

1-1-2013

## **Childish Figuring: The Child as Symbol and Actor in Lillian Smith's Killers of the Dream and James Agee's Let Us Now Praise Famous Men**

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CHILDISH FIGURING: THE CHILD AS SYMBOL AND ACTOR IN LILLIAN SMITH'S  
*KILLERS OF THE DREAM* AND JAMES AGEE'S *LET US NOW PRAISE FAMOUS MEN*

by

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Bachelor of Arts  
University of Cambridge, 2009

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Masters of Arts in

English

College of Arts and Sciences

University of South Carolina

2013

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am deeply indebted to Dr. Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr. and Dr. Sara Schwebel for their time, effort and patience in helping me develop this thesis through its many stages and written incarnations. Dr. Catherine Keyser and Dr. Alison Arant were also extraordinarily generous with their time and their suggestions have enriched the ideas in this thesis. Dr. Graham Stowe and Bethany Tisdale at the University of South Carolina Writing Center were unfailingly supportive and encouraging in their comments about my writing during both the drafting and revision processes. My thanks to Gilla Shapiro, Jennifer Mackenzie and Lauren Eyler who all volunteered to read various chapters. Lastly, I would like to thank my graduate colleagues, especially Jillian Weber, Elizabeth Morgan, Stephanie Stripling and Adam Griffey, in the English Department who listened to my ideas and always gave insightful advice at many different points throughout the whole process.

## ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I examine the presentation of the child in James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and Lillian Smith's *Killers of the Dream* as part of a rhetoric of growth. Both Agee and Smith present southerners as psychologically immature due to their traumatic childhood experiences of sexism, racism and poverty. Childhood is a recurring theme in both texts. Agee and Smith present childhood as a biological, developmental stage and a metaphor for growth in their texts. The child is a real, contextually-specific figure, drawn from Agee's and Smith's observations of children in Depression-era society. Images of children's bodies document the physical and psychological effects of social problems. Smith and Agee present these images as documentary material but the bodies are also symbolic, representing the children's trauma as well as signifying essentialised characteristics of childhood. The image of the child becomes a documentary icon, combining empirical, contextual details with symbolic qualities. In Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, images of children are part of complex metaphors, illustrating how children's growth is circumscribed. In Smith's *Killers of the Dream*, the child is a symbolic actor who models alternative social behaviors and suggests social change.

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## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

In *Killers of the Dream*, Lillian Smith begins her jeremiad against the mental, physical and cultural apartheid of the South from the perspective of the child. The first chapter title, “When I Was a Child,” invokes Paul’s Letter to the Corinthians from the New Testament (Smith 25, 1 Corinthians 13:11). Through this reference, Smith figuratively returns to the body and intellectual capabilities of a young child to suggest that the problems in the South are intrinsically related to the figures of children. She states that “[e]ven its children knew that the South was in trouble. No one had to tell them; no words said aloud” (25). The children’s awareness of the South’s social problems represents the severity of the situation. Smith implies that children should be protected from the effects of the South’s socio-political problems but are not. The children Smith documents are actual, contextually-specific figures which testify to the presence and effects of social problems. Smith’s backward glances to her childhood demonstrate that contextual specificity: “This haunted childhood belongs to every southerner of my age. We ran away from it but we came back like a hurt animal to its wound, or a murderer to the scene of his sin. The human heart dares not stay away too long from that which hurts it most” (25). Smith identifies the traumas of southern childhood and their lingering psychological effects as the common, shared experience of all southerners.

The effects of childhood experiences endure, symbolically haunting the adult southerner. Smith suggests the widespread, damaging consequences of the South's social problems through metaphors connected to the child's body. In this respect, the child's somatic experiences represent individuals' awareness of the social problems. The child's body further signifies the cost, physically and psychologically, of denying that awareness for the sake of social conformity, metaphorically becoming the "wound" and the "scene of sin" (Smith 25). Children are thus uniquely qualified to visually represent the adverse consequences as victimized figures whose minds and bodies objectively represent the effects of the social problems. It is through the child's body, which acts as a physical index exposing and documenting the damage, that Smith explores the long-lasting psychological consequences of an unjust and restrictive society on southerners.

By articulating the problem from the child's viewpoint, Smith privileges the child's experiences. This viewpoint is essentially different from the adult viewpoint because the child has a different relationship with his or her society. As Patricia Yaeger notes, the child is initially placed at the margins of society and is progressively inducted to its social practices but "the child may question her society's values and provide a narrative space for challenging its beliefs. [Consequently,] children also become a tragic center for exploring the effects of race and class politics in everyday life" (136).<sup>1</sup> Children's observations reveal a possibility for change based on the child's inherent interpretive abilities, which frequently contradict established conventions and viewpoints.

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<sup>1</sup> Beverly Lyon Clark also theorizes children's social marginality in *Kiddie Lit*, suggesting why so little work about children and their marginal social position exists: "Another strand of literary cultural theorizing that could acknowledge children is one that explores the parameters of marginality. Yet children are still so thoroughly beyond the pale that feminists who theorize marginality have paid virtually no attention to the position of children" (8).



It is a limited opportunity, though; children's relatively un-indoctrinated viewpoint exists for a limited period of time before society forces them to conform.<sup>2</sup> Children represent an opportunity to change social customs due to "their fine talent for doing the unpredictable" (Smith 18). They are symbols of a different, better future. Smith presents the child simultaneously as an object that documents the damaging effects of social inequities, a symbol of the possibility for change, and an actor who can potentially deviate from the established social conventions.

Smith is not the first southern author to recognize the significance of the child's experiences in narratives about the South. In his non-fiction text, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, James Agee similarly depicts the child as an object and a symbol. Agee presents images of children to comment on the devastating effects of poverty in rural Alabaman society. William Stott notes that in documentary narratives "[c]hildren figure so often in propaganda because they are par excellence the blameless victims of social circumstance" (27). Agee specifically documents the children of three different sharecropping families, noting their work on their family's land as well as other everyday activities such as their educational experiences in *Famous Men*. As in *Killers of the Dream*, these children are real children; Agee's portrait of their lives is based on a two-month observation period of the Gudger, Ricketts and Woods families.<sup>3</sup> He observes that

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<sup>2</sup> In *The Fourth Ghost*, Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr. demonstrates how the South's fascist systems applied to the education of children (140-142). However, if the child becomes an object for cultural indoctrination, it suggests that the child's interpretations and actions are, or have the potential to be, non-conformist. Children in *Killers of the Dream* routinely demonstrate non-conformist intellectual and behavioral tendencies which give them a unique perspective on southern society, especially on Smith's principle subjects of "sin, sex and segregation" (94), while also making them targets, and frequently victims, of the South's authoritarian rules.

<sup>3</sup> Agee's and Evans's stay in Alabama significantly exceeded the time allocated by the publisher. They "literally disappeared for two months, more than twice as long as their field work was supposed to last." (Stott 261)

the children's "whole environment is such that the use of the intelligence, of the intellect, and of the emotions is atrophied, and is all but entirely irrelevant to the pressures and needs which involve almost every instant of a tenant's conscious living" (260). The children are evidently psychologically as well as physically damaged by their immediate surroundings. As a result of this environmental damage, Agee asserts, the children struggle to improve their living conditions even though they possess the intellectual ability to do so. Their potential is frustrated by their environment, perpetuating a cycle of poverty. The effect of the children's poverty leaves them psychologically stunted as adults because they are helpless and confused, unable to prevent or even mitigate the negative consequences of the adverse social conditions in which they live.

Agee emphasizes how a child's social environment negatively affects them because society upholds the social conventions that allow poverty and racism to flourish at the child's expense. Agee believes these problems are obvious and if acknowledged, could be remedied:

Any child should be able to grasp them. To grasp such facts, to try to understand them and their application, would seem as primal and as relevant to and influential upon the rest of what we are and do as breathing. Our own inability to grasp them or our negligence, which amounts to the same thing, does not qualify us very highly to handle more difficult facts which are of central importance at very least (to remain provincial) to the good of the human race. (220)

Like Smith, Agee returns to the child's perspective to emphasize the obvious severity of the problem. Poor education (both formal school education and informal social education) permanently diminishes the child's inherent interpretive abilities and makes

overcoming their situational disadvantages more difficult. Here lies the root of the problem because Agee's and Smith's contention is that the children's social-educational experience is more concerned with protecting the unjust social practices based on tradition and religion which perpetuate sexism, racism and other forms of intolerance, than in nurturing the physical and psychological health of children. Children become progressively disabled by their education and environment with terrible personal and social consequences. Both authors identify a vicious cycle from which there appears to be no escape. However, both authors also recognize that the children's natural intellectual abilities and perspective offer an opportunity for them to break free. Firstly, children are at a different intellectual and physical developmental stage so they engage with their environment differently. They do not understand in the same way or to the same degree as adults but they are capable of observation and analysis. Furthermore, because these children have not yet been fully indoctrinated into social practices, they are temporarily less influenced by the social systems which contradict logical observations and thereby curtail children's, and later adults', ability to reason.

In this thesis, I argue that Smith and Agee use childhood as a metaphor to draw a portrait of southerners as psychologically immature because of the longstanding effects of racism, sexism and poverty, which they are introduced to as children and which leave them confused and largely powerless to determine their social environment. Smith attributes the perpetuation of problems to a "Southern Tradition" of racism, sexism and poverty, dating it from the settlement of the South (57-73).<sup>4</sup> She acknowledges, "People

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<sup>4</sup> Smith reflects extensively on the contributing factors for the South's problems in her chapters "Unto the Third and Fourth Generation," "The Stolen Future," "The White Man's Burden" and "Giants in the Earth."

find it hard to question something that has been here since they were born” (57), particularly when they are convinced by journalists, politicians and authors that it is not in their interest to do so (78-79). She suggests that these discriminatory practices continue due to the self-interest of the ruling classes, the lack of critical insight and the failure of moral courage (67-68). Agee’s critique is less pointed and well-theorized than Smith’s. He blames human apathy and the overwhelming, systematic nature of the tenants’ poverty (70-73).<sup>5</sup> Children gradually perceive these issues but then learn as adults to accept their existence or deny that they are troubling and so rarely intervene in the problematic social situations. Consequently, as adults, they metaphorically become young children again with a limited awareness and ability to act. It is the liminal period between realization and acceptance or denial that interests Agee and Smith as it offers the slim possibility for change, even though the societal pressure on children and adolescents at this time is overwhelming.

Agee and Smith both present the image of the child as part of a rhetoric of growth.<sup>6</sup> The figure of the child works in the text as a documentary icon based on the author's empirical observations, frequently including biographical information from their own childhood. This documentary icon also has a double symbolic function: it signifies the contextually-specific damage that the South's social customs inflict on the

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<sup>5</sup> Agee ventriloquizes the tenants’ hopelessness: “In what way were we trapped? where, our mistake? what, where, how, when, what way, might all these things have been different, if only we had done otherwise? if only we might have known” (70). He repeats variations of the phrase, “How were we caught?” (72), to emphasize the tenants’ incredulity and helplessness. The tenants cannot see opportunities for improvement.

<sup>6</sup> In *Kiddie Lit*, Beverly Lyon Clark observes that “we nonetheless disparage what we consider childish and, as Bruce A. Ronda notes, ‘have insisted on development as the prime motif of identity,’ have insisted “on a rhetoric of growth” (11). Rhetorics of growth commonly use figures of children metaphorically to suggest a hierarchy of developmental stages.

child and it connects to a longer tradition of the child as a symbol which has more idealized qualities to support the hope for change. In this regard, Agee's and Smith's presentation of the child as object and symbol follows Fredric Jameson's theoretical template in *The Political Unconscious*. Jameson explains that

the historicizing operation can follow two distinct paths, which only ultimately meet in the same place: the path of the object and the path of the subject, the historical origins of the things themselves and that more intangible historicity of the concepts and categories by which we attempt to understand those things. (ix)

Jameson identifies a tension between texts' contextual specificity and the more generalized "concepts and categories" that authors reference in texts, which also have histories of associations. This tension is apparent in *Killers of the Dream* and *Famous Men*. Smith's and Agee's descriptions of children reflect the undeniably negative, empirical consequences of social restrictions, particularly the lasting psychological damage which manifests as a perpetuated childishness. However, their symbolic representations of children also project ideal qualities associated with children and childhood. These qualities are then re-contextualized as part of their critique when the authors apply them to the southern context to illustrate the disjunction between everyday social practices and long-standing cultural values. For Smith and Agee, the documentary and figurative are connected because the child's idealized qualities such as imagination, curiosity, integrity and honesty are foundational to the child's progression to physical and psychological maturity.

In the child's figure, I suggest that both Agee and Smith present a universal image to expose the specific human cost, physically and psychologically, of the South's social practices. Images of children, therefore, unite the two modes of representation: documentary and figurative. "[I]magery," as W.J.T. Mitchell notes, "serves as a kind of relay connecting theories of art, language, and the mind with conceptions of social, cultural, and political value" ( 2). The child's image provides a frame through which authors can disrupt established local, social practices and imagine different possibilities based on universalized concepts of the child's symbolic significance. In his analysis of an image's function, Mitchell defines the image as a "likeness," "resemblance" and "similitude" drawn from reality (11). He breaks the concept of the image into smaller functional categories: Graphic ("pictures, statues and designs"), Optical ("mirrors and projections"), Perceptual ("sense data, 'species' and appearances"), Mental ("dreams, memories, ideas, fantasmata") and Verbal ("metaphors and descriptions") (Mitchell 11). All these different conceptions of images are combined in the child's figure in *Famous Men and Killers of the Dream*: the child is a descriptive image based on documentary details, which provides the basis for symbolic and metaphoric interpretation; the child's sensory and intellectual capabilities frequently focus the author's gaze and signify a different social perspective; the child is associated with mirrors and/or photographic equipment at numerous points in both texts which provides another opportunity to reflect on their social environment and emphasizes their impressionability and sensitivity.

Agee's and Smith's presentations of children are complex because they rely on a diverse range of sources, drawn from cultural, historical, literary and theoretical contexts. In Chapter 1, I outline Smith's and Agee's assumptions about children and their

capabilities, and how it relates to a longer symbolic tradition of children. Both Agee and Smith present the child as a keen observer of their surroundings. Children's discovery of the world through their senses inspires both authors and suggests a strategy for navigating the illogical and damaging customs of southern society. As part of this presentation, each author references, explicitly or obliquely, contemporary literary critics such as I.A. Richards, Erich Kahler and F.L. Lucas, whose work on symbolism significantly informs how their images of children function. Richards, Kahler and Lucas frequently refer to children's perceptive abilities in their explanations of how symbols work, placing symbolism in the context of epistemology and the development of intellectual abilities.

In Chapters 2 and 3, I look at each author's presentation of the child separately because there are important differences in practice and effect. Smith's *Killers of the Dream* is a non-fiction text, which combines sociology, autobiography and psychology to draw a portrait of the South. Agee's *Famous Men* is a photo-journalistic documentary narrative about Alabama sharecroppers in which children feature significantly but which also extends to other subjects and symbols as part of its social critique. In Chapter 2, "James Agee's "Curious" Work in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*," I examine how Agee's depiction of tenant children operates in two principal modes: documentary and figurative. Agee combines the two in his metaphors of children to express the tenants' degradation but also their inherent human dignity. Agee's metaphoric images of children in different biological stages of development combine with other images to give an impressionistic picture of the tenants' situation. While children seem to make up a small portion of the text, I assert that it is through these figures that Agee most effectively articulates the tenants' experiences; furthermore, the child's engagement with society as a

highly attentive spectator provides a model for Agee's authorial engagement with his subject matter.

*Killers of the Dream* presents children more consistently throughout as Smith's autobiographical experiences as a child and as a children's instructor in a summer camp are the backbone of the text. In Chapter 3, "Play Acting and Arrested Development in Lillian Smith's *Killers of the Dream*," I explain how Smith develops the child as a symbol based on autobiographical observations. I argue that Smith adds an extra dimension to the child figure's documentary-symbolic function and presents the child as an actor, who models new ways of behaving in metatheatrical scenes of performance. Smith's children are symbolic actors which have a scriptive and a modeling quality as they represent an ideal which an audience aspires to reach. In Chapter 4, "Moving from Symbol to Actor," I conclude by comparing Agee's and Smith's presentation of children to demonstrate the different degree of agency they give to children and what this signifies about their perspectives on the South. Smith presents children as moving figures rather than as static images and she emphasizes the child's behavior more than the child's appearance or vision. Smith's children have greater opportunity to grow and develop into psychologically mature and independent adults than Agee's do because they can act on their observations.

Figures of children are particularly well suited for Agee's and Smith's critiques about the psychological damage southerners experience because they are multivalent images, connecting the documentary situation and symbolic tradition through their bodies and experiences. By documenting real children's experiences, the authors expose the need for change. The authors then translate this documentary image into a symbol, which



retrospectively acknowledges the lasting psychological and physical damage the South's social practices have engendered in southerners. The child as a symbol also imagines how the child's perceptive abilities could be nurtured, instead of denied, in order to avoid long-term psychological damage. Agee focuses on the near impossibility of growth in these social conditions; Smith focuses on the difficulty of growth but also expresses the hope that children will resist social indoctrination and assert their independence.

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In *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and *Killers of the Dream*, Agee and Smith rely on commonplaces about children drawn from cultural, religious, literary and historical contexts as part of their rhetorics of growth. These commonplaces are worth parsing out because, as Beverly Lyon Clark comments, "In general, we tend to assume that what it means to be a child, what it means for an adult to understand a child – never mind what it means to write from or for a child's perspective – is unproblematic" (9). Clark's point, however, is that it is never unproblematic. This is particularly true for *Famous Men* and *Killers of the Dream* because childhood is both a biological, developmental period and a metaphor.<sup>7</sup> Both Agee and Smith theorize a connection between the concept of childhood and the specific developmental stage. The two are part of a vicious circle: in childhood, southern children, who are not sufficiently protected by adults, learn not to challenge the injustice and illogical rationale for racism, sexism and poverty. As a result, they become psychologically immature adults, living a prolonged, metaphorical childhood, because they chose to conform, rather than think and act

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<sup>7</sup> Critics who have participated in this discussion about definitions of childhood, including Phillipe Aries, Karin Calvert, R.A. Davis and Karen Sanchez-Eppler, have emphasized the historical, geographical and social specificity of childhood.

independently. These adults then uphold social conventions at the expense of others and indoctrinate children to do the same. However, if children learn to develop their awareness and analytic skills, they can resist the social pressure to conform and become independent, mature adults.

During the developmental stage of childhood, the child is ideally placed to observe and to learn. The child is present in numerous social situations but s/he is excused from many social practices because of the limits of his or her understanding and ability to act. For instance, Smith illustrates this when she recounts her childhood experiences for one of her campers; she recalls,

Sometimes it was your nurse who made you know. You loved her, and suddenly she was frightened, and you knew it. Her eyes saw things that your eyes did not see. As the two of you sat in the sand playing your baby games, she'd whisper, "Lawd Jesus, when you going to help us!" And suddenly the play would leave the game and you would creep close to her begging her to shield you from her trouble.... (70)

The young Lillian does not fully understand what she hears or sees but she can observe the effects. Young children in southern society can sense the existence of problems and, although they do not fully understand what they are, they can empathize as Smith does with her nurse. Agee takes a similar view of the developmental stage of childhood, arguing that "[c]hildren are, or quickly become exquisitely sensitive to social, psychologic, and physical meanings and discriminations" (274). It is a child's ability to feel and acknowledge his or her emotions that the authors particularly value.

Children adapt themselves quickly to their situation. However, instead of empowering them, it frequently circumscribes their opportunities as they learn to follow programmatic social rules, instead of their intuitions. Agee observes how this happens in a child's formal education: "A child is quickly and frightfully instructed of his situation and meaning in the world; and that one stays alive only by one form or another of cowardice, or brutality, or deception, or other crime. It is all, needless to say, as harmful to the 'winners' (the well-to-do, or healthful, or extraverted) as to the losers" (274-275). For Agee, children's abilities to interpret their environment are wrongly directed towards social conformity, rather than toward independent thought and action. Ironically, therefore, individuals have less autonomy as adults because they have learned to consciously limit their vision and analysis. So, although the individual is technically more capable, the action that results from this narrow view only reinscribes social inequity, it cannot challenge it. The adult consequently has a diminished psychological capacity, exacerbating their confusion and helplessness. Agee presents Louise Gudger as an individual example of this because "she already has traces of a special sort of complacency which probably must, in time, destroy all in her nature that is magical, indefinable, and matchless: and this though she is one of the stronger persons I have ever known" (275).

Smith's and Agee's rhetorics of growth rely on the commonplace that southern society should nurture children to develop their capabilities; their critiques address the fact that it does not. In her entry on "Childhood" for *Keywords for Children's Literature*, Karen Sanchez-Eppler articulates this commonplace, stating that "[t]he configuration of the family and of gender roles, the socializing institutions of education, class and racial

formations, literary and other forms of cultural production, national security, religious and sexual virtue all tout the needs of the child” (Sanchez-Eppler 36). *Famous Men* and *Killers of the Dream* illustrate how the child’s needs are not met. On this subject, Smith provides an example of how adults, in this case specifically mothers,

tried to shut out evil, and sometimes succeeded only in sheltering their children from good. If you could just keep from [children] the things that must never be mentioned, all would be well! Innocence, virtue, ignorance, silence were synonyms twining around young lives like smilax. It was not evil but the knowledge of it that injured, these mothers believed. What you don’t hear or read or see surely can never be known to you. (142)

By teaching children to see selectively, adults obstruct the full use of children’s intelligence and so prevent them from actions that would alter the situation in which they are placed. Smith excuses this on the basis that these mothers believed that no change was possible or desirable and so the only comfort was in studied ignorance. These women were victims themselves because their culture “had ripped off their inherent dignity and made them silly statues and psychic children, stunting their capacity for understanding and enjoyment of husbands and family” (Smith 151). The mothers subvert qualities associated with childhood such as innocence and ignorance to prop up the social system. Smith clearly does not agree with this approach, however, as in the metaphor, the smilax obscures, perhaps even chokes, the children’s lives. In this organic image, it is not children who grow and prosper.

Smith and Agee represent the inadequacy of social education to nurture children as a serious moral failure. To emphasize this as a moral question, they both refer to religious commonplaces by quoting biblical passages involving children. “Let Us Now Praise Famous Men” is a quotation from the Book of Ecclesiasticus. The chapter highlights the different fortunes of different social classes, beginning with “famous men” and public figures before speaking of less fortunate individuals:

And some there be, which have no memorial; who are perished, as though they had never been born; and their children after them. But these were merciful men, whose righteousness hath not been forgotten. With their seed shall continually remain a good inheritance, and their children are within the covenant. Their seed standeth fast, and their children for their sakes. Their seed shall remain for ever, and their glory shall not be blotted out. Their bodies are buried in peace; but their name liveth for evermore. (Ecclesiasticus 44: 9-14]

The author recognizes the individual’s worth and honor, which is passed onto future generations. This emphasizes the religious commonplace about the value of the individual, but perhaps especially the value of the child. Religious covenants in the Old and New Testaments always involve promises about the well-being of future generations. Agee exposes how neither of these precepts is fully honored by southern society in relation to the tenant farmers and their children. In a scene reminiscent of the biblical passage’s images of dead bodies, Agee and Evans visit a graveyard toward the end of *Famous Men*. Agee’s final observations on this graveyard are about children’s graves and the ornaments used to decorate them. He describes these objects: “there are still pretty pieces of glass and china, but they begin to diminish in size and they verge into the forms

of animals and into homuncular symbols of growth” (386). The “homuncular symbols” are toy animals and dolls and they visually represent the dead children’s permanently arrested development. Here too, Agee suggests how one generation determines the fate of the next but he does not suggest that this is a positive legacy, instead stating “let us then hope better of our children, and of our children’s children; let us know, let us know there is a cure, there is to be an end to it, whose beginnings are long begun, and all deceptions clearing” (386-387). Agee effectively rewrites the biblical passage, echoing its language, to express a need for change and to reject complacency. In a final twist which heightens a reader’s sympathy for the children, Agee ends with the Lord’s Prayer where the petitioner presents himself or herself as a child, thereby placing the reader in a child’s situation and perspective in relation to authority. Agee effectively elides the distance between children in the text and readers by reminding presumably adult readers that in a religious context, they are children.

Smith invokes Christian commonplaces in *Killers of the Dream* through Paul’s Letter to the Corinthians, where Paul famously writes, "When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things" (1 Corinthians 13:11). The full quotation narrates a natural progression from childhood to adulthood and draws attention to the child performing the actions of thinking, talking and reasoning. Smith’s fragmented quotation suggests the stasis of childhood by interrupting the narrative of stages. However, the stasis that the quotation initially suggests about childhood is misleading as the quotation and the period it refers to remain to be completed. In order to transition out of the stasis of childhood and figurative childhood, southerners must act to change their habitual behaviors beginning with or by

returning to childhood. The chapter narrates the progression to spiritual maturity through empathy and reasoning as it prizes the Christian quality of “charity,” which is often rendered as “love” in modern translations but which could also be a synonym for human understanding as “charity” is not simply irrational feeling. Paul defines charity as a quality that “suffreth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; Rejoiceth not in iniquity but rejoiceth in the truth” (1 Corinthians 13: 4-6).

The difficulty is in nurturing this quality and in her closing paragraphs of *Killers of the Dream*, Smith suggests that it is the quality of charity that needs to be developed by children and nurtured by adults:

Religions were built by its light, poets’ minds shone in its brightness, political systems used its warmth to draw men closer together, and science examined it cautiously and “proved” it to be the essence of sanity, the seed of human growth. It may only be a bedtime story that men told themselves in their loneliness; it may be a lie: this sanctity of the human being, this importance of man the individual, this right of the child to grow[.] (252-253)

The individual and social rewards of developing this quality are clear as it would allow the southerner to unite the pieces of their segregated existence and order their experiences into developmental stages. Childhood and adulthood are currently hopelessly conflated as men tell themselves bedtime stories to ease their confusion and their pain. In order to resolve the confusion, the individual must take responsibility for “the burden of their own

evolution” (Smith 253). Like Agee, Smith uses this biblical passage to structure her text as the reference strongly reinforces the necessity for this course of action as a process that must be consistently engaged with from childhood onwards. At the end of *Killers of the Dream*, she recognizes the gradual improvement in southern society due to the tenacious efforts of certain individuals who “still see as if through a glass darkly, but they, at least, keep peering” (249).

Commonplaces about children in *Famous Men* and *Killers of the Dream* present them as real victims and as symbols of hope. Agee and Smith are influenced by Romantic perspectives about childhood innocence.<sup>8</sup> Smith’s assertion that “[e]ven its children knew that the South was in trouble” (25) presupposes Rousseau’s concept of childhood as naturally good and innocent. For Smith, this “goodness” does not mean idealized perfection but rather the absence of cruel, discriminatory social behaviors against other members of society which the child must be taught as s/he matures. Smith differentiates between acquired and natural behaviors:

In Europe, Sigmund Freud was already embattled by the fear and hatred of men who recognized too well the power of his findings but we had not heard of him in the South or in most of America. No one had begun to worry about the hidden terror in the unconscious; no one apparently guessed that children had a sex life though Stendhal had written his biography and Dostoevsky his novels and

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<sup>8</sup> In “Brilliance of a Fire: Innocence, Experience and the Theory of Childhood,” Robert A. Davis identifies innocence as the defining quality of Romantic ideas about childhood. Davis argues that childhood innocence has a longer critical and literary tradition than is frequently acknowledged but also states that there was a “decisive Romantic intervention,” promoting innocence as necessary characteristic of childhood (382).



Rousseau his confessions and the old Greek plays had been acted thousands of times in the Western world. (42)

Like Rousseau, who “inverted the assumptions of infant depravity, instead declaring adulthood corrupt and the social world a sad decline from natural innocence” (Sanchez-Eppler 39), Smith is proposing that children are intuitively more honest social actors and astute interpreters than adults. Similarly, Agee argues that “[c]hildren like figures of speech or are, if you like, natural symbolists and poets: being so, they see through frauds such as this so much the more readily” (265). Smith’s and Agee’s Romantic outlooks present the child’s unaffected social behaviors as essentially more honest and less deliberately cruel than adult behaviors which is why they return to childhood throughout *Killers of the Dream* and *Famous Men*: youth is a corrective model for the socially acquired actions of adults.

Children are vulnerable to the pressures of social practices, however, and frequently conform to social expectations, rather than resist them because resistance is difficult, requiring understanding and courage. They then become victims of their society’s restrictive practices. As a victim, the image of the child is powerfully affective. Karen Sanchez-Eppler observes, “[R]omantic celebrations of childhood were always shadowed with grim alternatives” as in William Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, where adults fail to protect children from damaging social situations (41). Agee, in particular, explores this darker aspect of childhood in the repeated images of fetuses in *Famous Men* and in the suggestions of childishness that he projects onto some of the tenants that he encounters. He remembers that a tenant’s face was “seemed and short as a fetus” and that he was “wandering in his motions like a little child” (Agee 31).

The stunted physical and psychological growth which make the tenant “like” a child signals the powerlessness and victimization of the rural poor in the unnatural prolongation of childhood (Agee 30,31). Smith expresses the sense of injury in less grotesque but equally clear images: “The childhood of southerners, white and colored, has been lived on trembling earth: let us accept this, and the hurt that comes from a realization of what it means to the human spirit and meant to me” (22).

The Romantic concept of childhood frequently translates images of the child into symbols of innocence. Therefore, as in *Famous Men* and *Killers of the Dream*, the relationship between the child as actual, documentable object and its suggestiveness as a symbol is close and complex. Romantic theories of symbolism drew figures or objects from everyday life and endowed them with metaphorical meanings. In the introduction to *Romanticism and the Object* (2009), Larry H. Peer notes how Romantic writers use objects to link everyday experiences to broader philosophical concerns. The children in *Killers of the Dreams* and *Famous Men* act as *object-symbols* that can address the contextual specificity of southern problems but which also draw on universal ideas about children and childhood. Peer observes that “Romantic theories of signification and symbol usage [...] insist upon the correlative, rather than oppositional, relationship of the marvelous and the realistic. Thus Romantic “allusiveness” as a semiotic strategy is significantly more complex and linked to the “real” world” (Peer 1). Agee and Smith use the child as an object-symbol in this way to create an intersection between southerners’ lived experiences and its presentation in literary texts. Smith and Agee frequently move between the literal presentation of the child and symbolic associations of children swiftly and without announcement. An object-symbol is similar to my concept of the

documentary icon because the child figure has an objective, contextual specificity and a subjective, metaphoric function in the text for the authors.

In their adaptation of this tradition of Romantic objectification and symbolism in their writing, Agee and Smith were clearly influenced by contemporary literary critics writing on the nature of Romantic symbolism. *Killers of the Dream*, in particular, references contemporary practitioners such as F.L. Lucas and Erich Kahler. Both write on the nature of symbolism as an epistemology. Lucas, a Cambridge academic, discusses the rejection of Romantic criticism by modernists, which he argues is also a rejection of principled, social engagement in favor of “stained-glass writing” (Smith 210; *Decline and Fall of the Romantic Ideal* 177). In *Decline and Fall of the Romantic Ideal*, Lucas connects the rejection of Romantic criticism and its interest in the intersection between symbolism and everyday life to the rise of totalitarianism, which is an extreme example of a restrictive society (Lucas 1-3). In connection to ideas of Romantic symbolism, Kahler contributes the concept of the symbol as a means of bridging division. Smith borrows the idea that “[t]he symbol originates in the split of existence, the confrontation and communication of an inner with an outer reality” from Kahler and his theories about the role of symbolism in society (Smith 14). Smith combines all these articulations about the Romantic symbol, the individual and societal theories to form her own hybrid, critical frame, which is most obvious in relation to children in *Killers of the Dream*.

The influences on Agee’s use of symbolism are harder to trace than Smith’s as his interests in literary criticism are not as clearly developed or stated. He was, however, a student of I.A. Richards at Harvard. Richards, while working at the University of Cambridge, developed the theory of Practical Criticism which became New Criticism in

the United States. Richards's work engages specifically with Coleridge's ideas of the imagination and perception in relation to symbolism. In his work, Richards engages with how social concerns and individual psychology shape a text. In the preface to *Principles of Literary Criticism*, Richards states that "[a] book is a machine to think with, but it need not, therefore, usurp the functions either of the bellows or the locomotive. This book might better be compared to a loom on which it is supposed to re-weave some raveled parts of our civilization" (vii). Richards emphasizes the importance of context: textual as well as the individual and social context of the interpreter.

In *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, Richards further demonstrates an interest in the relationships that readers construct between their own context and the texts which they read. It is in this text where Richards introduces the terms "tenor" and "vehicle" for discussions of metaphor, which, similar to the Romantic object-symbol, divide the parts of a metaphor into two: the "tenor" represents the symbolic associations given to the concrete object or "vehicle" (96). Like Smith and Agee, he returns to childhood to understand how the relationship between tenor and vehicle is constructed:

Last time I generalized, or stretched, the sense of the term metaphor – almost, you may think, to breaking point. I used it to cover all cases where a word, in Johnson's phrase, 'gives us two ideas for one,' where we compound different uses of the word into one, and speak of something as though it were another. And I took it further still to include, as metaphoric, those processes in which we perceive or think of or feel about one thing in terms of another – as when looking at a building it seems to have a face and to confront us with a peculiar expression. I want to insist that this sort of thing is normal in full perception and that study of

the growth of our perceptions (the animistic world of the child and so on) shows that it must be so. (116-117)

For Richards, the child's propensity to invest everyday objects with extra, metaphoric significance in order to understand their surroundings is a crucial part of their intellectual development and provides a model for productive interpretive strategies. This impulse to understand context is at the heart of literary metaphors, which perform the same action of imaginatively investing meaning in objects.

Universal forms, general principles and theories of epistemology relating to children can thus have dramatic literary effects when applied to a specific context. All these religious and cultural commonplaces had particular historical resonance during the Depression as the economic downturn constituted a social crisis in which children were considered as the "most vulnerable victims, both economically and psychologically" (Mintz 234).<sup>9</sup> These difficulties were not restricted to the severe hardships in the South as Steven Mintz observes in *Huck's Raft*:

There were widespread fears that the Depression had ignited a youth crisis. Books with such titles as *The Lost Generation* (1936) and *Youth – Millions Too Many* (1940) underscored the depths of the nation's youth problems. America's young were "discouraged, disgusted, sullen and bitter," and many worried that they, like their counterparts in Germany and Italy, were highly vulnerable to the lure of demagogues. (234)

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<sup>9</sup> *Report on the The Economic Conditions of the South* (41); Steven Mintz, "Coming of Age in the Great Depression" in *Huck's Raft*; many of the examples that Howard Zinn quotes in "Self-Help in Hard Times" in *A People's History of the United States* refer specifically to the effect of the Depression on children (388, 390, 393); Watkins (255-261).

Such fears had particular resonance within the South due to the region's acute poverty and racism. *Killers of the Dream* specifically engages with the threat of totalitarianism, either Fascism or Communism, and how it is a present danger "because in the strongest democracy on earth [young Southerners] were not free to live their ideals" (77). In this respect, Smith echoes Eleanor Roosevelt's earlier warning in 1934, when Roosevelt wrote, "I have moments of real terror when I think we may be losing this generation. We have got to bring these young people into the active life of the community and make them feel that they are necessary" (qtd. in Mintz 243). Similarly, in *Killers of the Dream* and *Famous Men*, the threat is twofold because the South's problems threatened individual children's lives but, as children represented the potential for the future, it also threatened the possibility for the economic and social improvement in the South. Limitations on children's development had enormous social consequences.

## CHAPTER 2

### JAMES AGEE'S "CURIOUS" WORK IN *LET US NOW PRAISE FAMOUS MEN*

In the foreword to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Walker Evans provides a portrait of James Agee: he "was a youthful-looking twenty-seven. I think he felt he was elaborately masked, but what you saw right away – alas for conspiracy – was a faint rubbing of Harvard and Exeter, a hint of family gentility, and a trace of romantic idealism. He could be taken for a likeable American young man, an above-average product of the Great Democracy from any part of the country. He didn't look much like a poet, an intellectual, an artist or a Christian, each of which he was" (v). Evans's verbal picture captures the biographical details which influence Agee's approach to his subject matter in *Famous Men*. It is youth-oriented, literary, artistic, philosophical, critical, socially-committed, Christian, idealistic and educated. All of these qualities are obvious throughout *Famous Men* but especially in Agee's presentation of children, the documentary icons which combine his intellectual-moral interests together. Through images of children, Agee articulates and frames his concerns about how the social environment inhibits individual development. The children exemplify the reasons for Agee's interest in the human condition as they are both victims and innocents. He emphasizes their victimization and their idealized qualities in the documentary icon of the child.

Agee incorporates documentary and figurative images of children as part of a rhetoric of growth to show how the tenants' environment progressively stunts their development from childhood onward. Children are physically and psychologically undeveloped and so are full of unrealized potential but this is threatened by their social environment. In order to emphasize the necessity for uninhibited growth, Agee introduces figurative language to the documentary genre because it reiterates and reinforces the documentary depictions in another mode. By including figurative representation, Agee differentiates *Famous Men* from other documentary texts. William Stott defines the documentary genre in *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* as “[t]hree basic techniques – direct quotation, case study, and firsthand (or participant) observation – describe the ways all written documentary works, the first two exemplifying the direct method of persuasion, and the last the vicarious” (143). *Famous Men* fulfills all these criteria but with significant alterations to its generic characteristics. Images of children, figurative as well as literal, effectively become case studies in *Famous Men* as they are images for examination. When Agee adopts the child's perspective, he is imaginatively situating himself in the bodies of the tenant children as a participant-observer. In so doing, he also demonstrates how the child's perspective becomes a metaphor for the human condition during the Depression as individuals struggle to understand their circumstances through direct observation.

In Agee's larger documentary project, the child's body and perspective is central to the extended metaphor of limited growth. Childhood becomes a privileged period when the individual is allowed more freedom in the use of their body and intellectual skills, than in later adulthood. Agee represents the inescapable, problematic physical and



mental effects of poverty on individuals in the South through the affective presentation of children's bodies and their perspective. His language frequently reflects children's sensory approach to their environment as well as their limited understanding of their situation, a strategy which gestures toward I.A. Richards's (one of Agee's Harvard professors) theories about language and its relation to epistemology and psychology. The image of the child becomes the focal point for these divergent influences, which are combined in complex metaphors in which the child's image becomes a multivalent symbol connecting to other symbols or objects. Agee frequently draws on Christian symbolism to dignify the tenant children and emphasize their vulnerability and their innocence.

In this chapter, I examine Agee's metaphors relating to children, looking at how they relate to the two modes of writing in *Famous Men*, documentary and figurative. I begin with the documentary descriptions which are the basis for Agee's metaphors. Children's bodies act as frames for Agee as their physical characteristics frequently dictate the images that Agee selects for comparison such as lamps, mirrors and globes, which reflect parts of the child's physiognomy while suggesting other symbolic meanings. In this respect, the child's body acts as a recurring symbol, an extended conceit providing a thematic structure for the text. I.A. Richards's division of metaphor into two parts, tenor and vehicle, fits Agee's compartmentalization of his metaphors where the vehicle is the child's body, a concrete object, and the tenors are variously innocence, integrity, sanctity, damage. The child is not the only vehicle within the metaphors; there are other objects which contribute to the tenors, specifically two recurring images, the mirror and the lamp. The significance of these objects to Agee's presentation of

childhood and the environmental conditions in the South may be explained by M.H. Abrams's work on metaphors of the mind in *The Mirror and the Lamp* where the mirror represents mimetic objectivity and the lamp romantic subjectivity. For Agee, juxtaposing the child with these images becomes another way of suggesting the tension between empirical symptoms of human degradation which the mirror reflects and the inherent value of the individual which the lamplight symbolizes. Agee associates the creation of metaphor with children and the ways in which children interpret their environment. He frequently adopts a child's perspective in the narrative to recreate the quality of a child's commitment and engagement to what s/he sees.<sup>10</sup>

Agee creates collages of images and their symbolic qualities together. As one critic noted, "Agee was essentially a modeler, in the sculptural sense of that term, building up each image by adding detail upon detail, until he had achieved an almost baroque, many-faceted surface of multiple nuances" (qtd. in Stott 266). In these metaphoric collages, Agee is specifically fixated on the ways in which the children's experiences weaken their physical frames and their intellects. He observes and documents the tenant children's impotent, and progressively damaged, bodies. He then uses their bodies as the basis for metaphors which exalt the physical form for its potential capabilities, especially its natural creative capacities, and for its inherent human value. However, Agee's construction of the metaphors undermines the body's integrity, just as the tenants' environment undermines their physical well-being. He creates this effect in his metaphors through multiple comparisons to other objects, many of which threaten

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<sup>10</sup> As I have already suggested in my introduction, Agee's construction of metaphor is deeply indebted to I.A. Richards's work on language and epistemology: firstly, because metaphor is at the basis of Richards's theory; secondly, because children are seen as gifted exponents of metaphoric association.

present or imminent damage to the child's body. Even where the objects suggest a positive quality about the child, the successive destruction of images in the metaphor detracts from the child's physical integrity.

Agee's presentation of children in *Famous Men*, therefore, has an antagonistic dynamic: it accurately represents how the tenants' poverty denatures the human frame and it figuratively exalts the human form. In this respect, the figure of the child is powerfully affective because it is vulnerable, balanced between hope and despair, although the outcome for the children Agee writes about is an adulthood characterized by confusion and helplessness, which he presents as involuntarily perpetuated childishness. Agee's metaphors with children reinforce limitations and opportunities of childhood as a developmental stage and metaphorical concept. As he explains,

Certainly, beyond denial, we, human beings, at our best are scarcely entered into the post-diaper stage of our development, and it is common sense to treat ourselves as what we are, and it would be as harmful and criminal as it would be foolish to treat ourselves as what we aren't. But it would be bright if the treatment caused us consistently to reach out and grow: you don't clamber out of infantilism by retreating, or staying, or being ordered to retreat, into what any average fool can see is the bedwetting stage. (221)

Agee suggests that childhood should be valued as a metaphorical and biological stage of development but that neither should continue indefinitely. Children possess intellectual abilities as demonstrated by their committed engagement with their environment that, if supported, would benefit them and their society. Agee returns repeatedly to images of

children and the child's perspective in order to theorize how to escape the limitations of childhood by taking full advantage of its comparative freedoms and opportunities.

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Agee's ideas of childhood and the danger of its perpetuation are gender specific. Although he emphasizes how poverty is disabling for both genders, it manifests itself in different ways. Girls' poverty makes them vulnerable to assumptions about their sexual precocity and availability. Agee's presentation of the effects of poverty on male children is more explicitly negative and it becomes more so if their childishness is perpetuated. Early in *Famous Men*, Agee recalls encountering a family of tenants where one of the men in the family is mentally disabled. Agee describes the man who

might have been fifty in appearance, yet, through a particular kind of delicateness upon his hands, and hair, and skin – they were almost infantine – I was sure he was still young, hardly out of his twenties, though again the face was seamed and short as a fetus. This man, small-built and heavy jointed, and wandering in his motions like a little child, had the thorny beard of a cartoon Bolshevik, but suggested rather a hopelessly deranged and weeping prophet[.] (31)

It is the juxtaposition of the physical details of different ages – infant, child, young man, old man – which is grotesque. When Agee observes that the man is treated by his relatives like “a dog masturbating on a caller,” he shows the man's sexualization to be animalistic and socially problematic (32). The man appears to inspire some degree of protectiveness in Agee as he describes his attempts to interact with him: “I took [the magazine] and thanked him very much, looking and smiling into his earnest eyes, and he

stayed at my side like a child, watching me affectionately while I talked to them” (33). However, Agee views his childishness and his sexuality together as grotesquely repugnant because it signals a lack of physical or mental control and, therefore, the impossibility of self-determination.

Agee’s physical descriptions of the tenant children gesture toward the imminent damage threatening their health and youth:

the tough little body of Junior, hardskinned and gritty, the feet crusted with sores; and the milky and strengthless littler body of Burt whose veins are so bright in his temples; and the shriveled and hopeless, most pitiful body of Squinchy, which will not grow [...] (52)

Agee describes the Gudger boys as suffering the physical effects of their poverty and hard labor. His evidence is the parts of their bodies which undermine their general health: Junior’s lacerated feet, Burt’s veins which signify malnutrition because of the pallor of his skin, and most damningly Squinchy’s entire physical self. Each child is at a different stage of childhood as signified by the adjectives which arrange their bodies in order of age: Junior is “little” but Burt is “littler” and “milky” because he is still a toddler. Agee pairs these adjectives which suggest the boys’ youth with others which contradict expectations of how they should appear at these developmental stages. Junior’s body is “tough,” “hardskinned” and “gritty,” surprising adjectives to describe an eight-year-old boy; Burt is “strengthless” and his “milky”-ness while it suggests his recent babyhood, also signifies poor health. It is Squinchy, however, whose body is “shriveled” and “pitiful”, who most forcibly contradicts a reader’s expectations about how a baby of

twenty-months should appear as these adjectives would be more suitable for the aged. As in Agee's description of the tenant man, the juxtaposition of ages seems unnatural and grotesque.

Louise, the eldest child, seems to be an exception to the portrait of children's physical suffering. Agee does not detail any seriously disfiguring signs of physical pain; instead, he documents her budding sexuality, which is "green" and "lovely" (52). Agee's gives similarly aestheticized descriptions of other girls and young women in the text. He only explicitly notes and condemns signs of damage to the child's body and signs of perpetuated childhood in his male subjects. By contrast, he appears to appreciate the perpetuated childhood of girls and women as it inspires his protective instincts. This perspective includes Louise's eighteen-year-old aunt, Emma, who Agee admits that "[he] very strongly, as something steadier than an 'impulse,' wanted in answer to take her large body in [his] arms and smooth the damp hair back from her forehead and to kiss and comfort and shelter like a child" (58). Emma and Louise's childlike vulnerability is sexually appealing to Agee as their male relatives' vulnerability is not. Even when Agee introduces negative aspects of their childishness it is counterbalanced by an appreciation for their vulnerable femininity; for example, his presentation of Emma as "a young queen of a child's magic story who throughout has been coarsened by peasant and earth living and work, and that of her eyes and her demeanor, too, kind, not fully formed, resolute, bewildered, and sad," acknowledges the wear and tear of life on Emma's body but the details become part of an aestheticized portrait where Emma is a heroine in Agee's fantasy (53). He finds her childishness is sexually appealing and clearly laments its future destruction: "Emma is rather a big child, sexual beyond propriety to its years than a

young woman; and this can be seen in a kind of dimness of definition in her features, her skin, and the shape of her body, which will be lost in a few more years” (53).

Agee heightens the sense of Louise and Emma’s tragic circumstances but diminishes or omits any grotesque physical descriptions. It is possible but unlikely that Emma and Louise’s bodies are less physically marked by poverty than their male relatives’; however, in his description of the Woods’ children, Agee shows a similar fascination with Emma’s eight-year-old step-sister’s latent sexuality: “the children sleep; Pearl, pale, adenoidal, already erotic; and Thomas like a dance, frog-legged, his fists in his eyes; and Ellen, like a baby, fish-mouthed between her enormous cheeks” (79). Thomas, like his relatives Junior, Burt and Squinchy, is described in grotesque adjectives but Pearl is not. Conversely, however, Agee’s approach to childish bodies only exacerbates the sense of their physical vulnerability which now has threatening sexual undertones. Agee openly admits his attraction to Emma and his detailed description of Louise’s ten-year-old body adopts a similar tone:

the body of Emma, [Annie Mae’s] sister, strong, thick and wide, tall, the breasts set wide and high, shallow and round, not yet those of a full woman, the legs long and thick and strong; and Louise’s green lovely body, the dim breasts faintly blown between wide shoulders, the thighs long, clean and light in their line from hip to knee, the head back steep and silent to the floor, the chin highest, and the white shift up to her divided thighs [.] (52)

Agee gives an eroticized survey of Emma and Louise’s prone bodies in itemized descriptions that verbally parallel each other as he notes their wide shoulders, still-

developing breasts and long legs. Agee's intrusive physical description is relevant to Emma's and Louise's poverty because their poverty forces the family and their guest to live in close proximity in a small, three-roomed house, giving Agee the opportunity to observe them with greater physical intimacy. In spite of the gendered differences in how poverty marks the tenants' bodies, their childish physicality and its sexualization makes them vulnerable. Agee finds such vulnerability attractive in girls and women but not in boys and men.

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These figures, marked by childishness in all the different stages of human development, are the inspiration for the images in Agee's metaphors, which bridge the gap between the figurative and documentary. Their physical vulnerabilities and the reasons for it become part of the metaphor's meaning. For example, in a second comparison of Emma and her niece, Agee introduces images that emphasize their fragile innocence and integrity. Emma is "childless still, and dim, soft as a bloomed moon, and still in health, who emanates some disordering or witless violation: and the still inviolate, lyric body of a child, very much of the earth, yet drawn into that short and seraphic phase of what seems unearthliness which it will so soon lose" (Agee 64). In the first comparison, Emma becomes like the moon. Her physical curves suggesting its fullness and circular unity but like the moon, which waxes and wanes, Emma is on the point of diminishing, losing her literal and symbolic wholeness because of her impoverished life and her husband's sexual jealousy which limits her literally and figuratively. Louise's body, by contrast, is "inviolate;" it is not yet marked by adverse physical experiences, including sexual experiences. Physically and metaphorically, Louise's body temporarily



retains a childlike integrity and its earthly reality is also still absolutely, unequivocally ideal. Consequently, her body is more suitable for Agee's metaphor. Agee poetically compares Emma's body to another object as part of a simile but he makes Louise's body indivisible from the metaphor's symbolism: hers is a "lyric body," simultaneously a figure based on documentation and a symbol of childhood innocence.

Louise becomes a documentary icon because her image intersects the documentary and the figurative: it is a portrait based on empirical, physical details but it also has symbolic qualities, making her a representative figure. In discussing Agee's metaphors, I.A. Richards's terms, tenor and vehicle, become useful. Richards explains that metaphor describes the whole figure of speech in which the concrete object is the vehicle and the thought or concept which the vehicle expresses is the tenor (*The Philosophy of Rhetoric* 96-97). Agee's image of the child is a vehicle in a double sense because it is a documentary and figurative image; for instance, when he is describing Louise's body, he is detailing her individual form and also outlining in more general terms a child's body. The tenor in this instance is the suggestion of innocence and integrity that Louise, like other children, possesses. In this respect, Agee is adapting Richards's theory because he is insisting on contextual specificity. Richards specifies that

[t]he words 'figure' and 'image' are especially and additionally misleading [in metaphor]. They both sometimes stand for the whole double unit and sometimes for one member of it, the vehicle, as opposed to the other. But in addition they bring in a confusion with the sense in which an image is a copy or revival of a sense-perception of some sort, and so have made rhetoricians think that a figure of speech, an image, or imaginative comparison, must have something to do with the

presence of images, in this other sense, in the mind's eye or the mind's ear. But, of course, it need not. (*The Philosophy of Rhetoric* 98)

For Agee, the child as a symbol does refer to the existence of real, specific children as his writing and Evans's photographs substantiate. He is representing an objective reality but also investing his documentation with symbolic significance. Furthermore, his symbolism is indebted to commonplaces about children and their experience of childhood, even though it frequently contradicts them. Richards's theory refers to exclusively literary works without a documentary purpose. *Famous Men* contradicts this theory in making the documentary images necessary to the formation of metaphors.

As the metaphors involving Emma and Louise indicate, certain bodies are more easily assimilated into metaphor. Agee suggests that the more childlike the human figure, the more easily it can be translated into a symbol because it suggests the child's universal, inherent characteristics more strongly. Consequently, the fetus is the human form that he refers to most in his metaphors. In this developmental stage Agee is able to compare the physical characteristics of the child to other objects/vehicles to cite multiple concepts commonly associated with childhood. The metaphors involving fetuses are the most complex in the text as images are superimposed over other images, reflecting the numerous possibilities for the child's physical development through the multiplicity of possible interpretations; for example, in one such complex metaphor, Agee moves through a number of contrasting images:

In this globe, and in this oil that is clear and light as water, and reminding me of creatures and things once alive which I have seen suspended in jars in a

frightening smell of alcohol-serpents, tapeworms, toads, embryos, all drained to one tan pallor of absolute death; and also of the serene, scarved flowers in untroubled wombs (and pale-tanned too, flaccid, and in the stench of exhibited death, those children of fury, patience and love which stand in the dishonors of accepted fame, and of the murdering of museum staring). (45)

Agee is initially meditating on the lamp in front of him. The shape of the lamp suggests both glass beaker and womb while the oil suggests preservative liquid and amniotic fluid. The objects contained in the lamp are suspended for scientific examination and the child's form is equated with the animalistic images of "alcohol-serpents, tapeworms, toads." Agee then juxtaposes the images of fetuses in jars, where the child's body is exposed for examination, with still-developing, in-utero fetuses, which he imagines as flowers. The flowers' organic growth is unimpeded and protected. The juxtaposition of the two images suggests physical fragility, victimization and the arbitrariness of circumstance: some fetuses are allowed to develop undisturbed (the "flowers" allowed to grow) while others are not. There are two tenors suggested by these images: the promise of growth and the threat of premature death. The child's form appears in relation to both tenors as the child faces both fates. Even when the fetus is allowed to develop, Agee's final image of the metaphor where the fetus has now developed into a child suggests that the child's weakened, damaged body still stands in danger of involuntary scientific exposure and cataloging, which figuratively, if not actually, is a kind of death. The tenors in this metaphor express Agee's fear about the ways in which damaged and underprivileged bodies are used and to what ends. They also suggest how such inhumane

scientific processes impede the more positive outcomes of natural and unimpeded growth.

The image of the child provides a connection to their physical experiences. Agee uses symbols as points of connection and to suggest the nature of the connection. In “Colon,” Agee addresses the reader and outlines the challenge to “screen off all mysteries of our comminglings – all these, all such, must be deferred – and must be here set in such regard as I can the sorry and brutal infuriate yet beautiful structures of the living which is upon each of you daily: and this in the cleanest terms I can learn to specify: must mediate, must attempt to record, your warm weird human lives each in relation to its world” (87). Agee is mediating between multiple contexts, which is why the fetus or embryo is so useful because its individual physicality and personality are not fully formed, making it easily malleable for different contexts and meanings. Therefore, in the fetus or embryo, Agee finds a universal human form, “a brutal infuriate yet beautiful structure,” which represents great, untapped potential because it has yet to develop physically or intellectually. The image of the embryo provides a visual point of connection in subsequent metaphors. Agee repeats its formal structure to join together parallel contexts. In one of the self-consciously metafictional moments of *Famous Men*, he imagines the text constructed as a series of globes:

I might suggest, its structure should be globular: or should be eighteen or twenty intersected spheres, the interlocking of bubbles on the face of a stream; one of these globes is each of you.

The heart, nerve, center of each of these, is an individual human life.

We should first meditate and establish its ancient, then more recent its spreaded and more local history and situation: how it is a child of the substance and bowels of the stars and of all space[.] (89)

Agee progressively transforms the image from the general outline of a globe to a specific reader, then back to an unspecified but individual life, then to the child's body which is a particular human life stage. As a counterpoint to this progress, the pronouns in the passage manage the dynamic of specific and general in a different order as the narrative voice moves from "I" to impersonal passive statement to "you" to "we". In this way, Agee moves quickly between the subjective and objective perspective before returning to an inclusive subjectivity. Here, the pronouns connect the reader to an image which they already recognize and empathize with as it suggests the human form. The image's easy structural translation from one form to another and from one context to another makes it a symbol with a universal application.

By figuratively returning to the embryonic stage, Agee connects the reader to the tenants and their environment. He emphasizes that the only difference between the tenants and the reader is "circumstance, physical and mental" (89). As a result, the likely damage and destruction that the tenants face in their lives has a more powerful emotional effect for the reader because, theoretically, the reader could be in that situation and only chance has made his or her fate different. Agee continues to align the reader's body with the tenants, talking about the fertilized embryo as "a crucifixion of cell and whiplashed sperm: our center, our nerve we spoke of; in this instant already his globe is rounded upon him and is his prison, which might have been his kingdom" (90). The embryo's senses are also the reader's and they share a common "center" in this image. However, as

the embryo develops its physical form, it separates from the reader, becoming progressively distant as it develops physically. When the body gains physical definition, Agee begins once again to refer specifically to tenant children with statements such as the child “is made for work” (90) and has “poor parents who so earnestly wish him well” (91). Consequently, within this context the embryo’s circumference, which signifies the boundaries of the child’s body, becomes as limiting as a prison. Progressively, the limits of the child’s body and the limitations of his life are one and the same: “This creature, this center, soul nerve, see he is now born, and I have said, how he is globed round, with what shall make and harm him: what are the constituents of this globe?” (92). Agee suggests that embodiment sentences the individual to a narrow and restricted life, not a “kingdom” full of opportunity. Through the embryonic images, Agee suggests the original physical similarity between the reader and the tenants. While these experiences soon diverge, Agee encourages the reader to empathize with the difficulties of the tenants’ lives based on the empirical reality of their common humanity.

As the child’s body ages, empathizing with the tenants’ situation gets increasingly difficult because the tenants’ lives denature their bodies, dehumanizing them. Metaphors with images of older children fulfill the violence threatened in metaphors about embryos and fetuses, progressively splitting the body into pieces. Agee asks,

So that 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:

these are matters too dreadful and fortitudes too gigantic to meditate long and not forever to worship [...] (51)

The images are on the point of splintering under the pressure of existence. While the spectacle is aesthetically beautiful, it is also clearly painful as the imagined weight of the “burden” figuratively impedes the child’s breathing. By specifying “breathing” rather than “being,” Agee suggests the child’s body more particularly and intimately but the image is overwhelmed by the metaphor’s crushing movement. The child appears to be slowly starved of breath by the weight of the burden but still endures. Agee states that the weight grows over time, unlike the other images, signifying the accumulative denaturing process. Although Agee appears to be worshipping the human form in this metaphor, the metaphor’s movement breaks the child’s body into fragments of nothing.

As part of Agee’s rhetoric of growth, the fetus or embryo is particularly affective because it is every human individual’s starting point. The embryo and fetus must develop, physically and psychologically. Through comparison to everyday objects such as lamps and mirrors, Agee can document the role that social conditions and individual’s environment play in its development in his metaphors. In this way, he creates a pattern of signification. The mirror and the lamp in relation to the child’s image signify two possible intellectual approaches to children and their environment: objectively reflective and subjectively projective. Lamps have two key physical attributes in this text: they are always globes and have the potential to create light, even if they are unlit. As M.H. Abrams notes in *The Mirror and The Lamp*, the lamp frequently symbolizes poetic expression and subjectivity as opposed to mimetic objectivity which is represented by

mirrors. When the image of the lamp is lit, it suggests vibrant inner life as becomes evident when Agee imaginatively addresses Louise Gudger:

your skin was a special quiet glowing gold color, which can never come upon the skin of nicely made little girls in towns and cities, but only to those who came straight out of the earth and are continually upon it in the shining sun, active and sweating, and toughening into work that has already made your clear ten-year-old mouth resolute and unquestioning of personal desire: your skin shines like a sober lamp in outdoor noon in all this whiteness; your feet and legs are bare, they were washed, but already they carry the fine orange pollen of the clay[.] (Agee 324)

Louise is luminous; although Agee suggests that this is in spite of the presence of life's hardships which figuratively dim her potential to "sober." The brilliance of her skin, although Agee finds it beautiful, is due to strenuous outdoor work which has tanned it to gold. While the comparison of Louise to a lamp outlines her physical form, it also signifies Agee's regard for her. His description of Louise's body acts as a blazon, which expresses his feelings about her personality as well as her physicality. The vehicle for these feelings is not just her body, however, but also the light he metaphorically associates with it; the tenor is Agee's admiration of Louise's youth, courage, integrity and energy. Louise's vibrant potential seems opposed to the metaphor of the fetus and the lamp quoted above where Agee sees the image of the fetus from the lamp. However, that lamp is unlit. It too contains life or the potential for life and in staring into it, Agee begins his meditation about life and death.



The metaphor of lamplight allows Agee to draw closer to his subjects and express his feelings in relation to them. By contrast, the figure of the mirror enlarges the distance between Agee and the object he is observing. When Agee snoops through the Gudgers' house, he takes himself to task for his intrusive observation of the tenants which he compares to his adolescent spying in his grandfather's house (120). He uses the image of the mirror to represent to himself the violence of what he is doing: "at length I took off all my clothes, lay along the cold counterpanes of every bed, planted my obscenities in the cold hearts of every mirror in foreknowledge [...] I permitted nothing to escape the fingering of my senses nor the insulting of the cold reptilian fury of the terror of lone desire which was upon me" (120-121). The mirror symbolizes Agee's self-reflexive hatred in this moment for his unfeeling trespasses into the tenants' lives.

The child is frequently associated with the mirror as well as with the lamp. However, it is a less positive association because the mirror image can only be an impassive reflection of the environment, it is not expressive. Therefore, metaphorically, mirror images are less dynamic than the lamplight, which symbolically illuminates the surroundings. As Agee wishes to present the child as both impressionable and expressive, they are associated with both images to suggest their greater potential for healthy growth. For Agee, the image of the mirror in isolation signifies a terrifying split from lived experience. It prompts the realization that something is wrong. He uses it present the adult tenants' broken body and to communicate the tenant's horrified reaction to their image: "even though the mercy of nature has hardened your flesh and has anesthetized your nerves and your powers of reflection and of imagination, yet reaches in time the brain and the more mirror-like nerves, and thereby is redoubled upon itself much more

powerfully than before” (Agee 300-301). The image of the mirror endlessly repeats and magnifies the tenants’ perception of their broken body. Agee connects the mirror’s reflective action to the brain and “mirror-like nerves,” making them unfeeling, clinical instruments exposing the body to view. Mirrors signify Agee’s and the tenants’ realization but simultaneously their powerlessness to act. Realistic reflection contrasts with the individual’s artistic license to creatively change their situation to suit themselves as reflection represents past or present circumstances.

The two images, the mirror and lamp, relate to a literary tradition of symbolism but model two radically different intellectual approaches: reflective, impressionable documentation and projective, associative expression. *Famous Men*’s composition and publication predates *The Mirror and the Lamp* so Abrams’s theory does not directly influence Agee but Abrams’s categorization of epistemology according to symbol is illuminating because it provides two metaphors for ways of seeing. The reflective mode records and relays information but does not alter or adapt it. It tries to replicate the form of the original as accurately as possible. The expressive mode is less bound by realism and more focused on articulating feelings, concepts and ideas to others. As M.H. Abrams notes,

The change from imitation to expression, and from the mirror to the fountain, the lamp, and related analogues, was not an isolated phenomenon. It was an integral part of a corresponding change in popular epistemology – that is, in the concept of the role played by the mind in perception which was current among romantic poets and critics. And the movement from eighteenth- to early nineteenth-century schemes of

the mind and its place in nature is indicated by a mutation of metaphors almost exactly parallel to that in contemporary discussions of the nature of art. (Abrams 57)

Agee's inclusion of both images in *Famous Men* points to his deliberate conflation of documentary and metaphoric writing. The extreme documentary mode is symbolized by the mirror; details are recorded and re-presented in another form or medium.

Documentary writing must be realistic and must replicate the narrator's observation. The extreme figurative mode is symbolized by the lamp, which expresses the individual's reaction to an object or situation. Within the metaphors, the symbols signal which mode of representation Agee is using predominantly. So while Agee rejects the mirror's figurative violence, he also rejects the absolute expressive subjectivity of the lamp. For the most part, he usually avoids either one's most extreme form.

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The child's body in all its forms is Agee's entry point into the tenants' world, which is why children are subjects for documentary writing and metaphor in *Famous Men*. Additionally, children's bodies determine the narrative perspective and symbolize the qualities of that perspective such as attentiveness and committed engagement to life. Agee adopts their perspective as his authorial stance, describing his approach as "adolescent" (272) and presenting himself as an author with a "[b]ad case of infantilism" (339) because he contends that interpretive writing and social criticism will prompt social and political change. Agee returns to his own childhood memories in *Famous Men* to highlight how children pay close attention to their surroundings to a degree which many adults do not. He remembers his own juxtaposition of himself and the external world: "I,

this eleven-year-old, male, half-shaped child, pressing between the sharp hip bone and the floor my erection, and, thinking and imagining what I was able of the world and its people and my grief and hunger and boredom” (335). Through childhood memories, Agee deepens his involvement with his subject matter. He suggests that, while the child immerses themselves in their surroundings, they never divorce themselves from their own physicality, marrying their consciousness of the world with their own self-consciousness of their body. He identifies so strongly with the child’s approach to their environment that Agee writes early drafts of *Famous Men* “into a school-child’s composition book,” a detail which he includes in the final printed, published version (44).

Agee’s point is that children are particularly receptive to their surroundings and perceptive about themselves, which is why he frequently imagines himself as a child. The child’s gaze is even compared to documentary and spying equipment. Agee describes Squinchy Gudger, the twenty-month-old baby, as a periscope, orienting himself by his external surroundings. He watches the world from his mother’s arms, “his knees locked simian across her, his light hands at her neck, and his erected head, hooded with night, next hers, swiveled mildly upon the world’s globe, a periscope” (119). Squinchy is too young to retain much of the information that he acquires. By contrast when Agee imaginatively presents Louise Gudger’s estimation of her life, he compares her to a photograph, saying “the child, the photographic plate, receiving: These are women, I am a woman, I am not a child any more, I am undressing with women, and this is how women are, and how they talk” (64). Louise can retain the information that she is receiving and try to remake herself in the image of the women she is looking at. The children’s association with the equipment that Agee and Evans use recalls Agee’s

accusation in the list of “Persons and Places” that he is “a spy” and Evans is a “counter spy” (np.). Like Agee, the child is attempting to take in as much information as possible to make sense of the world of which they are a part. They are the most diligent observers in *Famous Men* because they are watching from the sidelines: Louise is in the process of inserting herself into the adult world but she has not yet been fully inducted; Squinchy’s physical engagement determined by his parent.

Children’s attempts to rationalize their environment reflect Agee’s own process regarding documentary description and metaphor as they try to assemble the pieces of information available to them to create a coherent picture. Agee paraphrases their efforts and exposes his own approach in his description of the tenants’ children:

These children, still in the tenderness of their lives, who will draw their future remembrance, and their future sorrow, from this place: and the strangers, animals: for work, for death, for food: and the scant crops: doing their duty the best they can, like temperless and feeble-minded children: rest now, between the wrenchings of the sun. (69)

Agee imagines the children examining the components of their surroundings and connecting themselves to the objects. They read their environment like a text, recognizing how these objects will determine their lives. Significantly for Agee’s rhetoric of growth in *Famous Men*, the children’s thought process is circular: their present experiences negatively determine their future memories and feelings. Agee suggests that, literally and figuratively, they will remain in the same place because the effects of their environment will force them to remain “like temperless and feeble-minded” children. Children’s

natural intellectual abilities in this instance allow them to interpret but not to creatively adapt either themselves or their situation as much as Agee can. Agee's interpretive abilities here diverge from the child's as his more privileged experiences have enabled him to capitalize on his imagination and so he can better express his observations and his opinion on them. The tenant children remain caught in reflections about their environment and cannot act or create.

Agee argues that what the tenant children lack is a decent education which would nurture their natural abilities. In the section on education, he criticizes the teaching the children receive for its crippling effects, where

no attempt [is] made to clarify or even slightly to relieve the situation between the white and negro races, far less to explain the sources, no attempt to clarify psychological situations in the individual, in his family, or in his world, no attempt to get beneath and to revise those 'ethical' and 'social' pressures and beliefs in which even a young a child is trapped[.] (258).

It is a damning accusation of practical and moral failure. The adults who devise educational curricula avoid the subjects which matter most to the tenant children such as segregation, economic disparity and politics. School courses avoid content that would specifically address the children's problematic situation and equip them to deal with it. Worse still, Agee alleges that educators frustrate the child's abilities to engage with these problems because

no attempt, beyond the most nominal, [is made] to interest a child in using or in discovering his senses and judgment, no attempt to counteract the paralytic

quality inherent in ‘authority,’ no attempt beyond the most nominal and stifling to awaken, to protect, or to ‘guide’ the sense of investigation, the sense of joy, the sense of beauty, no attempt to clarify spoken and written words whose power of deceit even at the simplest is vertiginous[.] (258)

Education intellectually disables the children, preventing critical engagement with the difficulties of their lives and trapping them. Here is a psychological violation to match the images of physical destruction in his metaphors.

The sabotage of the tenant children’s intellectual skills, therefore, becomes symptomatic of a wider social problem because if the child’s perspective represents a particularly committed, ethical engagement with the social environment, then logically its destruction has profound consequences for society. For Agee, the child’s gaze embodies and signifies

[t]he ability to try to understand existence, the ability to try to recognize the wonder and responsibility of one’s own existence, the ability to know even fractionally the almost annihilating beauty, ambiguity, darkness, and horror which swarm every instant of every consciousness, the ability to try to accept, or the ability to try to defend one’s self, or the ability to dare to try to assist others; all such as these, of which most human beings are cheated of their potentials, are, in most of those who even begin to discern or wish for them[.] (270)

The child’s perspective is powerfully redemptive because viewing the surrounding environment through the frame of childhood can revise established viewpoints based on empirical stimuli. Agee suggests that children instinctively understand the value of

reading and analyzing empirical data. Their approach to their observations is always associative and relational. Using information as the basis for action makes the children adept actors and mediators: they demonstrate how to adapt to their environment or how to change the environment to enable their development. However, there are limitations to children's abilities and they cannot develop them or practice them independently of societal support. Neglecting children's efforts, irrevocably damages them and their ability to positively contribute to their society. As Richards notes, "[W]e all live, and speak, only through our eye for resemblances. Without it we should perish early. Though some may have better eyes than others, the differences between them are in degree only and may be remedied, certainly in some measure, as other differences are, by the right kinds of teaching and study" (*The Philosophy of Rhetoric* 89-90). Agee identifies as problem in southern society the fact that children's natural capacities are left uncultivated and children are therefore forced to conform to pre-existing systems of practice and belief.

Insofar that *Famous Men* has a thesis (and Agee strenuously denies that it does), this is it: the failure of education (institutional, social, parental) to nurture children destroys their chance to develop their skills and progress to a healthy, mature adulthood. In Agee's words:

I am not trying to lay out a thesis, far less to substantiate or to solve. I do not consider myself qualified. I know only that murder is being done, against nearly every individual in the planet, and that there are dimensions and correlations of cure which not only are not being used but appear to be scarcely considered or suspected. I know there is cure, even now available, if only it were available, in science and in the fear and joy of God. (271)



By identifying the societal neglect as well as pressure to conform and condemning it within the text of *Famous Men*, Agee posits the revolutionary possibility of improvement. Even if change is currently possible only in the text itself, Agee foresees the opportunity for change and enacts it through documentary and figurative presentation. In this respect, he is adopting and extending the epistemological theories that he learned from Richards, who proposes “[t]he theory of interpretation is obviously a branch of biology – a branch that has not grown very far or very healthily yet” (*The Philosophy of Rhetoric* 12). To continue the metaphor of organic growth running throughout *Famous Men*, the children’s social restrictions act as a blight stunting their growth. In *Famous Men*, the child literally and figuratively embodies how humans interact negatively and positively with their environment.

Considering his ambitions, it is not surprising that Agee anticipates his own failure to prompt change through his writing. From the beginning, he doubts that the conditions exist where a reader would act on his observations. In the preface, he accuses the reader of willful refusal to make connections and identify with the human subjects of *Famous Men*, apostrophizing that “you are too much for them” (11). Agee fears another act of disablement and a failure to impress the reader with the gravity of the situation. For this reason, metaphor becomes so vitally important to his documentary presentation because it presents familiar objects but chaotically disordered so that the reader is forced to make sense of what is in front of them. If he can provisionally create the circumstances where readers might identify with the tenants, then he stands a chance of influencing them. It is in language and its images that Agee places his hope. Richards writes,

A 'command of metaphor' – a command of the interpretation of metaphors – can go deeper still into the world that we make for ourselves to live in. The psychoanalysts have shown us with their discussions of 'transference' – another name for metaphor – how constantly modes of regarding, of loving, of acting, that have developed with one set of things or people, are shifted to another. They have shown us chiefly the pathology of these transferences, cases where the vehicle – the borrowed attitude, the parental fixation, say – tyrannizes over the new situation, the tenor, and behavior is inappropriate. The victim is unable to see the new person except in terms of the old passion and its accidents. He reads the situation only in terms of the figure, the archetypal image, the image, the vehicle. But in healthy growth, tenor and vehicle – the new human relationship and the family constellation – co-operate freely; and the resultant behavior derives in due measure from both. (*The Philosophy of Rhetoric* 135-136)

For Agee, the difficulty of metaphor in social criticism is that it can only suggest social action, it cannot demand it. Agee theorizes how children might develop into mature adults through education and action but he does not represent the fulfillment of this potential. As a result, children's images and their viewpoint are stuck in this stage of development and cannot progress further.

## CHAPTER 3

### PLAY ACTING AND ARRESTED DEVELOPMENT IN LILLIAN SMITH'S *KILLERS OF THE DREAM*

While Agee is obsessed by the threat of perpetual childhood, Smith acknowledges this danger in *Killers of the Dream* but writes to prevent the childishness that makes adult southerners so vulnerable to and accepting of exploitation. Figures of children in *Famous Men* emphasize stasis and decay whereas Smith's images of children suggest action and growth. Children in Smith's text are capable of playing, acting and moving within the metaphors, symbols and allegories she creates. In *Famous Men*, the images of children in figurative language are two-dimensional figures and the only movement is from one static image to another. In *Killers of the Dream*, the figure of the child changes from the two-dimensional, visual symbol to symbolic actor. A child actor performs within the social situation modeling different outcomes, thereby powerfully challenging the current social situation by suggesting alternative patterns of behavior with different consequences for the future. In this role, the child remains a documentable figure drawn from everyday southern life, but his or her actions become symbolic of the more equitable future Smith envisions.

Understanding Smith's presentation of children as symbolic as well as documentary is essential to understanding her argument about the damage done by "sin, sex and segregation" in southern communities and the response required to counteract it (94). *Killers of the Dream* is as symbolic as it is documentary because Smith connects

the two, investing the everyday with significance. She challenges readers of *Killers of the Dream* by stating:

We cannot get along without symbols, it would be unthinkable. But they are full of strange power and can destroy us quickly when used improperly – as the Germans’ experience with them demonstrated. They need to be handled as carefully as nuclear energy and the rules for doing so should be learned by all. Symbols should be kept in their place; they should not be mixed with facts and then treated as though they are symbols, for facts have their place, too. It is the merging and the mixing that causes most of the trouble. (244)

Citing the historical events in Nazi Germany provides a sobering point of connection between symbolism as an artistic practice and recent political events. Smith throws down the gauntlet to critics and authors, insisting that symbolism is a moral question; she compares its potential to the destructive power of nuclear energy. Smith relies on a number of images to illustrate how symbolism functions. In *Killers of the Dream*, the most important of these images is the human actor and more specifically, the child.

The child in *Killers of the Dream* is a real figure, a symbolic actor and a teaching model; each state or function is linked in the text. Structurally, the different parts of the child’s image act have three interconnected parts: object, symbolic function and model or script for performance. The object is the child, which is the perfect figure for Smith’s critique of segregated society as it is recognizable to an audience, recalling a universal stage of human development. Southern readers could identify even more closely with the child figures and their cultural experiences. While Smith does document children

following established patterns of behavior, she also shows them questioning authority and experimenting with behavior deemed deviant. Consequently, qualities of curiosity and honesty become associated with children. Children therefore symbolize characteristics that many other individuals in southern society lack. They model social conscience. In this respect, the child's image becomes, in Robin Bernstein's terminology, a "scriptive thing" because it represents the child's actions and qualities as the ideal model. It is a pedagogical tool because it demonstrates to the audience the failures and successes in teaching children about their bodies, sex and race. In exposing these failures and successes, the child prompts the readers to alter the way they educate the children and, to some extent, the child prompts them to remedy their own education and upbringing. Symbolism in *Killers of the Dream* becomes part of Smith's revisionist or re-scriptive strategy for change in the South. In this new script, the child has the principle role.

The presentation of the child and its function in *Killers of the Dream* has a number of interrelated parts, each of which I examine in this chapter. First, I look at the empirical basis for the child's presentation because, as Smith makes clear, it is a textual image based on biographical and sociological details. From the empirical basis, I trace how the image becomes a symbol of the human cost exacted by the racial, social and sexual divisions of southern society, but also demonstrating how these divisions can be successfully navigated. An illustration is the Smith family's short-lived adoption of Janie, an African American child: Janie is initially assumed to be white and so lives, plays, sleeps and eats with the Smith children. When Smith's parents learn that Janie is in fact black, they send her away and will not allow their children to associate with her. Smith presents this as an example of how southern society forces children to contend with the

confusing and damaging rules about racial separation. However, in episodes such as the performance of *The Little Prince*, the child also demonstrates the ability to overcome the confusion and damage of her environment by thinking critically (or being curious) and by acting logically (or being honest). When the child acts, s/he is frequently able to challenge the status quo because the child's critical thinking protects his or her physical and psychological integrity even as the environment threatens this. The problem is, Smith argues, that in most cases the child learns to silence questions and suspend critical inquiry under social pressure: "Critical intelligence was 'wrong' – both Catholic and Protestant churches had long opposed the new learning; science was 'wrong'; curiosity, already dulled by the suppression of the child's explorations of his small world, was 'wrong'" (206). Such repression leads to stunted psychological growth and unhealthy adulthood.

In her presentation of the child, Smith draws on two contemporary theorists, Erich Kahler and F.L. Lucas (Smith 14, 210). F.L. Lucas writes about symbolic representation as an epistemological process, which he likens to children's perception of the world around them.<sup>11</sup> By identifying symbolism with the child's perspective, Lucas suggests that it has a pedagogical purpose to help an individual understand his or her environment. Symbols which have no relevance to contemporary life, existing only in self-referential webs of signification, are pointless according to Smith and Lucas. For this reason, Smith rejects the New Critical approach because of its self-referential isolation from the South's social realities as the New Critical symbols refer to the past and do not apply to the present. It is also why she finds Kahler's theories of symbolism and social context so

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<sup>11</sup> Lucas connects the impulse to construct metaphor to childishness and childhood, stating that "imagery pleases the simpler side of us, as pictures please children. And again it is a relief and a reassurance to descend from the clouds of the abstract to the solid world of things tangible, visible, or audible. Concepts are enlivened and illumined by percepts" (*Style* 188).

persuasive. Kahler's work on the symbolic form and its social function informs the connections Smith makes between intellectual interpretation and images of the human body (14). He argues that cultural symbols create or vitiate communities based on principles of inclusion or exclusion. Smith adopts these ideas to explain the human cost of segregation. Like Kahler, Smith places the human form, particularly the child's, at the center of her imagistic writing and human well-being as the objective of *Killers of the Dream's* symbolism.

Smith prompts concern by creating documentary icons of children which reflect an objective reality where actual children are suffering from racism, sexism and poverty. Adult readers react empathetically to the affective presentation of children. The documentary icons of children script a sympathetic response from readers as they are based on real children in need of help. In *Racial Innocence*, Robin Bernstein argues that everyday material objects can be "scriptive things" which promote certain behaviors in children. These "scriptive things" include replicas of the human form, including dolls, figurines, and textual images in books, advertisements and postcards. Her argument focuses on how individuals respond to these physical scripts with certain actions and how they supplement the scripts by interacting with the scriptive thing (Bernstein 22-25). In *Killers of the Dream*, documentary icons of children become scriptive things or images. The child's image in the text is the reflection of an empirical reality, a human actor. In one sense, the image of the actor is at one remove from its material reality; in another, the image gains another kind of materiality as part of a written text. Adults respond to the images as "scriptive things," because the images are

performatives in that they *do* something: they invite humans to move. Dances with things, too, are performative in that they constitute actions: they *think*, or more accurately, they *are the act of thinking*. Things script meaningful bodily movements, and these citational movements think the otherwise unthinkable.

(Bernstein 74)

Adults pity the children and may be moved to help the real children they represent by refusing to accept the social injustices which harm them.

Documentary icons of children provoke sympathetic responses in order to initiate change. The icon of the child is not a static or passive image, however, it also moves and acts. In so doing, it models negative and positive behaviors as well as a particular engagement with its context. Children's bodies perform childhood. Smith's adult readers would recognize the child actor's performance of childhood because, in some respects, it recalls their own experiences.<sup>12</sup> Images of children in *Killers of the Dream* are then comparable to Robin Bernstein's concept of children as "effigies that substitute uncannily for other, presumably adult, bodies and thus produce a surplus of meaning" (23).

Bernstein's "effigies" are similar to my definition of "symbolic actors." However, "symbolic actor" emphasizes how the child's image as a symbol is an available form for adults to identify with and a perspective they can occupy. Calling the icon an actor,

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<sup>12</sup> Bernstein's argues that people recognize "scriptive things" based on their "performance competency." Her concept of "performance competence" derives from Jonathan Culler's concept of "literary competence." She defines literary competence as the knowledge that "literature functions as a system of signs; just as comprehension of an individual word depends on competence in a linguistic system, comprehension of a single text depends on a minimal understanding of literary genre [...] Similarly, the competent performer understands how a book or other thing scripts broad behaviors within her or his historical moment – regardless of whether or how the performer follows that script (78).



highlights how the form is moving and engaging with its environment.<sup>13</sup> Children as symbolic actors rehearse old and new social behaviors and so the adult reader does too. Through this surrogation, an adult understands the child's experiences but also crucially s/he realizes the characteristics of the child's perspective which s/he shares and the actions which the child performs which s/he can also do. Adults can then evaluate which characteristics and opportunities belong to childhood; they can decide which ones are still valuable to them and to children; and which ones they have no further use for in their adult lives. Smith ensures that adults feel implicated and involved in the performance of southern childhood to show her adult readers the opportunities and limitations of childhood in the South.

The child is a performer and a scriptive thing. It is scriptive because it provokes a sympathetic response from readers. It is performative because the children appear as symbolic actors who learn to repeat established social attitudes of racial, sexual and class segregation or who improvise new ones. Their divergence from social convention in their actions rehearses how children and adults could continue to resist damaging social restrictions as they mature. Together, the mimetic reflection and symbolic suggestion theorize realistic and creative possibilities to evade social conventions and historical precedent. Southerners cannot remain literal and figurative children; instead, they must learn or re-learn how they perceive their society in order to complete their progression to maturity. In *Killers of the Dream*, adult readers figuratively return to childhood, confronting images of damaged children and re-living their experiences through

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<sup>13</sup> For clarification, Smith uses the term "symbolic acting" to describe how fact and symbol can be hopelessly confused: "The trouble is worsened when 'ordinary acting' is suddenly without warning transformed into symbolic acting" (244). Smith is referring to how art can be used to obscure the problematic situation in the South. I am using it to suggest the formal features of the documentary icon when it moves and acts within the text.

archetypal figures of children. The objective of this figurative re-scripting is a psychological maturity to match an individual's physical maturity.

Children's bodies are, therefore, the pre-eminent image and concern in *Killers of the Dream*. As Jay Watson observes, "Smith reads *with* the body, *through* the historical testimony of her own somatic experience, finding there her truest critical lens and moral touchstone" (472). It is an effective strategy because, theoretically, the child's body can act as common ground between Smith and her readers because every reader remembers what it is like to be a child.<sup>14</sup> To this end, Smith often does not give very detailed physical descriptions of children; instead, she sketches a physical archetype of a child to include as many readers as possible. Readers can easily individuate the outline of the child's form with the memory of their own body and experiences. Smith identifies the dynamic between the particular and general in her preface to the 1961 edition of *Killers of the Dream*:

Against the sound and the fury of mobs, of angry foolish defenses and flat stereotypic responses, I look at this revised version of *Killers of the Dream*, turning the manuscript pages. As I do so, children pop out of the paragraphs and some of them resemble me and my brothers and sisters. I realize this is a personal memoir, in one sense; in another sense, it is Every Southerner's memoir.

Childhood...full of absurdity and tears and laughter; but there is anguish, too, and anger at a persistent blindness that has hurt us all. (21)

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<sup>14</sup> It should be noted that when Smith refers to "southerners" without any qualifying adjectives, she is usually referring to white, middle-class southerners. When she introduces African Americans and poor whites, she specifically identifies them as such. In *Killers of the Dream*, the archetypal southerner is white and middle class. For more on Smith's representation of southerners and its nuances (or lack thereof), see Richard King's *Southern Renaissance* (185-193).

Smith clearly states that *Killers of the Dream* is “Every Southerner’s memoir” as well as her autobiography. The common experiences of childhood that she then relates connect the general memoir with the autobiography. While childhood experiences are only roughly sketched out, they stand in contrast to “the flat stereotypic responses” Smith criticizes. Smith’s image of children in this passage further contradicts reductive or two-dimensional portrayal: the children “pop out of the paragraphs” as Smith reads, becoming individualized in the process as Smith or her siblings. In offering *Killers of the Dream* as “Every Southerner’s memoir,” Smith has created the circumstances for other Southerners to experience the same process of recognition and completion. Southern readers can personalize the child bodies they encounter in the text as appropriate.

A child’s particular, individual physicality is not, then, vitally important to Smith’s argument as the reader supplements specific details. Sensory experiences, on the other hand, are crucial because, for Smith, a child’s senses signal many of the problems in southern society. In the opening lines, Smith asserts that “[t]he children knew that this “trouble” was bigger than they, bigger than their family, bigger than their church, so big that people turned away from its size” (25). The children acknowledge the trouble because they have not yet been taught to accept the situation. Smith’s point is that children of her generation were not informed of the reasoning behind segregation or economic divisions or sexual mores; as she explains to one of her protégées at the summer camp, “Your parents and I lived our babyhood in those days of wrath. But always the violence was distant, the words vague and terrible for we were protected children” (70). In the absence of explanation, children must use their senses and intellect to make sense of the world around them; a task complicated by the education they do

receive from adults who, Smith writes, “so gravely taught me to split my body from my mind and both from my “soul,” taught me also to split my conscience from my acts and Christianity from southern tradition” (27). The children’s most reliable form of validation is their own bodies which they are encouraged to distrust, resulting in physical and psychological confusion.

Smith builds her case for the damaging effects of the problems of race, sex and religion on the children’s shared psychological confusion. She documents children’s trespasses against social conventions and the feelings that such small acts of transgression caused:

Therefore when we as small children crept over the race line and ate and played with Negroes or broke other segregation customs known to us, we felt the same dread fear of consequences, the same overwhelming guilt we felt when we crept over the sex line and played with our body, or thought thoughts about God or our parents that we knew we must not think. Each was a “sin,” each “deserved punishment,” each would receive it in this world or the next. Each was tied up with the other and all were tied close to God. (84)

Smith is referring to children five years old and younger who are already aware of social conventions about the use of their bodies and about the racial segregation of bodies (83-84). She emphasizes the recurrent tension between young children’s impulses to act out their desires and the prohibitions of the “segregation customs known to [them]”. The children live in a community of fear engendered by authoritarian rules which shapes their thoughts and their behavior. Smith ventriloquizes religious authoritarianism in the

pronouncements that mimic liturgical diction and repetition: “Each was a “sin,” each “deserved punishment,” each would receive it in this world or the next.” The statements are frightening but, for the moment, ineffectual as the children continue to trespass across these lines. However, Smith suggests that the children will gradually internalize the authoritarian rules and learn to discipline themselves when she says, “[W]e knew we must not think.” Consequently, while the tension between the authoritarian teaching and the child’s impulses is unresolved in this quotation, it is temporary because it is likely that as the child ages, s/he will be more inclined to conform.

Throughout the text, children are privileged observers and actors because they can admit that serious social problems exist and they can act in accordance with social customs or deviate from them. Childhood thus signifies a period of opportunity before children’s minds and bodies are fully regimented by social expectation, when they are still capable of and allowed some resistance. For a brief period of time, children may decide without devastating social repercussions on the extent of their engagement with segregated culture. Smith initially places children on the sidelines of cultural activity:

To them, it was a vague thing weaving in and out of their play, like a ghost haunting an old graveyard or whispers after the household sleeps – fleeting mystery, vague menace to which each responded in his own way. Some learned to screen out all except the soft and the soothing; others denied even as they saw plainly, and heard. But all knew that under quiet words and warmth and laughter, under the slow ease and tender concern about small matters, there was a heavy burden on all of us and heavy a refusal to confess it. (25)

In this scene, while the problems are present, they still remain peripheral to the children's world, to be engaged with in the future. Here, as elsewhere in *Killers of the Dream*, Smith focuses largely on older children and young adolescents: individuals who are conscious of their social environment but not yet completely inducted (or implicated) in established social attitudes. Agee's most recurrent image of childhood is the fetus, which is entirely powerless; Smith's is the prepubescent child or adolescent, who is conscious of social restrictions and must decide how to act in the adult world. It is a significant difference as so much rests on how the children will engage with these temporarily peripheral issues.

Focusing on the child's body and perspective allows Smith to write from the periphery. Smith records the child's experiences, thereby giving voice to a marginalized southern perspective but one which many of her contemporaries shared. As Scott Romine theorizes in "Framing Southern Rhetoric: Lillian Smith's Narrative Persona in *Killers of the Dream*," this voice from the margins is part of a strategy of decentering and revision. "In a sense," Romine argues, "*Killers of the Dream* itself represents an "undoing," a textual reclaiming from the perspective of a cultural survivor, an ex-Southerner of sorts" (104). Romine's impression of Smith as "an ex-Southerner" and the critical latitude that this position allows her is better expressed by the child's position. Romine recognizes this in part when he writes, "But within the text, there exists another site of undoing, the episode in which Smith helps Southern children literally dramatize the cultural forces at work in their lives" (104). Romine is referring specifically to the *Little Prince* play which Smith's campers perform. However, *Killers of the Dream* enacts this dramatic challenge to the dominant cultural symbols more consistently through the figures of children than Romine allows. For, although she condemns the South and its cultural practices, Smith

does not leave the South or turn away from its problems as she accuses the Nashville Fugitives (224-225). Indeed, she sees her role as a southern author to “embrace concern and action” in order to change the situation (Smith 225). She takes great pains to identify with and address other Southerners. The figure of the child provides her with the double opportunity to identify autobiographically by presenting her memories of childhood, and to critique from a position she once occupied but no longer does.

Smith connects the dynamic of being subjectively inside and objectively outside a situation to the theory of symbolism and to writing. She quotes Erich Kahler’s essay “The Nature of the Symbol” to explain:

There happened to me this thing that Erich Kahler speaks of: “All utterance,” he said, “... be it ‘language’ or shaping of objects, tends to expand and eventually to split the being from which it comes.” He was writing of the nature of symbol and said in the same essay, “The symbol originates in the split of existence, the confrontation and communication of an inner with an outer reality, whereby a meaning detaches itself from sheer existence.” I like that. But I see it, too, another way: the writer transcends her material in the act of looking at it, and since part of that material is herself, a metamorphosis takes place: *something happens within*: a new chaos, and then slowly, a new being. (14)

Kahler, similar to I.A. Richards, states that symbolism has two parts. For Kahler, they are meaning and existence, or inner and outer reality; one part of the symbol always exists in the empirical world. Smith applies Kahler’s theory of symbolism to the process of writing autobiography as a division and examination of parts which enable her to better

understand the whole structure and to remake it. His theory of symbolism is that it must deconstruct in order to reconstruct, arguing that “[u]ltimately, the image is no longer merely a road to reality, but the very figuration of reality – more than that, it is in itself a new independent reality” (“The Nature of the Symbol” 60-61). Smith imagines that analyzing and ordering her experiences will entail moving from “a new chaos” to “a new being.”

Division and chaos due to segregation already exist and obstruct the autobiographical writing process of analyzing and recreating; the division of bodies according to race and sex is arbitrary and threatening, not productive or unifying. Smith’s difficulties are similar to Kahler’s, who writes in *The Tower and the Abyss*, “What we are concerned with, however, is precisely *the breakdown of the human form*, dissolution of coherence and structure; not *inhumanity* which has existed all through history and constitutes part of the human form, but *a-humanity*, a phenomenon of rather recent date” (xiv-xv). Kahler’s comments refer to the recent events of World War II, particularly the Nazi death camps and the atomic bomb. The connection between such events and Kahler’s theories of symbolism is the damage that they both wreak on the human form, or the human image in creative works. He observes, “The atom, as we all know, is no longer unsplittable; science has succeeded in splitting it. And the same is true of the individual; he is no longer indivisible either. A variety of interconnected developments, in which science also had its part, has effected his split” (*The Tower and the Abyss* 4). Kahler further links the two together by tracing the etymology of “individual” back to the Greek *àtomon*, meaning “indivisible,” which is also the root for atom (4). Individuality is always characterized by physical and psychological wholeness, which is most effectively



represented by the image of a whole, healthy human form. The undamaged human form signifies literal and figurative integrity. Kahler's idea is similar to the Lockean concept of *tabula rasa* where everyone is born uncorrupted and is gradually effected by society. Historically and culturally, then, children frequently represent integrity.

Kahler suggests that the defacement or destruction of the human form, literally or figuratively, is a spectacle that an audience finds inherently threatening because the violence could be similarly inscribed on their individual bodies. The body must remain whole and able to function without threat of violence. "Thus, when we speak of man as an individual," Kahler argues, "we are implying that to divide him is to destroy him as a human. As long as he remains human, he must maintain his indivisibility" (*The Tower and the Abyss* 4). Therefore, while intellectual analysis of a situation into its component parts is a positive, it becomes unacceptable when such analysis leads to forcible social division of bodies because it transforms the body from empirical subject to victimized object. The full horror of such logic is obvious when the process is taken one step further to the dissection of human bodies. The two different systems of division are juxtaposed antagonistically in *Killers of the Dream* but the association of the human body with a physical and moral principle of integrity creates a symbol that successfully undermines the flawed logic of segregation. Of the human actors Smith could choose as a symbol opposing segregation, the child's body becomes an emotionally powerful image. Children's bodies have a privileged and protected status in most societies with strong reactions against any physical or psychological violations.

Finally, the last quality that Smith associates with the child which is appropriate for her argument about symbolism and southern society is the human impulse to

understand. The episode in the text which best illustrates this is when the Smith family adopts Janie, an African American girl, believing that she is white. When the Smith family realizes that there is a mistake and Janie is in fact African American, they send her away. Young Lillian, not understanding the reasons for this sudden change, questions her mother repeatedly. Her mother rejects the questioning, silencing Lillian by saying,

“You’re too young to understand. And don’t ask me again, ever again, about this!” Mother’s voice was sharp but her face was sad and there was no certainty left there. She hurried out and busied herself in the kitchen and I wandered through that room where I had been born, touching the old familiar things in it, looking at them, trying to find the answer to a question that moaned like a hurt thing.... (Smith 37)

In a peculiar twist, Lillian’s feeling of rejection that will so powerfully influence her later actions is anthropomorphized as a moaning “hurt thing,” caught between full humanity and objectification as an inanimate object. Smith specifies that this is the room where she was born. It is also the room where the question she carries “like a hurt thing” is born. The image is disabled and disabling because it splits Lillian in two, separating her childish curiosity from her childish body. Her question represents the childish curiosity that Smith can no longer express. Lillian should be able to make connections as she began to do but instead is forced to reject her question, which becomes a half-formed “thing,” and silence herself. The ellipsis suggests that at some level the search for the answer continued, even though she forgot about the incident for “more than thirty years” (Smith 38).

For Smith, the episode later signified the damage that can be done by rejecting children's curiosity, which is why she justifies telling such a personal anecdote. Smith values the child's intellectual approach to society more than the approach of most adults, primarily, for its unselfconscious commitment:

For twenty-five years a procession of children had come to our mountain, stayed a few summers, passed on. Sensitive, intelligent, eager, quick with their questions, generous and honest – fine raw material for the future. And much of it had been wasted by a region that values color more than children. (75)

The children's curiosity and attentiveness are easily damaged and Smith admits that many of these children will not remain inquisitive, committed interpreters. Some, however, will remember their childhood experiences and continue to question insistently as indeed she later did. These children, Smith argues, will be the individuals to initiate change if they can retain or relearn the ability to pose questions. Smith associates the child's perspective with revolutionaries and artists: "Whatever the names of the little seeds that fell in childhood soil, they sprouted into a sympathy for all men in trouble and an impatience with hypocrisy and inaction" (77). Curiosity is presented as being typical of children and so they become representative of this mode of being in the world. From the way that Smith presents it, she places the ability to be curious as the first step to children becoming actors in society, people who can read their surroundings and learn to respond creatively and independently.

The children are figures of unity in *Killers of the Dream* because they are capable of noticing that society is divided into fragmented pieces and some of them are eventually

capable of piecing these divisions together. Literally and figuratively, this is a constructive use of symbolism but one which Smith fears is not prevalent enough among southern leaders in politics, journalism, the arts and education. Later in *Killers of the Dream*, Smith turns specifically to the Nashville Fugitives and their adherents for the reasons why their symbolism fails to answer the questions she considers most important:

how to make into a related whole the split pieces of the human experience, how to bridge mythic and rational mind, how to connect our childhood with the present and the past with the future, how to relate the differing realities of science and religion and politics and art to each other and to ourselves. (Smith 21)

Two themes run through Smith's accusation: the human image and the ability to make connections. For Smith, the child performs both functions as it is a human image with which the audience easily identifies and a human actor who can interpret his or her observations. In Smith's view, the Nashville Fugitives, who practiced New Criticism, were not interested in representing contemporary, human problems in the South, in spite of the fact that they were deeply interested in literary symbolism.

Smith's comments about the Fugitives are quite general but, from her statements on the Fugitives' literary values, it is clear that she is in conversation with Donald Davidson's essay, "A Mirror for Artists." One of the contributions to *I'll Take My Stand*, Davidson's essay articulates an artistic manifesto on behalf of the Fugitives, asserting that "the chief subject of art, in the final sense, is nature" (29). Smith disagrees with many of Davidson's, and by extension the Fugitives', artistic principles. According to Davidson, great art is shaped by universal concepts of human nature and historical precedents. He

argues for the division of art and contemporary culture, saying that great art does not influence society and should not try (51). Davidson thinks the division between art and society unfortunate, and he partially agrees with Smith that “[h]armony between the artist and society must be regained; the dissociation must be broken down” (50). However, he envisions the interaction between art and society differently to Smith. He is ultimately more concerned with society’s appreciation of the arts, rather than the social application of artistic ideas, and even appreciation “can only be done, however, by first putting society itself in order” (Davidson 50). Smith, by contrast argues that art is critical to prompting social improvement. Because of the Fugitives’ disengagement with their social environment, she argues that the Nashville Fugitives failed: they “turned away [from contemporary problems] after some eloquent denunciations, and sought the ancient ‘simplicities’” (Smith 224).

Unsurprisingly, Smith’s contends the symbolism that the Fugitives analyzed and created was largely inapplicable to contemporary southern society: “Instead, the Fugitives urged their students to busy themselves with literary dialectics, to support the “New Criticism” instead of a new life; and one way to do this was to search the pages of contemporary turgid writing for secret symbolic meanings where no meaning existed” (Smith 224). She rejects the idea that symbolism should be isolated from any application beyond literature; to do so, creates a signification system that is hopelessly self-referential and, therefore, powerless to do anything but recreate itself. In her view, the New Critics actually exacerbate social problems by misusing the tool of symbolism which could ease them. New Critical symbolism shores up an unjust, damaging society, which authors such as Smith must counteract:

It was not an easy journey to make for we had lived in our never-never land so long; we had worn our invisible crinoline skirts with such charm; we had rested our powers of observation so comfortably behind white columns that had crumbled or never been built; we had wandered down grand magnolia-shadowed driveways where only chinaberry trees had grown; we had ridden to hounds though most of us did not own a mule to plow with; all of us, even those who had shoveled grits and fatback with a tin spoon, had eaten wondrous southern cooking out of old buried silver that the Yankees had stolen. (219-220)

Smith illustrates how familiar symbols from southern romance such as columns, magnolias, wealth figuratively obstruct or distort the gaze to the reality beyond it: the column interrupts the line of sight, magnolias replace chinaberry trees, and silver replaces tin. Art for art's sake effectively becomes a form of deception, detaching individuals from their particular context for a historical fantasy. In this passage, human actors are secondary to all the objects which surround them. With these symbols, the New Critics separate individuals from their lived experiences and create another form of segregation by disenfranchising and ostracizing those who "seek new words, new ways of interpreting the earth-shaking hour [they] live in" (224). Smith sees the New Critics' attitude to symbolism as artistically stunted and literally unproductive, a quality which she asserts that the writers disguise with false mysticism.

Smith regrets that the New Critics "were so nearly right to be so wrong" (224). They recognized the dehumanizing effects of modern industrialization and science but they failed "to recognize the massive dehumanization which had resulted from slavery and its progeny, sharecropping and segregation" (Smith 225). The Fugitives effectively

illustrate for Smith the ways in which symbolism can frustrate action and become a wasted intellectual and literary effort. Because of this, Smith likens the New Critics' writing to "stained-glass writing," quoting F.L. Lucas (210). Lucas, a Cambridge academic, wrote extensively on the moral and social purposes of writing style and literary techniques. Like Smith, he refutes the idea that art and everyday life can be separate:

In fine, you may use language in two ways, as you may use glass to make a window through which others shall see the landscape of your vision; or to make a stained-glass window, which will not so much give light, or sight of something beyond, as pleasure by its own colour and pattern. You may twist the golden wire of words to transmit a deeply felt message; or twist it into some elaborate bangle. But of course the two usages are not mutually exclusive; and there are infinite gradations. (*Decline and Fall of the Romantic Ideal* 177)

Lucas's first metaphor places the symbol of the glass window in the center of two different situations. In the first, the glass is transparent and acts as an intermediary frame created by the writer between the observer and the scene observed. In the second, the glass itself becomes the object of the gaze. The first version frames a scene, guiding the eye; the second, arguably, obstructs it and divides the observer from the scene beyond the image. In the second metaphor, Lucas's preference for art which "transmit[s] a deeply felt message" in place of pretty ornamentation is clear. It is a preference that Smith shares and affirms at the end of the text, when she comments, "In the South – and once more, let's turn back to it – our big hope lies in the fact that ten years ago, only a few saw things clearly; now, thousands see. Not only lonely individuals and the Cassandras, but groups – and these groups are growing larger and more energetic [...] some still see as if through a

glass darkly, but they, at least, keep peering” (249). Smith borrows Lucas’ conceptual metaphor of writing as a transparent frame but she also reconnects it to her larger theme about the importance of a healthy, unsegregated childhood by paraphrasing another verse from Corinthians following, the verse she quoted in Chapter 1, “When I was a child”. The biblical verse reads, “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known” (1 Corinthians 13:12). The verse encapsulates many of Smith’s concerns and their resolution: blindness becomes clarity, parts are unified and the symbols are broadly applicable to people and their capacity for development. By contrast, the danger of the Fugitives’ artistry is that it is exclusive in the subjects and concerns that it illustrates and those it does not. The Fugitives’ writing causes a division of parts, especially between the writer and his immediate context which should be his subject matter.

Smith’s symbolism acts as a bridge, a term that she uses widely throughout *Killers of the Dream*, as she follows Kahler’s principle that “[i]n order to show the coherence embodied in a perceptible form, a representative figure had to be chosen, a being or an event, designed to serve as a symbol by which the individual coincides with the general” (*Man the Measure* 496). One of the symbol’s bridging functions is between its different operations of documenting, representing and scripting. The figure of the child allows Smith to move from documenting the empirical (past and present) to symbolic representation of its significance before considering how this should prompt future action. To prompt action, the child must act as a model which the audience considers as a suggestion for their own behavior. In this, the generalized materiality of the child’s body is important because (as I discussed earlier) it encourages the individual adult, providing



enough information for the adult to identify with the child and his or her situation. The child outlined in the text operates as an objective image entirely separate from readers and a subjective figure which the audience can individuate and invest with their own biographical details and experiences. Smith's presentation of the child as a real and symbolic human actor makes it possible for the audience to scrutinize the figure and its actions in order to judge either the child's literal resemblance to his or her past experience or figurative applicability to their present or future conduct. Either way a southern audience is implicated in the performances in the text.

The two prime examples of performance in *Killers of the Dream* are the Smith family and Janie, and the young campers performance of Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince*. The Janie episode is primarily documentary and records the past act as a precaution against repetition; the performance of *The Little Prince* is a primarily symbolic act as a creative attempt to escape established custom. Smith's introduction to her memory of Janie sets the scene for the details she is about to narrate. Smith carefully theorizes what the audience's relationship to her memory will be and what they will gain by watching it:

I shall tell it, not because it was in itself a severe trauma, but because it became a symbol of buried experiences that I did not have access to. It is an incident that has rarely happened to other southern children. In a sense, unique. But it was an acting-out, a private production of a little script that is written on the lives of most southern children before they know words. Though they may not have seen it staged this way, each southerner has had his own private showing. (30)

Smith balances here between the unique facts of her biography and the scene's wider applicability. She admits that the particular details of what happened are not identical to other southerners' experiences but by referencing theatrical performance through "script" and "staged" she finds a generalized, material presentation of behavior that can apply to others. In this statement, Smith turns the biographical details of her life into an individuated performance of a general script. Her comments propose that other, parallel scripts exist or can be imagined and the audience is drawn into a comparative relationship as the young Lillian acts out her story. Despite its apparent biographical specificity, Smith introduces the concept of an actor, a script and a stage which makes the event public property, open to, even requiring, audience participation. Smith has transformed her child self into an actor, her biography into a script and her childhood into a stage.

In the adaptation of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince* that the girls stage at Smith's summer camp the symbolic function supersedes the empirical details in importance during the girls' performance. The motivation behind this performance was that

[t]hey had read Antoine de Saint Exupéry's fantasy *The Little Prince* and borrowing from it, had agreed that in their play Every Child was born in a planet, too, where no one lives but himself but if he grows he does not stay there. There are other planets which he must visit. In such simple pictures they saw the old troubled story of man's progress. (43-44)

Smith anticipates the learning outcome of the children's play: the difficult progression to maturity. The children attempt to enact the progression but fail because they struggle to

negotiate between two scripts: the script of social conventions and customs which they have adhered to their whole lives and *The Little Prince*, their literary inspiration and guide. After the girls add more and more figures of southern convention (Conscience, Southern Tradition, Religion, Science), the two scripts appear more and more irreconcilable. Suddenly instead of being guided by two scripts, the children's play becomes unscripted and increasingly improvised. Smith comments:

Now we were in trouble. The Prince was speaking new words. She said, "I was born on a planet where I live all alone. I have journeyed to other planets and have had strange and wonderful experiences. I have lived with my family. I have gone to school. I have felt lonely and I have failed. But I am no longer afraid of the dark and there are things I know that once I did not know. I have made things with my hands. I have also made a friend and that was nice and I shall never forget it. I have had a date. I have family memories that are good and some I hate to remember and all of them I take with me wherever I journey." (45)

The child actor conflates the two scripts of *The Little Prince* and social custom so that elements from both are united in her performance. However, difficulties emerge when the campers decide to visit Earth and apply the two scripts they are referencing to situations with which they are familiar. The tension reaches crisis point when the Prince suggests, "We are children living on the earth and I think to grow up we should play with all the earth's children. That is an important experience which the Prince in our play has never had. Don't you think he should have it?" (45-46). Here is a symbolic re-working of Smith's desire to play with Janie. The campers approach the issue from the opposite direction but Smith observes that "[e]ach camper in that room was living this play now as

it if were her own biography” (48). Whether moving from empirical reality to symbolic representation or vice versa, the child actor is caught mid-performance between the two, attempting to work out how to proceed.

Theoretically, the children have greater freedom to allow a racially integrated play than Smith’s parents did when Smith asked them if she could play with Janie (37). However, the actors’ and audience’s initial reaction to the Prince’s unscripted request to “play with all the earth’s children” is similar to Smith’s parents’ reaction to the revelation of Janie’s racial identity: it precipitates a confused but definite refusal of integrated play (Smith 46-50). Unlike the response in the Janie episode, however, Smith describes the refusal and its impact on the actors in performance terms. The crisis is presented as a theatrical crisis involving stalled action, missed cues and forgotten lines. The actor and audience’s crisis is exacerbated by the fact they do not know which script to follow. Smith notes that “[t]he actors had made their own lines from the beginning of the play. Now one of them said, “Shall we make our words or will you help us? You know, since this is a kind of emergency” but Smith refuses the responsibility, saying, “Make your own lines. As honestly as you can” (47). Because of the children’s age and because this play is still primarily figurative and theatrical, they are able to act towards a make-shift resolution where Religion as “love” and Science push Southern Tradition off the stage (Smith 50). Smith encourages the campers to settle for the ending which is more theatrically appropriate, if not realistic. She reasons, “The play had to be mended. I told them that things were as their actors had said but things need not be that way. A day would soon come when the little Prince could play with the earth’s children. Therefore it seemed to me that we might bridge the gap in time” (49-50). Because the play is a

symbolic representation of the campers' lives not documentary fact, it can representatively bridge the gap between the actions that the campers wish to perform and their environment, allowing them to forego the actions they feel constrained by social norms to repeat.

*The Little Prince* play effectively encapsulates in miniature the main themes of *Killers of the Dream*. It positions itself between the general or symbolic and the particular or empirical as a play for "Every Child" which recalls Smith's assertion in her book's introduction that *Killers of the Dream* is "Every Southerner's memoir" (21). It places itself in a marginal space on a mountaintop. It places children in the principle role and presents the story as a quest for maturity. Smith acts as a theatre director, guiding but not definitively scripting the performances. Combining all these elements, it deliberately unpicks established modes and customs and in their place suggests new actions. Smith consciously re-echoes her position when she begins the anecdote about the play: "I saw a group of southern children try their strength against that ghost a few summers ago. It happened on our mountain where the children were spending the summer. We were gathered in the big gymnasium-theatre making a play. It was the children's affair and was about Every Child who makes a journey through the universe to collect new experiences he may need in order to grow up" (43). Smith is making and remaking scripts which prompt but do not dictate how actors should perform. The unmaking of the socially authorized script in favor of a new one is a metatheatrical moment, even if the campers fail to apply it outside of the camp. Having staged the ideas and the movements in the camp, the children have rehearsed the concepts and their problems. Theoretically, the script should then be easier to perform again in other spaces. Similarly, in trying out the

ideas in her text, Smith facilitates articulation and repetition elsewhere. Consequently, although *Killers of the Dream* is not commonly understood as a script, it does have performative elements which are scriptive. Bernstein defines a script as “a dynamic substance that deeply influences but does not entirely determine live performances, which vary according to agential individuals’ visions, impulses, resistances, revisions, and management of unexpected disruptions” (71). The human actors in *Killers of the Dream* present moving images which create a scriptive frame which the audience has already performed or which they can emulate. Thus, *Killers of the Dream* effectively becomes a script which suggests alternative actions and outcomes to an audience to encourage agency over mindless conformity. The child figure becomes a scriptive thing within the larger script of *Killers of the Dream*.

The child’s scriptive purpose in *Killers of the Dream* is to act within the progressive narrative of maturity and model this progression to the audience. In the post-performance analysis between Smith and one of the campers, the camper accuses Smith, saying, “[Y]ou have made us want to be good. *Mature*, you’ve called it. You taught us to be honest, not to cover things up. You made us think it fine to be like that, even when it hurt. All these years, you’ve said so much about human dignity – it’s a nice phrase... You’ve talked of love...human rights...bridging chasms between people –“ (51). The girl is confused and angry about the impossibility of behaving maturely as Smith has defined it outside of the camp. Smith has directed the campers away from established social conventions but not provided them with a complete, comprehensive substitute script, which dictates how they should behave. The girl is frustrated at the lack of comprehensive directions. However, her frustration at the lack of structure must be

juxtaposed with the actors' melancholy observation at the end of the play that, if they were to follow the rules of southern tradition, then "The Little Prince can never grow up" (49). The stasis and frustration of the stalled performance as the actors try to act without a script is still more productive and satisfying than following tradition blindly. As when she refuses to provide an authoritative script to the actors in the play, Smith also does not provide one to the girl. She explains the reasons behind social convention in "Unto the Third and Fourth Generation" but finishes inconclusively: "I told her there were ways out of the trap, things were changing a little, and people could change anything, even segregation, if they really wanted to.... If they really wanted to...." (73). If the girl wants to live according to her ideals, then she must want to change her social environment. Smith cannot provide a definitive script for that future, nor would it benefit the girl or the other children in the play if she did. Consequently, Smith only gives suggestive models and scripts for performance which are necessarily left incomplete.

Childhood becomes a stage in a double sense: it exists for a limited time and it is inherently performative (Bernstein 22-29). By returning to childhood, Smith imagines the possibility of abandoning socially prescribed behaviors and learning or relearning social interactions in order for southerners to grow, literally and figuratively, to a healthy maturity. Images of children in *Killers of the Dream* effectively work as guides for how this transition can be achieved by southern children -- both the actual children Smith concentrates on and the figurative children which many southerners remain:

I began to see that though we may, as we acquire new knowledge, live through new experiences, examine old memories, gain the strength to tear the frame from use, yet we are stunted and warped and in our lifetime cannot grow straight again

any more than can a tree, put in a steel-like twisting frame when young, grow tall and straight when the frame is torn away at maturity. (39)

Smith recognizes how traumatic childhood memories negatively determine southerners' views of society. The metaphor of a tree warped by a frame represents the damage poor parenting or teaching methods does to children. While Smith suggests in this quotation that it is too late for many adults to repair the damage done by the frames they grew up with, they can recognize the frames' existence and limitations. Furthermore, if adult southerners cannot grow straight, Smith intimates they can become self-conscious of their crookedness and work to correct its effects on them and prevent the negative consequences of such frames for their children. The metaphor re-emphasizes the significance of childhood and introduces a concrete image of a frame or model guiding learning which will become increasingly important because of Smith's insistence on the enduring effect of childhood for the southerner. Smith presents the child in *Killers of the Dream* as an image acting as a frame that the individual should outgrow. Frames should not be restrictive or permanent. The image provides a frame for the individual to begin learning but, unlike in *Famous Men*, does not determine or limit the learning. The idea being that, provided that the model is good, the child-model will become redundant once the reader learns enough to think and act independently.



## CHAPTER 4

### CONCLUSION: MOVING FROM SYMBOL TO ACTOR

In *Famous Men* and *Killers of the Dream*, figures of children provide Agee and Smith with a framework to show the human cost of segregation, sexism and poverty on society's most vulnerable individuals. They demonstrate how the confusion and powerlessness of childhood symbolically endures into adulthood because children were taught to limit their vision and understanding to culturally sanctioned ideas and practices, instead of developing reasoning abilities that might ultimately be used to challenge the status quo. The problem Smith and Agee identify is that children are molded into the image that southern society dictates but that this is damaging for the individual and society because it is so restrictive. In their texts, they instead consider how children might be able to shape their environment, expressing their individuality and becoming independent agents.

Childhood is a stage to which both authors return to validate positive human qualities such as curiosity and attentiveness. It is a position from which they can theorize how an individual might bring about social change through personal development. Agee and Smith connect social progression to individual human progression, which is why childhood becomes a productive metaphor for their narratives: it makes societal change appear natural and necessary. Thinking of childhood as a literal and metaphorical stage enables them to do this because, as Beverly Lyon Clark observes,

[S]tage theories can be useful: they can help parents and educators recognize that young people are not necessarily miniature adults but may, for instance, reason and approach abstraction differently. But we need to avoid reifying the stages that theorists have posited. Stage theories become pernicious when entire categories of people seem to be stuck at an early stage. (11)

Clark acknowledges the benefits of recognizing childhood's unique qualities, which, in *Killers of the Dream* and *Famous Men*, are social innocence, imagination and honesty. She also identifies, however, how if childhood is metaphorically prolonged or restrictively applied to groups of people, it can circumscribe agency. Smith and Agee appreciate the child's qualities but they also indicate that these must be developed or they will be destroyed and lost.

In order to encourage individuals to protect and develop their intellectual curiosity, Smith and Agee create the child's image as a documentary icon which affectively persuades their readers. As images, children's bodies visibly reflect the physical effects of society's restrictive problems because they illustrate progressive dehumanization. Smith and Agee translate the empirical evidence of damage on children's bodies into their symbols, juxtaposing the victimized details and the idealized qualities associated with childhood in this image. Through the combination of contextually-specific empirical details and the universal, archetypal associations, Agee and Smith create a symbolic image which encapsulates the common experiences for southern childhood and signifies the lasting effects of those experiences. However, it is also a symbol which suggests a model for what southern childhood could have been, based on the child's inherent intellectual abilities of observation and analysis. Had

southern society nurtured these qualities through social education, the damage to the children's bodies and minds could have been avoided, and they could have grown to an independent maturity. Figures of children would not then function as symbols of the severity of the South's social problems but as symbols of health and potential.

The failure of social education to adequately equip children to either improve their environment or to protect their own physical and psychological well-being ensures that these damaging conditions are perpetuated because children cannot progress to a healthy maturity. Education obstructs the child's development. The only opportunity that remains is for children to learn how to protect their own psychological and physical integrity by continuing to trust in their intellectual abilities and the conclusions that they draw from empirical observation. It is a difficult task because children are the principal targets of cultural indoctrination, which pushes them to conform to social behaviors and expectations. However, both Agee and Smith suggest that there is a small chance that the children might change the regimented social practices of the South. On the question of change, Agee is less radical than Smith because he is more ambivalent about the possibilities for improvement. Therefore, while his metaphors involving children reinforce the sanctity of human life, they do not provide a script suggesting how to change, as Smith's images do, because they are static representations. His children cannot analyze their situation and creatively intervene to the same extent as Smith's. Instead, it is primarily Agee's adoption of the child's perspective which models agency. However, as he is insecure about the effectiveness of his creative ability and concerned about the apathy of his readers, the enduring impression on the reader is one of stunted potential and intellectual stasis.

By contrast, Smith's scriptive images create documentary icons that can and do act, even as they symbolize the enduring damage that southerners experienced as children. Smith depicts children as competent actors whose intellectual abilities analyze the situation, enabling them to respond in new and radical ways. Smith's children are models for the audience to follow so they can leave behind the limitations of their childish perspectives and act as fully, capable adults, who have learned the value of observation and empathy. *Killers of the Dream* is a script which invokes images of children as part of a pedagogical performance, showing the child actors and audience members (including the reader) how to grow. Smith contends that children's conclusions from their observations will mean challenging unjust, authoritarian rules and that this activity is essentially their rite of passage into psychological maturity. Conversely, if they continue to blindly copy the example of the adults in their society, they will figuratively remain children. Smith asserts that adults in the South have made childhood a permanent refuge from difficult social questions and responsible action, in spite of the fact that it is harmful to them.

*Famous Men* and *Killers of the Dream* recognize the value of childhood but they do not advocate prolonging it indefinitely. Instead, they return to children's bodies and their behaviors during the developmental stage to identify what is inherently positive about childhood and what society should nurture. For both authors, the child's observation skills and social attitude are valuable, which is why they privilege the child's perspective above the adult's. As part of this documentary presentation Agee and Smith expose the harmful societal behaviors which limit the child's useful skills and attitudes. They demonstrate how children, given greater license from social strictures, act logically

and compassionately. However, social indoctrination does not permit them to continue to do so. As a result, the good qualities of childhood are circumscribed and only the negative qualities remain, including greed, self-interest and unquestioning adherence to authority. Childhood's unnatural prolongation is disabling because being childlike or childish when the subject is not a child prevents them from effectively taking an active part in a situation as an adult with an adult's fully developed reasoning abilities and independence of action. Agee's and Smith's strategy is to identify and imaginatively return to the period of childhood where the child is aware of social restrictions and indoctrination but capable of evading them. They attempt to demonstrate through child images and the child's perspective how this period of childhood represents an opportunity to learn and to act independently, which will have long-lasting positive consequences for the individual and their society. If children protect their independent thoughts and actions, and if adults safeguard children's freedom, then the children can grow to be mature individuals.

Privileging children in *Killers of the Dream* and *Famous Men* provides a different critical perspective on the South and its problems because it redirects the gaze and redefines the field of vision. Children's images in these texts become patterns of signification which disrupt established, local social practices by exposing their lasting damage. Children's marginalized perspectives contradict romanticized narratives about the South and southerners through close observation that is difficult for adult southerners to invalidate or correct, except by outright denial. While I have focused on Agee and Smith in this thesis, this argument is relevant to other southern texts where authors employ images of children or critique from a child's perspective. Even a cursory survey

of southern literature will show that authors such as Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, Truman Capote and Harper Lee frequently adopt the child's perspective in their work as part of a process of decentering and revision. Their youth-oriented literature provides another powerful counterpoint to presentations of twentieth-century southern literature as insular, backward-looking and static because the figure of the child shows a deep concern about the possibilities for and limitations on growth. Like Smith and Agee, these authors actively engage with how individuals navigate historical and cultural conventions to decide which are restrictive and which are productive. Children are important to this negotiation as images which exemplify the consequences of social behaviors and environments, and as actors who will determine what future action to take.

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