

# Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

TCLC

19

# Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

# Guide to Gale Literary Criticism Series

When you need to review criticism of literary works, these are the Gale series to use:

If the author's death date is:

You should turn to:

After Dec. 31, 1959  
(or author is still living)

***CONTEMPORARY LITERARY CRITICISM***

for example: Jorge Luis Borges, Anthony Burgess,  
William Faulkner, Mary Gordon,  
Ernest Hemingway, Iris Murdoch

1900 through 1959

***TWENTIETH-CENTURY LITERARY CRITICISM***

for example: Willa Cather, F. Scott Fitzgerald,  
Henry James, Mark Twain, Virginia Woolf

1800 through 1899

***NINETEENTH-CENTURY LITERATURE CRITICISM***

for example: Fedor Dostoevski, George Sand,  
Gerard Manley Hopkins, Emily Dickinson

1400 through 1799

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the Beowulf poet

*(Volume 1 forthcoming)*

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who write for the preschool to junior-high audience.

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This two-volume set presents criticism on  
contemporary authors writing on current issues.  
Topics covered include the social sciences,  
philosophy, economics, natural science, law, and  
related areas.



Volume 19

# Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

**Excerpts from Criticism of the  
Works of Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,  
Short Story Writers, and Other Creative Writers  
Who Died between 1900 and 1960,  
from the First Published Critical Appraisals  
to Current Evaluations**

**Dennis Poupard  
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**Gale Research Company  
Book Tower  
Detroit, Michigan 48226**

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## Preface

It is impossible to overvalue the importance of literature in the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual evolution of humanity. Literature is that which both lifts us out of everyday life and helps us to better understand it. Through the fictive lives of such characters as Anna Karenina, Jay Gatsby, or Leopold Bloom, our perceptions of the human condition are enlarged, and we are enriched.

Literary criticism can also give us insight into the human condition, as well as into the specific moral and intellectual atmosphere of an era, for the criteria by which a work of art is judged reflects contemporary philosophical and social attitudes. Literary criticism takes many forms: the traditional essay, the book or play review, even the parodic poem. Criticism can also be of several types: normative, descriptive, interpretive, textual, appreciative, generic. Collectively, the range of critical response helps us to understand a work of art, an author, an era.

### Scope of the Series

*Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism (TCLC)* is designed to serve as an introduction for the student of twentieth-century literature to the authors of the period 1900 to 1960 and to the most significant commentators on these authors. The great poets, novelists, short story writers, playwrights, and philosophers of this period are by far the most popular writers for study in high school and college literature courses. Since a vast amount of relevant critical material confronts the student, *TCLC* presents significant passages from the most important published criticism to aid students in the location and selection of commentaries on authors who died between 1900 and 1960.

The need for *TCLC* was suggested by the usefulness of the Gale series *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)*, which excerpts criticism on current writing. Because of the difference in time span under consideration (*CLC* considers authors who were still living after 1959), there is no duplication of material between *CLC* and *TCLC*. For further information about *CLC* and Gale's other criticism series, users should consult the Guide to Gale Literary Criticism Series preceding the title page in this volume.

Each volume of *TCLC* is carefully compiled to include authors who represent a variety of genres and nationalities and who are currently regarded as the most important writers of this era. In addition to major authors, *TCLC* also presents criticism on lesser-known writers whose significant contributions to literary history are important to the study of twentieth-century literature.

Each author entry in *TCLC* is intended to provide an overview of major criticism on an author. Therefore, the editors include approximately twenty authors in each 600-page volume (compared with approximately fifty authors in a *CLC* volume of similar size) so that more attention may be given to an author. Each author entry represents a historical survey of the critical response to that author's work: some early criticism is presented to indicate initial reactions, later criticism is selected to represent any rise or decline in the author's reputation, and current retrospective analyses provide students with a modern view. The length of an author entry is intended to reflect the amount of critical attention the author has received from critics writing in English, and from foreign criticism in translation. Critical articles and books that have not been translated into English are excluded. Every attempt has been made to identify and include excerpts from the seminal essays on each author's work. Additionally, as space permits, especially insightful essays of a more limited scope are included.

An author may appear more than once in the series because of the great quantity of critical material available, or because of a resurgence of criticism generated by events such as an author's centennial or anniversary celebration, the republication of an author's works, or the publication of a newly translated work or volume of letters. Generally, a few author entries in each volume of *TCLC* feature criticism on single works by major authors who have appeared previously in the series. Only those individual works that have been the subjects of vast amounts of criticism and are widely studied in literature classes are selected for this in-depth treatment. Rainer Maria Rilke's *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* and Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* are examples of such entries in *TCLC*, Volume 19.

### Organization of the Book

An author entry consists of the following elements: author heading, biographical and critical introduction, principal works, excerpts of criticism (each followed by a bibliographical citation), and an additional bibliography for further reading.

- The *author heading* consists of the author's full name, followed by birth and death dates. The unbracketed portion of the name denotes the form under which the author most commonly wrote. If an author wrote



consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the real name given in parentheses on the first line of the biographical and critical introduction. Also located at the beginning of the introduction to the author entry are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose languages use nonroman alphabets. Uncertainty as to a birth or death date is indicated by a question mark.

- The *biographical and critical introduction* contains background information designed to introduce the reader to an author and to the critical debate surrounding his or her work. Parenthetical material following many of the introductions provides references to biographical and critical reference series published by Gale, including *Children's Literature Review*, *Contemporary Authors*, *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, *Something about the Author*, and past volumes of *TCLC*.
- Most *TCLC* entries include *portraits* of the author. Many entries also contain illustrations of materials pertinent to an author's career, including holographs of manuscript pages, title pages, dust jackets, letters, or representations of important people, places, and events in an author's life.
- The *list of principal works* is chronological by date of first book publication and identifies the genre of each work. In the case of foreign authors where there are both foreign language publications and English translations, the title and date of the first English-language edition are given in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.
- *Criticism* is arranged chronologically in each author entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over the years. All titles by the author featured in the critical entry are printed in boldface type to enable the user to ascertain without difficulty the works being discussed. Also for purposes of easier identification, the critic's name and the publication date of the essay are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the journal in which it appeared. When an anonymous essay is later attributed to a critic, the critic's name appears in brackets at the beginning of the excerpt and in the bibliographical citation.
- Critical essays are prefaced by *explanatory notes* as an additional aid to students using *TCLC*. The explanatory notes provide several types of useful information, including: the reputation of a critic; the importance of a work of criticism; the specific type of criticism (biographical, psychoanalytic, structuralist, etc.); a synopsis of the criticism; and the growth of critical controversy or changes in critical trends regarding an author's work. In many cases, these notes cross-reference the work of critics who agree or disagree with each other. Dates in parentheses within the explanatory notes refer to a book publication date when they follow a book title and to an essay date when they follow a critic's name.
- A complete *bibliographical citation* designed to facilitate location of the original essay or book by the interested reader follows each piece of criticism. An asterisk (\*) at the end of a citation indicates that the essay is on more than one author.
- The *additional bibliography* appearing at the end of each author entry suggests further reading on the author. In some cases it includes essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights. An asterisk (\*) at the end of a citation indicates that the essay is on more than one author.

An appendix lists the sources from which material in each volume has been reprinted. It does not, however, list every book or periodical consulted in the preparation of the volume.

### Cumulative Indexes

Each volume of *TCLC* includes a cumulative index to authors listing all the authors who have appeared in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism*, and *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800*, along with cross-references to the Gale series *Children's Literature Review*, *Authors in the News*, *Contemporary Authors*, *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series*, *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, *Something about the Author*, and *Yesterday's Authors of Books for Children*. Users will welcome this cumulated author index as a useful tool for locating an author within the various series. The index, which lists birth and death dates when available, will be particularly valuable for those authors who are identified with a certain period but whose death date causes them to be placed in another, or for those authors whose careers span two periods. For example, F. Scott Fitzgerald is found in *TCLC*, yet a writer often associated with him, Ernest Hemingway, is found in *CLC*.

Each volume of *TCLC* also includes a cumulative nationality index. Author names are arranged alphabetically under their respective nationalities and followed by the volume numbers in which they appear.

A cumulative index to critics is another useful feature in *TCLC*. Under each critic's name are listed the authors on whom the critic has written and the volume and page where the criticism may be found.

### **Acknowledgments**

No work of this scope can be accomplished without the cooperation of many people. The editors especially wish to thank the copyright holders of the excerpted criticism included in this volume, the permissions managers of many book and magazine publishing companies for assisting us in securing reprint rights, and Anthony Bogucki for assistance with copyright research. We are also grateful to the staffs of the Detroit Public Library, the Library of Congress, University of Detroit Library, University of Michigan Library, and Wayne State University Library for making their resources available to us.

### **Suggestions Are Welcome**

In response to various suggestions, several features have been added to *TCLC* since the series began, including: explanatory notes to excerpted criticism that provide important information regarding critics and their work; a cumulative author index listing authors in all Gale literary criticism series; entries devoted to criticism on a single work by a major author; and more extensive illustrations.

Readers who wish to suggest authors to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to write the editors.



## Authors to Be Featured in *TCLC*, Volumes 20 and 21

Arnold Bennett (English novelist)—Bennett is credited with introducing techniques of European Naturalism to the English novel. Set in the manufacturing district of the author's native Staffordshire, Bennett's novels tell of the thwarted ambitions of those who endure a dull, provincial existence.

Hermann Broch (Austrian novelist, poet, and essayist)—Broch was a philosophical novelist whose works are considered profound reflections upon the social and moral disintegration of modern Europe. His major works, which include his masterpiece *The Sleepwalkers*, have been compared to James Joyce's *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* for their contribution to the Modernist exploration of language.

Sādeq Hedāyat (Iranian novelist)—Considered the most important prose writer in modern Persian literature, Hedāyat has been compared to Edgar Allan Poe and Franz Kafka for his gruesome outlook on the human condition and for the often fantastic quality of his works.

James Hilton (English novelist)—Hilton was the author of *Goodbye Mr. Chips* and *Lost Horizon*, two of the most popular and well-loved works of twentieth-century English fiction.

Julia Ward Howe (American poet and biographer)—A famous suffragette and social reformer, Howe was also a popular poet who is best known as the composer of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic."

T. E. Hulme (English poet)—A major influence on the work of T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and other important twentieth-century poets, Hulme was the chief theorist of Imagism and Modernism in English poetry.

Ilya Ilf and Evgeny Petrov (Russian novelists and short story writers)—Among the most prominent humorists of post-Revolutionary Russia, Ilf and Petrov collaborated on numerous works satirizing the weaknesses of Soviet society. Their humorous but pointed stories and novels earned them a reputation as "the Soviet Mark Twain."

Sheila Kaye-Smith (English novelist)—Kaye-Smith is best known for her novels of the Sussex countryside. Often compared to Thomas Hardy's Wessex novels, the works of Kaye-Smith also portray strong-willed male and female characters who demonstrate the natural vitality of an agrarian way of life.

Velimir Khlebnikov (Russian poet)—Khlebnikov was a leading member of the Russian Futurists, a literary movement whose adherents sought to revitalize poetry by rejecting traditional aesthetic principles. The author of experimental poetry and multi-genre works he called "super-tales," Khlebnikov is considered among the twentieth century's most brilliant linguistic innovators and poetic craftsmen.

Thomas Mann (German novelist)—In novels characterized by irony and a deep, often humorous, sympathy for humanity, Mann singlehandedly raised the German novel to an international stature it had not enjoyed since the time of the Romantics. In his most important novel, *The Magic Mountain*, Mann explored such themes as the nature of time, the seduction of the individual by disease and death, and the conflict between the intellect and the spirit. *TCLC* will devote an entry to critical discussion of this work, which is considered the twentieth century's foremost representative of the German bildungsroman.

Ferenc Molnár (Hungarian dramatist)—The author of comedies praised for their wit, charm, and technical excellence, Molnár was the first Hungarian dramatist to achieve international acclaim. His most successful play, *Liliom*, gained fame through its adaptation by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein as the musical *Carousel*.

Horacio Quiroga (Uruguayan short story writer)—Represented in English translation by the recently published *Decapitated Chicken, and Other Stories*, Quiroga's tales of death and madness in the jungles of South America reflect the influence of Edgar Allan Poe as well as the sensational tragedies of Quiroga's own life.

Raymond Roussel (French novelist and dramatist)—Roussel was a wealthy eccentric who staged expensive but entirely unsuccessful productions of his own plays and published elaborate but ignored editions of his novels. He was ~~named~~ as a forerunner by the Surrealists for the extravagant and often shocking imagination demonstrated in his ~~works~~ and is today recognized as one of the oddest and most ingenious authors in modern literature.

John Ruskin (English critic)—Most renowned for his critical writings on art and architecture, particularly *Stones of Venice* and the five-volume series *Modern Painters*, Ruskin was also an important social critic. His advocacy of various reforms and his association with the Pre-Raphaelite circle of artists, writers, and thinkers place him at the intellectual and cultural center of Victorian England.

Bernard Shaw (Irish dramatist, critic, novelist, and essayist)—Considered the greatest dramatist of the English language since Shakespeare, Shaw revolutionized English theater by disposing of the romantic conventions of the "well-made" play and instituting a theater of ideas firmly grounded in realism. In *Man and Superman*, which he called "a dramatic parable of Creative Evolution," Shaw described his theory of a life-force that guides the evolution of humanity. *TCLC* will devote an entire entry to critical discussion of this work.

Olaf Stapleton (English novelist)—An important influence on the works of C. S. Lewis, Arthur C. Clarke, and Stanislaw Lem, Stapleton was the author of what he described as "fantastic fiction of a semi-philosophical kind." Today, critics regard his novels as among the most significant and

accomplished examples of science fiction and speculative writing.

Lincoln Steffens (American journalist and autobiographer)—Steffens was one of a group of writers in the early twentieth century who were described as “muckrakers” by President Theodore Roosevelt. Steffens’s call for radical reforms in American government and society forms the substance of his best works, including *The Shame of the Cities* and *The Struggle for Self Government*, and serves as the background to his highly readable *Autobiography*.

George Sterling (American poet)—A poet whose work was traditional in form yet modern in the nihilist sensibility it expressed, Sterling was one of the major figures in the bohemian society of writers and artists who congregated around Carmel, California, in the early decades of the twentieth century.

Beatrice and Sydney James Webb (English social writers)—Prominent members of the progressive Fabian society, the Webbs wrote sociological works significant to the advent of socialist reform in England and influenced the work of

several major authors, including H. G. Wells and George Bernard Shaw.

Owen Wister (American novelist)—Considered the founder of modern fiction about the Old West, Wister is best known as the author of *The Virginian*, a novel that established the basic character types, settings, and plots of the Western genre.

Virginia Woolf (English novelist)—Woolf is one of the most important English novelists of the twentieth century. *Mrs. Dalloway* is perhaps the most frequently studied of her novels and a landmark work in the history of modern fiction for its use of the literary device known as stream of consciousness. *TCLC* will devote an entire entry to this important work.

Emile Zola (French novelist, dramatist, and critic)—Zola was the founder and principal theorist of Naturalism, perhaps the most influential literary movement in modern literature. His twenty-volume series *Les Rougon-Macquart* is one of the monuments of Naturalist fiction and served as a model for late nineteenth-century novelists seeking a more candid and accurate representation of human life.

## Additional Authors to Appear in Future Volumes

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 Thoma, Ludwig 1867-1927  
 Trotsky, Leon 1870-1940  
 Tuchmann, Jules 1830-1901  
 Turner, W(alter) J(ames) R(edfern)  
 1889-1946  
 Vachell, Horace Annesley 1861-1955

Van Dine, S.S. (William H. Wright)  
 1888-1939  
 Van Dyke, Henry 1852-1933  
 Vazov, Ivan Minchov 1850-1921  
 Veblen, Thorstein 1857-1929  
 Villaespesa, Francisco 1877-1936  
 Wallace, Edgar 1874-1932  
 Wallace, Lewis 1827-1905  
 Walsh, Ernest 1895-1926  
 Webb, Mary 1881-1927  
 Webster, Jean 1876-1916  
 Whitlock, Brand 1869-1927  
 Wilson, Harry Leon 1867-1939  
 Wolf, Emma 1865-1932  
 Wood, Clement 1888-1950  
 Wren, P(ercival) C(hristopher) 1885-  
 1941  
 Yonge, Charlotte Mary 1823-1901  
 Zecca, Ferdinand 1864-1947  
 Zeromski, Stefan 1864-1925

Readers are cordially invited to suggest additional authors to the editors.

# James (Rufus) Agee

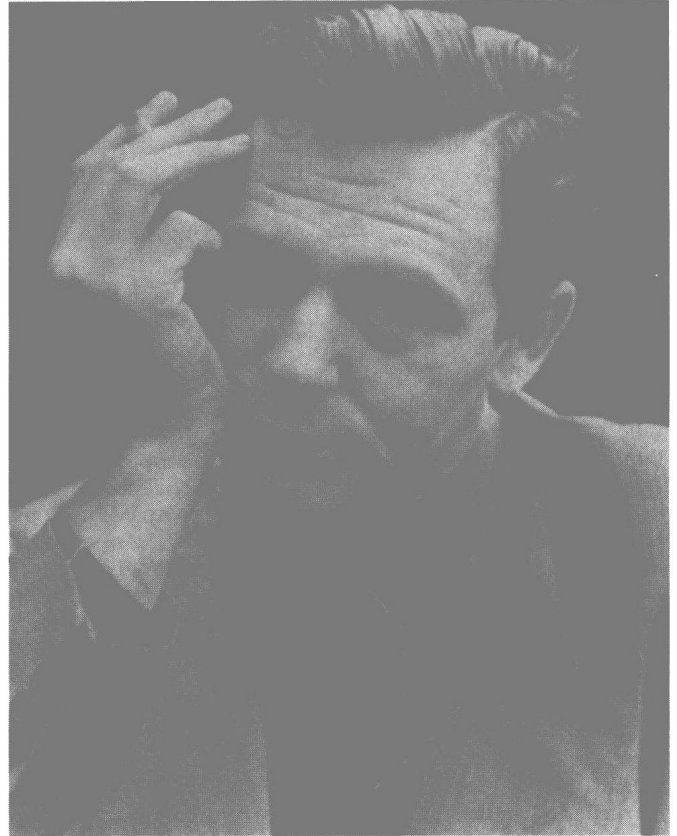
1909-1955

American novelist, journalist, critic, essayist, screenwriter, and poet.

Known primarily as a journalist during his lifetime, Agee has since been recognized as a versatile writer of outstanding talent through the posthumous publication of critically respected works in a variety of genres. His most highly regarded writings include the autobiographical novel *A Death in the Family*, which was awarded the 1958 Pulitzer Prize in fiction, and *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, considered one of the most important works to document the social trauma of the Great Depression.

Agee was born in Knoxville, Tennessee. His father was the poorly schooled son of a rural Southern family and his mother the daughter of an educated Northern family, a dichotomy which preoccupied Agee throughout his life and decisively affected his literary career. When Agee was six years old his father was killed in an automobile accident, and the boy was raised by his mother. The loss of his father prompted in Agee's later life what commentators have called a crisis of identity, which was at least partially due to Agee's conviction that he had betrayed his father's Southern heritage by becoming a successful member of Northern society. From 1919 to 1924 Agee attended St. Andrew's, an Episcopal boarding school in the Cumberland Mountains, where he first met Father James Flye and initiated a friendship that provided him with encouragement and guidance throughout his life. He continued his education at Phillips Exeter Academy in Maine and began earnest preparation for a career as an author, contributing numerous poems, short stories, dramas, and essays to the *Phillips Exeter Monthly*. He continued to write prolifically at Harvard, where a successful academic career culminated in graduation with honors, despite periodic bouts of severe depression and his reluctance to become part of the social establishment represented by the prestigious university. Upon graduation in 1932, Agee was offered a position as a staff writer on *Fortune* magazine, which he accepted despite misgivings about his potential for success in writing for a magazine devoted to capitalism, given his own poetic temperament and leftist political leanings. The association proved difficult; Agee later wrote that his attitude toward *Fortune* varied from "a sort of hard, masochistic liking without enthusiasm or trust, to direct nausea at the sight of this symbol \$ and this % and this *biggest* and this blank billion." Nevertheless, the work provided him with a steady income and enough free time to continue his other literary projects, and he remained with *Fortune* for the next seven years.

In 1934 Agee's first volume of poetry, *Permit Me Voyage*, was published to generally favorable reviews. Critics admired the technical excellence of the poems, written primarily in the tradition of Elizabethan and Jacobean English verse, and predicted for Agee a distinguished career in poetry. However, Agee soon abandoned poetry for prose, a medium which, according to Robert Fitzgerald, was better suited to his literary ambitions. In 1936 Agee was assigned by *Fortune* to the project that eventually became the central work of his career, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. *Fortune* conceived the project as a series of articles, illustrated with photographs by Walker Evans,



Photograph by Florence Homolka

ans, which was to document the lives of tenant farmers in the Deep South, examining farm economics and evaluating the efficacy of relief efforts. The work resulting from Agee's eight weeks among Alabama sharecroppers, however, was a lengthy, subjective, and deeply personal account of three tenant families and Agee's stay among them. *Fortune* rejected the work, and Agee devoted the next three years to expanding and reworking his manuscript, which was eventually published in book form, with photographs by Evans, in 1941. Although many critics of the 1940s objected to the work's departure from conventional documentary methods, finding particularly offensive Agee's personal participation in the narrative and his frank treatment of sexuality, critical reaction to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* was generally favorable. The book was nevertheless ignored by the reading public, with the first edition selling only five hundred copies. Upon its reissue two decades later, however, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* was acclaimed by critics and readers alike as a brilliant and original work, judged by Granville Hicks to be "one of the extraordinary, one of the great books of our time."

In 1939 Agee moved from *Fortune* to *Time*, hoping that a position as a literature and film critic for *Time* would be better suited to his talents and temperament. In his film reviews for *Time*, and particularly in those written for the *Nation* beginning

in 1942, Agee produced what critics consider America's first serious body of film criticism. Praised for their intelligence, insight, and wit, Agee's critiques prompted W. H. Auden to proclaim the weekly *Nation* column "Agee on Films" "the most remarkable regular event in American journalism today." Agee remained with *Time* and the *Nation* until 1948, when he resigned both positions in order to concentrate on a variety of literary projects. He devoted the rest of his life to writing fiction and Hollywood film scripts, most notably a treatment of C. S. Forester's novel *The African Queen* in collaboration with John Huston. In 1951 he suffered his first heart attack, after which he was advised by doctors to limit his drinking, smoking, and habitual overwork. According to friends, Agee was unwilling to adopt a sedate lifestyle after years of overindulgence, and his health rapidly deteriorated. He died of a heart attack in 1955.

*Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Agee's least orthodox and most famous work, is also considered by critics to be the pivotal work of his literary career. In returning to the rural South after years at Eastern schools and as a member of New York's literary community, Agee was presented with an opportunity to rediscover the Southern heritage that he felt he had betrayed, as well as to confront the memories of his childhood in Knoxville and at St. Andrews. Empathetic toward the farmers of the South and sensitive to their situation, he objected to the assignment as delineated at *Fortune*, and to social documentary in general, in the following terms: "It seems to me curious, not to say obscene and thoroughly terrifying . . . to pry intimately into the lives of an undefended and appallingly damaged group of human beings, an ignorant and helpless rural family, for the purpose of parading the nakedness, disadvantage, and humiliation of these lives before another group of human beings." He also disapproved of the often patronizing attitude of journalists toward their subjects in essays designed to elicit pity rather than respect and understanding from the reader. Agee therefore took particular care to present his subjects as individuals, not as class victims or representatives of a social group. He departed most radically from conventional documentary methods in his personal participation in the narrative. Critics observe that the work is as much a record of Agee's reaction to his subjects and their plight as it is a documentary; Richard H. King has commented that in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* "a (perhaps the) central concern was an investigation of his own motives and intentions." Basing his aesthetic approach to the project on his conviction that life is superior to art, Agee relied heavily on bare description in an attempt to transcend the artifice of literature, meticulously cataloging the contents of the tenants' houses down to the texture of the dust in a corner of a drawer. Lamenting the inadequacy of words to express what he had observed, he regretted that the book could not include "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." Critics often comment on the shapelessness of the text, which is a disorderly assembly of topics and digressions that appear to have been arranged, as William Stott has observed, "on the spur of the moment, in pencil, on a scrap of paper, with casual arrows shifting tens of thousands of words about." While some critics see this formlessness as evidence of an unfocused approach to the subject, others consider it a conscious expression by Agee of the impossibility of communicating reality, or, in the words of Lionel Trilling, "an inevitable failure, for failure alone can express the inexpressibility of his matter."

Agee's fiction is primarily autobiographical. In *The Morning Watch*, a novella concerning the emotional and spiritual ma-

turation of a twelve-year-old boy at a religious school in Tennessee, the setting and many of the characters are modeled closely after Agee's experiences at St. Andrew's. The novella has been praised for its subtle rendering of the protagonist's development from immature idealism to a mature awareness of life's complexity. At the same time, commentators have frequently criticized the work for sacrificing substance to technique, particularly in its overly rhetorical style and excessive reliance on symbolism. Richard Chase refers to the language in *The Morning Watch* as "a kind of free-lance, predatory agent" and comments that "one feels that the author has turned loose a kind of ravenous metaphorical beast who has swallowed up the hero." More highly regarded by critics is Agee's only novel, *A Death in the Family*. Like *The Morning Watch*, Agee's novel is based on an autobiographical episode, in this case the death of the author's father. Agee wrote that he intended the book to be "chiefly a remembrance of my childhood, and a memorial to my father." Left unfinished at his death, the novel was pieced together by editors who inserted several passages from outside the time frame of the story between major divisions in the narrative. Critical comment has centered on this editorial decision. While some critics maintain that the interpolations detract from the narrative by creating internal contradictions and by further complicating Agee's attempt to present the event from a variety of viewpoints, others contend that the inserted passages surpass the main narrative in the quality of their prose and contribute to the cohesiveness of the novel by focusing the narrative more exclusively on the principal character, Rufus.

Agee published relatively few works during his lifetime, and was at the time of his death widely considered a gifted writer who did not fulfill his promise due to an unwillingness to concentrate his abilities on any particular genre. The publication of *A Death in the Family*, however, and its subsequent receipt of the Pulitzer Prize in 1958, regenerated interest in Agee and his works; the resulting reissue of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and publication of six volumes of previously unpublished poetry, prose, screenplays, and letters have established Agee's reputation as one of the most talented and accomplished writers of his generation.

(See also *TCLC*, Vol. 1; *Contemporary Authors*, Vol. 108; *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 2: *American Novelists since World War II*; and *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 26: *American Screenwriters*.)

## PRINCIPAL WORKS

- Permit Me Voyage* (poetry) 1934
- Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* [with photographs by Walker Evans] (essay) 1941
- The Morning Watch* (novella) 1951
- A Death in the Family* (novel) 1957
- Agee on Film: Reviews and Comments* (criticism) 1958
- Agee on Film, Vol. II: Five Film Scripts* (screenplays) 1960
- Letters of James Agee to Father Flye* (letters) 1962
- Four Early Stories by James Agee* (short stories) 1964
- The Collected Poems of James Agee* (poetry) 1968
- The Collected Short Prose of James Agee* (prose) 1968
- Selected Journalism* (prose) 1985