

Dictionary of Literary Biography

Volume 26:

**American
Screenwriters**

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American Screenwriters

Edited by
Robert E. Morsberger
Stephen O. Lesser
and
Randall Clark

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Plan of the Series

... Almost the most prodigious asset of a country, and perhaps its most precious possession, is its native literary product—when that product is fine and noble and enduring.

Mark Twain*

The advisory board, the editors, and the publisher of the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* are joined in endorsing Mark Twain's declaration. The literature of a nation provides an inexhaustible resource of permanent worth. It is our expectation that this endeavor will make literature and its creators better understood and more accessible to students and the literate public, while satisfying the standards of teachers and scholars.

To meet these requirements, *literary biography* has been construed in terms of the author's achievement. The most important thing about a writer is his writing. Accordingly, the entries in *DLB* are career biographies, tracing the development of the author's canon and the evolution of his reputation.

The publication plan for *DLB* resulted from two years of preparation. The project was proposed to Brucoli Clark by Frederick G. Ruffner, president of the Gale Research Company, in November 1975. After specimen entries were prepared and typeset, an advisory board was formed to refine the entry format and develop the series rationale. In meetings held during 1976, the publisher, series editors, and advisory board approved the scheme for a comprehensive biographical dictionary of persons who contributed to North American literature. Editorial work on the first volume began in January 1977, and it was published in 1978.

In order to make *DLB* more than a reference tool and to compile volumes that individually have claim to status as literary history, it was decided to organize volumes by topic or period or genre. Each of these freestanding volumes provides a biographical-bibliographical guide and overview for a particular area of literature. We are convinced that this organization—as opposed to a single alphabet method—constitutes a valuable innovation in the presentation of reference material. The volume plan necessarily requires many decisions for the

placement and treatment of authors who might properly be included in two or three volumes. In some instances a major figure will be included in separate volumes, but with different entries emphasizing the aspect of his career appropriate to each volume. Ernest Hemingway, for example, is represented in *American Writers in Paris, 1920-1939* by an entry focusing on his expatriate apprenticeship; he is also in *American Novelists, 1910-1945* with an entry surveying his entire career. Each volume includes a cumulative index of subject authors. The final *DLB* volume will be a comprehensive index to the entire series.

With volume ten in 1982 it was decided to enlarge the scope of *DLB* beyond the literature of the United States. By the end of 1983 twelve volumes treating British literature had been published, and volumes for Commonwealth and Modern European literature were in progress. The series has been further augmented by the *DLB Yearbooks* (since 1981) which update published entries and add new entries to keep the *DLB* current with contemporary activity. There have also been occasional *DLB Documentary Series* volumes which provide biographical and critical background source materials for figures whose work is judged to have particular interest for students. One of these companion volumes is entirely devoted to Tennessee Williams.

The purpose of *DLB* is not only to provide reliable information in a convenient format but also to place the figures in the larger perspective of literary history and to offer appraisals of their accomplishments by qualified scholars.

We define literature as the *intellectual commerce of a nation*: not merely as belles lettres, but as that ample and complex process by which ideas are generated, shaped, and transmitted. *DLB* entries are not limited to "creative writers" but extend to other figures who in this time and in this way influenced the mind of a people. Thus there will be volumes for historians, journalists, publishers, and screenwriters. By this means readers of *DLB* may be aided to perceive literature not as cult scripture in the keeping of cultural high priests, but as at the center of a nation's life.

DLB includes the major writers appropriate to each volume and those standing in the ranks immediately behind them. Scholarly and critical counsel has been sought in deciding which minor figures to include and how full their entries should be.

*From an unpublished section of Mark Twain's autobiography, copyright © by the Mark Twain Company.

Wherever possible, useful references will be made to figures who do not warrant separate entries.

Each *DLB* volume has a volume editor responsible for planning the volume, selecting the figures for inclusion, and assigning the entries. Volume editors are also responsible for preparing, where appropriate, appendices surveying the major periodicals and literary and intellectual movements for their volumes, as well as lists of further readings. Work on the series as a whole is coordinated at the Brucoli Clark editorial center in Columbia, South Carolina, where the editorial staff is responsible for the accuracy of the published volumes.

One feature that distinguishes *DLB* is the illustration policy—its concern with the iconography of literature. Just as an author is influenced by his surroundings, so is the reader's understanding of the author enhanced by a knowledge of his environment. Therefore *DLB* volumes include not only drawings, paintings, and photographs of authors, often depicting them at various stages in their careers, but also illustrations of their families and places where they lived. Title pages are regularly reproduced in facsimile along with dust jackets for modern authors. The dust jackets are a special feature of *DLB* because they often document better

than anything else the way in which an author's work was launched in its own time. Specimens of the writers' manuscripts are included when feasible.

A supplement to *DLB*—tentatively titled *A Guide, Chronology, and Glossary for American Literature*—will outline the history of literature in North America and trace the influences that shaped it. This volume will provide a framework for the study of American literature by means of chronological tables, literary affiliation charts, glossarial entries, and concise surveys of the major movements. It has been planned to stand on its own as a vade mecum, providing a ready-reference guide to the study of American literature as well as a companion to the *DLB* volumes for American literature.

Samuel Johnson rightly decreed that "The chief glory of every people arises from its authors." The purpose of the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* is to compile literary history in the surest way available to us—by accurate and comprehensive treatment of the lives and work of those who contributed to it.

The *DLB* Advisory Board

Foreword

The American screenwriter has received very little serious study. Even among film scholars, emphasis has most often been placed on the director rather than the writer, and literary scholars have denied the screenwriter the attention given to his closest relative, the playwright. But the screenwriter is no less a writer simply because he writes for a visual medium. Like any other writer, the screenwriter is interested in telling a story, and like any other literary figure, the best screenwriter's works will be marked by recurring concerns, themes, motifs, and images.

What does make the screenwriter different from other writers are the requirements of the film medium. He must be prepared to tell his story with a minimum of dialogue and in a limited amount of time. The story must be conceived entirely in visual terms; it must be properly paced and have mass appeal. Although it is a written work, the screenplay is not composed to be read. It is not meant to exist apart from the motion picture.

As the American motion picture has developed over the past decades, the status of the screenwriter has changed, and the screenplay has emerged as a new form of literature. The earliest movies were one-reel "quickies" that were entirely improvised and required no script. As silent films became longer, writers were needed to provide continuity and dialogue in the form of title cards, which at first contained short phrases but soon became more sophisticated. In particular, Anita Loos's titles for the highly successful 1916 film *Intolerance* proved that audiences were willing to read titles while they viewed a motion picture.

The screenwriter achieved true prominence with the advent of sound in 1927. Title cards were replaced by spoken dialogue, and Hollywood recruited playwrights to provide the dialogue for its films. Throughout the 1930s virtually everyone writing motion pictures had a stage background, and screenplays reflected the literary qualities of theater work. By the end of the decade, screenwriters had begun to recognize that the motion picture had a different set of requirements from the stage play and began writing their scripts accordingly. Hollywood began to rely less on screenplays by playwrights and more on scripts by a new kind of

writer, the professional screenwriter who worked within his medium and understood its demands.

The screenwriter is, of necessity, a collaborator. In pre-1970s Hollywood, almost all screenplays were written by two or more people, with writers encouraged to develop a specialty: dialogue, gags, polishing a script. Collaboration on scripts in the 1930s was so common that the screenplay was likened to an assembly-line product. Because of regulations established by the Writers Guild, it is possible for a writer to make significant contributions to a film but receive no credit and for a credited writer to have little to do with the finished screenplay. The screenplay may be further altered by producers, directors, actors, editors, and cinematographers so that the completed film bears only a remote resemblance to the screenplay. Still, it is by the film that most screenwriters must be judged, and the work of a talented screenwriter is often recognizable no matter how many other hands were involved.

American Screenwriters contains studies of the careers of sixty-five significant motion-picture writers. Obviously, not every important figure is in the volume; instead, what is offered is a representative sample of the hundreds of screenwriters who have worked in Hollywood, ranging from the artistically important to the commercially successful to the relatively obscure. (A second volume of *American Screenwriters* is in progress.) Because this is a study of screenwriters, only writers who wrote primarily for the screen—or those who wrote in other media but had noteworthy film achievements—are included. Novelists who wrote for motion pictures part-time to supplement their income—William Faulkner, Raymond Chandler, F. Scott Fitzgerald—are not included. Playwrights whose film careers consisted mostly of adapting their own works, such as Neil Simon and Tennessee Williams, have been omitted, as have performers who wrote their own material, such as Mae West, Charlie Chaplin, and W. C. Fields. The filmographies in this volume include only movies for which writers received official screen credit; uncredited contributions are discussed in text.

—Randall Clark

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No record of screenwriters' careers is com-

plete without visual evidence of their most memorable films. Muriel Hamilton of Hampton Books, Newberry, South Carolina, and Fred Zentner of Cinema Bookshop, London, generously gave of their time and energy to help assemble movie stills and other illustrative materials for this volume. To them the editors would like to express their deepest gratitude.

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American Screenwriters

Dictionary of Literary Biography

James Agee

(27 November 1909-16 May 1955)

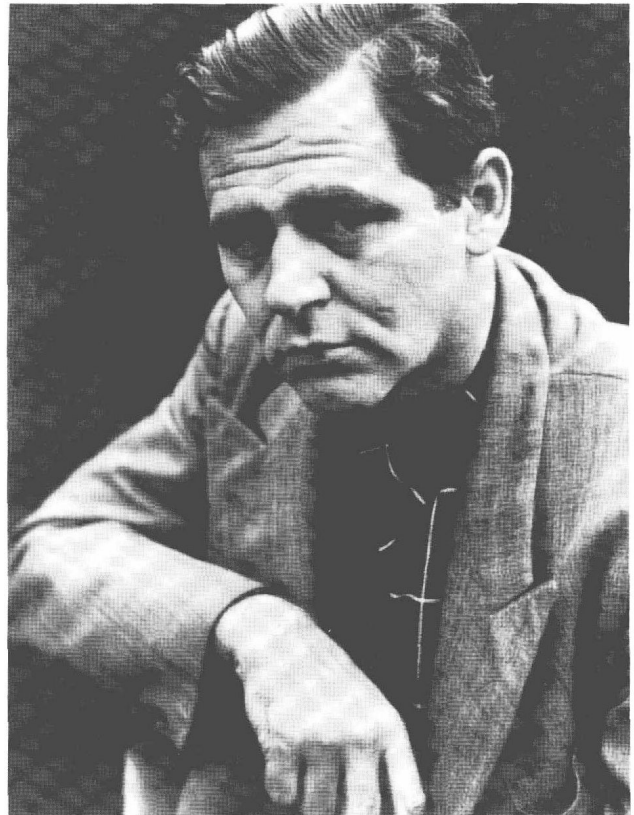
Andrea Rosenwein

See also the Agee entry in *DLB 2, American Novelists Since World War II*.

MOTION PICTURES: *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: *The Blue Hotel, Omnibus* (NBC, late 1940s), script;
Abraham Lincoln, Omnibus (NBC, 1953), scripts.

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: 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: Owen, 1963);
Agee on Film, Volume II: Five Film Scripts (New York: McDowell, Obolensky, 1960; London: Owen, 1965)—includes *The Blue Hotel*, *The African*



James Agee (photo by Florence Homolka)

Queen, *The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky*, *Noa Noa*, *The Night of the Hunter*;
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).

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 was an eclectic writer, shifting easily among fiction, documentary prose, movie criticism, and screenwriting. His talents ultimately won him a Pulitzer prize in 1958 for *A Death in the Family* and an Academy award nomination in 1951 for *The African Queen*. But he died in relative obscurity, not living long enough to enjoy the fruits of his efforts. His screenplay with John Huston for the movie classic *The African Queen* was filmed on location in Africa without him, for he suffered the first of a series of heart attacks in 1951 and was too weak to make the trip. He died at the age of forty-five before his adaptation of *The Night of the Hunter*, a movie acclaimed by critics such as Kenneth Seib as "perhaps one of the two or three finest 'horror' movies produced in the last two decades," was released in 1955. Two years after Agee's death, the publication of *A Death in the Family* finally brought his work recognition which it never received during his life. Agee became a symbol of the artist struggling in a commercial society, pouring his talents into movie and book reviews instead of writing fiction. Agee himself felt guilty about this, holding stringent standards for himself as an artist, yet succumbing to his desires for money and alcohol.

James Rufus Agee was born in Knoxville, Tennessee, and attended St. Andrew's School, outside Sewanee, where he received Episcopal schooling. He attended Knoxville High School from 1924 to 1925 and graduated from Phillips Exeter Academy in Exeter, New Hampshire, in 1928. From there Agee went to Harvard, where he was editor of the *Advocate*; he graduated in 1932. From 1939 to 1948 he was the movie reviewer for *Time* magazine, and from 1942 to 1948 he wrote the film column for the *Nation*. Agee was married three times, to Olivia Saunders; to Alma Mailman, by whom he had a son, Joel; and to Mia Fritsch, by whom he had a daughter, Julia Teresa.

John Huston, Agee's good friend and movie collaborator, described the writer in the introduc-

tion to *Agee on Film, Volume II* as being about "six-two and heavy but neither muscular nor fat—a mountaineer's body. He was always gentle towards his fellow humans with that kind of gentleness usually reserved for plants and animals." Houston claimed that Agee's physical self-destruction was implicit in his psychological makeup, and indeed, on 16 May 1955, a final heart attack ended his life. It is ironic that Agee's prolific output yielded only three major works and a few short stories in print and a small scattering of feature-length films and documentaries on the screen.

Agee's earliest scripts, never filmed, were highly experimental in nature. The first, *Notes for a Moving Picture: The House* (1937), anticipated the modern film in its call for the use of color and black and white in the same frame and its Dada-like directions for neon signs that "spell out semi-intelligible names for suspense." Agee's second script, *Man's Fate—A Film Treatment of the Malraux Novel* (1939), was a described picture rather than a formal shooting script, similar to *The House*. Written in a similar manner was a later satire, *Dedication Day* (1946).

In the late 1940s, Agee wrote the commentary for Helen Levitt's documentary about a Negro boy in Harlem, *The Quiet One*, and then began work on commercial scripts. Under contract to Huntington Hartford, Agee wrote a script based on Stephen Crane's "The Blue Hotel" in 1948-1949 that was never filmed but was adapted by NBC television for *Omnibus*. In 1951, he collaborated with John Huston on the script for *The African Queen*, adapted from the novel by C. S. Forester.

In the early 1950s Agee adapted another Stephen Crane short story for Huntington Hartford. Entitled *The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky*, the film was released by RKO as half of *Face to Face*, a pair of filmed short stories; the other story included was Joseph Conrad's "The Secret Sharer," adapted for the screen by Aeneas MacKenzie. During this time, Agee also wrote narration for a Filipino movie, *Genghis Khan*, released by Italian Film Exports in 1952. A commission by the Ford Foundation for *Omnibus* produced Agee's scripts on the life of Lincoln for television in 1953.

That same year, Agee wrote an original treatment of the life of Paul Gauguin, *Noa Noa*, which has not been produced. Agee wrote commentary and narration for an Italian travel film, *Green Magic* (1955), and also adapted for the screen Davis Grubb's novel *The Night of the Hunter*, which was released by United Artists in 1955. During this time, he worked with *New York Times* music critic Howard

Taubman on the shooting script for "Tanglewood," about the Berkshire music festival. Just before his death, Agee sketched out an allegorical fantasy about elephants.

In all of his scripts, Agee paid close attention to photographic technique. He saw the camera's function as capturing surface detail without sentimentalization. No matter how carefully he outlined the process of filming, he wanted the result to simulate reality. He called for the use of orthochromatic film, for example, to achieve the look of the grainy newsreel in *Man's Fate*. "If you can invent something worth watching, the camera should hold still and clear, so that you can watch it," Agee once wrote.

Agee was equally emphatic in his views on film cutting, saying that the power and honesty of screen images lie "in juxtaposition and careful series, in rhythm, and in a rhythmic and spatial whole." In *Noa Noa*, his detailed instructions for the king's funeral scene include as many as eight shots for each beat of Chopin's "Funeral March."

Detailed directions in Agee's screenplays are not limited to technical instructions, and in many instances he provides so many acting and scenery suggestions that the director could conceivably have nothing of his own to do if he were to follow all of Agee's written indications. Agee's scripts read like well-crafted fiction. The use of the first-person plural in directions is reminiscent of a novelist elucidating his viewpoint. The richness of imagery in his directions is sometimes difficult to render on the screen but contains an almost Shakespearean appeal on paper.

A unity of theme threads many of Agee's screenplays together. According to Victor Kramer, Agee frequently adapted literary works in which the "regenerate or unregenerate Adamic motif is basic. He was fascinated with the idea of the confrontation of innocence with evil—a situation which is immediately obvious in both of the Stephen Crane stories for which he did scripts, 'The Blue Hotel' and 'The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky.' " *The Blue Hotel* shows a Swede unbalancing a peaceful prairie town; the other script describes the drunken gunman Scratchy as "turned loose with both hands" on quiet little Yellow Sky.

The Night of the Hunter is Agee's most searching treatment of the innocence versus evil theme. Faithfully adapted from Grubb's novel of terror, the movie concerns two children who are mercilessly hounded by a psychopathic preacher because they know where their father hid some stolen money. The sumptuous settings in the country are juxtaposed against the corruption of the townspeople

in the film. The audience sees through the eyes of the children, sharing experiences from their naive point of view. Their river trip, a journey into nature, brings forth images of helpless rabbits and sinister spiders, and the end of their journey is shown with the images of a canary in a lighted window. Stylized cinematic effects help the audience relate to the children's plight.

Directed by Charles Laughton and produced by Paul Gregory, *The Night of the Hunter* diverges from Agee's original script in many ways. The film, starring Robert Mitchum, Lillian Gish, and Shelley Winters, employs numerous comic effects to relieve tension for the audience. Laughton altered some of the cinematic devices called for in Agee's script; yet his respect for Agee's intentions is apparent in the camera movements, grouping and compositions, and helicopter shots. The novel, cluttered with ponderous verbiage, has been streamlined by Agee, and what remains is effectively translated to the screen by Laughton.

Another mediocre novel that Agee tightened and successfully adapted for the screen was *The African Queen*, C. S. Forester's story about a prudish old maid and a simple, crass cockney, who find themselves forced together on a dilapidated riverboat in Africa during World War I. The missionary's sister and the engineer fall in love when her courage and his pragmatism combine toward a common goal—to destroy a German gunboat. The theme of courage and moral conviction, which surfaces in the character of the little boy in *The Night of the Hunter*, appears again in *The African Queen*. Rose refuses to accept defeat, even when the boat propeller shaft is twisted and a blade breaks off. Her tenacity overwhelms Charlie, who ultimately gives in to her whims at every juncture.

Forester's novel, though filled with action, explains the characters' motivations in too great detail. "Resolve was hardening in Rose's heart." "There was within her a lust for adventure." Sentences such as these are not only trite but redundant. Agee gets rid of deadwood descriptions and fashions two dynamic individuals whose moral values collide. Humphrey Bogart was given the Academy Award for Best Actor for his portrayal of Charlie Allnut, and Katharine Hepburn played a convincing Rose Sayer.

Though the script is commercial by nature, Agee's attention to meaningful detail gives it spunk entirely lacking in the original story. Agee's concern with sound and image supporting each other is apparent in numerous scenes of *The African Queen*, notably Rose's serving tea at the mission. The scene,



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

which does not take place in the book, juxtaposes Charlie's growling stomach with the decorum of the formal situation. Typically, Agee wrote more than a full page of directions about sound and gestures for this short, comic scene.

The rich imagery of Agee's directions is also evident in the script for *The African Queen*. Rose's struggle with her inhibited virginal world is brought out in the very first scene as Rose plays the organ in a missionary church. The directions call for her to "pump the pedals vigorously" of the "reedy organ," "spreading with her knees the wings of wood." Later, when the orgasmic excitement of shooting the rapids in Charlie's boat subsides, Rose sits back: "Despite an empty feeling in her stomach and a pounding heart, she wears a smile of satisfaction."

Because Agee's work was interrupted by illness, it is difficult to attribute an exact portion of the detail of this script to him. Besides his precise descriptions of action, however, it seems clear that he influenced the making of the movie with his anticipation of its need for a distinguishing rhythm. He greatly admired the director John Huston, but he

felt that the overall rhythm of Huston's work might be improved. Agee wrote the falls sequences of the movie to have the effect of a mounting series of suspenseful scenes. Only when Rose and Charlie have run the current does the audience get relief. Huston's direction, as well as John Collier's and Peter Viertel's collaboration, cannot be underrated in assessing the merit of the film.

Some critics say that *The Blue Hotel* and *The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky* are Agee's finest scripts. "There is a precision, a tightness, and a unified effect to each of these that Agee failed to achieve in the other, more original scenarios," according to Kenneth Seib.

The Blue Hotel centers around the figure of a Swede, an alien staying overnight in a small whistle-stop town, whose fate rests in the hands of several men, or, by implication, humanity. Generally, Agee is faithful to Crane's short story, fleshing out characters presented in the original and adding the farmer and Scully's daughter to act as foils in the drama. Agee is able to extend the symbolism introduced by Crane, showing in visual terms what Crane began in verbal description.

The train that brings the Swede and the other passengers to Fort Romper symbolically connects the town with the outside world. The train begins and ends the screenplay; it is a reminder that the town is a microcosm and that the incident could have occurred anywhere that the transcontinental express ran. Other graphic symbols can be found in the script: the steel engraving of the "Stag at Bay," the record player, and the allusions to the Swede as a Christ figure ("a tired Pilgrim on the homestretch to Paradise"). When the Gambler kills the Swede, the audience does not see the Gambler's face; anyone at the table could have killed the Swede, but fate would have it that the Gambler was approached by the intruder.

Agee's one major deviation from Crane's text concerns the timing of the Easterner's confession. In the original, the Easterner does not reveal that the innkeeper's son was cheating at cards until sometime after the Swede's death. In Agee's script, Johnnie is accused immediately after the card game, after the Swede has left the hotel but before his death. The audience, therefore, is aware that if something happens to the Swede, the guests of the inn are responsible. By this device, the death of the Swede takes on an even more tragic character than in the original story. The screenplay ends with a closeup of the Easterner's face taking on an expression of sorrow, tenderness, and hopelessness of expiation. Crane's message that "every sin is a collab-



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*.

oration" is then brought home with a camera long shot showing the three figures going inside, and then only the starlit sky, slowly turning.

Like his other adaptations, *The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky* is faithful both to the theme and the tone of the original story. This time, however, Agee takes considerable liberties with Crane's tale, focusing on the town and its inhabitants. The bartender in the story becomes a woman in the script; the salesman becomes a major character. Agee introduces Frank Gudger, a benign jailbird whose presence emphasizes the passing of frontier life. Besides working as scriptwriter and technical consultant, Agee acted the part of Gudger, whose name is first seen in his book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941). Agee doubtless saw this part as a caricature of himself; he played the role of another drunk in the Lincoln series.

Like *The Blue Hotel*, the screenplay for *The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky* uses visual symbolism to convey Crane's theme. When Potter crosses the threshold of his home with his wife, Gudger throws torn-up pictures from early West murder stories

into the wind. Scratchy Wilson, the last of the old-guard bad guys, drags a "real shock of a necktie" "snakily" from its hook; Potter's conservative tie is contrasted. In the end, when he wants to have a showdown with Potter and discovers that his only rival in town has given up the old ways and gotten married, Scratchy "turns both revolvers in his hands, looking at them, then puts them with finality into their holsters." The Old West is dead.

Like many of the female characters portrayed in Agee's screenplays, Crane's bride is "not pretty, nor was she very young." Rose of *The African Queen* is "early thirties, tight-featured and tight-haired." Agee's women have grit in a time when the country still saw them as passive and peroxided. In *Noa Noa* Gauguin's wife Mette is described as a "woman of courage," and Rose and Rachel of *The Night of the Hunter* are both strong in their moral convictions.

Agee's own concept of moral strength, which was carefully honed during his religious upbringing, revealed itself in his attitudes about artists' responsibilities. "The real effort has always been, simply, to be true to my own soul," he says through his