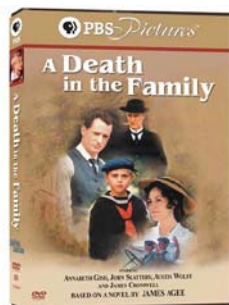


## Discussion Questions

- 1 Describe Mary and Jay Follett and their family before Jay's death. Is this an idealized portrait of a family, or a believable, realistic one?
- 2 Early in the novel, Mary prays to be able to close "the gulf" between herself and her husband, Jay. Why is religious faith a source of tension in their otherwise strong and close marriage? When does the question of faith recur in the course of the novel?
- 3 What do you think Agee's view of Christianity was? Is Agee critical of the Catholicism of Mary and Aunt Hannah or the skepticism of Joel and Andrew? What do we learn about the problem of faith when it is seen through the eyes of Rufus?
- 4 There are various contrasts that shape the relationships between characters in the novel: between black and white, rich and poor, country life and city life, privilege and hard work. How does Agee show the ways in which these differences can create a "gulf" between people? What does he show us about how a family or a society can bridge the gulf and be drawn together?
- 5 Agee's writing is characterized by attention to small details: gestures, subtle shifts of feeling, tactile descriptions of a mug of hot milk or a kiss on the lips. What scene from the novel will stay with you long after you have put this book back on the shelf? Without looking back at the text, what details can you recall? Was the scene included in the film? If it was, how well was it captured on screen?
- 6 The point of view in the narrative shifts back and forth between characters, showing the reader, in each scene, only what a particular character witnesses and understands. What did you think of this literary strategy? What special contribution does Rufus's point of view make?
- 7 The chronology of the storytelling shifts: from the present to the past and back again. What do these scenes from the past add to the reader's understanding of the family's reaction to Jay's death?
- 8 In bringing the novel to the screen, how did the filmmakers adapt Agee's storytelling strategies? Were they able to retain the novel's varied points of view? If so, how? What changes or omissions did you notice? Why do you think the filmmakers made the choices they did about what to change?

- 9 *Knoxville: Summer, 1915*, is a short memoir that Agee's editors placed at the front of the novel to serve as a prologue. Are there passages in the novel that remind you of this short section? Could Rufus have narrated this first-person reflection? How did the filmmakers weave the prologue piece into the film?
- 10 *A Death in the Family* has been called an autobiographical novel because the events and the central cast of characters are drawn from Agee's own life. James Agee grew up in Knoxville, where his young father Jay died in an auto accident when Agee (who was called Rufus as a child) was six years old. As a reader or viewer, does it make a difference to you to know that a work of fiction is based on real events? Why? Can an adult writer recall and capture what he thought, felt, and witnessed as a child? Is the accuracy of James Agee's memory important to the success of the novel as a work of art?

*A Death in the Family*, by James Agee, was first published in 1938. For more about the MASTERPIECE film *A Death in the Family* and related features, visit <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/americancollection/death/index.html>. For *A Death in the Family* Teacher's Guide, go to <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/americancollection/death/tguide.html>.



You can purchase *A Death in the Family* DVD from [shoppbs.org](http://shoppbs.org). Enter code BOOKANDFILM during checkout to receive a 15% discount.

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