

DISCOVERING AUDIENCE AND VOICE: JAMES AGEE REVIEWS FOR HIGHBROW AND MIDDLEBROW

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Experienced writers understand that the audience for whom they write determines to a great extent their persona, or voice. Inexperienced writers, on the other hand, often fail to understand this basic rhetorical concept, writing instead in a vacuum in which their message is created for and communicated to an amorphous reader whom they never define. In a classroom setting it is especially difficult to increase students' awareness of audience because in their minds only two possibilities exist: (1) they are either writing for the instructor, who is less interested in *what* they say than in *how* they say it, or (2) they are writing for no one—merely putting words on paper to fulfill an assignment.

Russell Long suggests that a productive approach to this problem is to require students to analyze the discourse of published writers: "This approach would focus upon the analysis of texts in the classroom with a very detailed examination given to the signals provided by the writer for his audience" (225). Barry Kroll agrees with this text-oriented approach, observing that "the writer's sense of audience is based upon . . . knowledge gained not from social interaction but from broad exposure to various forms of written discourse" (182). Both Long and Kroll are, of course, echoing Walter Ong's seminal essay, "The Writer's Audience Is Always

a Fiction,” in which Ong argues that because student writers—or, for that matter, all writers—are writing for readers who are not immediately present, they must “fictionalize” their audiences (11). This ability, Ong continues, is largely derived from knowledge of how, in the past, other writers have fictionalized their readers. The implication is, therefore, that one learns to write for an audience by becoming familiar with the types of audiences historically and conventionally used by other writers.

Few, if any, would argue that an experienced reader is much more likely to have writing skills—including the ability to create or visualize an appropriate audience—than is an inexperienced reader. However, in a single composition course, it is impossible to transform inexperienced readers into experienced readers, much less experienced writers. Such an attempt only results in the composition course’s becoming a literature course. Students may improve their ability to analyze literary discourse but will not become appreciably better writers since such training requires many years to translate effectively into writing skill.

We propose a compromise—one that dramatizes for students how an experienced writer responds to his audience but does not require that the writing course be devoted entirely to literary analysis. Rather than studying in detail a succession of authors, students can more efficiently learn how an experienced writer shapes his or her discourse to accommodate different audiences by comparing the discourse produced by one writer for two different audiences. A writer who effectively demonstrates this ability is James Agee. The collection *Agee on Film* contains two versions of reviews of eighteen films that Agee wrote for *Time* and *The Nation* from January 1944 to February 1948.¹ A study of any pair of these reviews provides students with a challenging exercise in rhetorical and stylistic analysis as well as new insight into the significant role that audience plays in shaping a piece of discourse.

In *The Nation* Agee wrote for an audience of his peers, one that, at least in his unspoken assumption, felt itself above movies, especially above Hollywood movies. In an introduction to his *Nation* reviews, Agee announces that he saw both himself and his audience to be amateurs, “deeply interested in moving pictures, considerably experienced from childhood on in watching them and thinking and talking about them, and totally, or almost totally,

without experience or even much second-hand knowledge of how they are made" (*Agee on Film* 22-23). In other words, he regarded himself not as a technician or expert but as a critic in the broader, Arnoldian sense. The resulting reviews reflect this critical dimension. They were obviously intended for an audience of sophisticated film goers who were primarily interested in Agee's critical insights.

Agee's *Time* reviews, on the other hand, were addressed to an audience that did not perceive themselves as critics in any sense but rather as movie goers interested in useful information about films. The *Time* reviews, which focus on such matters as plot and character, are written in a straightforward, informative style. Although most experts in film criticism have dismissed these reviews as "clever hack work" or as condensed versions of those that Agee produced for *The Nation*, a careful analysis of the *Time* reviews reveals that they are not necessarily inferior to those in *The Nation* and, in a number of instances, are demonstrably clearer and more carefully written—or edited. Furthermore, the dates of the reviews indicate that Agee did not consistently write those for *The Nation* first. We may assume then that the rather striking differences in tone, style, organization, and content are the result of Agee's awareness that he was writing for two distinctly different audiences.

Students can discover these differences by analyzing any pair of reviews, and with some assistance can recognize that their rhetorical, stylistic, and grammatical differences derive primarily from Agee's awareness of his audiences. In order to demonstrate the possibilities that exist in such an assignment, we provide below an analysis of Agee's reviews for the film *Meet Me in St. Louis* (126-28, 356-57).

In *The Nation* review, Agee's roles as fan and critic overlap. He begins his review by stating his preference for the movie: "Of the new films, *None but the Lonely Heart* most respectably bids for appreciation, general courtesy, and even enthusiasm; but on the whole I preferred *Meet Me in St. Louis*." A bit further down, however, Agee as critic complains of the film's "sumptuous idealization" while Agee as fan concedes that he is pleased at having "something unusually pretty to watch." In fact, Agee's review of *Meet Me in St. Louis*, like most of his *Nation* reviews, consists primarily of his personal reactions to the film.

Throughout *The Nation* review, Agee seems anxious to discover what is good and to indicate how it could be made still

better. The actors and film-makers are, he implies, better than they know; the film is, he also implies, more interesting and important than the intellectually more respectable film whose discussion he postpones at the beginning of the review. To put it another way, he attempts to impart higher critical standards to those who create in order to affect future work. To those who judge, his readers, he strives to infuse a sense of created life in the work before them.

Because Agee assumes a certain sophistication on the part of the readers of *The Nation*, he includes numerous allusions. Although less allusive than some of his other *Nation* reviews, this one invokes Garbo, Ibsen, and Chaplin as touchstones to elevate the film in the estimation of his readers and to establish a standard beyond the accomplishments of the film but not—and this is an important distinction—beyond the attainments of those who make it.

While the *Nation* review is an exploration and an exhortation, that in *Time* is more like a formula review: the empty but eye-catching distinction at the beginning—“a musical that even the deaf should enjoy”—leads to the point made in *The Nation* that the “rather pretty new tunes are sung in an up-to-date chromium-and-glucose style” that detracts from the visual impact of the picture. But the *Time* review continues with an outline of characters (mentioning five actors rather than only Margaret O’Brien as in *The Nation* review), story, plot, and then, in somewhat clearer if simpler terms, the real subject of the movie. Agee assumes, then, that his review introduces the audience to the movie, that they will want to know what is striking about it, what it is about, who the actors are, and what they do. However, he also assumes that the audience is not immune to standards or incapable of learning because the final paragraph compresses and summarizes the aesthetic high points and critical judgments diffused throughout *The Nation* review.

In both reviews of *Meet Me in St. Louis*, Agee discusses the film’s Halloween episode, thus providing representative samples of his contrasting style. The two accounts differ primarily in that the one in *The Nation* not only tells its readers what to look at but also what to look for—the effects produced with the aid of camera movement and film processing:

THE NATION

Her walk on Halloween, away from the bonfire into the deepening dark of the street, her fear and excitement intensifying as she approaches her destination (the most frightening man in the neighborhood) and follows the camera (which withdraws a few feet ahead of her in a long soft curve) are a piece of acting, of lovely, simple camera movement, and of color control which combined, while they lasted, to make my hair stand on end (127).

TIME

Her self-terrified Halloween adventures, richly set against firelight, dark streets and the rusty confabulations of fallen leaves, bring this section of the film very near the first-rate (356-57).

Clearly a much more knowledgeable audience is assumed for *The Nation*. Furthermore, the reservations and distinctions about the direction of the Margaret O'Brien performance are missing in *Time*, although the judgment of the total effect of the sequence and of the film as a whole is almost identical. In *Time* Agee focuses on present achievement, in *The Nation* on future achievement on the part of critical readers as well as creative filmmakers.

Agee's sense of audience not only controls the content of his reviews but also shapes the structure of his discourse. In *The Nation* he employs something like deductive reasoning, stating or implying general principles at the beginning of the review and basing his complex analysis on those principles. However, the review is very loosely structured, almost rambling. The only consistent principle of organization seems to be Agee's private process of association. The paragraphs in this review not only lack explicit topic sentences, but, in several instances, even implicit controlling ideas. In the second paragraph, for example, he begins by stating, and approving, the intention of the film, drifts into a criticism of its lack of realism, and concludes with a tribute to its star, Margaret O'Brien.

The *Time* review, on the other hand, has a coherent, linear structure, and each paragraph has a fairly explicit topic sentence

traditionally placed at the beginning. Unlike those of the *Nation* review, these paragraphs are arranged in a logical sequence, with a conclusion based on inductive reasoning. The introductory paragraph focuses on the music in the movie; the second summarizes the plot; the third explains the primary plot complications; and the last discusses the outstanding achievements of the film.

The differences in structure reflect the differences in Agee's rhetorical purpose. While both reviews contain Agee's opinions about the film, neither is primarily persuasive. The *Time* review is clearly expository, or referential, discourse. The *Nation* review, on the other hand, is primarily expressive. Here Agee is communicating with an audience of his peers, and his primary concern is not to inform but to express his ideas, opinions, and even his feelings. As a result, elements in the reviews for *The Nation* tend to be less tightly integrated than in *Time*. For example, Agee praises the use of "studio-sealed Technicolor" in a scene "in which a mother and four daughters, all in festal, cake-frosting white, stroll across their lawn in spring sunlight, so properly photographed that the dresses all but become halations. . . ." This is vibrant but, in the sense that it is not clearly related to other elements of the movie like character or plot, almost static. What coherence there is comes from juxtaposition of reader inference. Agee apparently trusted his audience to make the leap. In *Time*, however, Agee places the "sober mahoganies and tender muslins and benign gaslights of the period" firmly in the thematic context of a "love story between a happy family and a way of living." Perhaps *The Nation* version is "better written"; that in *Time* is very far from being less disciplined or, considering its purpose, less effective.

Our initial assumption that vocabulary in *The Nation* review would be more formal and difficult than that in *Time* proved to be wrong. The level of diction, choice of vocabulary, use of colloquialisms, and dependence on modification are essentially the same in both. In fact, several times Agee uses the same, or very nearly the same, expression in both reviews, describing, for example, the Smith family as "well-heeled." And in both reviews his range of diction is equally wide—from "confabulations" to "sure-fire" in *Time* and from "halations" to "fearful jag" in *The Nation*.

However, the most striking characteristic of Agee's diction is the high degree of modification. He uses a profusion of simple adjectives and adverbs—some original, others bordering on the

trite—and especially in *The Nation* review, stacks adjectives *Time*-style, to modify a single noun (as in “up-to-date chromium-and-glucose style” or “festal, cake-frosting white”). He also has a fondness for using adverbs to intensify adjectives (as in “embarrassingly handicapped,” “incredibly vivid,” and “too perfectly waxen”).

Although this use—or some would say overuse—of modifiers is almost equally apparent in both reviews, Agee seems to use the stacked and intensified adjectives more freely in the *Nation* review—not always to the best effect. His unrestrained use of multiple modifiers in the *Nation* review often impedes the reader’s progress and makes the already convoluted sentences even more difficult to comprehend.

Actually, the syntax—the individual sentences more than the overall structure—of the two reviews provides the best example of how Agee adapted his writing for different audiences. Figure 1 below provides specific information about the syntactic features of the individual sentences in the two reviews. The nineteen sentences in the *Time* review are fairly conventional in length, punctuation, and structure. Simple sentences predominate, and, except for appositives, interpolated elements are few. In general, the *Time* review is clear, readable, straight-forward prose—exactly what is required in informative discourse.

The sixteen sentences in the *Nation* review are, in contrast, very long, predominantly complex and compound-complex, and contain a large number of interpolated elements—one an entire parenthetical sentence that contains two additional interpolated elements.

In general, the *Nation* review consists of sentences that are long, dense, richly textured, and sometimes almost impossible to comprehend. In fact, Agee must have had some difficulty in reading some of his own sentences because in one of his longest sentences, the one describing the Halloween episode, his subject and verb do not agree. Small wonder. The sentence has a total of seventy-eight words. It begins with the subject *her walk* (part of an intended series from which Agee was evidently distracted), and the incorrect verb *are* follows fifty-three words later. Between this subject and verb *are*, among other things, seven prepositional phrases, a nominative absolute, two subordinate clauses (one of which is parenthetical), and a second parenthetical element that functions as an appositive.²

A final and significant difference between the two reviews is Agee's use of third person point-of-view in the *Time* review and his use of first person in the *Nation*. Not only does Agee use seventeen first-person pronouns in the *Nation* review, but he also addresses his audience directly three times. Although the absence of any first- or second-person pronouns in the *Time* review may reflect that magazine's editorial policy more than Agee's rhetorical choice, the result is a review that is impersonal and objective in tone. The *Nation* review, in contrast, seems not only more personal but also less formal. And herein lies much of its charm. The objective tone of the *Time* review, though appropriate to its informative purpose, is less seductive than the more personal, even intimate, tone of the *Nation* review, which creates the impression that Agee is writing to an audience with whom he identified and, not incidentally, with whom the critics also identified.

A comparison of these two reviews, or of any of the existing pairs of reviews, provides valuable insight into how an expert writer perceives and accommodates his audience. Most important, perhaps, is the realization that, contrary to the impressions of decades of thesaurus-wielding students, vocabulary is not a major element in creating an authoritative voice or the impression of an informed audience. Far more significant are elements of structure, ranging from individual sentences to the total pattern of discourse. From Agee's more clotted sentences in *The Nation*, students can also learn that sounding intelligent is not the same as being intelligent or even intelligible. Finally, they can learn that even the best writers can fall in love with the sound of their own prose if they are not critical readers of their own work.

Finally, this assignment can lead effectively into a writing assignment in which students review a movie, television show, concert, or record album for two different magazine audiences. Although students should be allowed to choose the two magazines, they should be encouraged to select two that appeal to distinctly different audiences (for example, *Cosmopolitan* and *Parents' Magazine*, *Ms.* and *Playboy*, *The Texas Monthly* and *The New Yorker*, or *Family Circle* and *Field and Stream*). As a preliminary assignment, students can be asked to write an audience analysis for each of the magazines they choose.

An awareness of audience, like any rhetorical concept, evolves out of years of reading and writing experiences. We cannot, in

one assignment or even in one course, provide students with this awareness. The assignment based on Agee's reviews is not, obviously, the final solution. Rather it is an effective and efficient method of increasing students' awareness of audience and the role it assumes in any rhetorical situation.

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FIGURE 1

ANALYSIS OF SYNTAX AND POINT OF VIEW

Syntax	<i>Time Review</i>	<i>The Nation Review</i>
Number of sentences	19	16
Types of sentences:		
Simple	11	0
Compound	1	1
Complex	7	10
Compound/complex	0	5
Average number of words per sentence	22.6	53.1
Punctuation:		
Semicolon	0	8
Dash	0	3
Colon	1	2
Sentence beginnings:		
Subject	14	11
Prepositional phrase	2	1
Adverb clause	0	1
Participial phrase	1	1
Transition word or phrase	2	2
Use of specific syntactic structures:		
Parallel elements	0	6
Interpolated elements	2	17
Subordinate clauses	8	34
Free modifiers (appositives, nominative absolutes, participial phrases)	4	10
Inversions (verb preceding subject)	0	0

NOTES

¹The pairs, in chronological order, are reviews of *The Song of Bernadette*, *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek*, *Since You Went Away*, *Hail the Conquering Hero*, *To Have and Have Not*, *Meet Me in St. Louis*, *The Clock*, *Henry V*, *Odd Man Out*, *Ivan the Terrible*, *Monsieur Verdoux*, *Kiss of Death*, *Nightmare Alley*, and *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*.

²As a test of our findings—lest some think us too schoolmarmish—we subjected both versions of the review to a computerized stylistic analysis (GRAMMATIK). Although it failed to count the number of sentences accurately (it has trouble with periods that do not end sentences), the program did identify sixteen problems with the *Time* review: twelve instances of "Error," one of "Wordiness," and three of "Vagueness." The review for *The Nation* excited its wrath thirty-six times: twenty-seven times for "Error," six for "Vagueness," twice for "Wordiness," and once for "Redundancy." Although we have not checked these findings closely, those we have examined can be classified as "Obvious," "Irrelevant," or "Stupid."

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