

ANALYSIS

All the King's Men (1946)



Robert Penn Warren

(1905-1989)

“Dear Red.... I read your novel and was enthusiastic. Wrote a letter to Lambert Davis about it, which he wanted to use as a blurb—now he tells me that he lost the letter and won’t I do it over again. It’s been a little driven out of my mind by a long trip...but the gist of my remarks was that one felt from the first page that here was a picture of how things were—that one was held from the first page—that your work as a novelist, always brilliant but sometimes dispersed, had this time come together, taken shape.... For your own ear, let me add that the Huey Long figure is more interesting than the hero, that I think the structure does get a little loose beyond the middle of the book (until the drama at the end) through this divided focus; that the women are fine, especially the Governor’s wife and Sadie Burke; that all together it’s a damned impressive job, the best novel I have read since God knows when.”

Malcolm Cowley

Letter to Warren (24 July 1946)

The Portable Malcolm Cowley, ed. Donald W. Faulkner
(Viking/Penguin 1990) 480

“The protagonist is said to be based on Huey Long [Governor of Louisiana, Democrat]. Willie Stark, a self-educated Southern Backcountry man, infatuated with power and dreams of public service, is elected governor of his state. Vital, unscrupulous, and demagogic, he attracts into this employ Jack Burden, a newspaperman and ‘student of history’ in search of truth. Sadie Burke, an intense and intrepid secretary, who becomes his mistress; and Tiny Duffy, a fat yes-man. Willie sends Jack to Burden’s Landing, his childhood home, to find something with which to blackmail Judge Irwin, a dignified, honorable, old family friend and former attorney general, who reneged on a promise to the Boss.

In his ‘excursion into the past,’ Jack renews old friendships with Adam Stanton, an idealistic surgeon, and his sister Anne, the unmarried patrician who was his first love. Through Jack they become involved with the Boss, who fascinates and repels them and fulfills an incompleteness in their characters: Anne eventually replaces Sadie as his mistress and Adam becomes director of the hospital Willie built as an

altruistic act. Jack gets evidence that Irwin took a bribe, but the Judge won't submit to Willie and commits suicide. From his grief-stricken mother Jack learns that Irwin was his father.

Adam, after receiving news of Anne's affair by an anonymous telephone call instigated by Sadie, gets into the Capitol and, in shooting Willie, is himself killed. Jack returns to Burden's Landing, marries Anne, and comes to realize that Willie was corrupted by success and destroyed by a conflict between the will to power and the desire to perform good works. At last able to understand his own past and aware of the infinite consequences of a single act and the common guilt of men, Jack prepares to 'go into the convulsion of the world...and the awful responsibility of Time'."

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83) 20

"The South...produced, in addition to Faulkner, its share of social critics in the serious and introspective vein. A younger member of the Nashville 'Fugitive' group of poet-critics, Robert Penn Warren had published two promising novels—*Night Rider* (1939) and *At Heaven's Gate* (1943)—before the end of the second war. His reputation was made secure by *All the King's Men* (1946), a popular as well as a critical success. Thereafter he seldom failed to score with the reading public. His popularity is not easy to explain, for the novels are subtle in theme and construction and are filled with symbolic meaning. Yet there is plenty of story interest and violent action... Two themes are dominant in Warren's novels: the need for self-fulfillment, which can be achieved only through self-recognition, and the inevitability of contamination by the world when one steps out of the prison of self.... In *All the King's Men*, Jack Burden, close to the corrupting power of Willie Stark (modeled on Huey Long), attempts to understand the evil that flows from Willie and so discovers his own identity."

Willard Thorp and Robert E. Spiller
Literary History of the United States, 3rd edition
(Macmillan 1946-63) 1404-05

"Warren is a faulty writer, but he is worth a dozen petty perfectionists. Though commonly associated with 'formalists' and 'classicists' in criticism, he is close to the type of romantic genius: robust, fluent, versatile, at his worst clever and clumsy, at his best brilliant and profound."

Eric Bentley
Kenyon Review
(Summer 1948) 424

"The wide range of his subjects, the treatment of problems that touch upon the fundamentals of human existence, the vitality of his characters, the skill with which he creates suspense and atmosphere, and the richness of his language, are characteristics that one does not often find together in a modern writer.... Like Hemingway and Steinbeck, he believes in the principle of solidarity as an essential value, but different from them, he stresses its inevitable clash with other elements of human behavior, above all with those of ambition, love of power, physical desire. He stands for the fundamental honesty that is so vital an issue for the generation between the two wars, but he realizes that the process of arriving at some truth may have devastating effects on the seeker."

Heinrich Straumann
University of Zurich
American Literature in the Twentieth Century
(Hutchinson 1951) 114-15

"Both the rhetoric and the 'smart-aleck' commentary of *All the King's Men* have been roundly condemned by critics, usually without reference to their functional significance.... The cynical smart-aleck pose is Jack's defense against an alien world, the 'fancy writer' the smothered and hence exaggerated ideal of himself. The two continually warring elements are further overlaid by the retrospective reflections of the mature philosophic Jack of the book's end.... Warren's ear is uncommonly acute, but the most valuable faculty he possesses is human insight, a shrewd and at the same time sympathetic ability to penetrate imaginatively into the inner life of his characters. In the most caustic vignette offered through Jack Burden's squinted eyes, the pity of human wastage is never lost. Warren's sense of 'irreducible evil' and of

human frailty permits an extremely wide range to a natural sympathy that is completely devoid of sentimentality—ironic in the [I. A.] Richards sense that it is immune to irony.”

John M. Bradbury
Accent (Spring 1953) 87-89

“I find all of the novels of Robert Penn Warren to be variations on a single theme, symbolized in the polarities of violence and order. He could not have chosen two concepts more arresting to the modern reader or more deeply imbedded in the history of his country and his region.... Robert Penn Warren has uncovered the historical sources of American violence and made them available for literary purposes, all four novels taking off from violent episodes in history that are used to illuminate modern meanings. But in writing tragedy, though the downward plunge into action takes up the most space and provides the greatest interest, violence alone is not enough. The tragic note cannot be struck without a positive world view.... For Warren murder, rape, and arson are simply the most effective dramatic means of developing one half of his theme: that *violence is life without principle*. Nor, to illustrate the other half, does he use orderliness for its own sake (there are no police chiefs or private detectives among his heroes); to him *order is living by principles*, even when the particular effort to do so falls far short of perfection.”

Charles R. Anderson
Southern Renaissance
eds. Louis D. Rubin and Robert D. Jacobs
(Johns Hopkins 1953) 207-09

“What he has managed to create (in *All the King's Men*) is a work of literature that is a fully realized ‘concrete universal,’ a work which presents particulars everywhere concretely imaged yet having together a kind of universal relevance or reference—a work of the order of *Crime and Punishment* or Pope’s satires or the *Oedipus Tyrannus*.... Such creation always depends upon a unified, integral imaginative grasp which apprehends reality in many dimensions or on many levels simultaneously. A concrete-universal cannot be schemed into existence; it issues from a sensibility aware of the implication of the universal in the concrete and a narrative skill or felicity which is able to exhibit, not merely assert or weakly suggest, their fusion. It is Warren’s particular distinction to have created such a work in these times of fragmented sensibility.”

Neal Woodruff, Jr.
All the King's Men: A Symposium
(Carnegie Institute of Technology 1957) 62

“*All the King's Men* (1946) describes the career of Willie Stark, a Louisiana dictator and demagogue, as seen through the eyes of Jack Burden, a newspaperman who becomes one of his assistants. Stark’s career is roughly based on that of Huey Long, although the parallel is confined to the public part of Long’s career; the family relationships and the inner psychological tensions of Willie’s organization are Warren’s inventions. Willie Stark begins as a naïve country lawyer who sincerely wants to better the lot of the ‘hicks’ and ‘rednecks’ from whose ranks he sprang; he is taken in hand by two people, Burden and the wisecracking ‘secretary’ Sadie Burke, and with his natural talent for demagoguery he soon becomes a powerful figure. As the novel opens he is already governor, and Burden, a trained researcher, is engaged in digging up material on enemies Stark hopes to slander and blackmail. Meanwhile Stark’s family life deteriorates; his wife Lucy, a country school-teacher, is repelled by his new coarseness and arrogance and leaves him, and his son Tom, spoiled and self-satisfied, is continually in trouble.

The remaining important characters of the novel are Anne Stanton, daughter of an old Southern family, whom Burden loves but who eventually becomes Stark’s mistress; Adam Stanton, her brother and Burden’s friend, an eminent surgeon who accepts a position as director of a medical center Stark is building; and Judge Irwin, who has befriended Burden in his boyhood but is later betrayed by Burden because he has become Stark’s enemy. The plot, becoming successively more involved, ends in a series of catastrophes: Irwin commits suicide and Burden learns that the man he has destroyed was actually his father; Tom, playing football while out of training through dissipation, breaks his neck and dies; and finally Adam, discovering his sister’s relations with Stark, kills him and is in turn killed by Stark’s bodyguard. As the novel ends Burden, disillusioned and cynical, nevertheless sets out with Anne to build a new life out of the wreckage of the old.

This novel is more than a mere fictionalized portrait of a dictator; it is an intricate network of moral conflicts and psychological relations in which each character exerts an influence on the others. The central character is Burden, cynical and detached yet retaining a basic decency. Stark himself is sometimes genuinely concerned for the people who worship him as an idol, sometimes callous and brutal. Adam Stanton, consecrated, idealistic, somewhat resembles the hero of Lewis' *Arrowsmith*; Anne, who serves merely as a focus for Burden's love and disillusionment, is less well motivated but still a convincing character. The minor characters—Sadie, the politician Tiny Duffy, the perverted chauffeur-gunman Sugar-Boy—are vivid and well-drawn.”

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature 4
(Barron's Educational Series 1958) 246-47

“Jack Burden, a young intellectual, narrates the story of the rise and fall of Willie Stark, a Southern demagogue obviously modeled on Huey Long. Willie starts off as a popular reformer, but degenerates into an unprincipled power-seeker. Even at his worst, however, Stark accomplishes some good things, such as building a clinic. This forces Burden to confront the problem of identifying good and evil, and leads him to a new self-understanding at the end of the book, after Stark has been assassinated. Warren adapted the Pulitzer Prize winning novel into a motion picture which received an Academy Award, and into a stage play.”

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962) 18-19

“Although Robert Penn Warren is a generation or so older...he is technically a post-Second-World War novelist. That is, the larger body of his fiction, including his major novel *All the King's Men*, has been published since 1945. Though a valuable novelist, Warren is also notably a playwright, poet, teacher, scholar, and critic—a man of letters in the best sense....

Almost all of Warren's fiction suffers somewhat from the determined this-marriage-can-be-saved compatibility between the novelist and Warren the explicator. The harder he tries to fuse the two selves, the farther apart they spring, as if resistant to the meddling of an outsider. As Eric Bentley has actually observed, ‘The problem lies precisely in his [Warren's] being so two-sidedly gifted; he evidently finds it endlessly difficult to combine his two sorts of awareness.’ Warren's novels are informed by a fairly complex set of intellectual alternatives, while at the same time they rely for their movement on frenetically charged melodramatic action, often for its own sake, for the sake merely of narrative excitement. Though Warren is a serious novelist, and at his best a brilliant prose writer, there is a curious separation in his novels between the events of the narrative and the meaning Warren insists they accommodate.

Of Warren's eight novels to date, *All the King's Men* (1946) seems to me the most achieved, the most serious and the most enduring—for all its flaws, one of our near-great novels. For some time *All the King's Men* was misread as a disturbingly sympathetic fictionalized account of the demagogic career of Huey Long. Approached as an historical document, the book was condemned by politically liberal critics as a florid, rhetorical justification for a Napoleonic brand of American neo-fascism. There is no need any longer to point out the irrelevancy of this attack, to explain that Jack Burden is the center of the novel and that Willie Stark, ‘the man of fact,’ is not *actually* Huey Long, but a kind of ‘Mistah Kurtz.’ [Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*].

In fact, in recent years a critical orthodoxy has clustered about Warren's novels... Though Warren intends Jack Burden to be the center of the novel, Willie Stark is by virtue of his energy the more realized and interesting character. Burden, as thinly disguised authorial spokesman, is a literary conception, created from other fiction rather than from life, a combination, if you can imagine it, of Nick Carraway [*The Great Gatsby*] and Sam Spade. Whatever Warren's intention, the character of Willie Stark, a colossus of human and inhuman possibilities, inadvertently dominates the novel. Inevitably, a distortion results, the kind of distortion which would permit *All the King's Men* to be read as the story of Willie Stark's rise and fall (a tragedy of over-reaching pride brought low by retributive justice).

For all that, Jack Burden, acquiescent narrator, at once vicarious Willie and vicarious Adam, is the novel's center, the ultimate synthesizer of its polarities. While Willie and Adam die unfulfilled, Jack completes the spiritual voyage; he moves, an exemplary sleepwalker, from sin to recognition and guilt to redemption and rebirth. Jack's ritual search for a true father, or at least a true absolute, leads him into Willie's employ (on the coat-tails of his political ascension). Ironically, there is a certain amount of narcissism in Jack's discipleship because he has, in part, created Willie the 'Boss,' catalyzed him from the raw materials of 'Cousin Willie from the country.' At the outset, Willie is an innocent, a do-gooder whose campaign speeches are scrupulously honest and drearily dull. Jack gives him his first taste of the apple: 'Hell, make 'em cry, make 'em laugh, make 'em think you're God-Almighty. Or make 'em mad.'

This is the first and last time that Jack gives Willie a short course in cynical wisdom. Once having learned the lesson, Willie becomes the teacher, the authority on man's fallen nature. As Willie tells Jack later on in his (and Warren's) characteristic evangelical rhetoric: 'Man is conceived in sin and born in corruption and passeth from the stink of the didie to the stench of the shroud'... It is Jack, however, who has initiated Willie's conversion from the man of idea to the man of fact, from romanticism to pragmatism. By demonstrating to him that his start in politics was made possible by political corruption, Jack destroys Willie's sense of innocence...

While Jack, who suffers chronically from paralysis of the will, converts Willie through abstract example, Willie converts the uncommitted Jack through practical demonstration. The 'Boss' Willie is Jack as he would like to be, but only if he could watch himself being it. For all his admiration of action, Jack is essentially a spectator, an historian waiting for history to happen. Willie performs history for him, tests the efficacy of Jack's theories, while Jack with clinical dispassion sits on the sidelines taking notes. (Jack's role as spectator is defined symbolically in the scene in which he sits in the hospital amphitheater watching Adam Stanton perform a lobotomy.) As a dutiful son, Jack Burden participates in and even admires his father's ruthless pragmatism without sensing his own culpability. What you refuse to know can't hurt you, but, as Jack discovers, for only so long as you can remain blind. The longer you avoid self-knowledge, however, the more vulnerable you are to its intrusion.

Aside from Willie, Jack has two other fathers: a nominal one who he thinks is real and whom he has rejected (Ellis Burden) and a real one whom he admires and inadvertently kills (Judge Irwin). When Willie assigns him to get 'something on' Judge Irwin, who has been outspoken in his criticism of Stark's administration, Jack is forced for the first time to choose between the prerogatives of opposing fathers. (Though he doesn't know that Irwin is his natural father, he respects, resents, and feels obligated to Irwin as a son to a father because of Irwin's decency and friendship over the years.)

Looking for a way out of his predicament, Jack tells Willie that Irwin is 'washed in the blood' and that an investigation of Irwin's past will be a waste of time. Willie knows, however, that man is fallen, that 'there is always something.' In investigating the facts of Irwin's life, Jack puts to the test the last illusion he has permitted himself to retain, that despite the rank and malodorous corruption which underlies so much of contemporary life, a truly good man like Irwin remains incorruptible. Jack has another naïve notion which justifies the political dirt-digging he does so that Willie can blackmail his opponents: that the truth, regardless of its immediate effects, is always salutary and that unadulterated fact constitutes truth.

In search of the hidden facts of his real father's past, Jack visits Ellis Burden, the Scholarly Attorney turned Religious fanatic, his nominal father. It is here that the divergent influences of his trinity of fathers come into focus and are symbolically defined. Once again, Jack rejects the Scholarly Attorney, the weak saint, whose life of squalor, piety, and indiscriminating compassion seems purposeless to him when contrasted with Willie Stark's vigorous usefulness. This dispossessed nominal father has adopted a substitute son, George, a former circus aerialist who has reverted to childhood. George, redeemed through trauma into helpless innocence, spends his time making angels from masticated bread crusts. He is, in an ironic sense, Jack's brother. George's idiot purity embarrasses Jack and he rejects the image of his opposite (his innocent brother) along with his Scholarly Attorney father, along with the past. But, at the same time, he is again rejected by his father, who refuses to answer his questions about Irwin—who is unable to hear

him when Jack calls him 'Father.' The visit is a failure; Jack learns nothing about Irwin, and he experiences the loss of his father all over again.

The uncovering of Irwin's one dishonorable act has massive...ramifications. In consequence of Jack's discovery, Judge Irwin commits suicide, Anne Stanton has a self-destructive affair with Willie Stark, Adam Stanton kills Willie Stark, and Willie Stark's bodyguard kills Adam Stanton. For all his disinterested intentions, Jack must bear the burden of responsibility for this proliferation of tragedy. He has set in motion as surely and perfectly as if he had consciously planned it. The 'facts' that incriminate the Judge also indicated the complicity of Governor Stanton, who deliberately covered up for his friend. This further discovery destroys for both Anne and Adam Stanton the idealized notion of their father that has sustained them in their myth of purity as children of innocence—descendants of innocence. When Anne discovers that the purity of the old governor is tainted, she is able to shed her restrictive moral restraints as a snake sheds its skin. If there is no pure God, a pure Satan is the next best thing—he is at least whole. With the loss of her good father, Anne commits a sort of symbolic incest with the bad father—the new governor—searching for an absolute to replace the one she had lost. The loss of innocence in the novel for Jack, Willie, Anne, and Adam is concomitant with the loss of the good father.

It is Adam, Jack's innocent self, the least convincing of all Warren's characters, who guilelessly gives Jack his first lead in uncovering Irwin's blemished past. Adam answers Jack's cunning, direct question, 'Was Judge Irwin ever broke?' because he is too ingenuous not to. However, Adam's innocent volunteering of harmless information about Judge Irwin is, in its effects, irresponsible as only innocence can be. It gives Jack the necessary clue to unearth Irwin's guilty secret, which, in ramification, destroys each of the participants in the central action of the novel. Adam's ingenuousness here anticipates his later, more destructive, act of innocence—his self-righteous assassination of Willie Stark. To say any more about Adam is beside the point. Whereas some of Warren's characters are half-human, half-idea, Adam is pure idea; he is an allegorical personification of *Innocence*. But without life, he is finally nothing, a figment of the author's imagination.

All of Warren's main characters experience at one time or another the loss of innocence and are characterized in terms of their accommodation to their Fall. Judge Irwin, sustained like Adam by the myth of self-purity, has attempted to evade the implications of his one intentionally corrupt act (his Fall) by shutting it out of his memory. Some thirty years later, Jack, the unacknowledged child of his loins, confronts him with the forgotten past. Jack's confrontation has a twofold significance; Jack is the manifestation of Irwin's other sin, his adulterous affair with Jack's mother, so that he becomes for Irwin the symbol of his fallen past, the tale-bearer of one crime and the embodiment of the other. Warren images Jack's information as a barb finding meat, suggesting its lethal nature. The Judge, illuminated by self-knowledge at once destructive and redemptive, bears his pain stoically. For a moment Irwin is tempted to reveal to his son the nature of their relationship in order that Jack withhold his information, but he doesn't—because it is beside the point....

By not telling Jack—an act of moral restraint—Irwin accepts full responsibility for his sin. Irwin's withholding of his 'truth' is, given the occasion, more honorable than Jack's revelation of his. The next morning Jack is awakened by his mother's 'bright, beautiful silver soprano screams.' In her hysteria, she continues to shriek at Jack, 'You killed him. You killed him,' without identifying the 'him': "'Killed who?' I demanded, shaking her. 'Your father,' she said, 'your father and oh! you killed him'." Without further clarification, Jack realizes what has happened, as if he had known all the time, in the secret wisdom of instinct, that Irwin was his father. That the Judge shoots himself through the heart indicates symbolically the implication of Jack's betrayal. Despite the terrible consequences of his act, Jack reflects on his responsibility for Irwin's suicide, as if it were an intellectual abstraction which does not touch him personally. At first he considers his father's death as the just retribution of Mortimer Littlepaugh, the man whom Irwin's own corrupt act drove to suicide....

As a result of Irwin's death, Jack loses two fathers, the weak but saintly Scholarly Attorney and the strong but tainted Judge. Willie Stark, the evil father, the father who has cuckolded him, is all that is left for Jack in a world of decimated fathers, and finally Jack kills him too. As Jack tells us, 'I had dug up the truth and the truth always kills the father.' In a symbolic sense, only after Jack destroys his fathers can he

become a man himself. As part of his quest for knowledge (manhood), Jack kills the fathers of his world only to resurrect them finally in himself.

Jack's articulated intellection dissipates the effect of this scene as it does much of the richly rendered experience of the novel. Granted his cleverness, Jack is verbally aware of too much, and also too little; Warren is forever peeking over his shoulder, but withholding from his narrator the whole picture. That Jack as narrator is almost always the reception of an insight ahead of the reader is one of the recurring distractions of the novel. With rare exception, the reader is not permitted to discover meanings; they are discovered for him.

When Willie loses his innocence, he is transformed almost overnight from the son of his world to its father. Willie's spiritual metamorphosis (which resembles Kurtz's in *Heart of Darkness*), though thematically subordinate to Jack's guilt-and-redemption passage, dominates the action of the novel. Willie's career anticipates and parallels Jack's, as a father anticipates a son's, though it is enlarged where Jack's is diminished, and Willie never successfully makes the spiritual voyage back from hell. Like Kurtz, the 'Boss' has gone too far into darkness ever to return into light.

Willie becomes governor. Ostensibly, his ends have not changed, only his means of achieving them. Gradually, however, the ends become inseparable from their means and Willie yields himself to his most voracious interior devils. The thesis is classic and bromidic: power tends to corrupt; absolute power tends to corrupt absolutely. With a difference, however: Warren inverts the cliché; for all his sins, 'Willie is a great man.' This is the verdict of his wife Lucy, to whom he has been unfaithful, whose son he has destroyed through vanity, and of Jack Burden, who has moved from blindness to whole sight represents, one must believe, the point of view of the novel, this must stand as Warren's judgment of Stark. The question remains: Is it a reasonable judgment borne out by the experience of the novel? Or is it a piece of gratuitous iconoclasm, the cliché-anti-cliché?

Warren enlists sympathy for Willie by indicating that the context in which he is forced to operate (southern politics) is unreclaimably corrupt. Whereas Tiny Duffy and Willie's opponent MacMurfee are interested in petty graft as an end, Willie's ego wants nothing less than recognition by posterity. Willie is a real devil at sup among dwarfed, flabby devils; in that he is more real and more potent than the others, he is to that extent more admirable. Once Willie has fallen, he discovers his true voice, the voice of the rabble rouser, the appeal to primordial violence.

The easier it becomes for Willie to manipulate the crowd, the less respect he has for its common fallen humanity. As he becomes more powerful, he becomes, like Kurtz and like Macbeth, more voracious, more proud, more evil. Willie's palpable moral decline is manifested for us when he covers up for an underling who has taken graft. It is not in the act of covering up but in his justification for it that Willie's inhumanity and presumption are manifested.... Willie's self-defining presumption is that he *knows* himself a superior being, aspiring to law, to omnipotence, to God. The machine metaphor he employs reveals his attitude not only toward Bryan but toward the populace in general: people are things to be used by him, 'the Boss,' for *his* purposes. From Willie's 'bulging-eyed' point-of-view, everything, all existence has been set in motion to serve him.

Willie's will to power, his lust for omnipotence, is defeated by what might be called a tragic virtue. Despite Willie's professed thesis that 'you have to make the good out of the bad because that's all you have to make it out of,' that all men are innately corrupt, that 'political graft is the grease that keeps the wheels from squeaking,' he wants to build a magnificent, immaculate hospital as his gift to the state, untainted by the usual petty corruption and graft. In pursuing this ideal, Willie refuses a deal with Gummy Larson, the power behind his enemy MacMurfee, whose defection to Willie would leave the 'Boss' all but unopposed. Having fallen from Paradise into Hell, Willie wishes—his one romantic illusion—to regain his lost purity, to buy back Paradise... That Willie, so compellingly articulate on other occasions, cannot cogently rationalize his motives suggests that they are contradictory to him as well as to Jack. He wants at once to be noble and to have everyone admire his nobility—selflessness for the sake of self. Yet, and herein lies the contradiction, he also wants redemption.

As part of his obsessive desire to transcend his corruption, his dream of greatness, Willie hires Adam Stanton to run his hospital, hoping through connection, through transfusion of spirit, to inform himself with Adam's innocence. Ironically, Willie has, with almost perfect instinct, chosen his redeemer, his redeemer as executioner. Adam and Willie as ideological polarities must inevitably merge or destroy each other. Jack unites them; he is the means of their collaborative self-destruction. Willie's brief affair with Adam's sister Anne is another extension of his specious quest for innocence. What Willie pursues is not innocence, really, but seeming innocence—respectability. His holy search for the false grail is the tragic flaw in his otherwise perfect expediency.

Willie's lost innocence resides not with Adam and Anne, but with his wife Lucy and his father; his substitution of Anne for Lucy symbolizes his degeneration, his spiritual blindness. In his obsession with purity, Willie makes an enemy of the spiteful Tiny Duffy and puts too much faith in the erratically naive, the fallen innocent, Adam, thereby predicating his own destruction. Duffy makes an anonymous phone call to Adam, falsifying the implications of Anne's affair with Willie. The inflexibly idealistic Adam, unable to live in an imperfect world, acts as the unwitting tool of the vengeful petty corruption and gratuitously murders Willie. Specious innocence and cowardly corruption conspire to destroy the 'Boss' at the height of his power and at the threshold of his apparent self-reform.

Willie's deathbed scene is the most potent of the various dramatic climaxes in the novel. In it Warren brings sharply into focus the moral paradox of Willie's ethic—the tragedy of his unachieved, over-reaching ambition; it is rendered as Judge Irwin's death is not, as a profoundly affecting experience. It is the death of Jack's last symbolic father—in extension of all his fathers—leaving him, for a time, alone and uncommitted in the chaos of his ungoverned universe.... Willie's deathbed claim is an easy one to make; it is as impossible to prove as to disprove. One is tempted to say to him, as Jake does to Brett at the end of *The Sun Also Rises*, "Isn't it pretty to think so?" though significantly Jack does not. However, it is not out of motives of sentiment that Jack withholds his ironic disbelief. He is not fully convinced that Willie's self-justification is unjust. The possibility remains: 'It might have been different—even yet.' Willie is, after all, a paradox.

In becoming Willie's executioner, Adam, in his blind way, follows the example of Willie's career—he becomes Willie. For the 'man of fact' and the 'man of idea,' as Jack classified them, there has been an alternation of roles. Each incomplete, seeking completeness, has chosen his polar opposite as an exemplary image. In building the hospital without the 'grease' of political graft, Willie is operating idealistically—in Adam's image. In brutally shooting down Willie, Adam is acting as disciple of the man whose power-authority is symbolized by the meat axe. From Jack's standpoint, Willie is superior to Adam: 'A man's virtue maybe but the defect of his desire, as his crime may be but a function of his virtue.' If a man has not faced temptation, or, as in Adam's case, has not admitted its existence, his purity is illusory and beside the point.

Willie's relationship to his son Tom is another variation on the novel's father-son conflict, and it serves as an ironic comment both on Jack's relationship to his real father and to Willie. Jack's search into Irwin's discreditable past is continually juxtaposed to scenes of Willie worshipfully watching Tom perform on the football field: 'He's my boy—and there's not any like him—he'll be All-American...' Tom Stark is the perfect physical extension of Willie's wishful self-image; he is all man of action—with the bottle, on the gridiron, and in bed—one hundred percent performance, no waste. Burden sees him as 'one hundred and eighty pounds of split-second, hair trigger, Swiss-watch beautiful mechanism.' Inhuman but perfect, he is the embodiment of Willie's crass values. Willie is willing to overlook Tom's personal decay so long as he continues to function as a perfect mechanism on the football field and so sate Willie's rapacious vanity. Willie's attitude toward Tom is symbolic of his attitude toward the governmental machine—proud, permissive, and blind. Corruption is permissible because it 'keeps the wheels from squeaking.'

His failure with Tom is symptomatic of his potential failure as governor; to satisfy his vanity Willie would have all men, even his own son made into functioning 'things.' Inadvertently, Willie destroys Tom, who is, outside of personal power, the 'thing' he loves most in his world. When Tom has been barred from playing football for breaking college rules (the boy manages, among his heroics, to cripple one girl in an auto crash and to impregnate another), Willie pressures the coach into reinstating him. Almost immediately

after Tom comes into the game, as if in direct consequence of Willie's corrupt use of authority, his spine is snapped by a vicious tackle. As a result, the son of the man-of-action is left actionless, without the use of his arms and legs. As the emotional paralysis of Jack catalyzes, in a sense, the action of Willie, Willie's action causes the physical paralysis of Tom. The irony is evident: ultimately a machine stops, even a perfect Swiss-made mechanism breaks down if it is dropped too often. The sins of the father are visited on the son. Similarly, the 'breaking' of the son anticipates the destruction of the father; it is an intimation of Willie's mortality.

Whereas in Jack's case the son kills the father, in Willie's the father kills the son. However, Tom is, through the ineluctable chain of cause and effect, also the instrument of Willie's destruction. As a consequence of Tom's impregnating the daughter of one of MacMurfee's men, Willie is forced through blackmail to compromise his principles and give the corrupt Gummy Larson the hospital-construction contract. After Tom's injury, however, the guilt-ridden Willie breaks the contract. Tiny Duffy, who has been intermediary in the deal, exacts his vengeance; he initiates Willie's murder through Adam's pride. Before Adam shoots him down, Willie accepts Tom's paralysis as a judgment for his sins and seeks expiation through good works: 'you got to start somewhere.' As Irwin ultimately redeems Jack, Tom almost redeems Willie, but not quite; after his fall, Humpty-Dumpty cannot be put together again. Willie, like Tom's paralyzed body, is denied rebirth. Willie's death does, however, make possible the redemption of Tom's illegitimate son, whom Lucy decides to adopt and name, of all names, Willie Stark. Through his son's son, Willie regains his lost innocence.

With the death of Willie, the effective father, Jack has no one left to whom he can transfer his responsibility. However, before he can achieve manhood, Jack has one other father with whom he has to come to terms—Cass Mastern; the subject of his Ph.D. dissertation is Jack's historic father. The episode of Cass Mastern, a self-contained short story within the novel, is intended as a gloss (in Warren's term, 'the myth') on the larger action of the main narrative. Though it illuminates certain themes in *All the King's Men* and is in itself an exceptionally resonant tale, Cass's tragedy is hardly indispensable to the novel. In any event, at the cost of temporarily stopping the action, it gives added dimension to Burden's odyssey into self-knowledge, his passage from innocence to limbo to guilt to redemption. Though Jack has pieced together all the facts of Cass Mastern's life, he is unable to complete his dissertation. The significance of Cass's story eludes him, though he is aware that it has significance. Neither Jack's early philosophic idealism ('What you don't know won't hurt you') nor his disillusioned belief in the Great Twitch (that man is an involuntary mechanism and no one is responsible for anything) is adequate to a comprehension of Cass's sainthood.

Cass, though innocent and virtuous, falls into an affair with Annabelle Trice, his best friend's wife. As a consequence, three lives are destroyed. Thereafter Cass, suffused with guilt, makes his existence a continuous penance for his sin. He finally joins the southern army and gives up his life while refusing to fire a shot in his own defense. Through martyrdom he achieves expiation. At the end, Cass becomes a religious fanatic, and on his deathbed he sends a strange letter to his successful brother. The passage is typical of the evangelical eloquence of Warren's rhetoric: 'Remember me, but without grief....' Cass's martyrdom is exemplary; it is not only his own guilt for which he has suffered and died but the guilt of the land, 'the common guilt of man.' In the mystery of Cass's life and death resides the meaning of Jack's life, which is to say the essential meaning of all our lives. As Cass has written in his journal, and as Jack finally discovers for himself, 'It is a human defect—to try to know oneself by the self of another. One can only know oneself in God and His great eye.' After the recognition of his guilt, it is in God that Cass does find himself; similarly, after Jack accepts his guilt, it is in himself that he finds Cass and, ultimately, God. The recognition of guilt for Cass (and by implication for Jack) is an awesome discovery...

Cass's revelation is existential; that is, since the ramifications of a particular act are for the most part unknowable and the inherent responsibility for its entire chain reaction inescapable, the burden of guilt is endless—and unbearable. So Cass, in search of redemption, tracks down the various consequences of his act of sin only to discover that there is no undoing of the harm he has already caused. What he has done is irrevocable. It is only by 'living in God's eye'—a saint's life—that he can hope to achieve expiation and redemption. Since Duncan Trice, who is considerably older than Cass, initiates him into vice, he is, in effect, the father of Cass's adultery with Annabelle. What Cass has learned from Duncan he had put into

practice with Duncan's wife. Therefore, Cass's crime, Warren suggests, is implicitly incestuous, for if Duncan, the man whose death he effects, is his 'substitute' father, Annabelle as his wife is a sort of symbolic mother. This is essentially what Cass understands when he proclaims himself 'the chief of sinners and a plague spot on the body of the human world.'

Cass's experience acts as an anticipatory parallel to Jack's own nightmare passage, though the connections are remote and abstract. When Jack discovers that Duffy 'had killed Stark as surely as though his own hand had held the revolver,' he feels absolved of responsibility, free at last to act, to vindicate the deaths of Willie and Adam. However, Jack's newborn sense of freedom is illusory. It is for him another evasion of responsibility, in a way the least admirable of all. Convincing himself as Willie had, and as Adam had when he squeezed the trigger, that an act is a self-willed moral entity, Jack assumes for himself the role of avenging angel; he wishes to destroy Duffy in order to justify himself. However, after Jack chastises Duffy, 'You are the stinkiest louse God ever let live!' and threatens him with exposure, he realizes that 'I had tried to make Duffy into a scapegoat for me and to set myself off from Duffy,' that Duffy is his alter ego, his corrupt brother, and that whatever he had said about Duffy was also true of himself. In the power of Warren's prose, we get the visceral horror of Jack's self-revulsion....

Jack, by evading the responsibility for his own sins, had, amid the corruption about him, retained the illusion of innocence. Since he had not acted out of conscious choice, but had merely yielded to the demands of the 'Boss,' he had been able to slough off the burden of guilt. Once he discovers himself free to act, he becomes aware that the possibility of all acts, the whole spectrum of good and evil, are in him; that he is, as human being, Oedipus and Duffy and Willie and everyone else. Having discovered the magnitude of his guilt—that he is responsible not only for his own sins but for all sins—Jack begins his return from the interior hell in which he has languished so long. He cannot leave hell, of course, until he has discovered its boundaries.

When Jack runs into 'Sugar Boy,' Willie's driver and bodyguard (*the* man of action), he is presented with the opportunity of destroying Duffy with no risk to himself. He restrains himself not out of the paralysis ('the defect of desire') which prevented him many years before from making love to Anne when she offered herself to him but because Duffy is his 'twin,' and if he can sanction Duffy's murder he must sanction his own. (Cass refused to kill in the Civil War because: 'How can I, who have taken the life of my friend, take the life of an enemy, for I have used up my right to blood?') Jack's refusal to take easy vengeance on Duffy is not inaction but a decisive moral act.

For a time, as a projection of his self-hate, Jack has a baleful view of all humanity. When he comes to love his mother, whom he has rejected long ago, he is able as a consequence to stop hating himself, which also means no longer hating the rest of the world. The redemption of his mother through the recognition of her love for Irwin (his real father) is Jack's salvation; it re-establishes for him the existential possibility of love. However, as Jack discovers, the process has been circular, for 'by killing my father I have saved my mother's soul.' This discovery leads Jack into a further revelation (which is Warren's thesis) that 'all knowledge that is worth anything is maybe paid for by blood.'

For all his belief in the purgative powers of knowledge, Jack lies to his mother when she asks about the motive for Irwin's suicide, telling her that his father killed himself because of failing health. It is, however, a salutary lie, the least he can do for his mother. As his mother's rebirth has resurrected him, Jack's lie resurrects the image of his father for his mother...the lie is noble, and, in a sense, the truth.) His reconciliation with his mother begins his reconciliation with the past. For without the past Jack cannot really participate in the world of the present. By rediscovering the past he is able to re-create the present, to be spiritually reborn into a world in which before his destructive self-awareness he had only acquiescently participated. He moves into his father's house, affirming his linear heritage, accepting for himself at last the role of man and father. He marries his boyhood sweetheart Anne Stanton, to whom he had once in love and innocence committed his life irrevocably.... Anne is the symbol to him of his lost innocence, and in redeeming her he at last redeems himself. Having accepted the past with its hate and love, its guilt and pride, its evil and good, Jack can be regenerated into the world of the present, redeemed through suffering and self-knowledge.

When Stark and Adam destroy each other, Jack emerges from the vicarious experience of their deaths as the synthesis of their alternatives, as a whole man. Through the responsibility his manhood imposes on him, he brings the Scholarly Attorney, old and dying, into his home. Finally, it is the old man, the religious fanatic, the 'unreal' father from whom Jack learns the ultimate facts of life, who becomes a 'real' father. ('Each of us is the son of a million fathers.') Jack comes to believe in the old man's religious doctrine that 'The creation of evil is...the index of God's glory and His power. That had to be so that the creation of good might be the index of man's glory and power. But by God's help. By His help and His wisdom.'

Through his 'father,' Jack is able to understand the significance of Cass Mastern's life in the 'eye of God.' After Jack's nominal father dies and he has completed his study of Cass Mastern, fulfilling at last all of his obligations to the past, he can leave Judge Irwin's house, the womb of his rebirth, and 'go into the convulsion of the world, out of history into history and the awful responsibility of time.' While Cass has sacrificed his life to redeem himself, Jack achieves redemption somewhat easily and painlessly. For this reason, Jack's ultimate salvation seems externally imposed (redemption as happy ending), abstract and literary rather than real. Yet to object to Warren's fine novel because it falls short of its potentialities seems finally presumption. To have it better than it is would be at the expense of gambling with what it has already achieved—a fool's risk. *All the King's Men* is a great scarred bear of a book whose faults and virtues determine one another. The greatness of this bear devolves upon the magnificence of its faults and the transcendence into art of its palpable mortality."

Jonathan Baumbach

The Landscape of Nightmare: Studies in the Contemporary American Novel
(New York U 1965) 16-34

"Robert Penn Warren's finest fictional achievement, *All the King's Men* [is] regional, Naturalistic, yet symbolic of America in its details and its close attention to the 'counterfeit' career of Willie Stark. What gives Warren's novel its old-fashioned quality is his insistence on turning all narrative elements into plot functions. Eventually, plot turns stifle us. *All the King's Men* is, in fact, a superb example of the kind of novel the postwar writer felt obligated to alter; for with all its excellent qualities, it represented an earlier form of fiction. Its moral flavor and cast of characters direct us toward George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. For a Southern novel by a Southerner, it owes surprisingly little to Faulkner, and in most ways jumps over the 1920s and 1930s in order to point toward the nineteenth-century triple-decker.

In its look backward, the novel catches some of the late twenties and certainly the sense of the thirties, as a political maverick, Willie Stark, rises from obscurity to governor of what appears to be Louisiana, a reenactment of many aspects of Huey Long's career. Yet the moral pivot of the novel is not Stark, but the narrator, Jack Burden. Part of Warren's strategy is to perceive Stark's unfolding through Burden's eyes. Burden is a historian by training, having gone through all the work on his Ph.D. except the final stages of the dissertation, a study of a pre-Civil War figure, Cass Mastern. In a life that straddled small events, all of them involving moral decisions and moral courage, Mastern struggled to be decent in an amoral world, and ended up a sacrifice to a Union bullet. His is a 'small life,' but from Burden's point of view, it proves instructive, for it parallels his own life as it drifts increasingly from moral to atavistic concerns.

From his position as aide-de-camp to Stark, Burden observes the unfolding of a drama in which Stark believes that good can derive from bad, though he no longer distinguishes good from bad or himself from power. As Stark's career develops, he identifies himself increasingly with the power that will enable him to do good; so that the good is compromised at every turn by the means bringing it about. Megalomania permits him to enter into so many shady deals that the people he injures increase severalfold. The disgruntled surround him, even as his circle of loyal supporters grows smaller.

Warren very shrewdly works class/caste lines. Stark, who is dirt poor at the start, is egalitarian, in that he wishes to bring everyone down to his level rather than to rise. He brings in Jack Burden, of Burden's Landing, a young man with a long family history of landed property. He wins over Doc Adam Stanton as director of his hospital—the son of the former governor; and he gains Anne Stanton, Adam's frosty sister, as his mistress. He sets Burden into researching Judge Irwin, who opposes Stark's political career, and brings Irwin down when Burden strikes dirt. Stark levels everyone, turning them from their good sense of themselves into people who must confront their compromises and defaults. The most compromised is of

course, Burden, and he pays by discovering, after Judge Irwin commits suicide rather than face the revelations of his past, that Irwin is his father.

Further, within the lower- and upper-class confrontation, Stark's women represent several classes and types: his wife, Lucy, the typical 'lily' figure, loyal, honest, a woman of integrity, who leaves Willie when she cannot bear the dishonesty of his means. Sadie Burke, a dirt-poor, acne-pocked woman of great intensity, whose love for Willie permits her to enter into any deal, commit any act, go through any hell, as long as she can remain near his side; and finally, Anne Stanton, the aristocrat among Stark's respectable women. The governor's daughter agrees to become Willie's mistress so as to control Burden's discoveries about her father, to bring about some of her own projects, and because Stark touches in her forces she cannot resist.

Warren brilliantly demonstrates how such diversity, like the country itself, must lead to a violent resolution. Adam is 'Adam,' pure, frosty, a man of integrity who finds himself compromised at every turn, the final straw coming for him when he learns Anne is Stark's mistress. The crooked politicians around Stark, chiefly Tiny Duffy, create their own careers out of the former's enterprises, and will desert him as soon as they see him weaken. Burden is himself intensely loyal, but he reserves a part of himself; and the death of Irwin begins the widening of the gap between himself and his father figure, Stark. Even Sadie Burke finds that Stark's philandering is more than she can accept, especially his power-hungry grab for a woman like Anne Stanton.

Power indeed corrupts. But the heavy plotting creates situations that dissipate insights. Burden's sense of history, that all truth will out, is a search for stability. When he digs into Irwin's past, he is certain something will be there; for even the disorderly and deceptive past reveals an order. That quest for order thrusts Warren back into a previous era, thwarting the modern theme by presenting it in narrative terms of another society and world.... The neatness of Warren's formulation in this excellent novel provided the very hurdle that the postwar novelists had to overcome. A highly plotted, neatly organized, historically based, morally ordered novel proved not only an achievement but an obstacle." [to Postmodernists]

Frederick R. Karl
American Fictions 1940-1980
(Harper & Row 1983) 126-27

"Robert Penn Warren is the only American writer to win the Pulitzer Prize in both fiction and poetry. Indeed, he won the award three times: for *All the King's Men*, a novel based on the legend of Huey Long, the southern populist politician; for *Promises*, a mid-life resurgence of poetic power; and again for *Now and Then*, a demonstration of undiminished poetic skill published in the eighth decade of his life.... At Louisiana State University, where Warren taught from 1934 to 1936, he absorbed the legends and the spectacle of Huey Long, who provided the germ of the character Willie Stark in *All the King's Men*."

Katherine Snipes
Cyclopedia of World Authors II, vol. 4
ed. Frank N. Magill
(Salem 1989) 1541-42

"Popularly, this work turned out to be far and away the triumph of Warren's career. It received the Pulitzer Prize in 1947 and was promptly made into a successful film. Subsequently, knowledgeable critics have pronounced the book a masterpiece. Initially, much of the public's interest in *All the King's Men* was due to the widespread notion, understandable but erroneous, that it was based upon the career of Huey Long, who was assassinated in Baton Rouge during Warren's second year of teaching at the university there. Undoubtedly, Long was one of several factors that prompted Warren to develop a character, the governor of an unnamed southern state, whom he ultimately called Willie Stark.

Nevertheless, except in the most general way the career of Willie Stark cannot be related to that of Huey Long. He remains a character in his own right, a responsible artist's credible three-dimensional fiction, one unrestricted by the particularities of any documentable history but, thanks to the author's ingenuity,

revelatory of many. That ingenuity is nowhere more clearly manifested than in Warren's creation of Jack Burden, the narrator who presents the character of Stark and everything else in the novel.

Burden is a native of Stark's state, a onetime graduate student of southern history turned newspaper reporter, who, having gone to work for Stark out of curiosity and almost for want of something better to do, suddenly finds himself increasingly preoccupied with a problem of meaning that has vexed interpreters of human events from time immemorial. His attempts to come to conclusions about the matter constitute the substance of the novel's central action, in the course of which he discovers unsuspected truths about himself, his family, and his heritage; in these discoveries, or disillusionments, lies the special significance of *All the King's Men* in the advance of southern letters.

The title of the book alludes obliquely to the context of Burden's disillusionment by calling to mind a Humpty Dumpty irreparably fractured by his great fall, thus prefiguring the fate of the idealistic redneck Willie Stark. Throughout most of the novel Warren presents in Stark a fascinating composite image of selfless reformer, dictator, and Machiavel whom the more sophisticated Burden, of better birth and inheritor of a lingering belief in social hierarchy and an overarching moral order, in his supposed detachment inclines to regard as an amusing special case. In the course of things, however, Burden discovers that Humpty Dumpty's tumble symbolizes a universal proclivity from which nothing is spared, neither king nor dictator, aristocrat, commoner, commonwealth, or principality.

Two of his friends from childhood days at Burden's Landing, the reclusive young physician Adam Stanton and his sister Anne, son and daughter of a former governor widely remembered for his incorruptibility, demonstrate their vulnerability before his eyes. Anne Stanton, whom for a time he has wanted to marry (and eventually does), momentarily becomes Boss Stark's mistress; and the sensitive Adam, having reluctantly agreed to fill an important post under the boss's administration, is so chagrined when he learns of his sister's capitulation to a person of Boss Stark's character and station that he assassinates his would-be employer and is himself shot on the spot by one of the boss's henchmen.

These unfortunately are two of Burden's lesser disillusionments. Earlier, on the boss's orders, he has undertaken to examine the past of his most respected older friend, Judge Montague Irwin, at one time Governor Stanton's attorney general and presumably another model of patrician rectitude. To his dismay he uncovers documents that indicate both the judge's venality and Governor Stanton's complicity. Stanton, of course, is dead and beyond accounting, but Jack takes his evidence to Irwin, confident that the judge can and will clarify matters. Instead the judge acknowledges his guilt and almost immediately thereafter commits suicide. Jack's disillusionment reaches its culmination that same afternoon when he receives a hysterical call from his mother, with whom he lately has had strained relations, telling him not only that Judge Irwin is dead but that Irwin was in fact his father.

With these revelations Burden is finally forced to acknowledge to himself that no one can be spared Humpty Dumpty's fate—Willie Stark, proud judge Irwin and Governor Stanton, his mother, friends Adam and Anne Stanton, and himself—and since he and Anne, the two principal survivors in his immediate circle, are manifestly the products of corrupted seed, they will be committed hereafter to think of themselves as having been at least potentially tainted from the start. Jack, moreover, has reason to think that his corruption goes even farther back. In his graduate school days, he had begun a doctoral thesis on the journal of one of his own Civil War ancestors, Cass Mastern, and learned there how Mastern, although outwardly a model of breeding and ethical behavior, had unhesitatingly seduced the wife of his best friend, thus prompting the friend's suicide and inadvertently causing his erstwhile lover to sell an innocent slave, accidentally aware of her mistress's misstep, down the river. Mastern, to his credit, had tired unsuccessfully to find the unfortunate girl and make restitution, but failing in that, he had gone off to war and subsequently died in a military hospital, leaving his papers in lieu of a confession.

Burden's narration of the Mastern episode constitutes the better part of one chapter out of the book's ten, and critics insistent on thinking of the novel as a veiled criticism of the career of Huey Long have censured Warren for what they consider an intrusion in his narration. What the episode does, however, is to extend, strengthen, and, for attentive readers, make explicit the centrality of the novel's internal action, in which Burden moves from a prideful and cocksure cynicism at the beginning of the novel to a final sober

awareness of his involvement with the rest of the human race in history's unremitting flux of events, wherein values are relative, moral order is a dream, and falling in the universal fate of mankind.

Thus, in the final chapter the voice one hears is that of a soberer Burden who, having inherited Judge Irwin's home, returns to Anne Stanton at Burden's Landing and discovers from her how Willie's enemies managed to convey the news of her defection to Adam and so ignite his murderous rage. For a brief moment he contemplates a revenge of his own, but soon thinks better of that and instead simply confronts the manipulators, terrifying them with the realization that their machinations are known and, if he chooses, can be made public. He does not choose. At the end Burden and Anne, now married, leave the Landing, their fallen paradise, and like a modern Adam and Eve to out to face the convulsions of the modern world.

Successful as *All the King's Men* was, Warren's use of Burden as narrator left even some of its most ardent champions uneasy. Poe in several of his stories had employed with great effectiveness a similar device, that of a narrator writing from an achieved conclusion. In these short runs the device worked well enough, but in a novel it strained credibility, particularly a novel in which the narrator for the greater part of his account withholds from the reader the key bit of information that has climaxed his radical change from relative innocence to easy cynicism to the position of full awareness from which he has told his story. In spite of this defect, if it is that, Warren's novel, especially on a first reading, has an impact unmatched by previous works of southern fiction, and the author's deft sleight of hand at crucial points more than compensates from any technical lapses he may have committed. What is most important, however, is that for readers unencumbered by irrelevant preconceptions his account of the maturation of Jack Burden stands at the center of attention.

The effect of Burden's maturation is that he accepts and consents to live in a world which he cannot change. Traces of the old cynicism remain, but for the most part it has been transmuted into a kind of wise pessimism that is, or may be, the prelude to wise compassion. Warren makes this point by giving Burden a foil, who makes an appearance at mid-novel when Jack seeks him out to see what, if anything, he knows about Judge Irwin's possible missteps in the past. This character, formerly the judge's 'Jonathan,' as Jack once refers to him although routinely he callously calls him the Scholarly Attorney, is the man he has always considered his father. Now long divorced from Jack's mother and prematurely aged, he lives a reclusive existence in what resembles a section of New Orleans and tells Jack nothing except that he has forsworn forever the 'foolishness and foulness' of the world he has abandoned.

Such a retreat is not an option for Jack Burden, who for all his cynicism never loses sight of the goodness mingled with the evil that taints most people—Anne and Adam Stanton certainly, his mother, the judge, and even Willie Stark. He sees, too, that the human mix's dram of evil is an inextricable part of the nature of things. Nothing escapes its taint—not his and Willie's state, whatever its name, nor the South as a whole, with its presumed hierarchy of persons and its substratum of moral order. All are and always have been part of the world, which to all appearances is the continuing 'convulsion' that naturalists see. Accordingly with Anne as companion he will go 'out of history into history'—that is, out of the illusory world fallen from a Paradise that never was into the world as it is, declaring it neither foolish nor foul.

After *All the King's Men* poets and novelists would find it difficult to write convincingly of the South as envisioned by most of her latter-day apologists, even the more sophisticated ones among Warren's mentors and colleagues at Vanderbilt. These had readily acknowledged a fallen South, but each in his way had clung to the romantic notion that the region in its inception as a protostate had been the perpetuation of an orderly society begun in Europe perhaps as far back as the Middle Ages. Faulkner had anticipated Warren's realistic stance, most notably and brilliantly in *Absalom, Absalom!*, but in 1946 Faulkner's novels were still for the most part out of print and his reputation was only on the threshold of recovery. Warren's candid portrait of the South, so rich in authentic detail that contemporary readers could hardly avoid taking it for veiled history, opened the door for implied critiques in poetry and fiction that at the time were the prerequisite, still unacknowledged, for a healthy continuation of the so-called Southern Renaissance."

J. A. Bryant, Jr.
Twentieth-Century Southern Literature
(U Kentucky 1997) 107-11

Michael Hollister (2015)