade of the oak, which was as big as the whole corn patch they had seen, an old woman was standing up from a kitchen chair as they swung slowly in onto the dirt and under the edge of the shade, and another old woman continued to sit very still in her chair. (p. 175)

Images like this one confirm the validity of Roe's point that the setting heightens the underlying polarity of the city versus the country, the civilized versus the primordial (pp. 151-152). But it may just as well be cited as an example of the concreteness and vivid realism of many descriptions of setting in *A Death* in *the Family*. Such passages give the reader a feeling of moving inside a fictive world patterned on actual life, fashioned so as to reveal what its people are like.

Many descriptions of setting, especially in the interludes and in the vacant lot scene, establish a mood of quiet reflection, a moving sense of men in loving communion with nature and with fellow

men. Rich in sensuous appeal, they convey this sense of atmosphere mainly through a medley of finely modulated sense impressions:

> These sweet pale streamings [of hoses in the gardens] in the light lift out their pallors and their voices all together, mothers hushing their children, the hushing unnaturally prolonged, the men gentle and silent and each snail-like withdrawn into the quietude of what he singly is doing, the urination of huge children stood loosely military against an invisible wall, and gentle happy and peaceful, tasting the mean goodness of their living like the last of their suppers in their mouths; while the locusts carry on this noise of hoses on their much higher and sharper key. (p. 12)

Some of these Knoxville scenes are gems of prose poetry. They exemplify, Seib suggests, Agee's cinematic descriptive technique, 'which captures each nuance of color, shading, and light and seems to hold it for just a second in an eternal present' (p. 60).

The italicized interludes as well as the introductory sketch are partly or wholly written in a flowing lyrical style, marked by long periods and a paratactic sentence construction. Polysyndetically connected, some of the sentences express a simultaneity of events, an orchestration of sensuous details that stimulate the reader's sense perception in a coordinate effort. Here and there the steady stream of sentences connected by and is interrupted by sentences in asyndetic coordination. We also find instances of hypotaxis, where the subordination of clauses make the periods move more slowly and seem more formal. In some cases Agee employs nominal phrases in an effort to fix the attention of the reader in a moment of intense sensuous enjoyment:

> Out of any hose, the almost dead silence of the release, and the short still arch of the separate big drops, silent as a held breath, and the only noise the flattering noise on leaves and the slapped grass at the fall of each big drop. That, and the intense hiss with the intense stream; that, and that same intensity not growing less but growing more quiet and delicate with the turn of the nozzle, up to that extreme tender whisper when the water was just a wide bell of film. (p. 12)

He can also vary his style, however, by giving his lines a decidedly verbal quality, as for instance in the following quotation, where the present participles follow each other in quick succession to suggest lively action and movement:

> A street car raising its iron moan; stopping, belling and starting; stertorous; rousing and raising again its iron increasing moan and swimming its gold windows and straw seats on past and past and past, the bleak spark crackling and cursing above it like a small malignant spirit set to dog its tracks; the iron

whine rises on rising speed; still risen, faints; halts; the faint stinging bell; rises again, still fainter; fainting, lifting, lifts, faints forgone: forgotten. Now is the night one blue dew. (p. 13)

It would be difficult to find a better example than this of the novel's descriptive impressionism.

Such paragraphs illustrate Agee's extensive use of such poetical devices as alliteration, assonance, accumulation, parallelism, and repetition, devices that give many of his lines in the italicized sections a free-verse quality. This resemblance is even more marked in the passages that are set up on the page in strophic form, lines that may in a few instances assume a subtle rhythmic beat: 'Now is the night one blue dew, my father has drained, he has coiled the hose. / Low on the length of lawns, a frailing of fire who breathes' (p. 13). As Ohlin sees it, this lyrical mode both 'suggests the distance of the scene from the heart of the narration' and sometimes when it makes use of Biblical rhetoric — 'that the child's dependence on his parents is similar to the metaphysical need of God' (p. 186).[14]

Outside the introductory sketch and the introductory parts of the interludes the language is not allowed to draw attention to itself; it is held in a low key in keeping with the nature of the theme and of the characters. This impression is confirmed by the vocabulary, which is plain and predominantly Anglo-Saxon in the chapters containing dialogue or summary of thought. Only in the interludes and the narrative sections do passages with a high frequency of words of Latin origin occur.[15]

As might be expected, both dialogue and authorial narrative in *A Death in the Family* are characterized by a simple paratactic coordination of sentences. For the most part the dialogue is not a completely scenic exchange of words, but is interspersed with expository, descriptive or narrative lines that make it more varied than it would be otherwise. A good example can be found at the beginning of chapter 8:

A few minutes before ten, the phone rang. Mary hurried to quiet it. 'Hello?' The voice was a man's, wiry and faint, a country voice. It was asking a question, but she could not hear it clearly.

'Hello?' she asked again. 'Will you please talk a little louder? I can't hear. . . I said I can't hear you! Will you talk a little louder please? Thank you.'

Now, straining and impatient, she could hear, though the voice seemed still to come from a great distance.

'Is this Miz Jay Follet?'

'Yes; what is it?' (for there was a silence); 'yes, this is she.'
After further silence the voice said, 'There's been a slight—your husband has been in a accident.'
His head! she told herself. (p. 91)

The realistic quality of the dialogue appears in the fact that its sentences are mostly short, and not always complete or grammatically correct. Agee's characters pause, stress, and repeat, as people do in real life. Variations in diction, phrasing, and sentence length help the dialogue serve one of its main functions, characterization. Helpful, too, is the author's fine ear for colloquial speech, for dialect and popular idiom. The dialogue is at all times consistent with the individual character of the speakers, their social positions and special interests.[16]

How to reveal individual thought is an important concern for the author of *A Death in the Family.* Very often he prefers to do this direct. When Mary, for instance, is thinking, her thoughts may be articulated and ordered as if they were spoken out loud, in the form of monologue, prayer, or sighs. However, by leaving out the quotation marks that would have been there in a pre-realistic novel Agee tries to suggest that he is reproducing a silent cerebral process:

Throughout these days Mary had, during these breathing spells, drawn a kind of solace from the recurrent thought: at least I am enduring it. I am aware of what has happened, I am meeting it face to face, I am living through it. There had been, even, a kind of pride, a desolate kind of pleasure, in the feeling: I am carrying a heavier weight than I could have dreamed it possible for a human being to carry, yet I am living through it. It had of course occurred to her that this happens to many people, that it is very common, and she humbled and comforted herself in this thought. She thought: this is simply what living is; I never realized before what it is. She thought: now I am more nearly a grown member of the human race; bearing children, which had seemed so much, was just so much apprenticeship. She thought that she had never before had a chance to realize the strength that human beings have, to endure; she loved and revered all those who had ever suffered, even those who had failed to endure. (p. 229)

In a few instances extended passages of introspection occur in the novel, interior monologues on a high level of consciousness. Here, as elsewhere, the implied narrator's presence is generally felt, serving as selector, presenter, and guide. These passages are important for the insight they give into the feelings and qualities of the main characters. Without them, the reader would not have been in a position to understand sympathetically important characters in the

novel, notably Mary, Aunt Hannah, and Rufus. The revelation of Rufus's childish thoughts and dreams in the italicized parts of the novel is particularly touching and poignant. This is true even where the author interprets the little boy's thoughts for the reader's benefit rather than give him direct access to them. Indeed, the novel's theme makes the use of interior monologue virtually mandatory; intimate individual reactions to Jay's death have to be explored for the reader to see what both *death* and *family* really mean to those who are left behind.

These are the two themes that everything else radiates from in *A Death in the Family.* The novel's statement emerges through ordinary situations and emotions, which makes it the more meaningful and representative of universal human experience. Roe sees a key to the novel in the tension between the everyday nature of the characters and their thoughts, set in contrast with the immensity of the themes, a tension that forms an irony, especially in regard to the interaction of the characters in part II. This irony he defines as a misunderstanding of the present in terms of the future, a mistaking of referents (p. 152). In contrast to Roe I feel that its most outstanding thematic aspect is the fact that it presents death not only as the cessation of physical life but as a social event as well, meaningful especially to the bereaved, whose sense of family solidarity may be strengthened under its impact.

While Sosnoski suggests that the words of the requiem or burial service are merely meant to exorcise the evil spirit of death (p. 172), they should be understood as a reminder that death is also an event in the religious order of things. Ritual is not there to gloss over the reality of death's existence, but to help us find consolation in the belief that man's essential being does not come to an end with the decomposition of his body. Sosnoski is right, however, when he observes that Agee describes man 'as the being who, in the proximity of death, if he is not able to find meaning, introduces it' (p. 172). This is what Rufus does after his father's death. But such a description also suggests that man is unique because, being the only animal capable of reflecting on the meaning of his own physical destruction, he can, through an act of faith, give his intuitive understanding of it the validity of truth.

Several times I have pointed to the warm human atmosphere of this novel, to its compassion, and to its wonderful depiction of humor in the midst of grief. Sosnoski calls it the celebration in a low key of the unidealized common man, 'blazing with pettiness

and triviality, raging with blind faith and unquestioning love' (p. 173). This is a very accurate characterization; it is not because Agee idealizes the Follets and the Lynches that we are so taken with them; it is rather because they are equipped with flaws and follies like ourselves and still able to live together on a footing of mutual respect and love. Originating in the individual mind, this ability to love is reinforced by family tradition, by rootedness in the soil or in religious faith. It is seen in a steadily widening perspective, becoming in the end a principle of cosmic validity. The author is not sentimental about this, but develops his themes in a sober manner and with a realistic appraisal of his characters, who may not all be drawn in depth, but nevertheless serve well in the functions assigned to them. It is no mean achievement to make a work like *A Death in the Family* a success, for complex characters involved in subtle machinations of evil will often provide a material that is easier to exploit if maximum suspense and reader interest is aimed at.

In the letter to Father Flye referred to above Agee expressed the hope that he would be able to give his words a certain musical quality: 'That is, characters introduced quietly (as are the themes in symphony, say) will recur in new lights, with new verbal orchestration, will work into counterpoint and get a sort of grinding beauty—and so on.'[17] Nowhere else does he come closer to this ideal than in *A Death in the Family.*

But the novel has other salientformal features as well. Its logical structural pattern comes to mind, a pattern that Seib finds infinitely complex because of its balance and antithesis of numerous characters and events (p. 91). One remembers its precise and suggestive descriptive prose, the oral quality and easy flow of the lines in passages of authorial summary, and the fine individualization of the characters through their life-like American speech. The narrative passages are skillfully written, and the lyrical beauty and warm human feeling to be found in the italicized interludes must have gratified many a reader. The novel demonstrates that Agee had advanced very far in the direction of the goal he set himself as a college student: to achieve a control of his artistic medium that would allow him to express what he wanted to write.[18]

Agee clearly felt strongly involved in his theme, and it is doubtful whether he was able to distance himself sufficiently from it. Alfred Kazin is probably right when he observed that even if Agee tried hard to achieve objectivity, he made this effort to externalize his

private grief, and not to depict characters that he thought of as outside himself. Since the dead father is the one figure to whom all the living characters respond, it is his personality that comes through best. This circumstance gives Kazin an opportunity to bestow on Agee an accolade that he richly deserves: 'The sense of the father in this book, of both the place he filled in life and of the emptiness created by his death, is one of the most deeply worked out expressions of human feeling that I have ever read. And to think of James Agee, with his bad heart, writing with such fierce truth so soon before his own death is to marvel, all over again, how literally it is himself a writer will give to his task.'[19]

NOTES

1 Cf. his letter to Father Flye of November 19, 1930, in James Agee, *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye* (New York, 1962), pp. 45-50, especially p. 47.

2 H.M. Jones's and R.M. Ludwig's bibliography *Guide to American Literature and its Backgrounds since 1890,* 3rd ed. (Cambridge, Mass., 1964), characteristically lists it on p. 207 under the heading 'Conventional Fiction in the Twentieth Century.'

3 Michael Morris Roe, Jr., 'A Point of Focus in James Agee's *A Death in the Family,' Twentieth Century Literature,* XII (October, 1966), 149-153; James J. Sosnoski, 'Craft and Intention in James Agee's *A Death in the Family,' Journal of General Education, XX* (April 1968—Jan. 1969), 170-183; Peter H. Ohlin, *Agee* (New York, 1966); Kenneth Seib, *James Agee. Promzse and Fulfillment* (Pittsburgh, 1968). Page references to these works will appear in the text.

4 *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye,* pp. 170-171. My italics.

5 Cf. Robert Phelps's introduction to *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye,* p. 7.

6 Edwin Muir, *The Structure of the Novel* (London, 1928), p. 24.

7 James Agee, *A Death in the Family,* Avon Book Division (New York, 1957), p. 19. Page references to the novel will appear in the text.

8 Kenneth Seib (p. 80) gives this episode a more general interpretation: when Rufus kisses the old lady, 'theirs is the embrace of humanity, a love of human existence. In a final Joycean image, the 'water' that crawls along the dust under grandma's chair, Agee depicts the elemental waters of life, a visible sign of human ecstacy, and a hint of the cyclical regeneration of all earthly existence. Just as grandma waters the ground, so do we through death become the stuff from which new life springs.' I feel that Seib here attaches too great a symbolic significance to this episode, even if his interpretation has the virtue of giving it a more important thematic function in the novel.

9 Cf. Robert Fitzgerald's 'A Memoir' in his edition of James Agee, *The Collected Short Prose of James Agee* (Boston, 1968), p. 19; see also Agee's own words on p. 126.

10 Cf. *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye,* p. 47.

11 Four characters are made to believe that they experience the intrusion of the dead Jay in the house, but at least three of them are persons of a distinctly religious turn of mind. Mary's father is the only one to reject any irrational interpretation of the incident.

12 I think that Sosnoski (p. 176) is mistaken in seeing Jay as the protagonist for the reason that his decision to drive to his father's house begins the action.
13 See for instance the teasing scenes on pp. 161-170 and Rufus' dislike of Jay's brag about his son's reading ability on p. 20.
14 The example that Ohlin makes use of here is the passage on pp. 67-68 of *A* Death *in* the Family, beginning with 'I hear my father...' and ending '...lovingkindness.'
15 See for instance pp. 76-77: 'He felt consciously strong...'.
16 A good example is the way in which the author on p. 87 characterizes the lovable Negro maid Victoria through her manner of speaking to little Rufus after he offended her by asking her why her skin was so dark: 'Victoria don't pay it no mind, because she knows you. She knows you wouldn't say a mean thing to nobody, not for this world. But dey is lots of other colored folks dat don't know you, honey. And if you say that, you know, about their skins, about their coloh, they goan think you're tryin to be mean to em. They goan to feel awful bad and maybe they be mad at you too, when Victoria knows you doan mean nuthin by it, cause they don't know you like Victoria do. Do you understand me, chile?'
17 *Letters of* James *Agee* to Father *Flye*, p. 47.
18 *Ibid.*
19 See Alfred Kazin's review of *A* Death in the *Family* in Contemporaries (Boston, Toronto, 1962), p. 187.