

*All the King's Men* AND THE SOUTHERN RENAISSANCE

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It is the purpose of this paper to analyse Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*, as representative of the Southern Renaissance<sup>1</sup>. The Southern myth, which pervades Warren's writing, is a rich source for manifold and highly important considerations, as the recurrence of regional and mythical elements in his novel enable him to deal with the specific and the universal simultaneously. This paper will focus, however, on a single specific aspect: the importance of knowledge and its connection with time. By establishing the relationship of some of the more important characters with these two entities, this paper aims at showing how through the concrete rendering of the characters' realities, Warren gives to the story the quality of myth. As a Southerner he does not talk of abstractions, but through a firm hold on reality, he reaches a more universal realm, the understanding and acceptance of the life cycle: everything moves towards death, but from death comes life again. As Jack Burden puts it, "reality is not a function of the event as event, but of the relationship of that event to past, and future events" (p. 528). Only by assembling the pieces of the puzzle to see the pattern, and by overcoming each and every partial death, can man's reconciliation with the flux of life be attained, for "Life is Motion toward knowledge" (p. 208).

In order to understand the role played by knowledge in the novel, let us analyse first the progression of the reader from

ignorance to enlightenment in terms of the plot. In the beginning of chapter one, the reader is faced with a narrator whose name he does not know, and with some people piled in a car, on the road to Mason City: Sugar-Boy, the Boss, Mrs. Stark, Tiny Duffy, Tom, and the narrator. As the story unfolds, with a mingling of past and present events, a feeling of loss and disruption takes hold of the reader. A number of deaths, destructions, references to the defeat and failure of the South after the Civil War, and to the "good old days" of the aristocratic culture, bring about a certain pain whose reality cannot be denied, but which is to be overcome at the end. Once the reader organizes the facts, he understands the loss. More than that, his understanding of the nature and meaning of human existence is increased: from the ashes, life begins again to complete another cycle.

"There is one thing Man can't know. He can't know whether knowledge will save or kill him" (p. 14). For some characters in the novel, knowledge meant death. They could not cope with reality and were destroyed. One example of this can be found in Judge Irwin, whom Jack Burden calls the Upright Judge. He stood for the dignity, honesty and high values of the old aristocratic South, but his past had not been so glorious and clean after all: he had got a position in the Belle Fuel Company because of a bribe. It had been so difficult for him to face his action that he indulged in self-delusion:

*'Littlepaugh,' he said musingly, and waited.  
'You know', he said marveling, 'You know, I  
didn't even remember his name'. It's like  
it hadn't happened. Not to me. Maybe to*

*somebody else, but not to me (p. 475).*

Judge Irwin had some stain in his "glorious" past. As the image he had of himself dissolved, he succumbed to the crudity of his reality. He is, in this sense, the Old South itself: its rehabilitation was delayed by self-delusion and a paralyzing obsession with the largely imaginary glories of the past. The stain of the South was slavery. The awareness of that mark has allowed no peace for the southerner, and it shows up as a terrible and unbearable guilt. In many instances in the novel, this guilt appears in references to the negroes, carrying both personal and social aspects of such a burden. As Cass Masterns put it, "many cannot bear the eyes of the negroes upon them" (p. 252).

Adam Stanton is another character in the novel for whom knowledge meant death. He is an idealistic doctor, defender of a utopic old order that rested on the pillars of truth, courtesy and good breeding. He who wants everything clean and aseptic cannot bear to know that his father, the respectable and stainless Governor Stanton, had protected Judge Irwin, covering up his felony. It is even more difficult for him to learn that his own sister, Anne, has been having an affair with Willie Stark. That, for him, means corruption and a complete collapse of his values and his world.

In order to understand the effect of knowledge upon Adam, it is important to contrast him with Willie Stark. Whereas Adam stands for the Old South, Willie Starks stands for the New South, Adam is highly intellectualized, disciplined, out off from present life, unable to cope with a highly competitive and commercial

society. Willie is pragmatic, a man of action who knows everything. He is fully aware of the sordid games played by the machine of power and the system. But the use he makes of this knowledge is inadequate: he gets involved in corruption. Just as the Old South does not belong, the new attitude reflected in Willie Stark does not present the solution for the South, either. Between the two there is a profound gap. "Each of them was incomplete, carrying the terrible division of their age" (p. 599). They try, though unconsciously, a kind of reconciliation through the hospital: the money and power of the New South, plus the knowledge and tradition of the Old South. But this attempt does not work out. They want the hospital built for different reasons which can never be reconciled. It is no wonder, then, that their final clash, which has been gradually built up, brings about their mutual destruction.

*He had seen his two friends, Willie Stark and Adam Stanton, live and die. Each had killed the other. Each had been the doom of the other (...) They were doomed to destroy each other, just as each was doomed to try to use the other and to yearn toward and try to become the other.<sup>10</sup>*

"It might have been all different," Willie Stark says, but it was not"(p. 556).

In Jack Burden we will find knowledge not killing, but saving. Yet, pain, suffering, and the sense of loss implicit in the act of knowing, can be felt throughout his story. Knowledge

is achieved at the expense of loss. Although knowledge is the end of man, it is terrible and tremendously painful. Jack's struggle towards knowledge and his quest for the Self are the struggle of the South. His losses are the losses of the South and the hope which lies in him is the hope of the South.

In the first phase of his quest, Jack is afraid of knowledge, but the desire to know haunts him as a force gnawing at his bowels. Interestingly enough, he is a graduate student in history. And what is history but a plunging into past events to understand the patterns of the present? He has the letters of Cass Mastern in his shabby apartment, where he broods over them without knowing that they are related to his condition. Jack is the ironic idealist, who assigns individuals to categories: the Scholarly Attorney (Ellis Burden), the Young Executive (his mother's husband), the Sophomore Thunderbolt (Tom Stark), the friend of His Youth (Adam Stanton), and he himself the Student of History. Jack tries, with false detachment, to represent life to himself. He makes an attempt at compartmentalizing people and events. By doing so, he unconsciously defends himself from seeing any relationship between them. He still cannot know truth. He abandons his PhD. dissertation and each time he is on the verge of being confronted with himself, he is dominated by what he ironically calls "The Great Sleep":

*That was the way it was for a while after I didn't have any job. It wasn't new. It had been like that before, twice before. I had even given it a name - The Great Sleep (p. 145).*

It had happened the time before he quit the University, the time before he left his first wife Lois, and it had happened again when he learned that Anne Stanton was having an affair with Willie Stark. In every instance, The Great Sleep represents his fear of enquiring any further.

The impulse which drives him, however, is stronger than his fear. Through his three excursions into the past, Jack is slowly prepared for a broader understanding: he dives deeply into history, when, after Judge Irwin's suicide, he learns, through his mother, that the Judge is his real father. Slowly and painfully Jack builds up his own identity, and reconstructs his self. In his journey toward illumination, he loses the comfort of ignorance and loses friends. But he gains a profound realization and acceptance of his past. More important than that, he makes peace with himself:

*And that meant that my mother gave me back the past. I could now accept the past which I had before felt was tainted and horrible. I could accept the past now because I could accept her and be at peace with her and with myself (p. 459).*

Jack freed himself from the tyranny of his past by dealing with it in realistic terms. The truth gave his past back to him, and through it he acquired a clear consciousness of history and Self. Just as his reconciliation with himself and life were found in his past, any solution to the deep-rooted complex of Southern problems must come from within the South itself and from within

its own history.

The understanding of one's dimension and, beyond that, of the meaning of Life, is intimately interwoven with the understanding of the meaning of time. Time is an absolute entity. No act, no thought is isolated. Past, present, and future are mingled: "All times are one time" (p. 313). This has always been an obsession for the Southerner. Trapped in the past, he could not cope with the present and could not even dwell on the subject of his future. Jack Burden's progression from ignorance to enlightenment is ultimately an understanding of time:

*... if you could not accept the past and its burden there was no future, for without one there cannot be the other, and if you could accept the past you might hope for the future, for only out of the past can you make the future (p. 598).*

In the end of the novel, the mood is that of serenity, harmony, quiet and peace: Jack is now living in his father's house, with his wife, Anne Stanton, and Ellis Burden, the man who was once married to his mother. He is writing the book he has begun years before, the life of Cass Mastern. Their past troubles their life no longer. Jack is free. His writing the book is his final act of reconciliation. Now he is ready to "go into the convulsion of the world, ready to enter the flux of life" (p. 602). Now he belongs. His rebirth carries the theme of the cycle of Life. And beyond that it carries the hope that, in

spite of all cleavages, disharmonies, animosities and antagonisms, there is a possibility of integration for human beings.

NOTE

<sup>1</sup> Robert Penn Warren, *All the King's Men* (New York: Time Inc. Book Division, 1964). All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition.