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Concise Dictionary of American Literary Biography

The New Consciousness,  
1941-1968

## Plan of the Work

The six-volume *Concise Dictionary of American Literary Biography* was developed in response to requests from high school and junior college teachers and librarians, and from small- to medium-sized public libraries, for a compilation of entries from the standard *Dictionary of Literary Biography* chosen to meet their needs and their budgets. The *DLB*, which comprises nearly eighty volumes as of the end of 1986, is moving steadily toward its goal of providing a history of literature in all languages developed through the biographies of writers. Basic as the *DLB* is, many librarians have expressed the need for a less comprehensive reference work which in other respects retains the merits of *DLB*. The *Concise DALB* provides this resource.

This series was planned by a seven-member advisory board, consisting primarily of secondary school educators, who developed a method of organization and presentation for selected *DLB* entries suitable for high school and beginning college students. Their preliminary plan was circulated to some five thousand school librarians and English teachers, who were asked to respond to the organization of the series and the tables of contents. Those responses were incorporated into the plan described here.

### Uses for the Concise DALB

Students are the primary audience for the *Concise DALB*. The stated purpose of the standard *DLB* is to make our literary heritage more accessible. *Concise DALB* has the same goal and seeks a wider audience. What the author wrote; what the facts of his life are; a description of his literary works; a discussion of the critical response to his works; and a bibliography of critical works to be consulted for further information: These are the elements of a *Concise DALB* entry.

The first step in the planning process for this series, after identifying the audience, was to contemplate its uses. The advisory board acknowledged that the integrity of *Concise DALB* as a reference book is crucial to its utility. The *Concise DALB* adheres to the scholarly standards established by the parent series. Thus, within the scope of major American literary figures, the *Concise DALB* is a ready reference source of established

value, providing reliable biographical and bibliographical information.

It is anticipated that this series will not be confined to uses within the library. Just as *DLB* has been a tool for stimulating students' literary interests in the college classroom—for comparative studies of authors, for example, and, through its ample illustrations, as a means of invigorating literary study—the *Concise DALB* is a primary resource for high school and junior college educators. The series is organized to facilitate lesson planning, and the contextual diagrams (explained below) that introduce each entry are a source of topics for classroom discussion and writing assignments.

### Organization

The advisory board determined that entries from the standard *DLB* should be presented complete—without abridgment. Their feeling was that the utility of the *DLB* format has been proven, and that only minimal changes should be made.

The advisory board further decided that the organization of the *Concise DALB* should be chronological to emphasize the historical development of American literature. Each volume is devoted to a single historical period and includes the most significant literary figures from all genres who were active during that time. Thus, the volume that includes modern mainstream novelists Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, and John Cheever will also include poets who were active at the same time—such as Allen Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and John Berryman—and dramatists who were their contemporaries—such as Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, and William Inge. It should be noted that the volume of the *Concise DALB* that includes these authors comprises thirty-six entries, while the volumes in the standard *DLB* covering the same period include some four hundred author biographies. The *Concise DALB* limits itself to major figures, but it provides the same coverage of those figures as the *DLB* does.

The six period volumes of the *Concise DALB* are: *Colonization to the American Renaissance, 1640-1865*; *Realism, Naturalism, and Local Color, 1865-1917*; *Literary Responses to the Jazz Age, 1917-1929*; *The Age of Maturity, 1929-1941*; *The New Consciousness, 1941-1968*; *Broadening Views, 1968-1987*. The



sixth volume will also contain a comprehensive index by subjects and proper names to the entire *Concise DALB*. (As in the standard *DLB* series, there is a cumulative index to author entries in each *Concise DALB* volume.)

#### Form of Entry

The form of entry in the *Concise DALB* is substantially the same as in the standard series, with the following alterations:

1) Each entry has been updated to include a discussion of works published since the standard entry appeared and to reflect recent criticism and research of interest to the high school audience.

2) The secondary bibliography for each entry has been selected to include those books and articles of particular interest and usefulness to high school and junior college students. In addition, the secondary bibliography has been annotated to assist students in assessing whether a reference will meet their needs.

3) Each entry is preceded by a "contextual diagram"—a graphic presentation of the places, literary influences, personal relationships, literary movements, major themes, cultural and artistic influences, and social and economic forces associated with the author. This chart allows students—and teachers—to place the author in his literary and social context at a glance.

It bears repeating that the *Concise DALB* is restricted to major American literary figures. It is anticipated that users of this series will find it advantageous to consult the standard *DLB* for information about those writers omitted from the *Concise DALB* whose significance to contemporary readers may have faded but whose contribution to our cultural heritage remains meaningful.

Comments about the series and suggestions about how to improve it are earnestly invited.

## A Note to Students

The purpose of the *Concise DALB* is to enrich the study of literature. In their various ways, writers react in their works to the circumstances of their lives, the events of their time, and the culture that envelops them (which are represented on the contextual diagrams that precede each *Concise DALB* entry). Writers provide a way to see and understand what they have observed and experienced. Besides being inherently interesting, biographies of writers provide a basic perspective on literature.

*Concise DALB* entries start with the most important facts about writers: What they wrote. We strongly recommend that you also start there. The chronological listing of an author's works is an outline for the examination of his or her career achievement. The biographies that follow set the stage for the presentation of the works. Each of the author's important works and the most respected critical evaluations of them are discussed

in *Concise DALB*. If you require more information about the author or fuller critical studies of the author's works, the annotated references section at the end of the entry will guide you.

Illustrations are an integral element of *Concise DALB* entries. Photographs of the author are reminders that literature is the product of a writer's imagination; facsimilies of the author's working drafts are the best evidence available for understanding the act of composition—the author in the process of refining his work and acting as self-editor; dust jacket and advertisements demonstrate how literature comes to us through the marketplace, which sometimes serves to alter our perceptions of the works.

Literary study is a complex and immensely rewarding endeavor. Our goal is to provide you with the information you need to make that experience as rich as possible.

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# The New Consciousness, 1941-1968

A Brucoli Clark Layman Book

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Manufactured by Edwards Brothers, Inc.  
Ann Arbor, Michigan  
Printed in the United States of America

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**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

The new consciousness, 1941-1968

(Concise dictionary of American literary biography)  
(A Bruccoli Clark Layman book)

1. American literature—20th century—History and criticism. 2. American literature—20th century—Bio-bibliography. 3. Authors, American—20th century—Biography—Dictionaries. I. Title. II. Series: Concise dictionary of American literary biography.

PS225.A44 1987 810'.9'0054 [B] 86-33657  
ISBN 0-8103-1822-9



# Concise Dictionary of American Literary Biography

## James Agee

*This entry was updated by Robert E. Burkholder (Pennsylvania State University) from his entry in DLB 2, American Novelists Since World War II.*

<b>Places</b>	Knoxville, Tennessee Cambridge, Massachusetts	Sewanee, Tennessee Alabama	New York City
<b>Influences and Relationships</b>	Archibald MacLeish Dwight MacDonald	I. A. Richards Robert Fitzgerald	John Huston Walker Evans
<b>Literary Movements and Forms</b>	New Journalism Prophetic Poetry	Southern Literary Renaissance	Nonfiction Novel
<b>Major Themes</b>	Initiation Death Autobiography	Family Moral Courage Individualism	Search for Identity Role of First-Person Narrator
<b>Cultural and Artistic Influences</b>	Film	Christianity	
<b>Social and Economic Influences</b>	The Depression McCarthyism	Communism	Hiroshima

See also the Agee entry in DLB 26, American Screenwriters.

**BIRTH:** Knoxville, Tennessee, 27 November 1909, to Hugh James and Laura Tyler Agee.

**EDUCATION:** A.B., Harvard University, 1932.

**MARRIAGES:** 28 January 1933 to Olivia Saunders (divorced). 1939 to Alma Mailman (divorced); child: Joel. 1946 to Mia Fritsch; child: Julia Teresa.

**AWARDS AND HONORS:** Pulitzer Prize for *A Death in the Family*, 1958 (awarded posthumously).

**DEATH:** New York, New York, 16 May 1955.

**BOOKS:** *Permit Me Voyage* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934);

*Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, photographs by Walker Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1941; London: Peter Owen, 1965);

*The Morning Watch* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1951; London: Secker & Warburg, 1952);

*A Death in the Family* (New York: McDowell, Obolensky, 1957; London: Gollancz, 1958);

*Agee on Film: Reviews and Comments* (New York: McDowell, Obolensky, 1958; London: Peter Owen, 1963);

*Agee on Film, Volume II: Five Film Scripts* (New York: McDowell, Obolensky, 1960; London: Peter Owen, 1965);

*The Collected Poems of James Agee*, edited by Robert Fitzgerald (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968; London: Calder & Boyars, 1972);

*The Collected Short Prose of James Agee*, edited by Fitzgerald (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968; London: Calder & Boyars, 1972);

*James Agee: Selected Journalism*, edited by Paul Ashdown (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985).

**SCREENPLAYS:** *The Quiet One*, Museum of Modern Art, 1949, narration;

*The African Queen*, United Artists, 1951, screenplay by Agee and John Huston;

*Genghis Khan*, Italian Film Exports, 1952, narration;

*The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky* (half of *Face to Face*), RKO, 1953, screenplay;

*White Mane*, Rembrandt Films and Contemporary Films, 1953, script;

*The Night of the Hunter*, United Artists, 1955, screenplay;

*Green Magic*, Italian Film Exports, 1955, script.

**TELEVISION SCRIPTS:** *The Blue Hotel*, Omnibus, NBC, late 1940s, script;

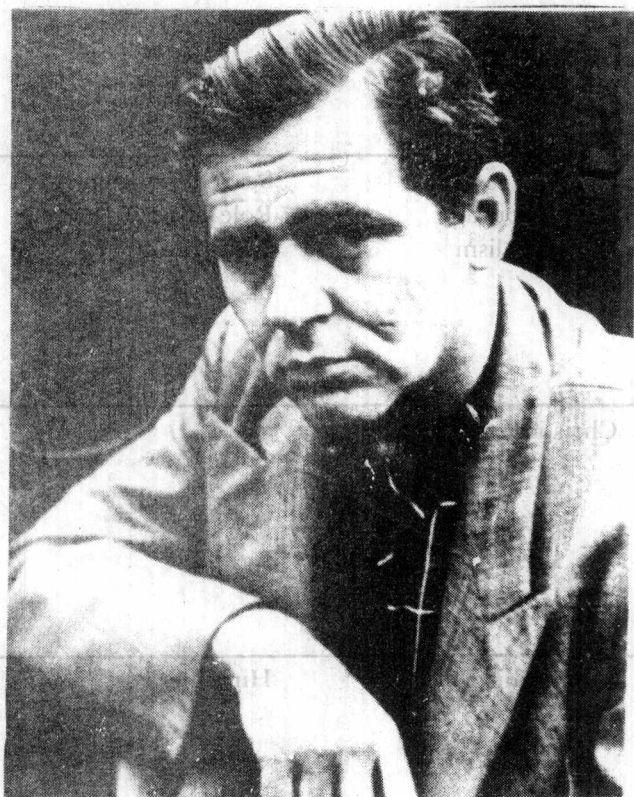
*Abraham Lincoln*, Omnibus, NBC, 1953, scripts.

**OTHER:** "Notes for a Moving Picture: The House," in *New Letters in America*, edited by Horace Gregory (New York: Norton, 1937), pp. 37-55.

**PERIODICAL PUBLICATIONS:** "Any Seventh Son," *Phillips Exeter Monthly*, 31 (June 1927): 107-109;

"Man's Fate—A Film Treatment of the Malraux Novel," *Films*, 1 (1939): 51-60;

"Dedication Day," *Politics*, 3 (April 1946): 121-125.



James Agee (photo by Florence Homolka)



James Rufus Agee, novelist, poet, journalist, film critic, and screenwriter, is best known for a documentary study of three Alabama tenant-farming families in the midst of the Depression, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, and an unfinished novel, *A Death in the Family*. Born in Knoxville, Tennessee, on 27 November 1909, Agee's childhood was marred by the death of his father, Hugh James Agee, in an automobile accident in May 1916, an event which Agee would draw on in both his published novels.

In 1919 Agee was enrolled at an Episcopalian boarding school, St. Andrew's, near Sewanee, Tennessee. During his five years at St. Andrew's, Agee formed a close personal friendship with one of the teachers, Father James Harold Flye. In 1924-1925 Agee attended Knoxville High School, and after a trip to Europe with Father Flye in the summer of 1925, he enrolled at Phillips Exeter Academy in Exeter, New Hampshire. It was at Phillips Exeter that Agee first became interested in writing, perhaps only because of the social distinction it afforded a poor southern boy at an exclusive northern school. One of his first role models at the school was Dwight MacDonald, who had graduated several years before Agee and gone on to Yale. Agee began a correspondence with MacDonald during these years that would last most of his lifetime, and with MacDonald's help he later secured a job at *Fortune* magazine. By the time Agee had matriculated at Harvard in 1928, he was committed to both the aesthetic and professional aspects of a literary career, writing poetry and prose and editing the *Harvard Advocate* during his career there. Agee also formed an important literary friendship at Harvard with his classmate Robert Fitzgerald, who would later become a noted translator.

In 1931 Agee fell under the influence of a visiting Harvard professor, I. A. Richards, whose theories about using language to embody physical reality greatly affected Agee's writing during the 1930s. The most important direct influence Richards's theories had upon Agee's approach to his art involves an increased role for the narrator in Agee's stories. Because he was impressed by Richards's idea that the final effect of any poetic endeavor depends upon the complex relationship between the poem, referent, and reader, Agee decided that it would increase chances for the original poetic experience to be communicated if his first-person narrators not only served as major characters in the chronological narrative, but also as aestheticians who explain the problems of perception involved in their secondary roles as intermediaries

between the experience and the audience. From the early short story "They That Sow in Sorrow Shall Reap" (which Agee was preparing for publication during his initial exposure to Richards and which appeared in the *Harvard Advocate* in May 1931), the technique of employing a first-person narrator with the dual functions of major character and aesthetician is a distinguishing feature of Agee's prose. It is also the technique upon which he would rely most heavily in attempting to recreate the physical reality of three tenant families in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.

In 1932, after graduation from Harvard, Agee was hired by *Fortune* magazine. Agee, whose roots were in the soil rather than the boardroom, worked hard on his *Fortune* assignments, but to him the best aspect of his employment was the money and free time it allowed him to pursue his artistic interests. It may seem odd that Agee, who was decidedly sympathetic to communism, would work for one of the most prominent organs of capitalism, but Henry Luce of *Fortune* prided himself on hiring the best writers for his magazine, regardless of political leanings. Also, the example of Archibald MacLeish, then *Fortune's* chief writer, convinced Agee that one could work for the magazine and still accomplish personal writing projects. The outcome of this limited freedom was a book of poetry, *Permit Me Voyage* (1934), which was published as part of the Yale Series of Younger Poets. More than any volume of Agee's work, *Permit Me Voyage* demonstrates the dramatic turn Agee's aesthetic approach took following his exposure to Richards at Harvard. It also demonstrates Agee's indebtedness to a number of prophetic poets that he himself numbered as important influences, including William Blake, Walt Whitman, and Hart Crane.

On 28 January 1933 Agee married Olivia (Via) Saunders, the daughter of a Hamilton College history professor, whom Agee had met on vacation from Harvard in 1930. When his marriage to Via went through a final break in 1939, Agee was already seeing Alma Mailman, a friend of the Saunderses, whose lower-class background seems to have appealed to Agee's sense of social justice. To Alma fell the thankless task of aiding Agee during the composition of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. After that book was published, and shortly after the birth of their son, Joel, in 1940, Alma left Agee. Despite the fact that Agee seems to have found both his marriages too restrictive to his personal freedom, he needed the stability and companionship that marriage provided. Therefore, in 1946, he married Mia Fritsch, whom he had met at *Fortune*. Agee's

marriage to Mia produced one child, Julia Teresa (born in November 1946), and lasted until Agee's death in 1955.

In 1936 *Fortune* asked Agee and photographer Walker Evans to go to Alabama and do a photo-story on tenant farming. When Agee finally finished the project more than three years later, he had channeled enough of his sensibility into the subject to produce one large book and projections for three more volumes about his Alabama experience (these projected studies never materialized). *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941) is now recognized as the centerpiece of Agee's career. Not quite a novel but too poetic to be nonfiction, *Famous Men* is perhaps a "non-fiction novel" or what Tom Wolfe has called the "new journalism." It is a supreme attempt at recreating the squalor and beauty of the tenant farmers' lives through use of experimental techniques, such as a shifting point of view, several narrative levels and time schemes, and a structure which combines elements of the Mass, five-act drama, and the sonata. Because of Agee's unconventional approach and subject matter far removed from the concerns of a nation preparing to enter World War II, most of the critics considered *Famous Men* a pretentious failure. When a second edition was published in 1960, the critics found it a failure still, but most were willing to grant Agee credit for an aesthetic attempt far beyond the scope of most writers.

Agee's aesthetic concerns in *Famous Men* involved his ability and the ability of his chosen medium, with all its variables, to capture the physical reality of the tenant farmers. These concerns were serious enough to make Agee consider a form of communication other than written language:

If I could, 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 excrement.

This alternative to words is, perhaps, a much more effective way of recreating an experience in the minds of the audience, but, as Agee speculated, the American public would probably turn it into some sort of parlor game. Besides, Agee did not wish to abandon his vocation as a writer before attempting to accomplish the re-creation of reality with words. Therefore, he exploited his personal involvement in the lives of the three tenant families—the Woods, Gudgers, and Ricketts—by writing about

that involvement and by recording the difficulties of writing in the first person. What this technique achieves is the feeling that the writer is working from a sincere concern for the people with whom he has lived and labored. The lack of authorial detachment in *Famous Men* aids in reinforcing the sense that the artist is motivated by his desire to tell the truth. It follows that if the reader is able to appreciate the artist's desire for truth, the artist's job of communicating experience will be easier.

But communication of the experience is not enough. The reader must also understand its significance. In *Practical Criticism* (1929) I. A. Richards says that "we understand when the words prompt in us action or emotion appropriate to the attitude of the person who speaks them." Obviously, the best way to make the reader aware of the attitudes of the person speaking in a work as large as *Famous Men* is to make that speaker the center of the action. By doing this, Agee is able to post the reader on how his attitude changes from section to section with shifts in tone.

Another rhetorical stance which seems to pervade *Famous Men* follows Richards's dictum that "nearly all good poetry is disconcerting." Therefore, Agee was willing to go to any length to assure the reader that his story was both real and frightening, from the lists of the Rickettses' possessions and household decorations to his masterly description of his first sleepless nights in the Rickettses' insect-infested shack. Agee simply did not wish his book to be considered an objet d'art, but it is too consciously artistic to fit into the "documentary" genre beside Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White's *You Have Seen Their Faces*. The basic problem is that Agee wanted *Famous Men* to be the sort of fury that can change man's attitude toward himself. To classify such a fury as art would mean that it has been accepted, discussed at teas and cocktail parties, and its message forgotten. As Agee says in his "Preface": "The deadliest blow the enemy of the human soul can strike is to do fury honor. Swift, Blake, Beethoven, Christ, Joyce, Kafka, name me one who has not been thus castrated." This passionate intensity, so typical of *Famous Men*, disappears in most of Agee's work after 1941.

In 1938, while still hard at work on *Famous Men*, Agee began reviewing books for *Time*. Soon he shifted to reviews of movies, and in 1942 he also began writing a weekly column on film for the *Nation*. He held both posts until 1948. The distinctive quality of Agee's film criticism is the subjectivity with which he approaches his subject, reacting to



each film he considers in a personal, rather than a critical or scholarly, way and always siding with the comparatively naive movie audience. Film, in effect, was the medium for which Agee's sensibility most suited him, because it offered the artist a means of communicating a reality directly. Therefore, much of Agee's criticism suggests the potential of film as an artistic medium which, with its blending of reality and fiction, could produce works of art much more real than any other art form. As testimony to Agee's personal approach to movies, his most famous piece of criticism, "Comedy's Greatest Era" (published in *Life* magazine on 3 September 1949), actually parodies analytic criticism by grading the four stages of laughter, from titter to boffo, and then, in Agee's most evocative prose, attempts to capture the poetry of the silent comedian in brief discussions of Turpin, Sennett, Chaplin, Lloyd, Langdon, and Keaton. This evocative quality is really the essence of Agee's film criticism. His ultimate desire was to recreate the film under consideration through written language so that the audience could decide for itself.

From 1948 until his death Agee divided his interest between writing film scripts and fiction. While he wrote several adaptations and one full-length original script, Agee's Hollywood work will always be remembered for the part he had in coauthoring *The African Queen* with director John Huston. It was while working on that film in January 1951 that Agee suffered the first of many heart attacks. But Agee's original film script *Noa Noa*, based upon the journals of Paul Gauguin, was his most ambitious project for the screen (although never produced), as well as his definitive statement about the role of the artist in society.

While working at *Time*, Agee formed a number of friendships with fellow staffers, including Whittaker Chambers and T. S. Matthews. As managing editor, it was Matthews who assigned Agee the task of producing a profound lead story for the 20 August 1945 issue that was devoted to the explosion of the atomic bomb at Hiroshima on 6 August. The essay that resulted may still be one of the best descriptions of man at a critical moment in his history, as well as a revelation of Agee's own abiding concern for the individual and the individual's responsibility for the rest of mankind. "When the bomb split open the universe and revealed the prospect of the infinitely extraordinary," Agee wrote, "it also revealed the oldest, simplest, commonest, most neglected and most important of facts: that each man is eternally and above all else responsible for his own soul. . . . Man's fate has



Katharine Hepburn and Humphrey Bogart in *The African Queen*. Agee collaborated with John Huston on this adaptation of C. S. Forester's novel.

forever been shaped between the hands of reason and spirit, now in collaboration, again in conflict. . . . If either or anything is to survive, they must find a way to create an indissoluble partnership."

Probably the best way to characterize Agee after 1941 is as a man who had extended himself too far. When he accepted the job of doing movie reviews for the *Nation* in the 1940s he found that he had little time to spend on his own personal projects. For instance, in 1937 Agee had projected plans for an autobiographical novel:

Only relatively small portions would be fiction (though techniques of fiction might be much used); and these would be subjected to non-fictional analysis. This work would contain photographs and records as well as words.

Obviously, as Agee originally planned his novel, it was intended to combine some fictional techniques with the kind proposed for *Famous Men* (records

and photographs). As it turned out, Agee only published one novel during his lifetime, and it is far different from his ambitious proposal of 1937. *The Morning Watch* (first published in 1950 in the Italian journal *Botteghe Oscure* and published in America in 1951) is indeed autobiographical, but it does not employ photographs, records, or nonfictional analysis—all those things disappear from Agee's work after *Famous Men*. It is a simply wrought tale about a young boy, Richard, who undergoes an awakening during a period of five hours on a Good Friday morning. All of the traditional Christian imagery of resurrection is here, rather heavily-handedly linked to Richard's discovery of a recently vacated locust shell and a snake which has shed its skin, but the conventionalities of *The Morning Watch* are of little interest compared with its symmetrical structure. Richard is a sensitive child, an artist figure of sorts, and all his actions are motivated by his desire to be a saint. However, Richard is a student at a small, private religious academy in the South (not unlike Agee's own St. Andrew's), and his fellow students represent a world totally unlike that of the church. Throughout the novel Richard is poised between the world of the spirit and the world of experience. This symmetrical conflict is resolved when Richard is able to find a proper balance of the two worlds. This balance is achieved when Richard kills a snake, acts against a commandment, and, therefore, gives up his right to sainthood, winning the respect of his classmates, Hobe and Jimmy.

*A Death in the Family* (1957) is far more complex than *A Morning Watch*, and yet it seems to rely upon many of the same techniques used in the shorter novel. For instance, like *A Morning Watch*, much of the action in *A Death in the Family* is created by an exploration of tensions. In *A Death in the Family*, however, this examination of polarities takes on a new complexity. There are tensions between individuals, notably the religious differences between Jay and his wife, the different qualities of manhood displayed by Jay and his brother, Ralph, and the differences between the sensitive young Rufus and his classmates. There are also those larger tensions which seem inherent in both individuals and the society in general: such things as the difference between black and white, rich and poor, being from the country as opposed to being from the city, and, most important, the difference between life and death. But the structure of *A Death in the Family* depends largely upon the difference created between "then" and "now." "Then" is the reminiscences of the narrator which deal with times

before his father died. Nearly all of these reminiscences involve the narrator's initiation into a new fact of life (like the meaning of parental love, pregnancy, or the problems between the races). This italicized secondary narrative is woven throughout the primary narrative, the story of Jay Follet's death in a freak automobile accident and the family's reaction to it. Therefore, the reader is aware of two levels of time working concurrently in the novel. This effect is created by suggestions of one level running through another, the recapitulation of past experiences in the present.

At the center of all these tensions is young Rufus Follet, who we are led to believe is the narrator. The opening section of the novel, "Knoxville: Summer 1915," begins with these words: "We are talking now of summer evenings in Knoxville, Tennessee, in the time that I lived there so successfully disguised to myself as a child." His disguise is that of a young boy, but he is actually a fully grown and developed artist who will not be limited by speaking through an adolescent persona. Therefore, the narrator creates the sense that he sees and understands far more than a boy Rufus's age could, and at times the narrator is even omniscient. Since we are made immediately aware of the dual identity of the narrator, we might conclude that all of *A Death in the Family* is aimed at merging these two identities: through experience the boy's disguise is slowly removed, and at the end of the novel we no longer have a boy at all, but a man. Thus the removal of disguise—Agee's trappings as a reporter for *Fortune* in *Famous Men*, Richard's saintliness in *The Morning Watch*, and Rufus's childhood innocence in *A Death in the Family*—is an important theme in all of Agee's work.

Agee's health problems, originally signalled by his first heart attack in 1951, grew progressively worse. In late 1952 he was hospitalized for a recurrence of his heart trouble, but Agee found it difficult to practice the abstinence his doctors recommended, often working on several projects at the same time. By the end of 1954, after nearly a year of good health, Agee's heart attacks began again. But this time they were much more severe and frequent, occurring up to eight times a day. Another series of attacks began in March 1955. In the midst of several film projects, including a screenplay for Colonial Williamsburg, Agee suffered a series of heart attacks and died while riding in a taxicab in New York City on 16 May 1955. In 1957 McDowell and Obolensky published *A Death in the Family*, tentatively arranging Agee's unfinished, and nearly indecipherable, working draft. A





Agee (center) as Frank Gudger in *The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky*. This movie, for which Agee wrote the screenplay, was one of two filmed short stories released under the title *Face to Face*.

*Death in the Family* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1958.

Despite Agee's comparative anonymity during his lifetime, he has received both acknowledgment and respect since the publication of *A Death in the Family*. Not only did that novel win a Pulitzer Prize, but in 1960 it was adapted for the theater by Fred Coe and Arthur Cantor, and subsequently turned into a television drama in 1961 and the movie *All the Way Home* in 1962. The popularity of *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye* and the re-evaluation of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* as one of the most important books of the 1930s, after its republication in 1960, have aided in advancing Agee's reputation. Finally, the publication of the two volumes of *Agee on Film* in 1958 and 1960 gave the public a new insight into the genius that motivated Agee's movie reviews and film scripts.

Agee's personality was of the iconoclastic sort which seems to draw worshipers and imitators. After his death, those closest to him tended to mythologize Agee's life in much the same way that F.

Scott Fitzgerald's has been mythologized: the incredibly gifted artist drained of talent and energy by a society unable to appreciate him. But the legend of Agee is the smallest part of his legacy.

#### Letters:

*Letters of James Agee to Father Flye*, edited by James H. Flye (New York: George Braziller, 1962; London: Peter Owen, 1964);

Agee's letters to Flye, his lifelong friend and confidant, are central to an understanding of Agee's life and work. The second edition of this book (1971) includes some letters of Flye to Agee.

#### Bibliographies:

Genevieve Fabre, "A Bibliography of the Works of James Agee," *Bulletin of Bibliography*, 24 (May-August 1965): 145-148, 163-166;

Bibliography of Agee's published work, including books, poetry, short stories, and criticism.

Nancy Lyman Huse, *John Hersey and James Agee: A Reference Guide* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1978);  
Lists books and articles written about Agee.  
Entries have long and valuable annotations.

#### References:

Alfred T. Barson, *A Way of Seeing: A Critical Study of James Agee* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1972);

A study of Agee's development as an artist that focuses on aesthetic theory and practice.

Laurence Bergreen, *James Agee: A Life* (New York: Dutton, 1984);

The most thorough and revealing biography of Agee. Bergreen uses many unpublished letters and manuscripts, and his work contains solid analysis of Agee's life and work. Especially strong on *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.

Mark A. Doty, *Tell Me Who I Am: James Agee's Search for Selfhood* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981);

An examination of the relationship of Agee's life and art. Doty argues that Agee used autobiographical writing as a way of sorting out his own life.

Victor A. Kramer, *James Agee* (Boston: Twayne, 1975);

Blends biography with superior analysis of Agee's work. Kramer's study is the most valuable introduction to Agee's life and work.

Erling Larsen, *James Agee* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971);

Brief overview of Agee's life and work.

David Madden, *Remembering James Agee* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974);

A collection of essays on Agee by those who knew him. Most are reprinted from previously published sources.

Genevieve Moreau, *The Restless Journey of James Agee* (New York: Morrow, 1977);

An accessible consideration of Agee's life and work that attempts to separate what was real from the legend that has grown up around Agee's memory.

Peter H. Ohlin, *Agee* (New York: Obolensky, 1966);

An examination of Agee's writing in light of Ohlin's belief that the "absolute commitment to the holiness of human reality" is the theme that links all his work.

Kenneth Seib, *James Agee: Promise and Fulfillment* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1968);

An overview of Agee's career that lacks documentation and is sometimes incorrect.

Ross Spears and Jude Cassidy, eds., with narrative by Robert Coles, *Agee: His Life Remembered* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1985);  
Based on the 1979 film, *Agee*, this volume presents pictures and reminiscences by those who knew Agee. The essay by Coles was composed specifically for this book.

#### Papers:

The University of Texas has a large collection of Agee's literary manuscripts and correspondence; see Victor A. Kramer, "James Agee Papers at the University of Texas," *Library Chronicle of the University of Texas*, 8, no. 2 (1966): 33-36.



# Edward Albee

*This entry was updated by Stephen M. Vallillo (New York, New York) from the entry by John MacNicholas (University of South Carolina) in DLB 7, Twentieth-Century American Dramatists.*

Places	New York City
Influences and Relationships	
Literary Movements and Forms	Theatre of the Absurd
Major Themes	<div>Dying</div> <div>Identity</div> <div>Relation of Art to Society</div> <div>Alienation</div> <div>Isolation vs. Communication</div> <div>Illusion vs. Reality</div> <div>Relationship between Love and Hate</div>
Cultural and Artistic Influences	
Social and Economic Influences	Post World War II American Society

**BIRTH:** Virginia, 12 March 1928. Adopted by Reed and Frances Albee.

**EDUCATION:** Trinity College, Hartford, Connecticut, 1946-1947.

**AWARDS AND HONORS:** Berlin Festival Award, 1959; Vernon Rice Memorial Award, 1960; Obie Award for *The Zoo Story*, 1960; *The Death of Bessie Smith* and *The American Dream* chosen as best plays of the 1960-1961 season by the Foreign Press Association; Berlin Festival Award for *The Death of Bessie Smith*, 1961; Lola D'Annunzio Award for *The American Dream*, 1961; New York Drama Critics Circle Award, Foreign Press Association Award, American National Theatre and Academy (ANTA) award, two Tony awards and one Outer Circle Award for *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, 1963; with Richard Barr and Clinton Wilder, the Margo Jones Award for encouraging new plays and playwrights, 1965; election to the National Institute of Arts and Letters, 1966; Pulitzer Prize for *A Delicate Balance*, 1967; D.Litt., Emerson College, 1967; Trinity College, 1974; Pulitzer Prize for *Seascape*, 1975; Gold Medal for drama from The American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, 1980.

**SELECTED BOOKS:** *The Zoo Story*, *The Death of Bessie Smith*, *The Sandbox* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1960; London: Cape, 1962); *The American Dream* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1961; London: French, 1962); *The American Dream*, *The Death of Bessie Smith*, *Fam and Yam* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1962); *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (New York: Atheneum, 1962; London: Cape, 1964); *The Play The Ballad of the Sad Cafe*, Carson McCullers' *Novella Adapted to the Stage* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963; New York: Atheneum, 1963; London: Cape, 1965); *Tiny Alice* (New York: Atheneum, 1965; London: Cape, 1966); *Malcolm*, *Adapted by Edward Albee from the Novel by James Purdy* (New York: Atheneum, 1966; London: Cape/Secker & Warburg, 1967); *A Delicate Balance* (New York: Atheneum, 1966; London: Cape, 1968); *Everything in the Garden from the Play by Giles Cooper* (New York: Atheneum, 1968); *Box and Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung: Two Inter-Related Plays* (New York: Atheneum, 1969; London: Cape, 1970);



Edward Albee (Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library at Lincoln Center, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations)

*All Over* (New York: Atheneum, 1971; London: Cape, 1972); *Seascape* (New York: Atheneum, 1975; London: Cape, 1976); *Counting the Ways and Listening, Two Plays* (New York: Atheneum, 1977); *The Lady from Dubuque* (New York: Atheneum, 1980).

**SELECTED PLAY PRODUCTIONS:** *The Zoo Story*, Berlin, Schiller Theater Werkstatt, 28 September 1959; New York, Provincetown Playhouse, 14 January 1960, 582 [performances]; *The Death of Bessie Smith*, Berlin, Schlosspark Theater, 21 April 1960; New York, York Theatre, 28 February 1961, 328; *The Sandbox*, New York, Jazz Gallery, 15 May 1960; *Fam and Yam*, Westport, Conn., White Barn Theatre, 27 August 1960; *The American Dream*, New York, York Theatre, 24 January 1961, 360; *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, New York, Billy Rose Theatre, 13 October 1962, 644;



- The Ballad of the Sad Cafe*, adapted from Carson McCullers's novella, New York, Martin Beck Theatre, 30 October 1963, 123;
- Tiny Alice*, New York, Billy Rose Theatre, 29 December 1964, 167;
- Malcolm*, adapted from James Purdy's novel, New York, Shubert Theatre, 11 January 1966, 7;
- A Delicate Balance*, New York, Martin Beck Theatre, 22 September 1966, 132;
- Everything in the Garden*, adapted from Giles Cooper's play, New York, Plymouth Theatre, 29 November 1967, 84;
- Box and Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*, Buffalo, Studio Arena Theatre, 6 March 1968; New York, Billy Rose Theatre, 30 September 1968, 12;
- All Over*, New York, Martin Beck Theatre, 27 March 1971, 40;
- Seascape*, New York, Shubert Theatre, 26 January 1975, 63;
- Listening and Counting the Ways*, Hartford, Conn., Hartford Stage Company, 28 January 1977;
- The Lady from Dubuque*, New York, Morosco Theatre, 31 January 1980, 12;
- Lolita*, adapted from Vladimir Nabokov's novel, New York, Brooks Atkinson Theatre, 19 March 1981, 12;
- The Man Who Had Three Arms*, New York, Lyceum Theatre, 5 April 1983, 16;
- Finding the Sun*, Greeley, Colo., Frazier Theatre, 10 May 1983, limited run of 5.

OTHER: Introduction to *Three Plays by Noel Coward: Blithe Spirit, Hay Fever, Private Lives* (New York: Delta, 1965).

PERIODICAL PUBLICATION: "Which Theatre Is the Absurd One?," *New York Times Magazine*, 25 February 1962, pp. 30-31, 64, 66; An article defending experimental theater and condemning mainstream, Broadway theater, which he calls absurd.

In the early 1960s it was customary to find the names of four young playwrights linked: Edward Albee, Jack Gelber, Arthur Kopit, and Jack Richardson. These, and certain others like them, wished to prevent theater in the United States from retreating further into a detached lethargy. These playwrights were turning to Europe for new forms to experiment with, much as Eugene O'Neill had done two generations earlier. In their hands the nature of human experience was not to be rendered either by a straightforward brand of realism

or by a merely genteel departure from it. Of these four playwrights, the most successful, prolific, and controversial is Edward Albee. The nature of the controversy surrounding his work seems little changed over the past two and a half decades. His willingness to experiment with the medium and to challenge the received ideas of theater audiences and society in general has, if anything, increased with age. His work betrays no signs of retrenchment, no evidence that he will cease being an acerbic, painstaking, vivid, lyrical, funny, and altogether serious scribe of human loss, self-delusion, and entropy.

Though he was probably born somewhere in Virginia, the place of Albee's birth is officially listed as Washington, D.C. Two weeks after his birth, Albee's natural parents gave him up for adoption to Reed and Frances Albee in the District of Columbia. Albee does not know and has been legally prohibited from seeking verification of the identities of his natural parents or his actual place of birth.

Reed Albee was the wealthy owner of part of the Keith-Albee vaudeville circuit started by his father, Edward Franklin Albee II. Reed and Frances Albee lived in Larchmont, New York, where they raised their adopted son amid the conspicuous splendor of a large Tudor house, servants, tutors, horses, pets, toys, and chauffeured limousines. Also present in the house was Mrs. Albee's mother, Grandma Cotter. Albee was frequently driven into the city for the matinee performances of shows. In addition, many show business personalities visited Albee's home over the years, even though Reed Albee retired from his business in 1928, the year of Albee's birth. Albee's mother was younger and much larger than her husband, who was a quiet man. According to Albee, his mother was "an excellent horsewoman and saddle horse judge. . . . I was riding from the time I was able to walk." Albee expresses no bitterness toward his adoptive parents; however, he has acknowledged "a deep-seated resentment against my natural parents for abandoning me." He was closely attached to his grandmother, whose generosity clearly extended far beyond the trust fund she gave Albee. The relatively modest income from the trust enabled Albee to leave home in 1950 and pursue his own interests. That he dedicated *The Sandbox* (1960) to her (she died in 1959, just as Albee's career was gathering momentum) reflects perhaps not only his grief but also an awareness of the way her life had contributed to his.