

Twentieth-Century
Literary Criticism

TCLC 180

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

**Criticism of the
Works of Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, and Other Creative Writers
Who Lived between 1900 and 1999,
from the First Published Critical
Appraisals to Current Evaluations**



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Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism, Vol. 180

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Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

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Preface

Since its inception *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (TCLC) has been purchased and used by some 10,000 school, public, and college or university libraries. TCLC has covered more than 1000 authors, representing over 120 nationalities and over 40,000 titles. No other reference source has surveyed the critical response to twentieth-century authors and literature as thoroughly as TCLC. In the words of one reviewer, “there is nothing comparable available.” TCLC “is a gold mine of information—dates, pseudonyms, biographical information, and criticism from books and periodicals—which many librarians would have difficulty assembling on their own.”

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TCLC is designed to serve as an introduction to authors who died between 1900 and 1999 and to the most significant interpretations of these author's works. Volumes published from 1978 through 1999 included authors who died between 1900 and 1960. The great poets, novelists, short story writers, playwrights, and philosophers of the period are frequently studied in high school and college literature courses. In organizing and reprinting the vast amount of critical material written on these authors, TCLC helps students develop valuable insight into literary history, promotes a better understanding of the texts, and sparks ideas for papers and assignments. Each entry in TCLC presents a comprehensive survey on an author's career or an individual work of literature and provides the user with a multiplicity of interpretations and assessments. Such variety allows students to pursue their own interests; furthermore, it fosters an awareness that literature is dynamic and responsive to many different opinions.

Every fourth volume of TCLC is devoted to literary topics. These topics widen the focus of the series from the individual authors to such broader subjects as literary movements, prominent themes in twentieth-century literature, literary reaction to political and historical events, significant eras in literary history, prominent literary anniversaries, and the literatures of cultures that are often overlooked by English-speaking readers.

TCLC is designed as a companion series to Thomson Gale's *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, (CLC) which reprints commentary on authors who died after 1999. Because of the different time periods under consideration, there is no duplication of material between CLC and TCLC.

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication. Lists of **Representative Works** by different authors appear with topic entries.

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- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Thomson Gale.

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An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *TCLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Thomson Gale also produces a paperbound edition of the *TCLC* cumulative title index. This annual cumulation, which alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in the series, is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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James Agee

1909-1955

(Full name James Rufus Agee) American novelist, journalist, critic, essayist, screenwriter, and poet.

The following entry presents criticism of Agee's works that was published after 1986. For earlier discussions of Agee's career, see *TCLC*, Volumes 1 and 19.

INTRODUCTION

Agee is regarded as an important literary figure for his contributions in a variety of genres, including poetry, fiction, autobiography, film criticism, and documentary writing. A recognized and respected journalist during his lifetime, he is now best known for his autobiographical novel *A Death in the Family* (1957) for which he was posthumously awarded the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1958. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), Agee's collaboration with photographer Walker Evans documenting the lives of sharecroppers in Alabama, is considered a definitive work on the effects of the Great Depression. Difficult to categorize because of the experimental nature of his prose and variety of his writings, Agee is typically praised for his poetic sensibility and, in the words of Victor A. Kramer, his "precise observation of the ordinary." As Kramer further noted in his 1991 study of the author: "In all of Agee's writing, there is an elegiac tone, for his are songs to moments which are passing."

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Agee was born 27 November 1909, in Knoxville, Tennessee. His parents, Hugh James and Laura Tyler Agee, came from very different backgrounds. Hugh James Agee was poorly educated and raised in a rural Southern setting, while Laura grew up in an educated Northern family. When Agee was six years old, his father was killed in a car accident, leaving young James to be raised by his mother. Agee attended Saint Andrews school near Sewanee, Tennessee, from 1919 to 1923. He was a student at Phillips Exeter Academy in New England from 1925 to 1928, and afterwards attended Harvard College, from which he graduated in 1932. During his years at school, Agee began writing, primarily about his childhood experiences and remembrances. After graduating from Harvard, Agee accepted a position at *Fortune* magazine. In 1936 he was given the as-

signment to document the lives of sharecroppers in rural Alabama. Agee and photographer Walker Evans spent six weeks living with three families. Although *Fortune* rejected the resulting report, Agee lengthened the work and it was published in 1941 under the title *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.

In 1939 Agee left *Fortune* and began working for *Time* and later for the *Nation*. It was during this period that he began writing film criticism. He also spent several of his last years writing screenplays, including an adaptation of C. S. Forester's novel *The African Queen*. In the spring of 1950 Agee completed his novella *The Morning Watch*, which was published in 1951. That same year he suffered his first heart attack, and his health rapidly deteriorated. During his recovery Agee began working on *A Death in the Family*, a novel that evoked the atmosphere and events of his childhood. He died of a second heart attack on 16 May 1955, before he could finish the book. It was published posthumously in 1957 and awarded the Pulitzer Prize for fiction.

MAJOR WORKS

Let Us Now Praise Famous Men is an experimental work that chronicles, through photographs and prose, the six weeks that Agee and Evans spent with three tenant farm families in Alabama during the height of the Great Depression. In formal structure, the work defies categorization. Evans's photographs are placed at the beginning of the book and act as a prelude, without textual description or explanation. When approaching this project, Agee purposely avoided what he considered the artifice of conventional documentary techniques. Commenting on his distrust of social documentary, he stated "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." Instead, Agee wanted to authentically represent his experience and enable his readers to identify with the sharecroppers rather than pity them. His prose sketches include narrative shifts, nonlinear episodic chronology, self-referential commentary, and catalogues of the minutiae of the sharecroppers' lives.

The Morning Watch represents the only extended work of fiction that Agee completed and published in his lifetime. The novella relies heavily on Christian symbolism

and takes place at a religious boarding school during a vigil. Richard, the twelve-year-old protagonist, approaches the vigil with religious fervor and hopes his prayers will be well received. The narrative reconstructs Richard's failure to sustain his religious fervor, even though he does experience genuine spiritual emotion. Though he strives to remain true to his religious state of mind, his thoughts wander—to memories of the death of his father six years earlier and to thoughts of sex and physical pleasure. In this work Agee suggests that childhood innocence and faith must yield to other ways of experiencing the world.

Some critics have observed thematic and narrative similarities between *The Morning Watch* and *A Death in the Family*; however, most agree that the latter is Agee's more mature work. *A Death in the Family* chronicles the loneliness, grief, and compassion of the Follets, a family in Knoxville, Tennessee, as they cope with Jay Follet's unexpected death in a car accident. The protagonist is a six-year-old boy named Rufus, whose memories of his father are woven into the primary narrative of the book, which details the events surrounding Jay's death. Agee explores racial, social, and religious issues as Rufus recounts his definitive childhood experiences. *A Death in the Family* is widely recognized as a complex and moving portrait of the significant moments in the life of a Southern family. Agee's prose sketch, "Knoxville: Summer of 1915," first published in 1938, has often been included as a prologue to *A Death in the Family*.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

During his lifetime Agee enjoyed critical success as a journalist, essayist, and film critic. His first major work, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, was generally appreciated as a moving account of the plight of impoverished sharecroppers in rural America, as well as an innovative form of documentary writing. Despite critical recognition of Agee's talents, many dismissed his unconventional approach to writing and, objected to the work's sexual content and to Agee's insertion of his own personal reactions into the narrative. By the time of his death in 1955, Agee was virtually forgotten by all but his close literary acquaintances.

Following the publication of *A Death in the Family* in 1957 and the reissue of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* in 1960, Agee's literary stature increased significantly. During the 1960s he became a cult figure, perceived as a rebel disenfranchised by the commercialization of American culture and publishing. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, was hailed by critics and readers alike as a brilliant and original work. More recent commentators have praised the unique formal decisions and

have argued that Agee's techniques facilitate an authentic representation of the sharecroppers' lives. Other critics have noted that by including reflections of his own experience into the narrative of the work, Agee provides an important commentary on the failures of the documentary form. Mark Allister has observed that "in a book filled with extraordinary passages of beauty, with uncommon insights about humans and their world, it is this, finally, that is most moving about the book: one set of seemingly impoverished lives—the tenants'—illuminates and ultimately changes a seemingly rich life—Agee's."

Agee's reputation as a novelist rests squarely on *A Death in the Family*. Initially critics lauded the work for its treatment of tradition and community, claiming that it spoke movingly to a generation of readers who had lost their connection to home and religion and yearned for a newfound sense of place in America. Later commentators have praised the novel for its poetic sensibility, its fictionalization of memory and autobiographical detail, and its deep use of imagery and symbol. Despite such favorable criticism, many scholars have debated the formal qualities of *A Death in the Family*, due mainly to the fact that the novel was left unfinished at Agee's death and was pieced together by editors, who inserted several passages from outside the time frame of the story. While some assert that the interpolations detract from and confuse the narrative, others contend that the inserted passages contribute to the cohesiveness of the novel by focusing the story line more exclusively on the principal character, Rufus. Alan Spiegel has averred that because Agee died before he finished the book, *A Death in the Family* remains "an enigmatic and equivocal work of art."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

- Permit Me Voyage* (poetry) 1934
- Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* [with Walker Evans] (prose and photography) 1941; enlarged edition, 2000
- The Quiet One* (film narration) 1949
- The Morning Watch* (novella) 1951
- A Death in the Family* (novel) 1957
- Agee on Film: Reviews and Comments* (film criticism) 1958
- Agee on Film, Volume 2: Five Film Scripts* (screenplays) 1960
- Letters of James Agee to Father James Flye* [edited by James H. Flye] (letters) 1962
- Four Early Stories by James Agee* [edited by Elena Harap] (short stories) 1964
- The Collected Poems of James Agee* [edited by Robert Fitzgerald] (poetry) 1968

- The Collected Short Prose of James Agee* [edited by Fitzgerald] (prose) 1968
The Last Letter of James Agee to Father Flye (letter) 1969
Selected Journalism [edited by Paul Ashdown] (journalism) 1985
James Agee: Literary Notebooks and Other Manuscripts [edited by Michael A. Lofaro and Hugh Davis] (notebooks) 2002
Brooklyn Is: Southeast of the Island (travel essays) 2005

CRITICISM

Mark Allister (essay date December 1986)

SOURCE: Allister, Mark. "Seeing, Knowing, and Being: James Agee's *Let us Now Praise Famous Men*." *Prose Studies* 9, no. 3 (December 1986): 86-102.

[In the following essay, Allister examines "how Agee translates beliefs about seeing, knowing, and being into a fusion of documentary and autobiography" in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.]

I

During the Depression, James Agee lived for three weeks with Alabama sharecroppers. The encounter with, in his words, "a portion of unimagined existence," pressured him both as a human experiencing and as an author writing—the pressure manifesting itself in the self-scrutiny that unfolds in his text and in the experimentation with nonfictional form. To illumine his subjects fully and simultaneously reveal his own personal development, Agee felt compelled to construct a new form—a genre that fuses documentary and autobiography. The drama of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* becomes, then, Agee's search for an appropriate form and language capable both of representing his subject and of portraying this dynamic interplay between self and others.

Because his text blends autobiography and documentary, Agee makes imperative literary and philosophical problems that rarely arise in fiction or poetry: problems about writers and "real" subjects; metaphorical language and documentary form; empirical knowledge of the world and translation of that knowledge into a non-fictional text.¹ Agee attempts to write a definitive documentary of tenant life that explains the artist's role in that process—both what his own has been and what any artist's should be when confronting real humans. His

creation of a self suitable for this task, and his description of tenant existence, become inextricably tied to how consciousness perceives the external world and how that perception becomes transformed by and into language. Agee redefines the roles of writer—subject—text for nonfiction, staking out an enormous territory that he knows cannot be mapped neatly but is worth exploring anyway.

Agee himself frames the question that is at the heart of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*: "how am I to speak of you as 'tenant' 'farmers,' as 'representatives' of your 'class,' as social integers in a criminal economy, or as individuals, fathers, wives, sons, daughters, and as my friends and as I 'know' you?" (101). How, in other words, can he construct a book of social criticism—necessitating a certain kind of generalizing—that will remain true to the particulars, to the real existence of the tenants? But if that is the heart of the text, the soul is Agee's journey to find out who he is, to discover why "at the end of a wandering and seeking, so long it had begun before I was born, I had apprehended and now sat at rest in my own home [the Gudger house], between two who were my brother and my sister, yet less than something else . . ." (415). Agee insists that the writer of a documentary—any writing, actually, that says "I have seen and know this"—must directly explain how and why he is making that claim. "I would do just as badly," he writes, "to simplify or eliminate myself . . . as to simplify or invent character, places or atmospheres" (240). All documentary that Agee would consider truthful, therefore, becomes autobiography—which is as much discovering and fashioning a life as telling it.²

As documentary through autobiography, and autobiography through documentary, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is a book about seeing, knowing, and being.³ To Agee these three terms become interconnected, even inseparable, because of his experience living with the tenants. The book's drama of conversion—Agee changing his world-view by coming to understand the inadequacy of his prior notions of seeing, knowing, and being—becomes intertwined with (at times hardly distinguishable from) the drama of Agee the writer who must construct a narrative of this conversion and tenant life. The book's convoluted structure—described variously as "impenetrable," "obnoxious," and "baffling"⁴—is best understood as an enactment of this pattern: Agee's initial "blindness" becomes seeing, which leads to knowing, which is followed by a different state of being.

"I know I am making the choice most dangerous to an artist," Agee writes, "in valuing life above art."⁵ That choice, however dangerous, is what makes possible *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. In this article I will examine how Agee translates beliefs about seeing, know-

ing, and being into a fusion of documentary and autobiography. Valuing life, but making art, he must find a form that can accommodate both a record of sharecropping and the enactment of self-creation.

II

In his essay "The Loss of the Creature," from *The Message in the Bottle*, Walker Percy describes the difficulty a tourist has in "seeing" the Grand Canyon. The difficulty is greatest, he says, when the person has examined the brochures, heard what a magnificent attraction the canyon is, and finds himself on a guided tour, perhaps riding the donkeys down to Bright Angel Creek. If the canyon looks like a postcard, the sightseer will be pleased; if it does not, he will notice only the disparity. Seeing becomes nearly impossible for this tourist because "the Grand Canyon, the thing as it is, has been appropriated by the symbolic complex which has already been formed in the sightseer's mind" (47). Viewing any sight under approved circumstances blinds one to all but what is expected, or even known beforehand.

Agee must also confront the fact that preconceptions obscure perception. As a Depression-era liberal, he goes to Alabama with his own symbolic complex concerning "sharecroppers."⁶ The problem is then compounded because he will be writing about these people, and writers—consciously or unconsciously—often exploit their subjects. Agee despised Margaret Bourke-White's best-selling *You Have Seen Their Faces* on both accounts: her tourist-like seeing led her to take contrived (he believed), even dishonest photos of Southern tenant life; the photos not only demonstrated her own pre(mis)conceptions but played to her audience's complacent decency. Agee in Alabama vigorously questions his own seeing because of his experiences living with the tenants. Part of the book's drama is Agee coming to believe his preconceptions about tenants are inadequate, which then drives him as a writer to find methods that will make readers overcome their own obstructing prejudices, that will break down for them what Percy calls the preformed symbolic complex. His goals, therefore, become twofold: "to recognize the stature of a portion of unimagined existence, and to contrive techniques proper to its recording, communication, analysis, and defense" (xiv).

Objects, says Percy—whether a canyon, a dogfish on a laboratory table, or a sonnet in an English class—must be removed from their symbolic packaging. To truly see something, a person cannot be the consumer of a prepared experience. To get inside the packaging prepared for him by journalists, sociologists, and politicians, Agee decides he must share the tenants' food, lodging, and work. He must live their lives in order to receive the unprepared experience—he must, in other words, open himself to the meaning of the sharecroppers' lives,

must change old ways of being, to comprehend new ways of seeing. His obsession with questioning how he sees emerges from his intense desire to know—to know the tenants, their life, his own.⁷ Action, then, leads to a necessary passivity: if he makes himself worthy, knowing will follow.

Agee, more aware of the sensual world than ever before, feels "a sense of wonder" at "the whole texture of the pleasure" that the mind and body receives (226). He returns this movement of energy, when his imagination transforms a roughhewn table and mantel into a shrine and altar, a mother and baby into the Madonna and her Son, a bedroom into a great tragic poem. Transplanted to Alabama, Agee perceives the external world—objects both human and nonhuman—imaginatively and vividly. "[E]verything . . . the mind touched," he writes, "turned immediately, yet without in the least losing the quality of its total individuality, into joy and truth, or rather, revealed, of its self, truth, which in its very nature was joy" (225).

The sentence is central to an understanding of Agee's ambiguity, never finally resolved in this text, concerning the subject—object relationship—a relationship crucial both to Agee as a person, living with the tenants and trying to understand their enormous impact on him, and as a writer, attempting to produce undistorted documentary about real humans. The mind, Agee proclaims, projects onto the object the qualities of joy and truth—a statement immediately qualified, however, by his asserting that truth resides inherently in the object, and perception of this truth gives joy.

If a rigorous philosophical method is applied, then Agee's response is paradoxical: either qualities reside in objects or such qualities are the mind's projections. The paradox is especially clear if the terms shift from joy and truth to existence and comprehension—phenomenological concerns. Edmund Husserl, believing that the existence of the external world cannot be verified, argues that a person can only be certain of how an object appears immediately in consciousness. Because the only certainty is what is available to the mind, everything else must be "bracketed" in order to cast in doubt the ontological status of those things not posited or intended by consciousness. Husserl, moreover, is not concerned with experiences of particular persons, but with human consciousness and how subjects, in transcending individual experience, can understand anything at all. Agee also desires to understand and then articulate how it is that we know. Unlike the phenomenologists, however, he is always concerned with specific situations, with someone understanding something in a particular cultural context and time. His experiences with the tenants and their living conditions demonstrated convincingly to him that knowing is individual and historical. What lies outside immediate consciousness—cotton

plants, a polluted spring, Louise Gudger—constitutes him as much as he constitutes the world.

Agee's struggle, made self-conscious and acute because of his living with the sharecroppers, is understanding this relation between what is inside his mind and what is outside in the world. It is especially troubling for him because he often feels alienated from the external world even while he desires to become one with it. The Gudger family becomes Agee's vehicle to a transcendent unity. Before he lives with them, he feels only an unhealable split between himself and the world. In the sketch "Late Sunday Morning" he uses his encounter with the negro singers to demonstrate his isolation. "[D]uring all this singing," he writes, "I had been sick in the knowledge that they felt they were here at our demand, mine and Walker's, and that I could communicate nothing otherwise" (31). Feeling self-torture, he nevertheless plays his part through, giving them money. When he scares the negro couple in "Near a Church," he thinks that "the least I could have done was to throw myself flat on my face and embrace and kiss their feet"; but he is stopped by "the realization that it would have frightened them still worse (to say nothing of me) and would have been still less explicable; so that I stood and looked into their eyes and loved them, and wished to God I was dead" (42). His meeting with the sick and enfeebled tenants of "At the Forks" dramatizes the separateness that he cannot overcome, a separateness that causes him alienation and guilt. Agee places these short sketches early in the text, however, because one of the book's structuring devices is Agee's progress in transcending this division. He does so through a reverent "negative capability" in which intuition and a sympathetic imagination attempt to fuse inner and outer.

Describing carefully late one night the oil in the Gudgers' lamp—how it feels, smells, looks—Agee interrupts to explain that he likes the way it sweats on the lamp's globe, and that when he runs his finger across this globe, he makes a streaked print. Furthermore, in this utter silence, looking at this lamp, he believes that the religious character of the moment gives him authorial power of a magnitude he has never felt: "I feel that if I can by utter quietness succeed in not disturbing this silence, in not so much as touching this plain of water, I can tell you anything within realm of God, whatsoever it may be, that I wish to tell you, and that what so ever it may be, you will not be able to help but understand it" (51).

Agee's contemplation of the lamp begins a wide-ranging description of all sharecroppers in Alabama, and consideration of how each family fits into a larger pattern of birth and death. Meditating on the loneliness of not just the sleeping Gudger family but of all people, he is moved to consider "how it can be that a stone, a plant, a star, can take on the burden of being; and how it is

that a child can take on the burden of breathing; and how through so long a continuation and cumulation of the burden of each moment one on another, does any creature bear to exist, and not break utterly to fragments of nothing" (56-7). Such reflections are followed by that memorable passage wherein he inhabits the tenants' very being: "But it is not only their bodies but their postures that I know, and their weight on the bed or on the floor, so that I lie down inside each one as if exhausted in a bed, and I become not my own shape and weight and self, but that of each of them, the whole of it, sunken in sleep like stones . . ." (58). This pattern is repeated throughout the book: Agee's observation of an object from the external world leads him to attempt a union with that world. His empathy—for animate and inanimate matter, alike—sets off an imaginative act in which he loses self-consciousness and gains an unusually clarified and rarified perception.

Agee is constantly struggling between two presumptions: that the external world is available to be known, and that before he came to Alabama he did not know it as he does now. In other words, who and what he is dictates how and what he can know. As he says, "For in the immediate world, everything is to be discerned, *for him who can discern it*" (11, my emphasis). Agee, presumably, becomes one who can; being so, his task is to discern "centrally and simply, without either dissection into science or digestion into art, but with the whole of consciousness, seeking to perceive it [the immediate world] as it stands: so that the aspect of a street in sunlight can roar in the heart of itself as a symphony, perhaps as no symphony can: and all consciousness is shifted from the imagined, the revisive, to the effort to perceive simply the cruel radiance of what is" (11). Agee is not personifying this external world, the street in sunlight, for example, that can "roar in the heart of itself." That world has an existence all its own, an existence that humans can learn from. Agee's oxymoron "cruel radiance," however, points up his difficulty: is yet another demonstration of the problematic relationship between subject and object, mind and world.

By living with the sharecroppers and writing of them, Agee comes to understand that perception is not isolated, a matter simply of human consciousness as Husserl believed, but always of and in the world. How one knows is intimately tied to who one is; knowing is dependent on being. In return, knowing changes being, which then changes again how one knows—in ever-deepening contexts. Agee's learning of this lesson becomes a conversion, a radical reevaluation of his role in relation to the world. His impulse is to testify. He has been changed, changed utterly: a terrible beauty has been born, a cruel radiance has been seen. His documentary of tenant life, therefore, is contingent both on what living in the world has taught him, and on the existence of that living world.