

From Prose to Pictures
The Evolution of James Agee and *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*

By

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Abstract

James Agee was a journalist, a poet, a film critic, and screenwriter. His most famous book, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, was influenced by his work in poetry, journalism, and film. In my thesis, I analyze the evolution of *Famous Men* from its origins as muckraking journalism to modernist literature, as David Trotter defines modernism in *Cinema and Modernism*.

To begin, I establish Agee as a journalist working in a similar vein to the muckraking journalists of the Progressive Era. Specifically, I show how the original articles Agee wrote for *Fortune*, which formed the basis for *Famous Men*, were written in this muckraking tradition. As such, I compare Agee's original articles, recently published long after their rejection by *Fortune* magazine in June 2013 under the title *Cotton Tenants*, to Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York*.

Following this comparison, I examine cinematic aspects of *Famous Men* to understand how Agee's love for film guided him in his revision from *Cotton Tenants* to *Famous Men*. In doing so, I demonstrate that the revision *Famous Men* underwent can be viewed as a microcosm of the greater shift occurring in Agee's work as a whole as he moved from journalism to cinematic work, from prose to pictures.

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Short Titles

- “Rediscovered”: Agee, James, Michael A. Lofaro, and Hugh Davis. *James Agee Rediscovered: The Journals of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men and Other New Manuscripts*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 2005.
- “Journalism”: Agee, James, and Paul Ashdown. *James Agee, Selected Journalism*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 1985.
- “FM”: Agee, James, and Walker Evans. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men: The American Classic, in Words and Photographs, of Three Tenant Families in the Deep South*. Boston: First Mariner Books, 2001.
- “Letters”: Agee, James, and James Harold. Flye. *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye*. New York: G. Braziller, 1962.
- “Tenants”: Agee, James, Walker Evans, and John Summers. *Cotton Tenants: Three Families*. Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2013.
- “Other Half”: Riis, Jacob A. *How the Other Half Lives*. [Whitefish, Mont.]: Kessinger Pub., 2004.
- “Augspurger”: Augspurger, Michael. *An Economy of Abundant Beauty: Fortune Magazine and Depression America*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2004.
- “Blinder”: Blinder, Caroline. *New Critical Essays on James Agee and Walker Evans: Perspectives on Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
- “Trotter”: Trotter, David. *Cinema and Modernism*. Malden, MA, USA: Blackwell Pub., 2007.
- “Wranovics”: Wranovics, John. *Chaplin and Agee: The Untold Story of the Tramp, the Writer, and the Lost Screenplay*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

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i.....“Walker Evans,
Cotton Tenants”, 13

ii.....“Jacob Riis, *How the
Other Half Lives*”, 15

iii.....“Charlie Chaplin’s
The Little Tramp”, 47

Introduction

It was supposed to have been a simple act of journalism. But it would become something much greater. In the summer of 1936, at the height of the Great Depression, *Fortune Magazine* assigned staff writer James Agee to write a series of articles on the economics of Southern white sharecropping families living in extreme poverty. Agee and photographer Walker Evans, on loan from Roy Stryker's Farm Security Administration, spent just shy of a month living with and documenting the lives of three tenant farm families in Hale County, Alabama. For Evans, older and more mature than Agee, this was just another assignment. He was already a professional, having spent several years photographing the effects of the Depression on rural America. But the 26-year-old Agee approached the project with tremendous excitement and zeal, seeing remarkable potential for what it could become. "Best break I ever had on *Fortune*," Agee wrote in a June 1936 letter to his close friend and mentor Father James Harold Flye: "Feel terrific personal responsibility toward story; considerable doubts of my ability to bring it off; considerable more of *Fortune*'s ultimate willingness to use it as it seems (in theory) to me" (*Letters*, 92).

As Agee predicted, the articles were never published in *Fortune*. Instead, the rights to the material were turned over to Agee and Evans. In 1941, their work was published in book form as *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. It was a commercial failure. But in 1960, with the advent of New Journalism and with the Civil Rights Movement gaining momentum, people were more willing and ready to read about a marginalized class of people; the book was republished and quickly became a classic of American literature (Davis, 5). It also became known as a work of writing that defies categorization—part magazine article, part poetry, part ethnography, part modernist experiment, part self-examination, part left-wing indictment of an exploitative

capitalist system, and part spiritual quest. The book's inability to be classified according to genre remains part of its allure, part of what keeps readers and scholars returning to the book over and over again, finding new elements that previously went overlooked.

It is fitting, also, that this hard-to-classify book was written by Agee, who was relatively unclassifiable as an author. Though Lord knows he could write—beautiful prose tinged with an old-fashioned Elizabethan flair; impassioned lines of poetic journalism that seemingly burst forth from his fingertips in frenzied bouts of productivity as he clanked away at his typewriter late into the night in the *Fortune* office of Manhattan's Chrysler Building, anxious to meet a deadline. As a writer, he appeared to shift medium as easily as water transforms shape to fill a container. For instance, he could move from muckraking journalism to sardonic film reviews. For many scholars, this was a failing on his part, as it prevented him from achieving the great ranks of fiction or poetry that were within his grasp. If he had seriously dedicated himself to one medium he might be classified in the same league as Fitzgerald or Hemingway or Joyce. If only he hadn't wasted those years cranking out magazine articles for *Fortune*, film reviews for *Time*, or screenplays in Hollywood, he could have been so much more.

But that was just not Agee's way. He had his practical reasons—he needed a steady income in order to produce more serious pieces of writing. He did want very badly to be known as a “great writer” and was a prominent figure in the Greenwich Village literary scene (*Letters*, 47). But Agee also looked beyond his literary stature. This was a man who made a name for himself as a film critic by championing B-level movies, bridging the gap between high and low art. He could achieve his great writing in the pages of a magazine, a book, or in a screenplay. If we go by the labels of “fiction writer” or “poet” his output looks relatively meager. But taken all

together, his literary production was as vast, varied, and complex as the turbulent period in which he lived, which included a global depression and a world war.

But no matter the genre in which he was working, he always ended up sounding like himself, being himself, linking each of his works inextricably together in an oeuvre that sparkles with that unmistakable combination of poetic sensibility, Marxist zeal, Romantic outlook, and a cinematic way of framing things. As Alan Spiegel has noted in *James Agee and the Legend of Himself*, Agee was a “consistently unified” writer who always ended up “talking Agee-talk” (Spiegel, 18). In this paper, I choose to look at two seemingly separate poles of Agee’s output—the journalism and the film work—to understand how they fit together. Specifically, I will examine both the journalistic origins of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and how this book provides evidence of Agee’s shift toward cinematic work. In doing so, I will show that *Famous Men* is in fact a microcosm of the greater shift that was occurring in Agee’s work as a whole, as he moved steadily from prose to pictures.

Agee was an artist who, for all of his flaws and drawbacks, understood full well that the form in which he worked was merely a method to disseminate a broader message. Whatever the tool may be, he found ways to communicate his varied passions as an activist, as a Communist, or as a fundamentally religious person. Despite the fact that Agee’s fiction might be as far away in the library from his poetry as his film reviews are from *Famous Men*, he immersed himself in everything he wrote, like a musician switching instruments. Different instruments offer different ways of playing the song, which comes from the musician’s heart. Each of Agee’s major works is filled with the aching passion of an empathic soul. Whether he was writing an article on deadline or laboring over a work of fiction, Agee spoke from the heart. The message is what

mattered for him. He wanted to reach as many people as possible, which is why he was drawn to a popular medium like film.

If Agee were alive today, he might well have hundreds of thousands of Twitter followers. He might be a proficient blogger with a video feature in which he discusses his latest thoughts on film. Methods of communication change fast for us today, as they did for Agee, who lived through Hollywood's golden age and the rise of televised mass media. Though the technology changed, for Agee, the song remained the same. But in order to understand the aesthetic shift Agee made in his work, as he expanded his literary reach to include the motion pictures, we need to understand Agee the man, a man who has faded in and out of obscurity over the years, who died of a heart attack in a New York City taxi cab at the age of 45, who has engendered fierce admiration from a few loyal followers and looks of confusion from many readers, and who has been called the "literary James Dean" (Davis, 21).

Agee was born in Knoxville, Tennessee on November 27, 1909. His father, Hugh James Agee, died in a car crash on May 18, 1916 when Agee was six years old; Agee would later document this traumatic event in his Pulitzer-prize winning novel *A Death in the Family*, published posthumously in 1957. Soon afterward, Agee enrolled at St. Andrew's, an Episcopal boys boarding school near Sewanee, Tennessee. It was here that Agee met and began his lifelong friendship with Father Flye. With Father Flye's encouragement Agee subsequently enrolled at Philips Exeter Academy in Exeter, New Hampshire and later at Harvard University where he earned a degree in English literature. At these institutions, Agee developed a strong interest in the arts, particularly books and movies, and started to earn recognition and win prizes for his talent as a writer. After Harvard, Agee went immediately to work as a cub reporter for Henry Luce's *Fortune Magazine*. But it was an unusual period in *Fortune*'s history, as described by

Michael Augspurger in his history of *Fortune Magazine* in the 1930s, *An Economy of Abundant Beauty: Fortune Magazine and Depression America*. Having been founded in 1929 as a “coffee table magazine for the extremely wealthy,” *Fortune*’s editors realized the magazine’s traditionally conservative, pro-business bent was “untenable” given the harsh economic climate of the 1930s (Augspurger, 2). It did not look good to publish articles boosting big business when so many Americans were out of work and struggling to put food on the table. As such, the editors had started hiring left-leaning writers and intellectuals to imbue the magazine with a new creative energy.

From 1932 until 1936, *Fortune* employed such leftist and left-leaning writers as Dwight Macdonald, Archibald MacLeish, and James Agee, who was perhaps the most radical and disgruntled staff writer when it came to his partnership with *Fortune*. While the magazine never abandoned capitalism, it did attack, on more than one occasion, capitalist enterprises, embarking on a short-lived foray into social-reform journalism. For instance, a 1934 *Fortune* essay titled “Arms and the Men” targeted the European munitions industry for high profits garnered from soldiers’ deaths during World War I. The article “created a sensation. It helped to inspire a congressional investigation into the munitions industry and garnered praise even from *Fortune*’s rival, the *New Yorker*” (Augspurger, 176). But, for Agee, the problems of the Great Depression went deeper than economic strife; they were spiritual. And he turned to the Romantic past for inspiration in his writing. To Agee, the problems of his time represented a loss of the humanist values of such figures as Walt Whitman. As Mark A. Doty explains in *Tell Me Who I Am: James Agee’s Search for Selfhood*, writers like Whitman, William Blake, and A.E. Housman played a major role in shaping Agee’s identity as a literary artist in his formative years. For example, as a

student at Exeter Agee published poetry that celebrated nature and the cyclical nature of life, evoking themes of “birth, fertility, and death” (Doty, 18).

Moreover, like many of his peers, Agee embraced Communism as an economic and political ideology that he felt could help the suffering masses. Yet as Augspurger explains, Agee differed from his *Fortune* peers in that he did not believe the problems of his time could be solved by a mere redistribution of wealth. He saw great danger in a society dictated by standardization, mechanization, commodification, and the need for safety and stability (Augspurger, 168). To this end, in his journalism, Agee lamented what he viewed as the alienated masses of modern bourgeois America. In one article, for example, he showed his admiration for the illegal sport of cockfighting as demonstrating the lost ideal of “rugged individualism” in American culture (*Journalism*, 26). In another example, he poked fun at passengers on a cruise to Havana, Cuba for their inability to overcome middle-class inhibitions and experience the basic human pleasure of sex. And yet, not all of his journalism employed this sardonic, disaffected tone. At times, he did fit into the category of social reform, as he attempted to use journalism to bring genuine change to an issue. This was especially the case when writing about material to which he felt a personal connection, such as issues affecting the South, his former home. As will be shown, in its early iteration, *Famous Men* was one such example that showed how Agee’s strong reformist tendencies could manifest themselves in his reporting.

Agee left his position as staff writer at *Fortune* in 1938. From 1939 to 1941 he was a book reviewer for *Time* and in 1941, the same year *Famous Men* was published, Agee became a film critic for *Time*, a position he held until 1948. During this period, between 1942 and 1948, he also served as a film columnist for *The Nation*. In 1948 he left full-time reviewing to write screenplays. He wrote several scripts, both for film and television. His two most famous and

enduring films are *The African Queen* (1950) and *The Night of the Hunter* (1954). So, to reiterate, just who was Agee? He was a writer who worked across genres. He was a poet, a novelist, a journalist, a critic, and a screenwriter. He was Proletarian and a Communist. He was a devoted Catholic. He was self-destructive—he was known to load up on whiskey and Benzedrine tablets while working in his *Fortune* office (Wranovics, xvi). He was bohemian. Above all, however, he was a man who loved language, and he was a man who was passionate about the movies.

As Alan Spiegel has observed, Agee's work can and should be read as a progression, a logical path that took him on a journey inward, describing and commenting upon the modern world as he made his way toward a deeper understanding of his own moralist, religious, and proletarian views (Spiegel, 18). In reading Agee's oeuvre as fundamentally autobiographical, Spiegel is joined by Doty, who views all of Agee's art as motivated by a "questing introspection" that was directly tied to his "religious consciousness" and his search for an "earthly/heavenly" father figure (Doty, xii-xiii). *Famous Men* is, in many ways, more about Agee than anything else, and includes direct Christian references in Agee's framing of the Gudger tenant family members. Moreover, Agee's final two pieces of extended prose were autobiographical fiction—*The Morning Watch* (1951) and *A Death in the Family* (1957), both of which include strong religious themes.

As Agee's friend and fellow writer Robert Fitzgerald has noted, Agee was an artist who began in verse and "found himself most memorably in prose" (Fitzgerald, Davis, 271). I will expand on this notion by proposing that Agee eventually found himself most memorably in pictures. I posit that Agee's work was building all along toward filmic writing, forged by a cinematic outlook that would shape the latter portion of his career. My method for doing so will

be to examine how Agee used his cinematic outlook to revise and transform his most notable work: *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.

Agee scholarship to date has focused on *Famous Men* without much consideration of the original articles Agee wrote for *Fortune*. In June 2013, seventy-seven years after the original publication of *Famous Men*, these articles were finally published in book form under the title *Cotton Tenants: Three Families*.¹ By comparing *Famous Men* with its journalistic origins, I will demonstrate that Agee's cinematic sensibilities aided him in transforming his *Fortune* articles from a work of social-reformist journalism into a work of modernism as defined by David Trotter in *Cinema and Modernism*.

My argument is divided into two chapters. The first chapter, "James Agee the Muckraker" compares Agee and Jacob Riis, the famed muckraking journalist, in order to affirm the strong social reformist tradition of journalism in which *Famous Men* had its roots. My second chapter, "*Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, The Tramp, and a Cinematic Aesthetic," describes how Agee's passion for film guided him in revision, how *Famous Men* is itself structured like a silent film, and how Agee used this cinematic aesthetic to portray the tenant farmers as figures who exemplified the Christian ideals that permeate much of Agee's work. In contrast to Agee's original articles that use facts and social commentary to produce outrage in readers, *Famous Men* immerses readers in an imagistic world that makes the tenant farmers subjects with which to empathize, deserving of respect and dignity, as opposed to objects deserving of pity. This empathy Agee creates, I will show, mirrors the empathy audiences may have felt for the comedic icon of the silver screen whom Agee loved: Charlie Chaplin.

¹Though this title was not the exact one Agee envisioned, it does pay homage to the title he originally envisioned for *Famous Men*. In his view, *Famous Men* was to be one part of an even bigger work that would be called *Three Tenant Families*.

Chapter 1

James Agee the Muckraker

James Agee was deeply influenced by the major cultural and political events and movements of his time. These included the Great Depression, the New Deal, the struggle between communism and fascism, World War II, the beginning of the Cold War, and the rise of mass media. A communist for much of the 1930s, Agee remained politically committed to communism throughout his early writing career. Many of Agee's contemporaries were employed by government agencies like the Works Progress Administration and the Farm Security Administration. Some wrote plays for the New Deal's Federal Theatre Project. Others exhibited at institutions like the Museum of Modern Art. Like others, Agee was involved in documenting the economic turmoil of the 1930s. Agee did this documentation for *Fortune Magazine*. A regular in New York City's Greenwich Village art scene, Agee was just one of many writers and artists employed by mass-circulation magazines. Agee's most famous work in this vein was the photo-text collaboration with photographer Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, originally published in 1941. Since that time *Famous Men* has become a classic example of Great Depression documentation, an intimate portrait of the lives of three tenant farm families that describes them with nuance, respect, and dignity. Yet *Famous Men* is also a curious, unclassifiable work that has baffled readers and scholars for decades. The general consensus is that the book began as journalism, was rejected by "uptight" editors at *Fortune* who could not tolerate Agee's overly expressive prose, and was then turned into a work of ethnographic modernism, reminiscent of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, a text that greatly influenced Agee.

Contrary to the common image of Agee as a discontented poet who emerged from the shackles of *Fortune* to write a book about an exploitative capitalist system that was different from all such similar projects in its “experimental form” (Davis, xv), I show that *Famous Men* began as a piece of traditional journalism and that this origin should not be ignored. By understanding the journalistic origins of *Famous Men*, and Agee’s social and political motivations, we can understand why he decided to ultimately write such a strange, genre-defying book. Despite having his articles rejected by his *Fortune* editors, in writing both the original articles and *Famous Men* Agee was motivated by a journalistic desire to reveal the worst parts of society for readers in the hopes of aiding those afflicted by poverty. Eventually, in *Famous Men*, he chose to influence readers by incorporating techniques from film to demonstrate the universality of the tenant farmers’ situation. A man who came to revere film for its populist tendencies and its ability to reach people in a non-elitist fashion, it fits with Agee’s progression as an artist that the later text, *Famous Men*, attempted to reach people in the same way that a cinematic figure like Charlie Chaplin attempted to reach people: through images that recorded and recreated the struggle of people’s everyday, contemporary reality.

As a reporter in Henry Luce’s magazine empire, Agee covered topics that ranged from cockfighting to the unethical business practices associated with malaria medication. His prose, however, was often more poetic than his editors may have liked—it was not terribly unusual for Agee’s articles to be rejected by his editors, as his writing often strayed too far in tone from the assignment he was given (Augsburger, 214). But Agee did produce articles, such as his series on the Tennessee Valley Authority, that Henry Luce himself called some of the finest writing ever published in *Fortune*. With the publication of *Cotton Tenants*, we can now compare the original articles Agee turned in to his *Fortune* editors and *Famous Men*. Previously, scholars have had to

imagine what exactly it was Agee wrote that could not be published in the pages of *Fortune*. But what he originally wrote was, quite simply, journalism. It may have been considered too verbose, too empathetic toward the tenant families, or just too long; Agee was known for his unwillingness to edit his articles. The fact is we do not know exactly why *Fortune* rejected Agee's articles.

We do know, however, that when Agee and Evans returned to New York after their time in Alabama, *Fortune* had already begun its shift back toward a much more pro-business editorial stance. As Augspurger explains, Henry Luce had become disturbed by the liberal direction the magazine had taken. He thus decided to re-emphasize "the magazine's commitment to capitalism in 1937" (Augspurger, 2). This decision made the previous period, the years 1932 to 1936, an anomaly in the magazine's history. The radical writers that *Fortune* had briefly employed started to leave. It seems likely that this editorial shift contributed to Agee's editors' increased intolerance for articles depicting the horrors capitalism imposes on the poorest and most disadvantaged members of society. Very much a part of the muckraking tradition of journalism, Agee's articles exemplify the kind of reporting rooted in social protest that was a staple of American journalism in the Progressive Era.

To illustrate my point, I have chosen to compare *Cotton Tenants* to one of the most important and well-known examples of early muckraking journalism: Jacob Riis's investigation of New York City tenement housing at the turn of the twentieth century, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York* (1890). Although Riis wrote about urban poverty and how it affected recent immigrants to the United States, his methods and attitude toward his project shed valuable light on how Agee originally approached his assignment on white Alabama tenant farmers in the summer of 1936. Riis's book, for instance, was one of the

first examples of journalism to incorporate photographs into the storytelling process. But while the photographic element is important in connecting these two works (given Evans' famous photographs in *Famous Men*), I am most concerned with Agee's voice. Specifically, I am interested in the fury he felt at seeing the great social injustice of tenant farming being so thoroughly and easily ignored by the rest of America. I will show how these original *Fortune* articles share with *How the Other Half Lives* Riis's sense of moral outrage at witnessing people caught in the vicious cycle of poverty. Moreover, by drawing on other examples of Agee's journalism for *Fortune*, and excerpts from his personal journals², I will show how Agee wrote these original articles with the goal of ameliorating the situation of cotton tenantry in the South, similar to the way that Riis wrote to improve the lot of tenement dwellers in New York City housing in the late nineteenth century.

The image often associated with Agee is that of the quintessential bohemian artist, a man who filled his nights in Greenwich Village with hard drinking and animated discussions of art, film, and literature. These visions of Agee certainly have some basis in fact. But it is also true that Agee did serious, thoughtful, and important journalism. Agee was more than just proud of this journalism; he was fiercely idealistic about it, believing it could improve and strengthen society. *Cotton Tenants* gives us a glimpse into this version of Agee, a version that is often disregarded or seen as trivial in the making of a great American artist. Spiegel, for example, views Agee as a "consistently unified" writer, but dismisses Agee's commercial work—the journalism and the film scripts, to be specific—as "minor" and "marginal" (Spiegel, 18). But to

² These notebooks—consisting of manuscripts, personal journal entries, and working drafts—were assembled and published by Agee scholars Hugh Davis and Michael A. Lofaro in 2005 as *James Agee Rediscovered: The Journals of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men and Other New Manuscripts*. The content is presented exactly as it appeared in Agee's notebooks. The journals are not all dated but they are mainly from the 1930s and 1940s, Agee's most prolific decades as a writer.

dismiss the commercial aspect of Agee's career is to ignore a crucial part of his goal as a writer: to communicate with audiences on a broad level, through popular mediums. Journalism was an important part of this development. The passion Agee felt while doing his best reporting would stay with him as he eventually looked for new aesthetic tools in transforming *Cotton Tenants* into *Famous Men*. And his journalism placed Agee in line with the muckrakers of earlier years, those who believed in the power of journalism to reform, empower, and enlighten.

Cotton Tenants, Riis, and Muckraking

The term "Muckraker" came into use after a speech given by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1906. In this speech, Roosevelt acknowledged the work being done by investigative journalists to expose political and economic corruption in American cities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Domínguez, *Other Half*, 243). Roosevelt compared these journalists—whose ranks notably included such figures as Jacob Riis, Lincoln Steffens, Upton Sinclair, and Ida Tarbell—to a character from John Bunyan's 1678 book *Pilgrim's Progress*, the "Man with the Muck-rake." This character is incapable of seeing the good in society; instead, his attention stays trained on the filth at his feet as he rakes the "muck" (Domínguez, *Other Half*, 243). Roosevelt's term was an apt label for these early practitioners of watchdog journalism who made names for themselves by writing stories about some of society's worst problems and publishing them in popular newspapers and magazines. Muckraking was an activist form of documentation, undertaken by those with a clear vision for what they wanted to see reformed by their fellow citizens and government officials. Riis's *Other Half* clearly fits this description, as does Agee's original *Fortune* articles about Alabama tenant farmers.



(Walker Evans, *Cotton Tenants*)

James Agee wrote about tenant farmers and sharecroppers in the South in the 1930s. While the terms “sharecropper” and “tenant farmer” are often conflated, there is a small but important distinction between the two terms, as explained by Dale Maharidge in his 1989 follow-up to *Famous Men*, titled *And Their Children After Them*³. For example, The Woods’ and Ricketts’ families were tenant farmers⁴. They worked in what were called “thirds” and “fourths” (Maharidge, 14). They provided their own farm equipment and mules, and, depending on the arrangement, they might give to the landlord one-fourth of the corn they grew and one-third of the cotton. Out of the proceeds of the crop that was left over, they would have to pay the landowner for the cost of seed and fertilizer as well as interest. They would also owe back rations money that had been advanced to them by the landlord to pay for basic living supplies like food, including more interest. But often, they were not advanced cash and had to buy rations at a company store. The Gudgers were sharecroppers, the poorest kind of tenant farmers⁵. They did not have their own tools or mules. They had only their physical labor to offer. Landowners provided sharecroppers with land, tools, and mules. In exchange, sharecroppers were forced to give up more of their crop than tenants did, and an average of 40 percent interest (Maharidge,

³ Maharidge’s Pulitzer-prize winning text, undertaken with photographer Michael Williamson, shows what became of the three tenant-farm families documented in *Famous Men*. It also examines how the South changed following the decline of Cotton as the primary source of the region’s economy.

⁴ These are two of the three families that appear in *Cotton Tenants* and in *Famous Men*. “Woods” and “Ricketts” are the pseudonyms that Agee gave them in *Famous Men*. In *Cotton Tenants* the families’ real names are used—“Fields” and “Tingles.”

⁵ The Gudger family’s real name, “Burroughs,” is used in *Cotton Tenants*.

14). This system of tenant farming trapped people in an oppressive system of debt, ensuring they would stay through the harvest and be there to work again the next year (Maharidge, 14). As Agee would observe, there was essentially no hope of escape for these tenants.



(Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*)

Jacob Riis wrote about New York City tenements at the turn of the twentieth century. This period was a time of massive immigration to the United States. Over 23 million European immigrants arrived on American shores between 1880 and 1919, with the majority of them settling in New York (Domínguez, *Other Half*, 248). Most of these poor immigrants, who hailed from such countries as Germany, Italy, and Poland, lived in tenement housing, particularly on New York City's Lower East Side (Domínguez, *Other Half*, 248). These tenements were often tightly cramped spaces that were poorly constructed and unsanitary. Crime and prostitution were rampant. By reporting on these conditions, Riis cemented his legacy as a crusading muckraker and the "Grandfather of photojournalism" (Domínguez, *Other Half*, 247). A Danish immigrant to New York, Riis had been empathetic toward the poor from a young age. In 1887, he began spending long stretches of time in the tenements, where he applied his skill with photography (Domínguez, *Other Half*, 253). In 1890, he published *How the Other Half Lives*, one of the first texts to use photographs instead of engraved illustrations (Domínguez, *Other Half*, 247). *How the Other Half Lives* became a landmark example of activist journalism undertaken to expose the horrors of poverty. In doing so, it would have a major effect on changing public policy toward an

underclass in society. Riis was a pioneer in this regard. Forty-six years later, Agee wrote *Cotton Tenants*, which also fits into this tradition.

In *Cotton Tenants*, Agee uses his observations of the tenant farmers to make broad conclusions about the oppressive system of tenant farming. In the first chapter of *Cotton Tenants*, titled “Business,” Agee describes the sense of despair afflicting the Tingles family. As a result of their never-ending debts that keep them trapped in the cycle of tenant farming, they no longer view life as something they can control. Agee compares them to objects floating in water swayed from one direction to another by outside forces. In his description, Agee’s voice becomes diagnostic as he boils down for readers the precise factors that caused this family’s plight. In a rather didactic tone, Agee arrives at a neat conclusion about the cycle of poverty. He writes:

The Tingles no longer think of what life they have in terms of something in the least controllable from season to season or even from day to day: they welter on their living as on water, from one hour to the next, flashing into brief impulse, disorganized and numbed; never quite clear, for instance, who will cook the next meal, or when. Poverty caused their carelessness; their carelessness brings them deeper poverty; disease runs in among them, free as hogs in a garden: and so the intermultiplying goes on, in steady degeneration (*Tenants*, 57).

There is a noticeable distance here between Agee and his subjects. Both the Tingles and the subject of poverty feel like they are from another world, things to be looked at and observed the way a scientist might take field notes while studying a foreign species. Agee’s voice is removed, allowing him to make succinct conclusions about poverty. These conclusions, in turn, can inform readers of what has gone wrong. The Tingles are careless because they are poor, and their carelessness perpetuates their poverty. By understanding precisely what is wrong, readers are better equipped to help fix the situation.

Granted, it should be noted that Agee’s efforts in this passage to reach for concrete, definite conclusions about Southern poverty cause him to blur the fact that he is dealing with

whole, complex individuals. His language toward the end of the passage employs an anthropological lens in explaining why the Tingles will continue on their downward spiral. While both Agee and the Tingle family members are white, they come from distinct social classes: Agee is well educated and lives among the wealthy elite in New York; the Tingles are poor and uneducated. They inhabit different worlds. Agee wants to get to the root of their problem in order to help them. In doing so, however, he turns the Tingles themselves into a problem to be solved, as opposed to nuanced, holistic individuals. This is not to denigrate Agee's reporting. Rather, it is to suggest that this mode of reporting emphasized the larger social issues, not particularities of the individuals. Agee was working on a deadline; he was constrained by the magazine's editorial limitations and page-space limitations (despite routinely ignoring the constraints *Fortune* placed on him); and his goal was large-scale social change. As a result, the smaller complexities of individual character had to be sacrificed in order to adequately present the larger issues in the time and space he was allotted by his editors.

Compare Agee's conclusions about the Tingle family members to the conclusions Riis draws while observing the homeless children of tenement families who are too poor to care for them. In the chapters of *How the Other Half Lives* titled "The Problem of the Children" and "Waifs of the City's Slums" Riis describes the situation of homeless children in the New York City tenements. He notes that the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children has had to assist 138,891 homeless children (Riis, *Other Half*, 145). Further, he emphasizes that homelessness among the city's children is a key problem that must be dealt with if people are to address the issue of poverty as a whole. He writes, "The concurrent testimony of all who have to undertake it at a later stage: that the young are naturally neither vicious nor hardened, simply weak and undeveloped, except by the bad influences of the street, makes this duty all the more

urgent as well as hopeful” (Riis, *Other Half*, 146). Riis’s language carries a sense of urgency, as though he is proselytizing from a podium on why people should adopt his religion. And, in a way, he is. Except instead of religion he has moral outrage and a sense of civic duty to which he believes all citizens should adhere. Lodging for homeless children is crucial and must be maintained and increased, he argues, while also highlighting the work done by the Children’s Aid Society in housing more than three hundred thousand homeless children in New York City over the span of thirty-seven years.

Riis, like Agee, emphasizes the large-scale social issues, not the details of individual lives. His portrayals of the actual slum children are broad and nonspecific. For example, he writes, “Only the poor abandon their children. The stories of richly-dressed foundlings that are dished up in the newspapers at intervals are pure fiction” (Riis, *Other Half*, 147). Similar to Agee’s summation of the cycle of poverty that grips the Tingles, Riis notes of the homeless children that “One gets a glimpse of the frightful depths to which human nature, perverted by avarice bred of ignorance and rasping poverty, can descend, in the mere suggestion of systematic insurance for profit of children’s lives” (Riis, *Other Half*, 151). Riis—who came to the United States a poor immigrant—likely identified with the situation of those he observed in the tenements. He spent long stretches of time embedded in these slums, getting know their intricacies, their people, and their problems. The slums became his beat, and he reported on it superbly. Still, because his goal was large-scale social reform, the small intricacies of the tenement dwellers’ lives are glossed over. Like Agee, Riis’s voice appears rather distant, like he is peering in on the lives of others, only visiting for a short period of time, a kind of tourist in a foreign setting. In many ways, Riis presents his subject matter in the form of a guidebook for the horrors of slum life, featuring such headings as “The Italian in New York” and “Chinatown.”

Throughout the text, Riis's goal is clear: to expose the destitute poverty of the tenements in order to arouse people to help change the situation. As Susan Sontag notes in *On Photography*, "Jacob Riis's images of New York squalor in the 1880s are sharply instructive to those unaware that urban poverty in late-nineteenth-century America was really that Dickensian" (Sontag, 23). Apparently, neither Agee nor Riis thought that painting a detailed portrait of their subjects was necessary to persuade middle-class readers to remediate economic inequality. By pinpointing the root causes of these social problems, I claim that they hoped to suggest the means to find solutions. In *Cotton Tenants*, the time and the place of his subject matter may have changed, but Agee's underlying motivation was comparable to Riis's. Moreover, when Agee does incorporate specific details of his subjects into the text, they are used as another means of making or illustrating broad definitions about the issues of cotton tenantry.

In *Cotton Tenants*, Agee uses subtle observations of the tenant family members to draw further conclusions about cotton tenantry and, in doing so, make the problems suffered by the tenant families more realistic and accessible for his middle- and upper-class readers. In the opening to a chapter on the tenant farmers' clothing, he insists that his observations are applicable to all tenants as opposed to just the individuals he observes. He writes:

Some pretty silly attitudes could be and have been struck over the subject of clothes: such as reproaching society for the fact that tenant farmers do not plow in swallowtails. The fact remains, however, that clothes are powerfully significant psychologically and socially: in every garment you see there is a badge and division of class as distinct as any uniform could effect and far more subtly exact; and a human being is shaped by the clothes he wears quite as much as by the amount of money he is accustomed to feel the presence, or lack thereof, in his pocket; and as the world is today the future of a marriageable girl, for instance, can be profoundly influenced by what clothes she can or cannot wear (*Tenants*, 103).

These observations of clothing reveal Agee's ideas about class and the exploitative system of labor to which he is bearing witness. Like a tour guide explaining the significance that clothing

held for an ancient race, Agee's descriptions have an anthropological tone. He could be making summations about all tenant farmers. Additionally, the broadness of his declarations make his ideas applicable to people who are not tenants at all. In these sentences, Agee is not just writing about tenant farmers. He is writing about anybody who relies on clothing as a way to engage socially with the world. His writing assumes a universal tone—these observations on clothing could apply to all people, everywhere. The society of the tenant farmers is Agee's society as much as it is their society. Agee notes that clothing can be just as powerful a means of asserting one's humanity as money. Although the tenant farmers may not have much money, they still have the clothes on their backs, which Agee suggests is an equally legitimate means of human identification. Furthermore, Agee's language compels readers to feel not just sympathy for the tenants, but compassion as well. By demonstrating that such symbolic items as clothing can mean the same thing for the tenant families as it does for Agee himself, he moves one step closer to bridging the gap between the world of the farmers and the world of his *Fortune* readers. Agee was regarded by many of his peers as a deeply compassionate soul; it seems natural that he should instill his reporting on a personal topic for him with this sense of compassion (Doty, 22). As he described in his personal journals, Agee initially approached the tenant farming assignment with the passion of a community organizer. He felt for the plight of those he was covering, and wanted to do all he could to help them.

***Fortune*, Communism, and the South**

A Tennessean by birth, Agee felt a strong kinship toward the South, its people, and its issues. His father was descended from Tennessee mountain people who were also tenant farmers, meaning that the South and tenant farming were in Agee's blood. He writes in a 1937 journal entry, "I was born in the South. I spent my first fifteen years about equally divided between a

Tennessee city and Tennessee mountains...In a limited, entirely unstudied way I knew a good deal about the south in terms of some of its parts, and I a great deal more than loved this country” (Agee, *Rediscovered*, 12-13). In addition, Agee had been politically engaged in Southern issues before ever going to Alabama in 1936 for the *Fortune* assignment. For example, he had already been attending meetings for the Committee for the Defense of Southern Workers, a part of the International Labor Defense of the Communist Party that was ultimately absorbed into the League for Southern Labor (Agee, *Rediscovered*, 13). In a 1937 journal entry Agee describes how the excitement he felt upon receiving the tenant farming assignment was directly tied to his desire to be of use in improving such problems as rural poverty. He writes, “Here was a chance to see more than I otherwise could have short of learning how to be of use as an organizer, a thing I had considered but never done anything about” (Agee, *Rediscovered*, 13). Agee viewed his upcoming time in the South as an opportunity to put his political ideas into action. The first action he took, upon receiving the assignment, was to get in touch with a Communist labor organizer in the South (Davis and Lofaro, *Rediscovered*, xxviii).

While Agee’s political ambitions never amounted to direct action, they influenced him as he began his reporting the tenant farming assignment. In another journal entry from 1937, Agee describes the three-tiered structure he initially envisioned for the articles: one piece on the tenant family members themselves; a second piece analyzing the economics of cotton tenantry and government efforts to change the situation; and a third piece on unions and organizers. He was ecstatic to begin the assignment. This excitement showed when he wrote in his journal in 1937 after the original articles had already been rejected, “When I was offered the story...I was within seconds as shifted in state of mind as I might have been if I had changed personalities” (Agee, *Rediscovered*, 14). In short, Agee approached the tenant farming assignment with an activist’s

mindset. But while he likely felt a deeper connection to the tenant farming assignment than he did to many of his other *Fortune* articles (given his political tendencies and his southern roots) a look at examples of Agee's other journalism reveals that this sense of compassion for his subjects had already been present in some of the other reporting Agee had undertaken for *Fortune* throughout the 1930s.

Before receiving the tenant farming assignment, Agee had demonstrated his desire and ability to write about problems plaguing the South in a fashion reminiscent of Riis. In 1933 and 1935, Agee wrote two articles for *Fortune* on the New Deal's Tennessee Valley Authority, a federally owned corporation created in 1933 to help provide navigation, flood control, electricity generation, fertilizer manufacturing, and economic development in the Tennessee Valley.

Although Agee's tone in these articles is more restrained than in *Cotton Tenants*, he still hints at his communist political views and his idealistic desire to see the government bring about positive change in the common people's lives. In his 1933 article, "Tennessee Valley Authority," Agee briefly outlines the TVA's intended goal of improving infrastructure in the valley in addition to helping the valley's farmers. Throughout the article, Agee reveals his enthusiasm for the TVA's experiments. He writes:

Apparently it isn't quite possible to undertake such comprehensive responsibilities without a somewhat Utopian gleam in the eye: at any rate TVA has it. The coordination TVA seeks is social as well as industrial. In other words, it involves human beings. The TVA vision runs something like this: the natural forces and resources in the valley will be developed with one eye on the long future and the other on the immediate welfare of the people. Farmers will till only the good and tillable soil. The rich resources of the valley will be developed by relatively small industrial groups; production will be governed more by local than by outside demand (*Journalism*, 14).

Agee uses the term "Utopia," a word that appears throughout other examples of his journalism, notably a February 1934 essay he wrote on the malaria medication Quinine. That essay is titled "Cinchona—Quinine to You." In this essay, he indicts a Dutch company called the Dutch Kina

Bureau for keeping the Quinine price high and thereby preventing millions of people from getting access to vital malaria medication. In this essay, Agee notes, “the utopian distribution of quinine at utopian prices must wait upon the utopian state” (Agee, Volume IX *Fortune* Number 2, 77). In both the Quinine article and the TVA article Agee’s language reflects his Marxist views. He is hopeful for the coming utopian socialist state. This way of thinking is further developed as Agee praises the TVA for focusing on the human element of social reform, in addition to the industrial element. As Agee notes in the article, “The coordination TVA seeks is social as well as industrial. In other words, it involves human beings” (*Journalism*, 14). For Agee, the Tennessee Valley is first and foremost about the people who live there and reasserting the importance of human interests over any business or industrial interests.

As a business reporter for *Fortune*, Agee regularly sought out the human element to his stories, focusing on the alienation ordinary people were suffering in an era of economic downturn and mass industrialization. Moreover, much of Agee’s work contained Romantic elements of anti-industrialism and a love for nature, much like such literary predecessors as Walt Whitman or William Wordsworth. In numerous letters Agee wrote to Father Flye, he routinely lauds figures like William Blake and Jonathan Swift, in addition to “Christianity” and “Communism” (*Letters*, 94) With almost childlike naïveté and innocence, Agee professes his love for these people and ideologies because they represent the power of love to uplift humanity. The ideals of Christ, Marx, and Blake, whom Agee considered personal heroes of his, figure prominently in his writing and thinking. For Agee, these people understood the best way to live in harmony with the world. They knew how to truly care for other people. Agee incorporated these ideals into his journalism. As such, for Agee, a key reason to be optimistic about the TVA is because it is returning the Tennessee Valley to the local farmers, who have been robbed by the

industrial world in which they live, and which caused the horrors of the Great Depression. Similarly, when Agee was first assigned the tenant farming assignment, he was instructed by his editors to write about the economics of sharecropping. As Agee describes in a June 1936 letter to Father Flye, he was assigned to do a story on “a sharecropper family” and a “study of Farm Economics in the South” and also “the several efforts to help the situation: i.e. Govt. and state work; theories & wishes of Southern liberals; whole story of the 2 Southern Unions” (*Letters*, 92). Instead, what Agee turned in to his *Fortune* editors were articles that showed how the economics of cotton tenantry trapped tenant farmers in a dehumanizing cycle of poverty, much the way Riis showed how the tenements bred entrenched poverty, unless people outside of the tenements acted to change the situation.

Rather than write a simple article about the economics of tenant farming, Agee used this subject matter in *Cotton Tenants* to chastise an exploitative economic system and portray the dehumanizing elements of this economic system. For example, in his introduction for *Cotton Tenants*, Agee writes:

A civilization which for any reason puts a human life at a disadvantage; or a civilization which can exist only by putting human life at a disadvantage; is worthy neither of the name nor of continuance. And a human being whose life is nurtured in an advantage which has accrued from the disadvantage of other human beings, and who prefers that this should remain as it is, is a human being by definition only, having much more in common with the bedbug, the tapeworm, the cancer, and the scavengers of the deep sea (*Tenants*, 34).

From the outset, Agee’s moral outrage screams off the page, like the rallying cry from a French revolutionary soldier about to storm the Bastille. Because civilization has permitted people to live in this dehumanizing system of cotton tenantry, it does not deserve the moniker of “civilization” at all. Agee proceeds to scold his middle-class readers for allowing such abject poverty to persist right under their noses. Similar to Agee’s use of the tenants’ clothing to make a

broader statement about all humanity, Agee here instills guilt in readers for their apathy. In the opening, he announces his moral and political viewpoints, the perspective from which he will evaluate the scenes of distress he observes in Alabama. He tells the reader that these articles are about human beings who have been victims of an unfair system. The readers of *Fortune* are assumedly prosperous. Agee has asserted that the reason for their prosperity is a result of them keeping those less fortunate in their place, preventing them from elevating their social class. Like the system of tenant farming that keeps tenants trapped in an ongoing system of debt, the whole capitalist system, on a grander scale, keeps people at the bottom of the social hierarchy trapped in a brutal cycle, according to Agee. As he notes, simply improving the lot of the tenant families will do little in terms of addressing the grander problems at play that caused the lot of cotton tenantry in the first place. He writes, “We would be dishonest for instance to cheer ourselves with the thought that in ameliorating the status of the cotton tenant alone, any essential problem whatever would be solved” (*Tenants*, 36). The cotton tenant is a subset of an unequal society. Agee asserts that he is at fault; his middle-class readers are at fault; anyone and everyone is at fault who prosper from capitalism and are content with the system’s necessary exploitation of the weak for its success.

In such a landscape, Agee was not only worried about increasing inequality, but also the horrific outcome that could arise from poverty and increasingly intense class resentment. It is important to remember that Agee was writing at a time when many artists and intellectuals viewed fascism and communism as ideologies that were competing for the spot of dominant political and social ideology in the Western world. As Agee scholars Hugh Davis and Michael Lofaro have noted, at the time he wrote *Cotton Tenants*, Agee was becoming increasingly worried that the apathy of the bourgeois class was leading not only to further economic

downturn, but also to a political landscape in which fascism could potentially triumph. This battle, as described in Agee's personal journals, was being played out in the Spanish Civil War, and also at home, embodied by "populist demagogues such as Huey Long⁶ and radio priest Father Coughlin⁷," figures whom Agee feared (Davis and Lofaro, *Rediscovered*, xxix). If communism did not win out, Agee feared the only other outcome could be fascism.

Diverging from Riis

Similar to Agee's introduction to *Cotton Tenants*, Riis begins *Other Half* with grand accusations against his society. Though in Riis's case, he was influenced by the class divisions of the Gilded Age, not the Great Depression and the rise of fascism that influenced Agee. Riis writes in the opening lines to his introduction:

Long ago it was said that 'one half of the world does not know how the other half lives.'⁸ That was true then. It did not know because it did not care. The half that was on top cared little for the struggles, and less for the fate of those who were underneath, so long as it was able to hold them there and keep its own seat (Riis, *Other Half*, 1).

Riis and Agee may well have been writing about the same topic, so similar are their views and language. Like Agee's *Cotton Tenants*, Riis's text is predicated on the notion that the wealthy can only keep their wealth by subjugating the less fortunate. Riis's text, however, reads as a more pragmatic handbook for how to solve problems of poverty. *Cotton Tenants*, though filled with the same kind of social outrage, does not do much in the way of explicitly stating how readers can change the situation. Riis, for example, encourages tax rebates for people who build "model tenements" and for the "summary punishment of landlords, or their agents, who persistently violate law and decency" (Riis, *Other Half*, 228). In this way, Riis argues, it would

⁶ Huey Long: 1893-1935.

⁷ Father Charles Coughlin: 1891-1979.

⁸ "The earliest known source of this proverb is from the 1532 text *Pantagruel* by Rabelais: *a moytié du monde ne scait comment l'autre vit* (ii. xxxii.), one half of the world knows not how the other lives" (Riis, 271).

become unprofitable for a landlord to own a bad tenement, and thereby slowly encourage the overall improvement of tenement conditions.

Perhaps Agee did not have enough time to determine specific solutions, or perhaps Agee thought the situation was unsolvable. Toward the end of *Cotton Tenants* he notes that “the trap the tenant is caught in is not only as huge as the structure of his civilization but as intimate as every breath he draws, the general inter-class tone or taste of air in the South peculiarly tranquil” (*Tenants*, 222). Agee imagines a South seemingly stuck in molasses, impossible to change. Agee writes that class relations are not tense in the South because the general consensus among those at the bottom of the Southern social system is that there is nothing to be done, no way out, no way to improve. At the end of *Cotton Tenants*, Agee calls for the continued interest of organizers, sympathizers, investigators, and reporters in the problems of the South (*Tenants*, 224). He urges these people to seek “the truth” about the South, as opposed to stereotypical visions of the Southern poor as backward and unsuitable for mainstream society (*Tenants*, 224). It is possible that Agee felt the problems plaguing Southern society were too great to be solved through practical efforts, as Riis attempts in *Other Half*. Yet it is also possible that Agee felt he had to present these problems in a different way, one that would employ visual tools to convey the issues suffered by the tenant farmers. As will be shown, the need to tell “the truth” of what he observed about cotton tenantry in the South would stay with Agee as he revised his articles from *Cotton Tenants* into *Famous Men*. But how was Agee to tell a story of these people outside of traditional journalism that would maintain their essential humanity, while also expressing Agee’s political, religious, and ideological views? *Fortune* had rejected his articles. So, if not journalism, then what? It would have to be something newer, a medium that had the necessary power to capture people’s attention.

In a letter from September 1936 sent to Father Flye, Agee expresses his doubts about the limitations of writing, of journalism, to tell the story in the proper way. Agee writes:

The trip was very hard, and certainly one of the best things I've ever had happen to me. Writing what we found is a different matter. Impossible in any form and length *Fortune* can use; and I am now so stultified trying to do that, that I'm afraid I've lost ability to make it right in my own way. Well, I don't know (*Letters*, 94).

Agee still wanted to tell the story of the tenant families. But magazine journalism was no longer the way to do it. As a lifelong movie-lover, he turned to a form of writing less focused on swaying readers' political and social opinions through explicit instructions on what to think and feel, and more focused on writing images that could move readers to the same conclusions Agee reached during his time in Alabama. This technique serves to put readers in the moment, as though they are watching Agee record the lives of the tenant farmers, similar to the effect achieved by a director/cinematographer in that most characteristic of twentieth-century mediums: film.

Chapter 2

Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, The Tramp, and a Cinematic Aesthetic

Some poems can read as a movie for the mind's eye, a sequence of images, crafted with language, to be felt and assembled by the human spirit. In this sense, the poet becomes a kind of animator, using only essential language to create a moving picture for the reader. James Agee, whose earliest works of writing as a student were poetry and whose final works of writing included film reviews and screenplays, surely understood this idea. Each of the works he produced, regardless of the medium, is touched by his poetic sensibility, his love for language, and his ability to breathe life into mundane, everyday banalities, turning them into beautiful images for the mind's eye, the way good poetry should. "In a sense it was all poetry," the filmmaker John Huston once said of the writing produced by his former friend and collaborator (Huston, *Agee on Film Volume 2*, ix).

Agee would combine his two passions of poetic language and film to develop a new way of documenting the tenant farmers after his *Fortune* articles were rejected. As Agee writes in the Preface to *Famous Men*, part of the book's goal is to "recognize the stature of a portion of unimagined existence, and to *contrive techniques proper to its recording, communication, analysis, and defense*" (*FM*, X, italics mine). With *Famous Men*, Agee achieved an "amphibious style" of writing, a style that, as he described in a November 1930 letter to Father Flye, would combine such elements as prose, poetry, and music (*Letters*, 48). The style Agee ultimately developed for *Famous Men* included those elements, in addition to film.

Agee's work in film was central to the latter half of his career, from the time he stopped working full-time as a journalist for *Fortune* and began working as a film critic for *Time* and as film columnist for *The Nation*. Other scholars—notably John Wranovics and Caroline Blinder,

who have influenced my own reading of *Famous Men*—have written on the book’s cinematic aspects. For my purposes, however, I have chosen to look not only at the cinematic elements of *Famous Men* itself, but also at how Agee’s passion for film influenced his writing process as he revised *Cotton Tenants* into *Famous Men*, a book that fits David Trotter’s notion of modernism as it was influenced by cinema.

In David Trotter’s *Cinema and Modernism* he explains the effect that cinema had on modernist writers, given their level of exposure to and experience with film. Trotter writes that certain modernist writers who were influenced by film attempted to capture “existence as such” (Trotter, 10). In Trotter’s view, through language, the writer does what the film camera does: He records fragments of life that seem to be made automatically, as though recorded by a machine. This idea is what Trotter calls modernist writers’ “will to automatism” or the theory that literature can operate as a kind of “recording medium” instead of as “representational art” (Trotter, 5). In keeping with Trotter’s notion of the modernist writer as mimicking the mechanical process of a film camera, in *Famous Men*, for example, Agee uses intense, often fragmented images. His techniques are reminiscent of cinema’s “close-ups,” “tracks,” “pans,” and “cuts from one ‘shot’ to another” (Trotter, 2-3). For example, there are prolonged scenes in which readers watch as the Gudger family members go about their daily lives, moving in and out of the frame Agee has placed around them while he records their motions, as though his eyes are a camera placed in the corner of the room. In a section titled “The Gudger House” Agee uses subheadings followed by physical descriptions that read like observations jotted down rapidly in a notebook. The first subheading is titled “*In front of the house: its general structure.*” Under this subheading Agee writes, “Two blocks, of two rooms each, one room behind another,” Agee writes (*FM*, 121). This subheading is then followed by one titled “*In front of the house: The*

façade” which goes on to describe the house’s front porch and the hall one finds upon entering the house. The following subheadings are titled “*The room beneath the house*” and “*Structure of four rooms,*” respectively. The descriptions in each subheading are bare and sparse, giving readers only the essential details in order to craft an image, as though Agee’s narrative itself is mirroring the act of a film as it cuts from establishing shots to interior shots, slowly moving inward, becoming increasingly personal in its portrayal of the house and the people who live inside of it.

Agee understood the power of the camera to zoom in on and record reality—a power greater than any words could produce, as exemplified by the book’s opening with Evans’ haunting, uncaptioned images. If Agee could have had his way, he informs readers early in the book, he would have filmed the Gudgers, the Woods, and the Ricketts. He would have recorded their existence and presented it to readers in a fashion that appeared raw and unmediated, as though readers were witnessing these events for themselves. I claim that this desire to record existence in Trotter’s sense of the term was strong motivation for Agee as he wrote *Famous Men*. As he describes in the early pages of the book, “If I could do it, I’d do no writing at all here. It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and of excrement” (*FM*, 10). Agee wanted to transplant his findings from Alabama to his readers in as visceral a way as he could. But he was a writer, and he understood that he was limited by this fact. So, he did what he could with the tools he had, with language. He did “what little I can in writing” (*FM*, 10).

In this chapter, in addition to Trotter’s theory of cinema’s influence on modernist writers, I pull from John Wranovics’ *Chaplin and Agee*, which examines the profound influence the great

film comedian had on Agee's work. But, while Wranovics' analysis of Agee's affinity for Chaplin forms part of the basis for my own thinking of film in Agee's work, I have chosen to look at *Famous Men* as being analogous to a narrative film, as opposed to a "literary analogue to a documentary film," as Wranovics describes it (Wranovics, xxviii). Though reading *Famous Men* as a literary form of filmed documentary is still valid, I argue that reading *Famous Men* as a kind of narrative film is also important in understanding the influence of film in Agee's progression as an artist and the transformation that *Famous Men* underwent. I also pull from Caroline Blinder's essay "Animating the Gudgers: On the Problems of a Cinematic Aesthetic in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*." In doing so, I will show how the progression of Agee's work toward the cinematic helped guide him in his revision of *Cotton Tenants* into *Famous Men*.

Working at a time when film had cemented itself as the main form of popular American entertainment, Agee believed in the medium's ability to rival and even overcome the power of the written word. In a January 1945 film column for *The Nation*, he wrote, "If you compare the moving pictures released during a given period with the books published during the same period...you may or may not be surprised to find that they stand up rather well. I can think of very few contemporary books that are worth the jackets they are wrapped in" (Agee, *Agee on Film*, 123). Throughout his life, dating back to his time as a student at Phillips Exeter Academy, Agee admired film for its newness as an art form and for its potential to break boundaries and move beyond the limitations of writing. For Agee, not only could film reach many people at once, but it could also tell stories through images, making them closer to mimesis than text could ever achieve. Like an actor inhabiting a role or a filmed image of scenery, an audience can literally see the world created by the cinematic artist—i.e. the director, the screenwriter, and the actor. But this cinematic world, in the sense of narrative film, is an imitation, a representation of

the real. Before Agee wrote for and about film, he wrote *Famous Men*. In many ways, that text can be viewed as Agee's first film, "a film with covers" (Wranovics, xxviii).

Cinematic Structure:

Famous Men opens with a series of uncaptioned photographs taken by Evans that depict the different tenant family members and daily life in Hale County, Alabama. This choice of opening demonstrates the transition Agee made in his work between 1936 and 1941. Instead of relying on his former methods of journalistic observation and moral indignation, he puts readers in the moment without then giving answers about how to think or feel about the situation. This technique places readers in the vantage point of Agee, with his eyes becoming the camera.

Following Evans' photographs is the section in *Famous Men* titled "(On the Porch: 1,"⁹ which consists of a series of short chapters, each of which are presented as images devoid of straight narrative. In these chapters, Agee describes as he and Evans get their bearings in Hale County. Agee observes various people filtering in and out of a coffee shop as he notes their habits and customs. He comments on the architecture of nearby houses. While he and Evans walk along a street, Agee describes as two young men observe him and Evans from their front porch, eyeing the two northern strangers with suspicion. Of the young men, Agee writes:

These two sat as if formally, or as if sculptured, one in wood and one in metal, or as if enthroned, about three feet apart in straight chairs tilted to the wall, and constantly watched me, all the while communicating thoroughly with each other by no outward sign of word or glance or turning, but by emanation (*FM*, 30-31).

In this passage we see a sparseness to Agee's language. The details are there, but only the necessary ones to let readers fill in the gaps as they craft their own image of the scene. Agee's descriptions focus primarily on form, shape, measurement, and material, like an artist sketching

⁹ There are three sections in *Famous Men* titled "On the Porch": (*On the Porch: 1*, (*On the Porch: 2*, and (*On the Porch: 3*. The title of each of these sections is formatted in this same way with the parentheses open on the end. Each of these sections is partially told from Agee's vantage point on the front porch of the Gudger family house.

out the basic contours of these men's bodies and the positions in which they are sitting before filling in the drawn lines with color and texture. Moreover, in these scenes no dialogue is spoken. Rather, the scenes are more like establishing shots of a film; Agee's eyes operate like a camera as he peers in on specific places and things. Imagine the credits are rolling and the opening music is playing during these short scenes.

Each of these scenes is as pithy, descriptive, and as packed with detail as a prose poem, serving to thrust readers into the action. In one short chapter, titled "Near a Church," Agee and Evans observe an African-American couple walking together. The following actions play out like a short silent film. As Agee and Evans set up their camera on a tripod outside of a church, they see the couple nearby. Agee decides to approach them to see if they might know of a minister who could let them into the church so they could take a photograph of the inside. As Agee approaches, he suddenly realizes the fear he has caused them as a white man approaching a black couple. Agee describes as he:

Looks into their eyes; at the man, who was not knowing what to do, and at the girl, whose eyes were lined with tears, and who was trying so hard to subdue the shaking in her breath, and whose heart I could feel, though not hear, blasting as if it were my whole body, and I trying in some fool way to keep it somehow relatively light, because I could not bear that they should receive from me any added reflection of the shattering of their grace and dignity (*FM*, 38).

It is notable that this scene begins with Agee and Evans setting up the camera like a director establishing his shot. Apparently Evans watches this scene play out, with his camera in hand. Even if he is not taking pictures in this moment, Agee positions Evans within the narrative as the cinematographer. Meanwhile, Agee positions himself as the writer, director, and lead actor—the auteur. From here, Agee inserts himself into the scene. In this moment, Agee does not need to explain the hostility of race relations in Hale County for us to immediately comprehend what is going on. We learn all we need to know from the gestures, actions, movements, and fear in these

characters' eyes. Like a comic actor who has gotten himself into a sticky situation, Agee's inner monologue reflects what could easily be an actor's funny and sad attempts to fix an awkward scenario. "They just kept looking at me," Agee writes of his feelings in the moment, like a voice-over narration providing running commentary for this squeamish scene. He continues, "There was no more for them to say than for me. The least I could have done was to throw myself flat on my face and embrace and kiss their feet" (*FM*, 38). We want to laugh. We want to grimace. But we understand what is happening because it feels so utterly familiar. It seems like the type of everyday interaction we might see on the street, a form of interaction that has been co-opted by Agee to paint an image, to tell a story, and to convey a point. He is imitating life. The words he thinks to himself are like an actor's thoughts in a scene: What is my motivation? What is my scene partner's motivation? The interaction, therefore, can become universal because it has been stripped to its most fundamental elements. In a sense, these are just people trying to navigate a problem on the street, the way any people on any street in the world might accidentally bump into each other. This is comic. But we also know that these figures, these "actors," are indicative of the greater problems and tensions at play between white and black people in the South. This is tragic. And in this tragicomic scene that Agee has staged—or filmed—these two elements are intertwined: the everyday and the universal.

Throughout *Famous Men*, Agee gives readers images that tell their own stories, like a series of silent-film vignettes. In the opening to an untitled segment in "*On the Porch: I*," Agee makes observations from the front porch of the Gudger household. He writes:

All over Alabama, the lamps are out. Every leaf drenches the touch; the spider's net is heavy. The roads lie there, with nothing to use them. The fields lie there, with nothing to work in them, neither man nor beast. The plow handles are wet, and the rails and the frogplates and the weeds between the ties: and not even the hurrying and hoarse sorrows of a distant train, on other roads, is heard (*FM*, 41).

In this passage Agee is both poet and camera. Nighttime does not merely descend. It envelops the world, pulling readers into a visceral experience of night. Agee may begin the description with hyperbole but the image he paints is crystal clear: from his vantage point, and from the vantage point of the farmers whose house he is in, the earth is Alabama. Alabama is lit by lamps. And now, the lamps are out, leaving the world engulfed in darkness. His words are simultaneously sharp as daggers and maddeningly opaque. The objects he describes are real; they are alive; they have weight and energy. Further along in his descriptions, we as readers can see and practically feel the “little towns, the county seats, house by house white-painted and elaborately sawn among their heavy and dark-lighted leaves” that Agee describes, poignant in his simplicity and clarity (*FM*, 41). But at the same time these objects and places are removed from context, as though Agee has zoomed in on an image with the surrounding edges blurred out. This is photographic realism freed from reality. With the frame distorted, the objects become new again, distinct from their traditional meaning, as though appearing in a dream. They become, in a way, almost surreal. For example, the streets of Birmingham are made of “stone, stone, smooth charted streams of stone, the streets under their lifted lamps lie void before eternity” (*FM*, 41). Agee has taken these real objects and used only the necessary parts to paint an image, his image, the one he wants to convey, the way Walker Evans might have chosen the precise details he wanted to include in his photographs of the tenant farmers. Agee here is recording his surroundings, but there is also imagistic artifice at play in his language.

For Agee, the power of film lay not just in realism, but also in finding poetry in the reality captured by the camera. As a seventeen-year-old high school student, he wrote to his former Exeter classmate—and future *Fortune* co-worker—Dwight MacDonald about his thoughts on film. Wranovics quotes Agee as arguing in a letter to MacDonald that “the screen

needn't stop at realism. The moving camera can catch the beauty of swaying, blending lights and shadows, and by its own movement impart to it as definite a rhythm as poetry or music ever had" (Agee, *Wranovics*, xxiv-xxv). By interacting with its surroundings on a literal level—light, sound, and movement can all be captured by the camera's lens, as opposed to a writer who must rely on impressions for his observations—the film camera creates an interplay between observer and observed, a kind of duet that Agee felt was similar to music or poetry. Through film, Agee was after something greater than documentary realism. He wanted to reveal the poetic aspects of life through a cinematic approach. For example, in the section titled "A Country Letter," Agee describes himself sitting up late in the Gudger house. He writes his thoughts and observations while the family members sleep. He stares at a coal-oil lamp illuminating the room. Slowly, as Agee stares at the oil in the lamp, this image reminds him of other images he also associates with the Gudgers. He thinks of "serpents, tapeworms, toads, embryos, all drained tan pallor of absolute death" and "the serene, scarved flowers in untroubled wombs" (*FM*, 45). As Agee positions the narrative in this moment, these fragmented images arise for him while he continues to stare at the oil and the light produced from the lamp, almost as though these loose poetic associations are embedded within the concrete, physical object of the lamp that sits before him. Throughout *Famous Men*, Agee employs this cinematic approach, noting in the book's preamble how part of his goal with *Famous Men* is to reveal the power of a Beethoven symphony at play in the daily lives of the tenant farmers. In the preamble, Agee instructs readers to "get a radio or a phonograph capable of the most extreme loudness possible, and sit down to listen to a performance of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony" (*FM*, 12). The power of this music as it "hurts" your ears and body, Agee suggests, is similar to his own goal in *Famous Men*: to present readers with that are not "pretty" or "beautiful" or "legal," but real and honest (*FM*, 13). Although there

is beauty in Agee's words, his goal is true-to-life images that can also convey the ugliness, awkwardness, and banality of these people's lives. His method for doing this throughout the book is often as simple as using the technique of positioning his subjects within a cinematic frame.

Consider the section in *Famous Men* titled "Clothing"¹⁰ in which Agee describes the clothing items worn by the various Gudger family members. Like his poetic descriptions observed from the Gudger's front porch in "*On the Porch: I*," his writing here places a frame around his subjects in order to exclude unwanted material. His syntax uses a cinematic sense of continuous action and movement as he begins the "Clothing" section with unfinished sentences. For example, he writes, "Sunday, George Gudger: Freshly laundered cotton gauze underwear. Mercerized blue green socks, held up over his fist-like calves by scraps of pink and green gingham rag. Long bulb-towed black shoes: still shining with the glaze of their first newness, streaked with clay" (*FM*, 227). These abrupt sentences give the reader the sense of being there with Agee, of going through the motions of observing and documenting alongside him, the way a camera brings a higher level of immediacy to a scene than mere text can achieve. Readers receive what appears to be the raw material of Agee's recordings. He is seeing without explaining. In addition, his rough, incomplete sentences mirror the incomplete actions being described in the routines. Each Sunday George Gudger puts on his Sunday clothes and goes about his Sunday routine. But the routine does not end. It will happen over and over again, long after Agee and Evans have left the families and returned to New York. The act is not summed up in a complete sentence because the act itself does not finish. The act persists. George Gudger is

¹⁰ As referenced in my first chapter, *Cotton Tenants* also has a chapter titled "Clothing." However, while *Cotton Tenants* and *Famous Men* share some of the same chapter headings—i.e. "Money," "Shelter," "Clothing," "Education," "Work"—*Cotton Tenants* presents them in journalistic fashion while *Famous Men* presents these same topics in more abstract, imagistic form.

not frozen in this action; he continues this Sunday routing week after week and Agee's syntax mirrors this continuity. Because the sentences are incomplete, the effect is more imagistic than narrative. They are closer to raw material—"existence as such"—than journalistic description. I can picture George Gudger, even though I cannot literally see what he is doing. He appears vividly before me—like a film for my mind's eye. This "film" is further evident in the structure of *Famous Men*, a structure that is reminiscent of that of a silent film.

Famous Men opens with a cast of characters—"Persons and Places"—that lists each of the tenant family members as well as Agee and Evans, who are billed as "spies." It also lists such figures as William Blake and Jesus Christ, whom Agee credits as "unpaid agitators." The book itself is divided into three parts, like the three acts of a film. The different sections within these three acts are separated by pages with words that establish the scene. These pages can be likened to intertitles—onscreen titles in silent films used to present key information to audience members—for a book. For example, prior to the first "(*On the Porch*" section, there is a page with just the words, "The house had now descended. All over Alabama the lamps are out" (*FM*, 15). Agee proceeds to paint a brief, introductory picture of what he finds while lying on the Gudger's front porch. After this scene, the next "intertitle" is a page that simply reads "July 1936." Immediately thereafter Agee begins the first actual narration of the book as he describes his and Evans' first meeting with a landowner and New Deal executive named Harmon. These "intertitles" continue throughout the book and are routinely followed by Agee's roving descriptions as he presents materials that seem and feel very close to raw material, demonstrating again Trotter's notion of modernist writers' "will-to-automatism."

An "intertitle" that reads "Intermission: *Conversation in the Lobby*" halts the narrative and places readers directly in the mind of Agee. Much the way audience members at a silent

movie theater might have taken a break during intermission, so too does Agee break completely from his subject matter. Instead, in this scene, he chooses to answer a May 1939 questionnaire from the *Partisan Review* titled “Some Questions Which Face American Writers Today.” Further evidence that Agee is the central character of *Famous Men*, he not only inserts the questionnaire, but goes on to answer each question, detailing, in his responses, his thoughts on Jesus Christ, James Joyce, Sergei Eisenstein, Catholicism, and Communism. If his proletarian and religious views had not been conveyed earlier in the text, Agee gives readers the chance to momentarily hear his social, political, and religious thoughts in a context divorced from the book’s nominal subject matter of cotton tenantry.

Once the three main sections of the book are completed, Agee lists an “intertitle” that reads, “Shady Grove: *Two Images*.” What follows is a description of a graveyard. Agee’s language here is precise. This kind of precision foreshadows his future role as a film critic whose reviews are at their best when recreating, in Agee’s own words, the images he views on the screen, detail by detail. Agee writes, “The graveyard is about fifty by a hundred yards inside a wire fence. There are almost no trees in it: a lemon verbena and a small magnolia; it is all red clay and very few weeds” (*Famous Men*, 383). As the “intertitle” suggests, this description is recreated with sparseness and exactitude in its word choice. Like the screenplays Agee would later write, his language here feels like the blueprint for a cinematographer or a film director. His words themselves are not necessarily beautiful. They read almost like an instruction manual, compelling readers to do the job of the director and assemble the pieces into the same image that Agee saw before him. If this scene were to be filmed, the beauty would come alive for the viewer. Agee here is screen writing; he is writing directly for the image readers make for themselves. This is poetry built with a camera-like sensibility on the part of the poet.

In the opening to the section titled “The Gudger House” Agee describes a procession of the Gudger family members walking on a hill near their house. They move from east to west, the way characters in a film might move from left to right on the screen. In this instance, having already introduced readers to these characters, Agee does not use character names. The image consists entirely of action, gestures, and movements. He writes:

Slowly they diminished along the hill path, she, and her daughter, and her three sons, in leisured enfilade beneath the light. The mother first, her daughter next behind, her eldest son, her straggler, whimpering; their bare feet pressed out of the hot earth gentle explosions of gold. She carried her youngest child, his knees locked simian across her, his light hands at her neck, and his erected head, hooded with night, next hers, swiveled mildly upon the world’s globe, a periscope (*FM*, 119).

By focusing solely on movement, Agee makes the Gudgers, a marginalized class of tenant farmers, universal in their actions. These actions could belong to any mother and her children. The child with legs wrapped in ape-like fashion around his mother conjures an allegory of primates for Agee’s educated readership, a way of classifying a human being on one of the most basic, primal levels. In addition, the scene is totally quiet. As Blinder describes in her essay, by visualizing the Gudgers with nothing but gestures and movement to guide the reader’s eye, Agee presents them with a kind of “poetic archaeology” that might not otherwise be possible, given that these are actual people with real lives and histories (Blinder, 148). Like an archaeologist excavating a lost civilization, Agee’s frame makes the Gudgers new again. It is as though they are his to identify and create. The defining characteristics Agee does use— i.e. “bare feet”, “knees locked simian”—are universal traits easily ascribed any people. Though the book begins with Evans’ photos of the Gudgers, Agee here has re-excavated them, broken them down into their essential components, which are also the essential components of Agee and his readers. This universality that Agee attempted to convey in *Cotton Tenants* through a muckraking voice of moral indignation has here manifested itself through Agee’s use of image and movement. In

this sense, the Gudgers become blank slates. Because they are walking across this screen that Agee has created, as characters in a silent film, they are like actors on a stage who have yet to be given their parts. They could be anyone, live anywhere, do anything. Like the silent films of Chaplin that Agee so admired, silence here is a universalizing force. Readers can see themselves in the Gudgers the way viewers could see themselves in Chaplin's famous character The Tramp. For example, in a 1949 essay for *Life* magazine called "Comedy's Greatest Era," Agee wrote of Chaplin that:

Of all comedians [Chaplin] worked most deeply and most shrewdly within a realization of what a human being is, and is up against. The Tramp is as centrally representative of humanity, as many-sided and mysterious, as Hamlet, and it seems unlikely that any dancer or actor can ever have excelled him in eloquence, variety or poignancy of motion (Agee, *Agee on Film*, 400).

Although Agee wrote these words a decade after he wrote *Famous Men*, it was in thinking about these cinematic tropes, and these famous cinematic characters, that he arrived at this form of cinematic writing. But it was not an easy journey. It took five years of careful revision.

Rough Drafts—Thinking of film and *Famous Men*

The journals Agee kept during the years in which he revised his magazine articles into *Famous Men* (from 1936 to 1941) open a window into how his thoughts about film were concurrent with his thoughts on how to turn his reported material into *Famous Men*. Having had his *Fortune* articles rejected, Agee hunkered down in a farmhouse in upstate New York and set to work on revision. For five years he wrote and revised, all the while recording many of his thoughts and drafts in personal journals.¹¹ As might be expected of a writer steeped in the New York avant-garde scene at the time, his journals exhibit, often in erratic, stream-of-consciousness style, his musings on life, concerns on personal matters, thoughts on film, and excerpts that

¹¹ As referenced in my first chapter, these are the same notebooks assembled and published by Davis and Lofaro in *James Agee Rediscovered: The Journals of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men and Other New Manuscripts*.

would later appear in *Famous Men*. Two journal entries in particular from 1938 demonstrate Agee's shared thinking between cinema and his approach to revising *Famous Men*.

These journal entries show the progression in Agee's thought process of how best to capture aspects of the tenants' lives in ways closer to image than prose. In the first of these entries, journal entry 5.2 (fifth journal, second entry) he tries to describe the Gudger family Bible; the final version of this Bible description appears toward the end of *Famous Men*, in the section titled "Inductions." In his journal version of the Bible description Agee writes:

Burroughs Bible. Cover: limp and moist-dank brown false leather, feels like a batwing to the hand. The paper thin and moist. The whole volume has absorbed and given off a cold and moist almost insupportable odor of pork sweat, and human excrement (Agee, *Rediscovered*, 122-123).

Under this description in his journal, there is a quote from the Old Testament's Book of Malachi. Beneath this Biblical quotation, Agee cites the family information included in the Bible: "ON FLYLEAF: PRESENTED TO.....Floyd Burroughs BY...Allienay Burroughs. FAMILY RECORD. PARENTS' NAMES. HUSBAND: Floyd Burroughs. BORN: September 11 — 1904" (Agee, *Rediscovered*, 123). These notes read as though they were jotted down in Agee's notebook while he scribbled furiously to record all there was to see in his limited time in the Gudger household. And yet, this journal entry was penned two years after Agee's reporting trip to Alabama. He was not writing in the heat of the moment, nor did he need to sacrifice proper syntax in order to get the facts straight. In this entry, he wants, and is trying, to artfully craft the experience of actually being there and seeing the Bible, the way a narrative film director artfully crafts an experience to look and feel like the real thing. A film director might spend hours staging a shot just so, coaching his actors, adjusting the camera's aperture, in order to capture that one fleeting moment that feels real and natural. Such is the way Agee labored over *Famous*

Men. But to accomplish this task, Agee required new aesthetic tools, the search for which caused him a good deal of anguish.

This anguish is evident in journal entry 5.4. (fifth journal, fourth entry) when he writes of his experience working on *Famous Men*:

I not only no longer know how to write it, I don't even know many of the reasons why. A feeling even at the best of working with only a fraction of the mind: like running a race with both arms tied to the sides and one leg cut off, or asleep... Why can I not write it in complete simplicity, yielding notice that of course it is incomplete, and working only for the completest possible clarity (Agee, *Rediscovered*, 128).

Agee's desire here for "simplicity" and "clarity" reflects his desire to literally place the Gudger family information within the text, like a photograph of the Bible inserted into the writing. But I contend that he could not insert an actual photograph in the middle of the text. Inserting an actual photograph into the narrative, I claim, would have negated the artifice Agee desires. The spell would have been broken. Agee would have lost cinematic control and readers would have been reminded that this was a real Bible in the real home of real tenant farmers. It would have been closer to documentary than narrative film. Evans' photographs may begin the text and these images do inform readers that they are reading about real people and real places. From there, however, Agee takes over and it is his world from then on out as he "animates" the lives of these tenant farmers into his own creation, as Blinder notes in her essay (Blinder, 146). Thus, instead of a photograph of the Gudger Bible in *Famous Men*, Agee includes a two-page sketch of what the interior of the Bible looks like, with the different family names recorded (*FM*, 372-373). This sketch looks a lot like what the Gudger Bible may have actually looked like. The names of the Gudger family members are recorded in cursive, on lines that look like they could have been the ones Agee saw in the Bible in the Gudger household. There are even stray lines scribbled on the

page, like a marker that went out of control. But it is not a photograph. Instead, it is an artful representation that looks very much like the real thing.

The films of Chaplin, for example, may look on the surface to audiences like accurate portrayals of 1930s poverty. But they are completely controlled by Chaplin's hand as the artist. While a photograph may present a slice of reality, a narrative film tells a story of reality in which the filmmaker, not the subject, has the final say. Walker Evans' famed photograph of George Gudger, clad in work shirt and overalls and printed on the cover of *Famous Men*¹², is a remarkable portrait of an Alabama tenant farmer. But when I see that photograph I see Gudger; I do not see Evans. A photograph is static. Evans' hand as the photographer is evident if I search for it—in the lighting, in the composition of the frame. But it is Gudger's eyes that stare out at me, dominating my focus. When I watch a narrative film by an artist like Chaplin, however, it is Chaplin's voice as a storyteller that rings loudest to me. When Chaplin writes and directs a film about *The Tramp*, for example, Chaplin has designed the film's visual and narrative content. Then, when he steps into the spotlight as *The Tramp*, the entire movie becomes about Chaplin. He has not only crafted the world of the film, but he has also inhabited the film's central role. He is both creator and star. Similarly, in *Famous Men* Agee exerts total control—he is the auteur. He arranges the prose in sections to guide the reader's eye from one shot to the next. He appears in scenes as a tragicomic figure, manipulating the reader's emotions through his own performance. Agee is not only the writer of the book, but he is also the lead character, the protagonist. We are on a journey with him as he ventures into the world of the tenant farmers, learning about their lives and, in the process, learning about himself.

¹² James Agee and Walker Evans. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men: The American Classic, in Words and Photographs, of Three Tenant Families in the Deep South*. Boston: First Mariner Books, 2001 (Cover Image).

Journal entry 5.6 (fifth journal, sixth entry) provides further evidence for Agee's turn to film and even music as resources to incorporate into his revision. He writes:

I guess I don't care much what I am moved by, so long as I'm moved. There were a few things in *4 Daughters*¹³ that had tears in my eyes, and I am grateful to have them there. The thought, even, of the [Beethoven's] G major concerto, & of a number of other pieces of music, nearly kills me now, for I know I understand what I want to write of in terms of equivalent planes, and am impotent (Agee, *Rediscovered*, 129).

Until this point in his career, Agee's medium had been words. But, as he describes, he was also equally affected and moved by music and film. This desire to incorporate other nonliterary forms of art into *Famous Men* is enunciated by Agee in the book's early pages when he writes that "It was intended...that the text be read continuously, as music is listened to or a film watched, with brief pauses only where they are self-evident" (*FM*, XI). Although Agee sets an unrealistic goal for himself—the text is, ultimately, nothing but his words and Evans' images—this desire for an interdisciplinary presentation of his subject matter is evident throughout the text. While it is important to distinguish between Agee's lofty goals for his text and what he actually wrote, his writing strove to include other mediums through language, imperfect though his striving may have been. As Blinder describes, Agee's prose in *Famous Men* can be viewed as the antithesis to Evans's still photographs. The photographs that begin the book are stationary figures locked within a frame. But by "animating" these people and places, Agee resists being static (Blinder, 145). By using the structure of the frame to shape his observations, through prose, the figures move. His lens can zoom in and out. He can obscure the image and then seconds later make it dazzlingly clear, like a film camera racking focus from one subject to another. He can allude to the power of music, like a film score. We can see music at work, for example, in the "Shady Grove" section. In this section Agee flows seamlessly from observations of headstones, to personal reflections on Maggie Louise—the Gudger family daughter—to the Lord's Prayer. As

¹³ *Four Daughters*, a 1938 film directed by Michael Curtiz.

Agee observes the headstones in the graveyard he notes, “they are the graves of the poorest of the farmers and of the tenants. Mainly they are the graves with the pine headboards; or without them” (*FM*, 384). Agee proceeds to reflect on the inevitable death of himself and the tenant family members. He wonders if the next generation human beings will live a better life and treat each other better. He writes, “One by one we shall all be drawn into the planet beside one another; let us then hope better of our children, and of our children’s children” (*FM*, 386). From here, Agee declares his optimism for a future in which there will be “an end” to the “slow agonies” of the tenants. To close the scene, Agee does not use his own words. Instead he uses the Lord’s Prayer. Agee writes:

Our father, who art in heaven, hallowed by thy name: thy kingdom come: thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven: give us this day our daily bread: and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us: and lead us not into temptation: but deliver us from evil: for thine is the kingdom: and the power: and the glory: for ever and ever: amen (*FM*, 387).

These words are familiar to readers and their familiar rhythm pulls readers into a kind of harmony with the tenants. They provide a cadence, a type of music to conclude the image Agee has painted of this graveyard. The Lord’s Prayer becomes a cinematic score to ease readers out of the scene.

A Love for The Tramp



(Charlie Chaplin’s The Little Tramp)

Agee loved Charlie Chaplin. The comedic icon appeared in Agee's fiction, film reviews, and even as the star of a never-produced screenplay that Agee wrote specifically for Chaplin's character The Little Tramp or The Tramp. The two men also had a long and lasting friendship throughout the 1940s and 1950s. Chaplin's most memorable onscreen persona, The Tramp appeared in numerous Chaplin films. Dressed in gentleman's clothing worn from use and lack of care, bowler hat perched atop his head, mustache resting idly above a mischievous grin, The Tramp was a comic vagabond, a homeless man constantly seeking shelter and work. In Chaplin's films, The Tramp survives by his wits and charm as he circumvents the authority figures that seek to put a stop to his pranks.

As Wranovics describes, to Agee, Chaplin represented the ideals he wished to achieve through his art. Like Agee, Chaplin was a Communist and a filmmaker. But, more importantly, through the character of The Tramp, Agee felt that Chaplin was able to turn a figure that is outcast and downtrodden into someone who can triumph against all odds over the pernicious, dehumanizing effects of the capitalist society. As Wranovics notes, "Agee wrote continually, both for publication and in his personal notes and letters, about how Chaplin's Little Tramp character stood for him as a modern, secular Jesus figure" (Wranovics, xxii). Agee, a man known by many to care little for his outward appearance and who routinely dressed in weathered, worn clothing, likely identified with The Tramp's homeless appearance. As an outsider himself—a Tennessee boy who was educated at private schools and lived and worked in New York—to see the triumph of Chaplin on the screen must have been to see, in some way, the triumph of a fictional version of himself. Agee "came to see Chaplin's Little Tramp as a new spiritual hero for the capitalist era, speaking to the masses through film, its most promising and popular new art form" (Wranovics, xxii-xxiii). The ideals Agee wanted to find in the tenant farmers—people

who lived their lives divorced from the speed and corruption and politics of mainstream city life—he found in *The Tramp*.

In *Cinema and Modernism*, Trotter characterizes Chaplin by what he terms “hypermimesis” (Trotter, 183). Chaplin imitates for the sake of imitating, Wranovics notes. Not only does Chaplin imitate his surrounding world in his films—such as a child or a police officer—but he also “becomes the very medium of the social production of mimesis” (Trotter, 184). At the same time that Chaplin is himself performing, he is crafting a character that has the ability to continue the act of imitation. Chaplin is imitating a vagabond who in turn becomes a vehicle for further imitation. Wranovics quotes the scholar Michael North in saying that Chaplin had “succeeded more completely than any other screen actor in turning himself into a purely visual object” (North, Wranovics, 193). As Wranovics further explains, *The Tramp* imitates machines and even “persons in an unconscious state” (Trotter, 185). Such acts of mimicry allow Chaplin to be more than just his fictional character of *The Tramp*. He can be representative of all people who struggle to get by as outcasts in an industrial society that does not welcome them. In this vein, Trotter quotes T.S. Eliot as saying, “Charlie Chaplin is not English, or American...but a universal figure, feeding the idealism of hungry millions in CzechoSlovakia and Peru” (Eliot, Trotter, 182).

Similarly, for Agee, Chaplin was a Romantic figure who created cinematic depictions of an outcast who uplifted the masses in a way that was reminiscent of Christ. Chaplin could capture the beauty of an older, simpler way of life; a way of life like that was described or alluded to by Romantic writers, such as William Blake or William Wordsworth, writers Agee cites as “unpaid agitators” in his list of “Persons and Places” that begins *Famous Men*. In several letters to Father Flye, Agee noted the influence of Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s poetry and

Beethoven's music on his writing and approach to art. In the preamble to *Famous Men*, Agee goes so far as to command readers to read his work the way they might read the work of William Blake or listen to a Beethoven symphony.

To Agee, Chaplin was a continuation of the great Romantic artists with whom he strongly identified. After first seeing Chaplin's film *Modern Times*, Agee wrote in a journal entry from 1938 that Chaplin:

Has gone through more phases of art than any other man. Primitive art...He shares with Blake and Christ this: that he indicates what is obviously the good way to live: to live that way would mean complete 'withdrawal from the world' for each individual; would mean the destruction of the world as is (Agee, *Rediscovered*, 132).

Agee's talk of "destruction" here should not be taken literally, but rather as a destruction of the way he sees people living their lives in his contemporary America. To contend with such an all-consuming force as capitalism, a force that could not simply be changed or eliminated, I believe, Agee wrote *Famous Men*, a book that frames the tenant farmers' as figures capable of maintaining their dignity in the face of an economic system that has all but reduced them to serfdom. They are not outside of capitalism, but they do survive its crippling and dehumanizing effects, going about their everyday lives. Agee glorifies their simple existence, which is evident in his passionate desire to bear witness to every moment he can in the Gudgers' lives in the "(*On the Porch*)" sections. As evidenced in his admiration for Chaplin's ability to remove himself from the grind of the modern world, Agee too wanted solace from the alienation of everyday life. Granted, part of Agee knew full well there was nothing glorious about tenant farm life, as is evident in his outrage filling the pages of *Cotton Tenants*. Still, in the five years in which he revised his original material into *Famous Men*, I contend that the ideals that Chaplin represented influenced Agee's writing to the point where the tenant family members became idealized individuals, harbingers of a lost Christian spirituality Agee wished to reclaim.

Agee was as much a religious man as he was a poet. Although not a practicing Catholic for much of his life, his Catholic upbringing and education at St. Andrew's School always stayed with him, appearing throughout his various works. In a September 1950 letter, Father Flye reassures a conflicted Agee that he is and always will be, fundamentally religious. He writes:

When I think of the difference and opposition between those who have a sense of reverence, wonder and worship and those who do not; the cruel and the compassionate; those who yearn towards good and love and those to whom evil and ill-will are all too congenial; there is no doubt on which side you are (Flye, *Letters*, 262).

In *Famous Men*, Agee frames the tenant farmers in terms of the Christian ideal. His portrayal of the tenant farmers, particularly toward the end of the book in his dealings with the Gudgers, reflects the line from the New Testament's Gospel of Matthew, which is quoted in the final lines of an untitled section in part one of *Famous Men*, titled *A Country Letter*. Agee writes, "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth" (*FM*, 73). In the final scenes of the book, viewed through Agee's lens, the Gudger family members are described as people capable of maintaining their grace and dignity in the face of grave societal obstacles; similar to the way Chaplin's Tramp character was a kind of deity for Agee, despite living life as a vagrant due to the pernicious effects of capitalism.

The Spiritual Tenant

The title *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* comes from the Old Testament's Ecclesiastes. The book's many biblical references include the listing of Christ in the book's cast of characters, the descriptions of a Church, and the inclusion of the Lord's Prayer. As a man who maintained a lifelong affinity for religion, and whose major works are all touched by his Catholic upbringing, it is not unusual that Agee found a spiritual aspect to his trip to Alabama. However, with the major influence of Chaplin on his work, Agee brings out the spiritual aspect of the tenants

through images. As Caroline Blinder notes, Agee uses his “camera like” poetic lens to “prove the sacredness of the families investigated” (Blinder, 161).

While I am building off of Blinder’s analysis, I intend to show that Agee was in fact working as more than just a cameraman or as an animator. He was also a Chaplin-like auteur. As the director of these staged scenes he gives viewers both the sacred tenant farmers and himself, Agee, the befuddled, out-of-place, idealistic journalist who guides readers in these scenes through his role as an imitator. Neither Chaplin nor Agee were truly poor themselves, though Agee did experience periods of financial instability. yet they did imitate poverty in their work. And because Agee can speak, whereas Chaplin’s Tramp stays silent, we can see him at work in his writing, directing the scene, setting the stage, choosing the specific cinematic elements he deems necessary to present the Gudgers in as sacred a way as he can while still keeping their context and reality in tact.

Toward the end of *Famous Men*, Agee describes how he and Evans travel back to Birmingham, Alabama after their preliminary encounters with the families. Evans had had enough of the families and wanted to be back in “civilization” (*FM*, 329). Agee, however, decides to return to the families, anxious to continue learning all that he can about them before he must return to New York. Agee and Evans part ways. Evans stays in Birmingham. Agee drives back to Hobe’s Hill, where the families live. As he drives, Agee’s thoughts wander, dipping into stream-of-consciousness as he considers sleeping with a prostitute he met a while back, his relationship with his parents, and his rocky marriage to his first wife Via. Presently, he describes how he is desperate to see George Gudger, as though he is the solution to Agee’s troubles and worries. He writes, “The one I wanted to see was Gudger, to himself, or anyhow just with his family. His yellow eyes and very slow way of talking had stayed with me

most...and I wanted to learn more about him” (*FM*, 340). Agee soon finds his way to the Gudgers, who kindly invite him to stay with them. Agee accepts their offer. The results of this invitation become the “(*On the Porch*” sections of *Famous Men*, the most mesmerizing and intimate sections of the entire book. In these sections, Agee describes the family members, watching them sleep, commenting on the general state of cotton tenantry, his feelings toward the Gudgers, his personal life, and the universe.

For the few days Agee lives with the Gudgers, he records the smallest details of their lives with a veneration that is almost holy. In certain key images, the Gudgers seem to be untouched by outside corrupting forces. Granted, Agee is sure to note the vicious system of cotton tenantry as well as the basic human vices of the family members (the sexual indiscretions of the tenant farmers is a particular favorite of his). But when Agee is able to insert his frame around the Gudgers, and record a simple image, Agee shows the Gudgers as examples of virtue to be followed and imitated.

The virtue Agee sees in the Gudgers becomes clear through his description of the Gudgers as they wait out a rainstorm toward the end of the book. As Agee lies awake in the Gudger household, he watches as a summer rainstorm rages and then subsides. He sees the Gudger family members huddle inside, fearful for the weather. The rain slowly abates. The Gudgers peer outside, not talking, anxious to see “what the rain has done” (*FM*, 355). Agee soon hears the sound of birds chirping and watches as streaks of sunlight pierce the gray clouds. He notices the embarrassment felt by him and the Gudgers as they remain clumped together even when there is no longer any need to be. And yet, they are still drawn to each other for warmth, for comfort. From here, Agee’s description of the scene takes on a distinctly cinematic tone as he uses the tools of painting and music to complement the scene. He writes:

The music of what is happening is more richly scored than this; and much beyond what I can set down: I can only talk about it: the personality of a room, and of a group of creatures, has undergone change, as if of two different techniques or mediums; what began as 'rembrandt,' deeplighted in gold, in each integer colossally heavily planted, has become a photograph, a record in clean, staring, colorless light, almost without shadow, of two iron sheeted beds which stand a little away from the walls; of dislocated chairs; within cube of nailed housewood; a family of tenant farmers, late in a Sunday afternoon, in a certain fold of country, in a certain part of the south, and of the lives of each of them, confronted by a person strange to them, whose presence and its motives are so outlandish there is no reason why any of it should ever be understood; almost as if there were no use trying to explain; just say, I am from Mars, and let it go at that (*FM*, 357).

As Agee describes, his vision of the scene moves from a Rembrandt painting to that of a photograph, indicative of a writer who crafted an entire book of so-called documentation framed around a cinematic aesthetic more in line with painting than the documentary realism of someone like Riis. While it should be noted that Rembrandt was famous for his Biblical scenes and his honest portrayal of common people, what is most captivating in Agee's language is his use of light to direct the reader's eyes toward the Gudger family members on the bed. Nowhere does Agee explicitly describe the Gudgers as anything other than what they are. They are tenant farmers "in a certain fold of country, in a certain part of the south." And yet, Agee has made a directorial decision about how to frame his subjects. They are bathed in gold light, without shadow. Juxtaposed against the Gudgers is Agee himself, who is "from Mars." Always the outsider, Agee positions himself as the reader or viewer would be positioned. In contrast to the radiance of the tenants, Agee is tainted; he left his home in the South; he now lives in New York City; his life revolves around the clockwork of an organ of capitalism as he toils away in Henry Luce's publishing empire. But in this moment he is in the presence of the tenants, this family unit, removed from external corrupting forces. They have each other, and that is enough. In this moment, Agee sees in the Gudgers the same thing he sees in Chaplin's Tramp character. In this moment, Agee himself becomes a Tramp-like figure, an outsider inhabiting and understanding

the world of poverty to disseminate the image to the outside world. He sees the chance to overcome obstacles, to “weather the storm,” both literally and figuratively, through the simplicity of living a life outside of mainstream society. The tenants did not choose to live their lives this way. They were victims of poverty, as Agee explained in *Cotton Tenants*. But here, through one of the many lenses Agee employs in *Famous Men*, he also highlights a virtue for his readers. It is a virtue of stoicism, the virtue of finding the strength to persevere and continue on toward the light, even when the world appears bathed in darkness and despair.

Conclusion

In September 1950, Agee published an essay in *Life* magazine titled “Undirectable Director” about John Huston, one of the film directors whose work he most admired. In the opening to the essay Agee presents the analogy of an ant and a grasshopper. The ant, Agee says, is a “model citizen” (Agee, *Agee on Film*, 415). It has a fixed goal of security and success and works to move steadily toward that goal. The grasshopper, on the other hand, is the ant’s opposite. It is a “hedonistic jazz-baby” that delights in its own pleasure, moving no direction in particular, achieving nothing (Agee, *Agee on Film*, 415). Agee then goes on to explain that John Huston was one of the top grasshoppers in the “Western Hemisphere” and “is living proof of what a lot of nonsense that can be. He has beaten the ants at their own game and then some, and he has managed that blindfolded, by accident, and largely just for the hell of it” (Agee, *Agee on Film*, 415). Agee proceeds to laud Huston for his brilliant work in churning out the best studio films out of anyone working in Hollywood. He praises Huston for using action in his films, which Agee views as the “natural language” of film and for being a “born popular artist” (Agee, *Agee on Film*, 417). He also notes that the reason Huston continues to make great movies is, beyond the money or the fame or the “dedication to the greatest art medium of his century,” because he loves the art of film (Agee, *Agee on Film*, 416). And it is this love and enthusiasm for what he does, Agee describes, that stamps Huston’s signature on each of his films, making each of them unique in their own way, and making them all unmistakably Huston.

Agee might as well have been writing about himself. If ever there were a series of prescribed rules for how an artist should act or comport himself, Agee was the one to break them. He was a man who appeared to live solely for pleasure, boozing frequently and leading a private life as promiscuous as it was feverish in its intensity. On one occasion, the story goes, a

Fortune coworker walked in to Agee's office and spotted him outside his window, dangling by his fingertips off the ledge. He then hoisted himself back up onto the ledge, climbed back into his office, closed the window, and proceeded as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened. On other occasions Agee was known to blast Beethoven symphonies from his office window out into the Manhattan night. Yet this same man was regarded by many of his peers to be a deeply compassionate soul capable of empathizing with anyone. He maintained a lengthy correspondence with Father Flye throughout his life and wrote intensely personal works of writing that drew on the loss of his father and his Catholic upbringing. Agee was a charismatic iconoclast and an anarchic good ol' boy from Tennessee.

At this point, I must pause and acknowledge that I, like many others, fall into the trap of placing Agee the man ahead of the writing he produced, something Agee scholarship has tried to move away from in recent years. Hugh Davis and Michael Lofaro have done a tremendous amount of work to place renewed emphasis on Agee's writing over the Agee myth, and for that I commend them and am deeply indebted to them. However, I see no reason why the myth of Agee need be separate from his work. Like his idol John Huston, he can be seen as an ant and a grasshopper. He was a hard-drinking celebrity who could be found on the film sets of Charlie Chaplin. He wrote some of the most mesmerizing prose poetry of the twentieth century that would never have come about if not for a big-business magazine. In short, Agee was a thoroughly American artist who worked in the middle of the most American century. Yet while he jumped from one innovative medium to another—practically inventing film criticism, writing for television, for film—he always kept one foot firmly placed in an older era, as though Walt Whitman were writing poetry in the era of the atomic bomb. But that was just who Agee was: an old soul who was also ahead of his own time. He could have been at home on the riverboat with

Mark Twain, but he also lived something of a rock star lifestyle before there were rock stars. He broke the rules of journalism while simultaneously channeling the most important American journalists that preceded him. He blazed his own trail, incorporating the latest literary and technological techniques into his reportage while producing words that feel as though they could have been written in Elizabethan England.

Yet once again I feel I must address the most basic question pertaining to this topic: Why study Agee? It is a question I think about often when I receive raised eyebrows of confusion while explaining the author to my peers. *Oh, you're an English major studying an obscure author*, they seem to be thinking. Well, in a way, yes. He is relatively obscure. But that owes more to the fact that the bed we have built for Agee is as confusing as Agee's own literary output. How do we keep this author's contribution alive and vital for readers today? The casual bookstore reader might pick a copy of *A Death in the Family* off the shelf and come to know Agee as a tender soul capturing the pain of lost innocence in the face of family tragedy, set against a beatific Tennessee backdrop. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* might be read in an American Studies department as an essential document of the Great Depression. Journalism instructors might inform students of their affection for *Famous Men* while simultaneously instructing them never to imitate Agee's self-reflective prose and distinctly anti-journalistic methods and techniques. Film lovers might encounter him as the man who some say invented film criticism as a literary form—W.H. Auden famously called Agee's film criticism "the most remarkable regular event in American journalism today" (Auden, *Agee on Film*, inside flap).

I propose a slightly different way of reading Agee's legacy (a method that I fully expect to bring me some flack from the purists who value his work as individual entities to be studied separate from the myth of the author). I say we look at each of his works as signposts, different

methods of parsing out the bizarre quirks and horrors of the time in which he lived. Because make no mistake, he was fully a man of his time. And in the period in which he worked, his voice was able, at times, to rise up above the din in an era ruled by violence and intense economic disparity. In his work, he was able to bridge the gap between rural and urban, rich and poor, hard partiers and devoted religious folks. At a time when the world seemed poised to blow itself to smithereens, Agee was there, smiling, his large hands slowly rubbing his temples as a cigarette dangled from his lips. He hanging out with John Huston and Charlie Chaplin on Hollywood studio sets, watching those film masters do what they do best. He had many a late-night drink with Greenwich Village pals as he discussed ideas for his latest film column for *The Nation*. He stayed in close contact with Father Flye, always remembering the importance of family and faith in his life.

I acknowledge that these are idealized views of the man. But in the current American landscape, when our social fabric is once again becoming characterized by the divide between haves and have-nots, when our technologies and methods of communication seem to shift faster than the speed of a Facebook instant feed, it feels increasingly important to have artists like Agee who can illuminate, if only for a short time, a path for us to follow. The forms they use might not look familiar. They might speak to us in a method we have yet to invent. But the important thing to remember about Agee is that the heart pumping oxygen to his words was as old as the values he found in the Biblical passages he loved dearly. Agee may have been difficult to work with. He may have drank too much or done too many drugs or stayed up too late talking animatedly instead of writing. But, for a time, he did write, and when he did he showed readers the way forward, through a bleak backdrop scarred by Depression and war. He reached back, way back, to a more idyllic time and fused those ideals with his current landscape. We don't necessarily

need to study Agee to do remember how to do this. But it is comforting to remind ourselves that then, as now, times were lonely and confusing. Agee understood this simple fact. Sometimes, when he was at his best, he could pierce the darkness with brilliant rays of light, shot out from some dark, unknown place deep inside him that harkened back to a bygone era.

Since Agee, there have been others like him. Hunter S. Thompson comes to mind, though it is questionable whether his empathy was ever any match for his insatiable ego. No, the artist that seems to come closest to fulfilling Agee's legacy is David Foster Wallace, the journalist cum fiction writer who wrote powerful works of nonfiction and fiction that seem to have no antecedent. But whether or not they have an antecedent is not really the point. The point is that Wallace, like Agee, with his gargantuan books and essays and journalism, was trying to help us work through a rapidly changing period in our history. Sadly, Wallace is also gone. Another one will come along, whoever they are, wherever they are. Until that point comes, we still have Agee. Somewhere he is still smiling that mischievous smile, thinking deeply, leaning way forward in his chair, about to say something funny, witty, or sad. Whatever it is, it will be remarkably on point, serving as a reminder to seek out the classic values in our everyday lives. They are there. We just need to look closely. And, thanks to Agee, we know how to look a little bit better.

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