

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

A Death in the Family

by
James Agee

Book Information

James Agee, A Death in the Family

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310 Pages

Book Level: 6.1

Interest Level: UG

Jay Follett's family struggles to cope with his death in an auto accident.

Award: NCTE Notable Children's Books in the Language Arts; Pulitzer Prize

Topics: Emotions, Courage; Emotions, Love; Family Life, Misc./Other; Poetry/Rhymes, Poetry/Rhymes; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Recommended Reading, ALA Outstanding Books for College Bound

Main Characters

Andrew Follet Mary's brother

Aunt Hannah Mary's aunt, who helps her in her grief

Catherine Follet Jay's young daughter

Father Jackson the priest who prays with Mary and performs services for Jay

Grandfather and Grandmother Follet Jay's parents

Jay Follet the young husband and father who is killed in an automobile accident

Joel and Catherine Mary's parents

Mary Follet Jay's wife, who must cope with her husband's death

Ralph Follet Jay's alcoholic brother

Rufus Follet Jay's young son

Walter Starr the family friend who drives Andrew to the accident site

Vocabulary

alacrity promptness in response

disconsolate dejected and downcast

prostrate to lie stretched out in a prone position

stertorous characterized by a harsh snoring or gasping sound

Synopsis

Jay and Mary Follet and their two young children, Rufus and Catherine, live in Knoxville, Tennessee, in 1915. One night, Jay is in a car accident. Mary's brother Andrew goes to the site, while Aunt Hannah waits with Mary. Mary and Aunt Hannah talk about how her family was originally opposed to Mary's marriage, but how they have since softened, even as Mary has realized the truth of their misgivings about Jay. It is clear that all now respect and love Jay.

Time passes, and Mary begins to suspect Jay is dead. Finally, Andrew returns with the news that Jay died instantly. Mary's parents arrive. Mary drinks quite a lot of whiskey. Joel speaks privately with Mary, offering financial help, urging her to be strong for the children's sake, and suggesting she use her religious faith, but not hide in it.

Mary has the terrifying thought that perhaps Jay was drunk before the accident, but decides not to dishonor his memory by asking.

Everybody in the family except Joel, Mary's father, feels Jay's presence in the house.

The differing religious beliefs of the family members are revealed during the evening. Mary and Aunt Hannah are strong believers, but Joel and Andrew are not.

Mary informs the children of their father's death the next morning. Rufus, who has been the object of teasing by the older school children, thinks he will earn the respect of these children by telling them his father is dead and confronts them on the street. He overhears boys suggesting his father was perhaps driving too fast or was drunk.

A priest arrives. He does not relate well to the children, but his prayers seem to comfort Mary.

At the funeral, the children view their father. They are to be taken home by a family friend, but he circles back and allows them to see the funeral

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procession. After the funeral, Andrew tells Rufus how a butterfly landed on the casket as it was being lowered into the ground, and when the coffin touched the ground, the butterfly flew high into the sky. Andrew says that if anything ever makes him believe in God, it would be that incident. He also shows his anger with the Catholic priest, who refused to conduct a complete burial service because Jay had never been baptized. Rufus is confused about his uncle's feelings toward family members who believe in God.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

Why did Mr. Starr take the children to see Jay's funeral procession after Mary had asked him to take them home? Do you agree with what he did?

He thought that later on they would wish they had seen it.

Literary Analysis

What happened at Jay's funeral that Andrew interpreted as being symbolic? What might it have symbolized?

As the casket was lowered into the ground, a cloud covered the sun, and a butterfly landed on the casket. It remained there until the casket touched the ground. Then the sun came out, and the butterfly flew high into the sky. It could be symbolic of Jay's spirit going to heaven.

Inferential Comprehension

What were the possible causes of the misgivings the family had had about Mary marrying Jay that Mary and Aunt Hannah discussed while waiting for Andrew? How do you know?

Probably Jay's former drinking problem, which Jay refers to during his comforting of Rufus's terror. Possibly a lack of intellectualism--when Joel gives advice to Mary, he thinks that her intelligence had come to nothing in the marriage. Possibly his ability to provide for the family--when Joel gives advice to Mary, he refers to "making ends meet."

Constructing Meaning

Why did the family members laugh while they were discussing Jay's death? Did you think it was appropriate? Have you ever laughed when under great stress?

The immediate cause of laughter was construing Catherine's comment to mean that Mary could not wait any longer for more whiskey. The laughter continued, becoming almost hysterical. It was a pressure-relief valve for their tension.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Literary Features Ask the students to discuss what Agee is saying about religion in the novel. Include in the discussion the differences among the family members' religious beliefs, Joel's warning to Mary not to bury herself in her religion, the solace Mary took in religion upon Jay's death, Father Jackson's behavior toward the children and his refusal to give Jay a complete burial service, Andrew's experience of the butterfly at the funeral, and Andrew's last conversation with Rufus.

Understanding Characterization Rufus is described by Agee as being teased unmercifully by the older schoolboys on the street and also by his Uncle Ted (who told him the cheese would jump off the table if he whistled for it). Hold a class discussion of how the teasing that Rufus endured could affect his personality. Use this as a springboard for a general discussion of the

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effects of teasing and how to respond to it.

Understanding the Author's Craft James Agee's descriptive writing is very powerful. The prologue is a description of the everyday activities taking place in a middle-class neighborhood on a summer evening. Read it aloud, and discuss the students' response. Ask them what makes the description so vivid. Ask them to select a topic about which to write their own two or three page description. Have volunteers read their descriptions aloud.

Responding to Literature *A Death in the Family* explores the reactions of various members of Jay's family to his death. Their responses varied greatly, depending on their age and understanding, and their relationship to Jay. Ask the students to reflect on their response to a death among their own family or friends. Ask them to write a short essay about their response to the death and funeral, keeping in mind their age at the time. If they have not yet experienced a death, ask them to write about how they might foresee themselves responding.