
**James Agee as Outsider:
Distance Described Through Documentation,
Self Reflection and Classism within
In Praise of Famous Men**



<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~UG97/fsa/evanspegs/evans31.jpg>

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Introduction

In 1936, James Agee and Walker Evans were commissioned by Fortune magazine to go to rural Alabama and write a piece on some Alabama sharecroppers. Both men benefited from elite education and lived in Greenwich Village at this time. However, despite the class and experience differences between themselves and their subjects, they eagerly approached the project as a method to document post-depression rural America.

The result was a piece ten times longer than Fortune had requested, which eventually evolved into In Praise of Famous Men. It is a highly personal oral narrative about a particular sector of Southern America in this time period. It meanders in time, emotion, description and voice to present more of individual account of two men's experiences than a document of the chosen focus. Richard Pells supports the time shifting by saying that "the book had no visible beginning, middle, or end; instead its structure was circular, scenes were repeated, arguments were interrupted, themes and characters abruptly disappeared only to re-emerge in another setting, memories of the past were juxtaposed with conversations in the present."¹ The

¹ Pells, p. 247

result is Agee's emotional truth along with the documentary truth.²

The Preface immediately breaks the rules of any standard form of literature. Agee's voice is immediately represented in his description of what is to follow:

" 'This experience' was just a series of various, fairly complicated, and to me interesting, things which I perceived or which happened to me last summer, that's all... I am respectful of experience in general and of any experience whatever, and because it turns out that going through, remembering, and trying to tell of anything is, of itself ... interesting and important to me."³

One key factor connected to the outside quality of Agee within In Praise of Famous Men is his presence as a Southerner. Despite being born and raised in Tennessee, Agee has acclimated to the North. He's been educated and separated by both class and geography. He arrives in Alabama with an air of humility and a great deal of social guilt as to the plight of rural Americans after the depression. However, the dichotomy is that despite his keen sense of being an outsider, as displayed by his constant self-reflection and self-consciousness, he

² Rankin and Ferris, Lecture

³ Agee, p. 216

delivers an intimate, almost raw, portrait of the three families he and Evans' studied.

The Fortune Article

James Agee wrote for Fortune Magazine from 1932 to 1937. Fortune commissioned Agee and photographer Walker Evans to write a quaint piece on Alabama sharecroppers as part of their "Life and Circumstances" series in 1936. At the time Agee was working for Henry Luce at Time and wanted to break free from journalism which asserted the class differences in post-depression America. Walker Evans was working for Roosevelt's Division of Information, a New Deal relief agency. The Division of Information was the publicity arm of the Resettlement Administration and later became the Farm Security Administration⁴.

Both Agee and Evans were living in Greenwich Village in New York City at the time and had met each other through mutual friends. Although both were fascinated by the subject, neither was interested in the angle that Fortune had put forth. Agee felt "the impossibility of his Fortune assignment - to write a succinct report on the lives of

⁴ Stott, American National Biography

'average' tenant farmers" ⁵, but also thought that the more daunting task was "the difficulty of ever 'knowing' another human being, and beyond this [lay] the problem of all that [was] 'beyond designation of words' ⁶." ⁷

"Rather than a typical, and typically condescending, expose of the sharecroppers' plight, Agee wrote a piece that was a mixture of lyricism, painstaking description, scathingly personal confession, and moral outrage." ⁸ It was also ten times longer than what the magazine had requested. Fortune attempted to rewrite Agee's effort for over a year and finally turned the piece down. Agee left Fortune at this point to pursue the development of his work into In Praise of Famous Men, which was published by Houghton Mifflin in 1941.

The novel had an original printing of only 600 copies and was quickly remaindered. It was re-released in 1960, where it received critical acclaim and was regarded as a classic document of sharecropping in the American South in the 1930s. The re-release also led to the re-discovery of

⁵ Folks, p. 44

⁶ Agee, p. 91 as quoted in Folks, p. 44

⁷ Folks, p. 44

⁸ Stott, American National Biography

huge body of Farm Security Administration work, with Evans' photos as a focus.⁹

James Agee

James Agee was born in Knoxville, TN in 1909. After the death of his father when he was age 6, his mother moved their family to St. Andrews, TN where he went to private school. In 1925, he began Philips Exeter Academy in Maine and eventually attended Harvard University. Richard King quotes W.M. Frohock as saying that as "much as [Agee] liked to think of himself as hill-born... he moved north too early in life and acclimated himself too thoroughly... By preference, he spent his vacations in New York."¹⁰

King continues by stating that "Agee has rarely been considered a major figure in the Southern Renaissance. Though his major writings are generally set in the South, his name is hardly mentioned when Southern cultural and literary achievements of the post-Depression years are assessed."¹¹ This brings to question Agee's relationship to the South and his status as a Southern writer. In the opening of In Praise of Famous Men, Agee writes that this story is set in "the whole memory of the South in its six-

⁹ Watkins, American National Biography

¹⁰ King, p. 197

¹¹ King, p. 204

thousand-mile parade and flowering outlay of the facades of cities".¹²

Writer Willie Morris told an interviewer in 1979 that "if there is anything that makes Southerners distinctive from the main body of Americans, it is a certain burden of memory and a burden of history.... I think sensitive Southerners have this in their bones, this profound awareness of the past."¹³ Agee certainly fits within this category.

Much of Agee's work has been called autobiographical. In particular, his Pulitzer Prize winning novel, A Death in the Family seeks to repair emotional damage attached to the death of his father. Tom Rankin stated that Agee writes about his childhood because he's unable to separate the story he's telling from his own. An example of this can be seen in the following passage from In Praise of Famous Men:

"I used as a child in the innocence of faith to bring myself out of bed through the cold lucid water of the Cumberland morning and to serve at the altar at earliest lonely Mass..."¹⁴

"Particularly in Famous Men a (perhaps *the*) central concern was an investigation of his own motives and intentions.

¹² Agee, p. 7

¹³ Bales

¹⁴ Agee, p. 80

There was clearly no straightforward way to separate the dancer from the dance."¹⁵

Walker Evans

Walker Evans was born in 1903 in St. Louis, MO. He grew up in gentility in the wealthy north shore Chicago suburb of Kenilworth. In 1918, he moved with his mother to New York City after his parents separated. He attended Phillips Academy in Andover, MA and went on to Williams College. After one year at Williams, Evans decided to drop out and spent a year in Paris studying at the Sorbonne.¹⁶

In the 1930s, "Evans began a series of trips through the South that collectively yielded the images that established his reputation as one of the century's foremost photographers."¹⁷ In 1935, he began working at what became the Farm Security Administration, photographing the effects of Roosevelt's New Deal on rural America. Evans chose to work with Agee in 1936 on the Fortune assignment because he was interested in the subject matter and how he and Agee could portray it. They worked intensely because they loved what they were doing.¹⁸

¹⁵ King, p. 208

¹⁶ Watkins, American National Biography

¹⁷ Watkins, American National Biography

¹⁸ Ferris, "Interview with Walker Evans"

William Ferris spoke to Walker Evans in 1973, shortly before his death in 1975. He asked him how he found living in the rural Alabama sharecropper community from In Praise of Famous Men. His reply was as follows:

"How did I find it? Well, I felt pretty much at home there; perhaps not as much as Agee did, because he came from Tennessee stock, with a rural background. ...I was a suburban-city son of a Chicago businessman, so I didn't really know a hell of a lot about what was there. But, I had almost a blood relation to what was going on in those people, and an understanding and love for that kind of old, hard-working, rural, Southern human being."¹⁹

Ferris and Evans also discussed that there wasn't a protest community in the 1930's of the type that developed in the 1960's. Perhaps part of Agee's work in Alabama was a chance for him to strike out on his own, to escape society, or oppose the plight of rural Americans after the depression.²⁰ In response to a further question from Ferris, Evans discussed what Agee's emotions in relation to the Alabama community and what he wanted to accomplish with his work:

"What he wanted to do was shock and scare people. He wanted to make people who were not poor, for example, really feel what it was like to be up against it. And he wanted to rub it in. He

¹⁹ Ferris, "Interview with Walker Evans", p. 31

²⁰ Ferris, "Interview with Walker Evans", p. 32

was angry. He wanted to say, 'Look, you sons of bitches and you bastards! What the hell do you think you're doing? Living this way while these people are living this way. And the hell with you! I wish you would all go to hell!'"²¹

As mentioned previously, *In Praise of Famous Men* did not do well in its 1941 publication. Its re-issue in 1960 brought Evans recognition for his documentary work done during this period. Unfortunately, by this time, Evans had sold a large portion of his portfolio.

Evans' Role in Alabama

Why did James Agee ask Walker Evans to accompany him to Alabama? Tom Rankin of the Center for Documentary Studies in Durham, NC purported that Walker Evans' photography enhanced the class distinction between Agee and Evans with the Gudgers, Ricketts and Woods due to their starkness and clarity. They seem meant to portray a bleak existence. For the most part, no one is smiling and everyone and everything portrayed is dirty. Although this is the reality of the existence of the people they are studying, it seems that Evans' style show a particularly hopeless quality.²²

²¹ Ferris, "Interview with Walker Evans", p. 32

²² Rankin and Ferris, Lecture

There has been a history of writers teaming up with artists to enhance their imagery. Other creative pairings have included painter/illustrator Jack Yeats and writer John Synge in their pieces on western Ireland for the Manchester Guardian in the early 1900s. Photographer William Eggleston and writer Willie Morris collaborated on Faulkner's Mississippi. The benefit that each partner gains is a perspective outside of the one that they're able to deliver in their craft.

Walker Evans' work reveals a distance. He attempts to take pictures so ordinary that the photographer is an invisible notion - as if he didn't exist.²³ Agee writes in In Praise of Famous Men:

"One reason I so deeply care for the camera is just this. So far as it goes (which is, in its own realm, as absolute anyhow as the traveling distance of words or sound), and handled cleanly and literally in its own terms, as an ice-cold, some ways limited, some ways more capable, eye, it is, like the phonograph record and like scientific instruments and unlike any other leverage of art, incapable of recording anything but absolute, dry truth."²⁴

J.A. Ward states in *American Silences* that "Evans exploits his subjects' awareness that he is taking their

²³ Rankin and Ferris, Lecture

²⁴ Agee, p. 206

pictures, and he gains unique effects from photographing them when they are still. The pictures do not freeze an action but absorb or retain a self-consciousness and in most cases a stillness that are both uncharacteristic and revealing of personality."²⁵

Ward supports that as much as Agee needed Evans to show the austerity of the Alabama sharecropper community, Evans needed Agee to go inside. The majority of Evans' photos are outdoors, possibly due to lighting. These conditions serve to enhance the viewpoint of an outsider.

Significant Passages

There are several significant passages in In Praise of Famous Men that illustrate Agee's standing as an outsider. Sections of *Persons and Places*, the *Preamble*, *A Country Letter*, *Colon*, and *In The Front Bedroom* will be discussed below.

A key passage which illustrates the outsider quality of the writer and photographer takes place in *Persons and Places* where Agee lists himself and Walker Evans as:

"James Agee: a spy, traveling as a
journalist.
Walker Evans: a counter-spy, traveling
as a photographer."²⁶

²⁵ Ward, p. 161

²⁶ Agee, *Persons and Places*

In Agee's description of himself and Evans as spies, there is duplicity, a sense that they are not as they represent themselves.²⁷ William Stott, in Documentary Expression and Thirties America says that "Agee continually reminds us of his position as outsider. Listing himself and Evans as spy and counterspy respectively in 'Persons and Places', he wonders what his intrusive presence looks like to the people whose 'living' he has come 'to reproduce and communicate as nearly exactly as possible.'"²⁸

The *Preamble* shows that the book is "written for those who have a soft place in their hearts."²⁹ J.A. Trilling, in his early favorable review, supports this by stating that this softness is a failure "in Agee's inability to see these people as anything but good. Not that he falsifies what is apparent: ...But he writes of his people as if there were no human unregenerateness in them, no flicker of malice or meanness, no darkness or wildness of feeling, only a sure and simple virtue, the growth, we must suppose, of their hard, unlovely poverty."³⁰

In *A Country Letter, Colon* and *In the Front Bedroom*, there are repeated phrases to stress the tone that Agee is

²⁷ Ferris, Lecture

²⁸ Stott, p. 232

²⁹ Agee, p. 15

³⁰ Trilling, p. 102

asserting. These are written as internal monologues by either the people being studied, or Agee himself. Annie Mae asks "how did we get caught"³¹ in *A Country Letter*. The poetic quality of the repetition emphasizes the fact that she is trapped in poverty. It is interesting that she is not speaking these words and they have been written by Agee as his perception of her thoughts. Tom Rankin said that despite the fact that Agee wants to give voice to these families, you rarely hear them.³² In essence, it is Agee overlaying his humility on Annie Mae and the situation presented, again displaying the class difference between himself and the sharecroppers. *Colon* continues this search-for-self theme in the repetition of the phrase "to find himself."³³

In *In the Front Bedroom: The Signal*, Agee writes "If I were not here; and I am alien; a bodyless eye; this would never have existence in human perception."³⁴ Paul Rabinowitz writes in Cultural Critique that through this segment "...Agee constructs his position as a voyeur - a 'spy', a 'bodyless eye', an 'alien' - and those he looks at

³¹ Agee, p. 72

³² Rankin and Ferris, Lecture

³³ Agee, p. 91

³⁴ Agee, p. 164

look back at him"³⁵ further supporting Agee's position as an outsider.

The Outsider

In looking In Praise of Famous Men, with an eye towards the outsider status of James Agee within the text, many questions arose. Some of these included who is speaking, to whom are they speaking and what are they trying to tell us, the reader? The following is an exploration of these questions along with a focus on some of the themes that support this distance. In the manner of Agee it seemed natural to create a stream of consciousness list of applicable terms: self consciousness, voyeurism, inventory, invasion of privacy, confession, distance, desire for intimacy, social realist, elitism, classism, self reflection, guilt, humility and social consciousness.

Agee asks the readers these same questions

"Who are you who will read these words and study these photographs, and through what cause, by what chance, and for what purpose, and by what right do you qualify to, and what will you do about it;..."³⁶

He further asserts that "...it is an effort in human actuality, in which the reader is no less centrally

³⁵ Rabinowitz, p. 150

³⁶ Agee, p. 7

involved than the authors and those of whom they tell. Those who wish actively to participate in the subject, in whatever degree of understanding, friendship, or hostility, are invited to address the authors in care of the publishers."³⁷ Rabinowitz writes that "through its first person narrative the reader was placed in the middle of unfolding events, seeing them through the eyes of the narrator as directly as possible."³⁸ Richard Pells continues that "...the text included extensive autobiographical passages and continual asides to the audience - all as a way of trying to redefine the relationship between observer and observed, analysis and empathy, internal emotions and the external world."³⁹

We see this book through our own experience. We have a role and responsibility. We are complicit as readers in all the emotion that James Agee puts forth. This is a dialogue in which the reader has involvement.⁴⁰ Rankin states that he's saying 'If I could take you there, you'd know these people, but I can't so I will write this book to describe these people to the best of my ability.' What right do you have to write about anyone else unless you

³⁷ Agee, XI

³⁸ Rabinowitz, p. 154

³⁹ Pells, p. 247

⁴⁰ Ferris, Lecture

recognize that you're an outsider? He never suggests that he's anything but an outsider.⁴¹

Agee arrives with pity for these people. They are patronizing relationships. 'I care about them and I think they're pitiful.' Agee seems to be saying that he and Evans were coming down to show you these people, these troubling people.⁴² "His attempts to see himself through their eyes even as he scrutinizes them mean 'the centers of my subject are shifty',⁴³." ⁴⁴

The book is lonely and solemn. Agee sees the people as much worse off than they are. Agee sees himself as an outsider in the story. But, he's also an outsider in his life. "If I were not here; and I am alien; a bodyless eye; this would never have existence in human perception."⁴⁵ This loneliness is manifested in extensive sections of self reflection. This book is both about Agee and Gudgers in that he relates his experience to theirs and is in a journey of self discovery.⁴⁶ This passage from *Colon* illustrates Agee's quest:

 "...to find himself;
 how should he know it, how should these poor
 parents who so earnestly wish him well, ever

⁴¹ Rankin, Lecture

⁴² Ferris, Lecture

⁴³ Stott, p. 10 via Rabinowitz, p. 156

⁴⁴ Rabinowitz, p. 156

⁴⁵ Agee, p. 164

⁴⁶ Ferris, Lecture

suspect it better than a little, how in
their ignorance and skinned sadness shall
they ever learn, how all the help they would
do him is but harm
to find himself;..."⁴⁷

Agee's distance is also observed through his
voyeurism. Robert MacLean says that "a voyeur is a watcher
who is not himself seen, a condition which Agee derides,
strains against and finally accepts."⁴⁸ He continues by
stating that "more positively, watching is a metaphor for
attention, alert and joyfully participating in the
actual..."⁴⁹

His voyeurism leads to invasions of privacy on the
Gudger's property which is described in detail through his
inventory of the contents of their house. Agee wants to
get close to people, to relate to them by going through
their materiel. It is a symbol for how close he wants to
get. Rabinowitz states that Agee is a voyeur for the sake
of his readers. "Looking across classes at the underclass
requires looking underneath their skirts, inspecting their
pants, because the middle class knows itself as a spy whose
desire is somehow 'curious.'"⁵⁰ Agee justifies his actions
at the Gudger's through his stated role. "...That a house of

⁴⁷ Agee, p. 91

⁴⁸ MacLean, p. 33

⁴⁹ MacLean, p. 44

⁵⁰ Rabinowitz, p. 166

simple people which stands empty and silent in the vast southern country morning sunlight, and everything which on this morning in eternal space it by chance contains, all thus left open and defenseless to a reverent and cold-laboring spy..."⁵¹

Agee's distance is also illustrated in statements of elitism. In describing the layout of one of the dogtrot houses, Agee writes that "all really simple and naïve people ... incline strongly toward exact symmetries, and have some sort of instinctive dislike that any one thing shall touch any other save what it rests on."⁵² He seems to be stating stereotypical behaviors of the Alabama sharecroppers which further separate them. Another example, within the house discusses why the cupboard is called a safe. "It seems to me of some interest that farm families, whose most urgent treasures are the food they eat, use for its storage-box the name used among middle-class people for the guardian of money, ledgers, and 'valuable papers.')"⁵³

Agee describes in several sections the plight of the families he is studying. In particular, his repeated voice of Annie Mae asking "How did we get caught? Why is it

⁵¹ Agee, p. 117

⁵² Agee, p. 137

⁵³ Agee, p. 158

things always seem to go against us? Why is it there can't ever be any pleasure in living?"⁵⁴ In his attempt to try and create a less pitiful character, he creates a fictionalized response: "(But I am young; and I am young, and strong, and in good health; and I am young, and pretty to look at; and I am too young to worry and so am I,..."⁵⁵

Another section illustrating Agee's class distinction describes the education of the sharecroppers. He writes that "it may be that more are born 'incapable of learning' in this class, or in any case 'incapable of learning,' or of 'using their intelligences,' beyond 'rudimentary' stages, than in economically luckier classes."⁵⁶ His use of quotations is to actually question these ways of thinking, not to affirm them. In his attempt to show that these ideas are wrong, he seems to be pointing out the differences between his background and that of the people he's writing about.

Agee writes that "...this is a book about 'sharecroppers,' and is written for all those who have a soft place in their hearts for the laughter and tears inherent in poverty viewed at a distance, ...and may feel kindly disposed toward any well-thought-out liberal efforts

⁵⁴ Agee, p. 72

⁵⁵ Agee, p. 72

⁵⁶ Agee, p. 269

to rectify the unpleasant situation down South."⁵⁷

Trilling poses the classist question: "How may we - 'we' being the relatively fortunate middle class that reads books and experiences emotions - how may we feel about the - and the word itself proclaims the difficulty - underprivileged?"⁵⁸ King states that "his concern with self took on the trappings of a secular quest for justification - by what right may I write and pretend to articulate the truth?"⁵⁹

Documentation as a Form of Distance

The art of documentation is the art of affirming value to a people and place.⁶⁰ "Agee and coauthor Walker Evans are constantly in pursuit of an understanding of their subject that eludes them."⁶¹ Documentation, by its nature, creates distance. Through the effort of recording the events of a culture or place, the recorder puts themselves in contrast with their subject. It calls into question whether it is ethical to document a culture with all the detail revealed? Agee, and other documentarians, would

⁵⁷ Agee, p. 11-12

⁵⁸ Trilling, p. 99

⁵⁹ King, p. 208

⁶⁰ Rankin and Ferris, Lecture

⁶¹ Folks, p. 43

most likely justify these actions by stating that documentation is actually bearing witness to the truth.

Many writers begin as documentarians and what they found shaped their work and informed their writing. Examples include Ernest Gaines as writer and photographer and Zora Neale Hurston, who began as a documentarian in Florida. Agee employs documentary methods through his 'thick description' - an anthropological term meaning to look at every thing. This can particularly be seen in his inventory of the house contents.

The term reportage came up repeatedly in articles and books regarding the work that Agee and Evans did for Famous Men. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, reportage is "... the reporting of events for the press or for broadcasting, esp. with reference to its style; an instance of this, a piece of journalistic or factual writing."⁶² Rabinowitz wrote that this new form, in the 1930's, "sought to overcome the divisions between literature and history, private thought and public action, subjectivity and objectivity, reportage appeared to overcome the contradictions literary radicals felt between their position as intellectuals and their allegiance to the

⁶² Oxford English Dictionary

working class."⁶³ She continues by stating that "typically, reportage foregrounds a rather ecstatic voice of the 'I' who proclaims a presence, a self, an identify that is directly connected to 'the people.'"⁶⁴

Evans, as photographer, enhances the distance that Agee creates with words. Evans aesthetic gives us a sense that the photographer is truly invisible, showing us only the sharecroppers and not himself or his views.⁶⁵

Rabinowitz describes his methods:

"Agee describes the painful embarrassment of Sadie Ricketts before the camera as she attempts to resist her husband's insistence that her family be photographed. ...Minute class distinctions among the tenants point up the larger class differences dividing the families from Agee and Evans..."⁶⁶

Conclusion

Through the readings and lectures described in the Bibliography, there is a strong sense that Agee was an outsider. As the information came together, and significant passages of Famous Men were re-read, confusion grew as to whether he truly was an outsider. The conclusion is that through Agee's artful use of prose, his near poetic style, and choice of language that presents an

⁶³ Rabinowitz, p. 154

⁶⁴ Rabinowitz, p. 154

⁶⁵ Rankin and Ferris, Lecture

⁶⁶ Rabinowitz, p. 159

intimacy with his subjects, he conveys knowledge of those he studied. However, due to his voyeurism, self reflection and the matter that he is as much a part of the book, in his search for identity within this context, he sets himself outside.

Another factor inherent is that we, as readers, are complicit in his self-reflection. There are several passages which tell the reader what to feel - which is humility, guilt, a class consciousness. There is the expectation that the reader has come from the same privileged background as Agee, and should take action based on the emotion he conveys.

A final question is whether Agee is truly Southern or not. Although raised in Tennessee, through his education and experience, Agee doesn't appear Southern. Although pursuant to this novel, as well as further works such as A Death in the Family, his writing is largely autobiographical and seeks to make amends for his father's death or repair old wounds. Yes, In Praise of Famous Men is a book set in the deep South, written by a Southerner, but the question is whether that makes it a Southern novel or not.

What can be said is that through his singularity of voice, this is an oral narrative about the South. For the

most part, we really don't hear anyone else except for Agee. When we do hear the Gudgers, Ricketts or Woods, it is often in his own interpretation and not actual stated words, but his perceptions of their thoughts at the time of their interaction. This could be connected to the fact that Agee wrote a large portion of the book in the years subsequent to his time in Alabama. To repeat Willie Morris, "if there is anything that makes Southerners distinctive from the main body of Americans, it is a certain burden of memory and a burden of history.... I think sensitive Southerners have this in their bones, this profound awareness of the past."⁶⁷ Agee certainly fits within this category.

⁶⁷ Bales

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