

AMERICAN WRITERS *Classics*



VOLUME II

ALL THE KING'S MEN
AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY
THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF ALICE B. TOKLAS
THE BIG SLEEP
THE COUNTRY OF THE POINTED FIRS
ETHAN FROME
THE GREAT GATSBY
HERZOG
INVISIBLE MAN
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WINESBURG, OHIO

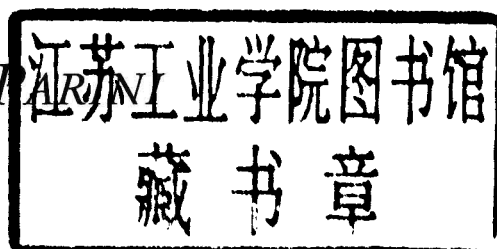
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AMERICAN WRITERS *Classics*

VOLUME II



EDITED BY JAY MARINI



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American Writers Classics, Volume II

Jay Parini, Editor in Chief

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Winesburg, Ohio

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Introduction

It was Ralph Waldo Emerson who warned that “The path you must take, none but you must know. The critic can never tell you.” What Emerson meant, perhaps, was that critics can only suggest a direction for reading, but that the actual work of reading involves the fierce application of the reader’s mind to the text at hand. That application will, in each case, be highly individual. A critic’s take on a book is just that: a single take, although one backed up by careful analysis, study, and reflection.

This is the second volume in a series that should prove immensely useful to students of literature who wish to benefit from the careful reflection on a single text by someone who has thought long and hard about that text. The series itself represents a further development of *American Writers*, which had its origin in a sequence of monographs called *The Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers*. These biographical and critical monographs were incisively written and informative, treating ninety-seven American writers in a format and style that attracted a devoted following. It proved invaluable to a generation of students and teachers, who could depend on the reliable and interesting critiques of major figures that were offered in those pages.

The idea of reprinting the Minnesota pamphlets occurred to Charles Scribner Jr. Soon four volumes entitled *American Writers: A Collection of Literary Biographies* (1974) appeared, and it was widely acclaimed by students, teachers, and librarians. The series continues, with volumes added yearly as supplements and retrospectives. The articles in these collections all consider the whole career of an important writer, supplying biographical and cultural context as well as taking careful look at the shape of the individual achievement.

This new series provides substantial articles that focus on a single masterwork of American literature, whether it be a novel, a volume of stories, a play, a long poem or sequence of poems, or a major work of autobiography or nonfiction. The idea behind the series is simple: to provide close readings of landmark works. These readings, written by well-known authors and professors of literature, in each case examine the text itself, explaining its internal dynamics, and consider the cultural, biographical, and historical dimensions of the work, thus placing it within a tradition—or several traditions. Some effort is made to place the work within the author’s overall career, though the main focus in each essay will be the text at hand.

In the past twenty-five years or so, since the advent of post-structuralism, the emphasis in most critical writing has been largely theoretical. What was called “close reading” during the days of the so-called New Criticism—a movement that had its origins in formalist criticism of the 1920s and 1930s, and

which reigned supreme in university English departments for several decades—was often immensely useful to students and teachers, who wanted careful and detailed analyses of individual texts. Every effort has been made in these articles to provide useful and patient readings of important works without sacrificing theoretical sophistication.

This second volume of *American Classics* is largely concerned with novels. We take up a fair number of novels that must be considered central to the American tradition of literary fiction. The novels discussed are *All the King's Men*, *An American Tragedy*, *The Big Sleep*, *Ethan Frome*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Herzog*, *Invisible Man*, *McTeague*, *The Member of the Wedding*, *Mona in the Promised Land*, *The Naked and the Dead*, *Sophie's Choice*, *Tender Is the Night*, and *White Noise*. We also consider *Winesburg, Ohio* and *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, which are ingeniously integrated collections of short fiction. Each of these must be considered a touchstone of American fiction. As anyone will see, the range of works discussed is broad, though each text can lay claim to cultural significance. Each of these books has also managed to attract a wide audience—another factor in their inclusion here.

Two other classic texts under discussion here are Robert Lowell's influential book of poems, *Life Studies*—a key text in the Confessional School of poets—and the bizarre, unlikely *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* by Gertrude Stein, a book that defies categorization but remains a landmark volume in American literature, and one that seems always to attract a new generation of serious readers.

Our hope is that these essays will encourage readers to return to the texts, thoughtfully, better informed than they were before. As Emerson noted, only the reader can forge a path, an individual way through a text, into knowledge and experience. But these essays provide a starting point, an encouragement to further consultation and reading. That is, after all, one of the traditional functions of criticism. My own sense is that we have achieved a good deal in this volume, and that readers will go away pleased and edified, encouraged along their own distinct paths.

—JAY PARINI

Contributors

Stephen Amidon. Novelist whose books include *Splitting the Atom*, *Thirst*, *The Primitive*, and *The New City*. His criticism has appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Guardian*, *New York Times Book Review*, *London Sunday Times*, and *Times Literary Supplement*. WHITE NOISE

Charles R. Baker. Poet, short story writer, and essayist. He has made many contributions to the *American Writers* and *British Writers* series. This is his first piece for *American Writers Classics*. His latest published fiction is the Christmas story "The Harp." Mr. Baker lives in Dallas, Texas, and is curator of "Mark Twain: Father of Modern American Literature" at Bridwell Library, Southern Methodist University. THE GREAT GATSBY

Dina Ripsman Eylon. Scholar, writer, poet, translator, and a former instructor of Jewish Studies at the department of Near & Middle Eastern Civilizations, University of Toronto. Since 1997 she has served as the publisher and editor of *Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary Journal*. Her works are published in *Convergence: Poets for Peace*, *Kinesis*, *American National Biography*, *Reader's Guide to Judaism*, and the new anthology *Stress(full) Sister(hood)*. THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF ALICE B. TOKLAS

Peter Filkins. Associate Professor of English at Simon's Rock College of Bard. He is the author of numerous reviews and essays, as well as two volumes of poetry, *What She Knew* and *After Homer*. His translation of the collected poems of Ingeborg Bachmann, *Songs in Flight*, received an Outstanding Translation Award from the American Literary Translators Association. He is the recipient of grants and fellowships from the Fulbright Commission, Massachusetts

Cultural Council, Yaddo, MacDowell, and the Millay Colony for the Arts. LIFE STUDIES

Angela Garcia. M.A., University of California, Davis. Her poetry has been published in *Mark My Words*, an anthology of five emerging poets. She is currently teaching high school English at the American School of El Salvador. ETHAN FROME

Jason Gray. Graduate of the Writing Seminars of Johns Hopkins University and the author of poetry appearing in several magazines, including *Poetry*, *Threepenny Review*, *Literary Imagination*, and *Sewanee Theological Review*, and in the anthology *And We the Creatures*. His book reviews appear regularly online at SmartishPace.com and in *Prairie Schooner*. His essay on *Long Day's Journey into Night* was featured in the first volume of this series. He teaches English at Montgomery College in Maryland. WINESBURG, OHIO

Mary Hadley. Associate Professor of writing and linguistics at Georgia Southern University in Statesboro, Georgia. She is the author of a nonfiction work, *British Women Mystery Writers*, as well as several articles on detective fiction and has recently published her first suspense novel, *Casey's Revenge*, which is coauthored with her husband. THE BIG SLEEP

Karen L. Kilcup. Author of *Native American Women's Writing, c. 1800–1924: An Anthology*, *Soft Canons: American Women Writers and Masculine Tradition*, and *Robert Frost and Feminine Literary Tradition*. The recipient of a national Distinguished Teacher award in 1987, she was recently the Davidson Eminent Scholar Chair at Florida International University. She is

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Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*



MARK WINCHELL

WHEN ROBERT PENN Warren became assistant professor of English at Louisiana State University in 1934, the state was dominated by one of the most charismatic and colorful figures in the history of American politics, Huey Pierce Long. Long would become Warren's inspiration for Governor Willie Stark in *All the King's Men* (1946). The seventh of nine children, Long was born in 1893 and was a restless and ambitious youth, eager to see the world beyond the family farm. After stints as a traveling salesman and student at the University of Oklahoma, Long married Rose McConnell of Shreveport in 1913. With no high school diploma and only a few months of college work, he entered Tulane University Law School in 1914. Although the law curriculum was designed for three years of study, Long passed a special bar exam in 1915, at the age of twenty-one, and began the practice of law in his hometown of Winnfield.

When Warren was twelve years old in 1917, Long gained notoriety by defending State Senator S. J. Harper, who had been indicted under the Espionage Act for his opposition to World War I. The following year, Long won a run-off election for railroad commissioner for the

northern district of Louisiana. In that position, he began to establish a reputation as a champion of the little man and scourge of the special interests. Although he lost his first race for governor in 1924, Long was swept into office in 1928.

After surviving impeachment during his second year as governor, Long consolidated his power base by courting the poor and dispossessed of both races and ruthlessly crushing his political opponents. He instituted massive road building and public works programs and pushed through higher taxes on industry. (There was even a rumor that Standard Oil had put a price on his head.) During the Great Depression, Louisiana was one of the more prosperous states in the nation, and many people in the rest of the country began to look to Long for leadership. With a worldwide economic crisis threatening the very survival of democratic capitalism, strong (even despotic) political leaders were more popular than ever before. Hitler in Germany, Mussolini in Italy, and Stalin in Russia were all consolidating power, even as Franco was a rising force in Spain. Domestically, tens of millions of Americans cheered as Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal greatly expanded the

powers of government. Although Long had supported FDR for president in 1932, he turned against the New Deal because he did not think it went far enough.

Most observers agreed that Long was an extremist, but few knew where to place him on the political spectrum. Defenders of representative democracy called him a fascist. Advocates of the free market were just as likely to brand him a communist. After he was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1930, Long began promoting increasingly radical methods for redistributing the nation's income. His political slogan was "Share Our Wealth," and his promise was "Every Man a King." He was known to friend and foe alike as the Kingfish, after the garrulous con man on the radio program "Amos 'n Andy." Back home in Louisiana he bestowed considerable largesse on the state university, hoping to make it a monument to himself. Professors at Louisiana State University enjoyed good salaries and a remarkable degree of academic freedom—so long as they did not cross the man who made it all possible.

Robert Penn Warren had arrived in this unique environment almost by accident. Born in 1905 in Guthrie, Kentucky, the precocious Red Warren graduated from high school in nearby Clarksville, Tennessee, at the age of fifteen. Although he had been unusually close to his bookish grandfather, an eccentric veteran of the Confederate Army who hated all aspects of modern life except for fly screens and painless dentistry, Warren's primary ambition in life was to become a naval officer. He had even received an appointment to the U.S. Naval Academy when a freak accident severely damaged his left eye and prevented his passing the physical examination. When Warren enrolled in Vanderbilt, he was initially a science major until he began taking English courses from the poets John Crowe Ransom and Donald Davidson and met an undergraduate prodigy named Allen Tate.

Prior to World War I, Ransom and Davidson had belonged to a group of young men who met

CHRONOLOGY

- 1905 Robert Penn Warren born on April 24 in Guthrie, Kentucky.
- 1920 Graduates from Clarksville (Tennessee) High School.
- 1921 Enrolls at Vanderbilt University, majoring in chemical engineering.
- 1923 Fellow student Allen Tate introduces Warren to the Fugitives, a discussion group consisting of local poets. *The Fugitive: A Magazine of Poetry* begins publication with Warren as an active participant.
- 1925 Earns B.A. in literature, at Vanderbilt (summa cum laude).
- 1927 Earns M.A. in literature, University of California at Berkeley. Enters doctoral program at Yale University.
- 1928 Leaves graduate program at Yale and enters Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar.
- 1929 Publishes his first book, *John Brown: The Making of a Martyr*.
- 1930 Publishes "The Briar Patch" in *I'll Take My Stand*; earns B.Litt. from Oxford; marries Emma Brescia.
- 1934 Warren becomes assistant professor of English at Louisiana State University. Helps found the *Southern Review*. Publishes *Thirty-Six Poems*. Long organizes nationwide Share Our Wealth Society.
- 1938 Publishes *Understanding Poetry* with Cleanth Brooks.
- 1939 Publishes first novel, *Night Rider*.
- 1939–1940 Travels to Italy on a Guggenheim Fellowship. Sees Mussolini in action. Writes *Proud Flesh*, a play that will form the basis of *All the King's Men*.
- 1942 *Eleven Poems on the Same Theme*. Becomes professor of English at the University of Minnesota.
- 1943 Publishes second novel, *At Heaven's Gate*. He and Cleanth Brooks publish *Understanding Fiction*.
- 1944 *Selected Poems: 1923–1943*. Becomes Chair of Poetry at the Library of Congress.

ALL THE KING'S MEN

1946 *All the King's Men*. Wins Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award.

1948 Stage version of *All the King's Men* at President Theater in New York.

1949 Movie version of *All the King's Men* wins three Academy Awards.

1950 Leaves University of Minnesota to become professor of playwriting at Yale. *World Enough and Time*.

1951 Divorces Emma Brescia Warren.

1952 Marries Eleanor Clark.

1953 Publishes book-length poem, *Brother to Dragons*. Daughter, Rosanna Phelps Warren, born.

1955 *Band of Angels*. Son, Gabriel Penn Warren, born.

1956 *Segregation: The Inner Conflict in the South*. Leaves Yale.

1957 *Promises: Poems 1954–1956*. Wins both the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize.

1958 *Selected Essays*.

1959 *The Cave*. Elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

1960 *You, Emperors, and Others: Poems 1957–1960* and *All the King's Men: A Play*.

1961 Publishes seventh novel, *Wilderness: A Tale of the Civil War*, and *The Legacy of the Civil War*. Returns to Yale as professor of English.

1964 *Flood: A Romance of Our Time*.

1965 *Who Speaks for the Negro?*

1966 *Selected Poems: New and Old 1923–1966*, which wins Bollingen Prize the following year.

1968 *Incarnations: Poems 1966–1968*.

1969 Publishes short book-length poem, *Audubon: A Vision*.

1970 Receives National Medal in Literature.

1971 *Meet Me in the Green Glen*.

1973 Retires from Yale.

1974 *Or Else—Poem / Poems 1968–1974*.

1975 Delivers prestigious Jefferson Lecture (“Democracy and Poetry”).

1976 *Selected Poems: 1923–1975*.

1977 Publishes tenth and final novel, *A Place to Come To*.

1978 *Now and Then: Poems 1976–1978*. Wins third Pulitzer Prize.

1979 *Brother to Dragons: A New Version*.

1980 *Being Here: Poetry 1977–1980*. Awarded Presidential Medal of Freedom.

1981 *Rumor Verified: Poems 1979–1980*. Receives fellowship from the MacArthur Foundation. Carlisle Floyd's opera *Willie Stark* premieres.

1983 Publishes book-length poem *Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce*.

1985 *New and Selected Poems: 1923–1985*.

1986 Selected America's first Poet Laureate.

1989 Dies of cancer on September 15.

informally on alternate Saturday nights to socialize and discuss philosophy. When Ransom began writing verse, he steered the bimonthly discussions to poetry. Soon members of the group started bringing their poems in progress for criticism and analysis. After a brief hiatus for the war, the meetings resumed in 1920. Older members, such as Ransom and Davidson, were joined by talented newcomers, such as Tate. Warren joined the group in 1923, the year it decided to publish *The Fugitive: A Magazine of Poetry*. Warren won a contest sponsored by the magazine late that year and was listed as one of the editors of the *Fugitive* by February 1924.

Although the magazine stopped publication in 1925 (the year of his graduation), Warren maintained close contact with his fellow Fugitives, even as he pursued graduate work at the University of California. After finishing his M.A., Warren entered the Ph.D. program at Yale in the fall of 1927. The following year, he won a Rhodes Scholarship and began a two-year program of study at Oxford University, which led to a B.Litt. degree in 1930. (In 1929 he was joined by poet Cleanth Brooks, whom he had known as an undergraduate at Vanderbilt.) It was while he was at Oxford that Warren became imaginatively engaged with the culture of the

American South. He published his first book, *John Brown: The Making of a Martyr*, in 1929, even as he and several former Fugitives were joining with other like-minded southerners in planning a symposium on the future of their home region. That symposium was published in November 1930 under the title *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*.

When Warren returned to the United States in 1930, he began living with Emma Brescia, to whom he was already secretly married. Having to decide whether to pursue a safe career as a scholar or to take his chances with fiction and poetry, Warren turned down a fellowship to resume doctoral studies at Yale and accepted a one-year position teaching English at Southwestern College in Memphis. The following year, he assumed a temporary assistant professorship at Vanderbilt. When the department's autocratic and myopic chairman, Edwin Mims, refused to renew his contract at the end of the 1933–1934 school year, Warren was rescued by Charles W. Pipkin, Dean of the Graduate School at Louisiana State University. Pipkin had already found Cleanth Brooks a position in the English department in 1932 and was more than eager to bring Warren in to join him.

Although Huey Long probably never heard the names of Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, the Kingfish created an unorthodox free-spending atmosphere on campus that made it possible for a maverick administrator such as Pipkin to hire almost at will. By the spring of 1935, Brooks, Warren, and Pipkin were launching a literary quarterly called the *Southern Review*. Then, on Labor Day weekend, Huey Long was shot in the Louisiana capitol and died three days later in the hospital. Witnesses at the capitol reported that Long was gunned down by a physician, Dr. Carl Weiss, who belonged to a rival political family and who was then shot numerous times by Long's bodyguards.

Robert Penn Warren never knew Huey Long, but he knew what it was like to live in a world

that Long had created. Years later, he recalled that the only time Long's

presence was ever felt in my classroom was when, in my Shakespeare course, I gave my little annual lecture on the political background of *Julius Caesar*; and then for the two weeks we spent on the play, backs grew straighter, eyes grew brighter, notes were taken, and the girls stopped knitting in class, or repairing their faces.

Warren needed the distance of Oxford to start writing about the South, and he apparently needed to be removed in both time and place from Long's Louisiana to write *All the King's Men*. Although he wrote an earlier dramatic version of this story (the play *Proud Flesh*) in Mussolini's Italy in 1939–1940, Warren did not begin the novel itself until a year after he left Louisiana and did not finish it until 1946, nine years after Long's death. During that period, Warren published two other novels, two volumes of poetry, and two textbooks while teaching for four years at the University of Minnesota.

INTRODUCTION TO THE NOVEL

All the King's Men begins in medias res, as Governor Willie Stark's Cadillac is speeding down the road in an unnamed southern state. Readers are introduced to the governor; his fawning bodyguard, Sugar-Boy; his loyal secretary, Sadie Burke; his feckless lieutenant governor, Tiny Duffy; his long-suffering wife, Lucy; and the narrator, Jack Burden. Jack is a kind of southern-fried Philip Marlow, a tough-talking aide to Governor Stark who specializes in digging up dirt on Stark's political adversaries. After mesmerizing a crowd of supporters in his backwoods hometown of Mason City, Stark goes to Jack's aristocratic hometown of Burden's Landing to visit Judge Irwin, Jack's childhood mentor, who has just thrown his considerable political support to Stark's enemies. After he is instructed to dig up some dirt on Irwin, Jack gives readers a flashback to Stark's beginnings in politics and Jack's own rather aimless past.

ALL THE KING'S MEN

Jack was raised the son of a scholarly attorney named Ellis Burden and the beautiful young wife Ellis had brought back to Burden's Landing with him from a trip to Arkansas. When Jack was a child, Ellis Burden inexplicably walked out on the family, only to end up as a kind of freelance missionary in the urban slums. Jack's best childhood friends were Adam and Anne Stanton, whose father was a former bourbon governor. Adam Stanton eventually becomes a successful physician with no personal life. After a failed romance with Jack, Anne Stanton drifts into spinsterhood devoted to good deeds. Meanwhile, Jack drops out of graduate school without ever finishing the dissertation for his Ph.D. in history and suffers through a bad marriage to a shallow hedonist. While working as a newspaper reporter, he meets Willie Stark, the idealistic young treasurer of Mason County. When he is played for a fool by a faction of professional politicians, Stark wises up and beats the old pols at their own game. After winning a landslide election for governor, he summons Jack to his staff. Having nothing better to do with his life, Jack decides to indulge his fascination with the phenomenon that is Willie Stark.

The choice of Jack Burden as narrator enables Warren to depict a politician obviously based on Huey Long without having to become the character. Although its roots go back at least to the nineteenth century, this narrative technique was used with increasing frequency after the dawn of modernism. Jack is what critics Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg call the "typical Conradian" narrator, a compromise between third-person-omniscient and first-person-protagonist narration. Such a narrator—Joseph Conrad's Marlow, F. Scott Fitzgerald's Nick Carraway, Herman Melville's Ishmael—is an eyewitness who tells another person's story.

Contending that "this has been a very fruitful device in modern fiction," Scholes and Kellogg note that "the story of the protagonist becomes the outward sign or symbol of the inward story of the narrator, who learns from his imaginative

participation in the other's experience." What this leads to is the sort of metafiction in which "the factual or empirical aspect of the protagonist's life becomes subordinated to the narrator's understanding of it." Thus, "not what really happened but the meaning of what the narrator believes to have happened becomes the central preoccupation." By dividing the narrator from his protagonist, the author obviates the "problem of presenting a character with enough crudeness of *hybris* and *hamartia* but enough sensitivity for ultimate discovery and self-understanding." If Willie Stark is Huey Long, Jack Burden is Robert Penn Warren imagining Huey Long.

Unfortunately, the initial reviewers of *All the King's Men* were so mesmerized by Stark's similarity to the Kingfish that this similarity was all they wanted to talk about. They failed to realize that Warren's relationship to history, even current history, was not as a political partisan. In the foreword to his book-length poem *Brother to Dragons* (1953), Warren writes, "Historical sense and poetic sense should not, in the end, be contradictory, for if poetry is the little myth we make, history is the big myth we live, and in our living, constantly remake." As a champion of agrarianism, Warren would have been philosophically more comfortable with the Tory benevolence of a Judge Irwin than with the acquisitive populism of a Willie Stark or Huey Long. But like Jack Burden and Anne Stanton, he is also fascinated by the myth of the strong leader. If Stark's assassin finally resembles Brutus striking down Julius Caesar, Warren's surrogate Jack Burden is more akin to Hamlet contemplating the vitality of Fortinbras. The problem is that Fortinbras is always stealing the show.

A year after the publication of *All the King's Men*, Robert B. Heilman wrote a scathing rebuke of those readers who could not see beyond the superficial topicality of the novel. Generally speaking, reviewers for national magazines and large circulation newspapers are liberal intellectuals, people who would

instinctively regard Huey Long as the incarnation of evil. Long may have seemed a plausible savior in the 1930s, but a nation that had just defeated Hitler and Mussolini and now faced a protracted conflict with Stalin could not afford to romanticize a domestic strong man. The only way that Warren could be allowed to write about a character like Huey Long was to make him the villain of a cautionary parable about the threat of demagoguery to American democratic institutions. When he failed to do so, Robert Gorham Davis wrote a breathtakingly fatuous critique in the *New York Times Book Review*, accusing Warren of being a flak for the Kingfish simply because he taught at Louisiana State University and edited the *Southern Review*.

Davis and like-minded reviewers would have been pleased with the 1949 film version of *All the King's Men*, which turned out to be the politically correct melodrama that Warren had refused to write. No longer a complex and ambiguous figure, Willie Stark simply becomes another idealist corrupted by power. (In this regard, it is essentially the same story that the film industry would produce two years later in *Viva Zapata!*) Also, by depriving the audience of Jack Burden's brooding narration, the movie limits the audience's perspective on Stark; he is seen only for what he does and what other people say about him. Unsophisticated readers who do not confuse Willie Stark with Huey Long might well mistake him for Broderick Crawford, the actor who played him in the movie.

Perhaps because the film version of *All the King's Men* was made before negative images of the Deep South became a cliché of American popular culture, director Robert Rossen does not depict Stark as a stereotypical southern demagogue. Instead, the tale is removed from its southern setting to a small town in California. Almost all the characters speak a bland middle-American dialect. (The only obviously ethnic character is Stark's Irish-American secretary, Sadie Burke.) Moreover, the story is told in a strict chronological order, thus focusing atten-

tion on Stark's rise, corruption, and fall. But moviegoers (Warren included) finally accepted this vulgarization of *All the King's Men* for its sheer melodramatic power.

Because of his ability to appropriate the genres of popular literature for high thematic purposes, Warren could simultaneously appeal to literary intellectuals and a mass audience. Strip away the intellectual trappings, and there remains a story capable of entertaining anyone. Such crossover appeal has become exceedingly rare since the rise of modernism. The kind of baroque excess that was Warren's stock in trade reminds one more of opera than of the well made literary artifact. It is therefore not surprising that, in 1981, one of America's foremost composers, Carlisle Floyd, turned *All the King's Men* into a highly successful opera.

After the more commercial reviewers and the Hollywood dream merchants had their say, academic scholars and critics minimized the importance of Willie Stark in order to focus on the tortured psyche of Jack Burden. If anything, they learned their lesson too well. Almost all of Warren's novels feature a character like Jack Burden, but Willie Stark is one of a kind. Huey Long was a kind of "found metaphor" who embodied the clash between idealism and pragmatism. If the fictional Stark is less brutal and crude than the real-life Long, it is because Warren wanted to focus on that clash, not because he wanted to whitewash Long. In the opinion of Joyce Carol Oates, however, Warren's theme would actually have been enriched by greater fidelity to the historical record. "Set beside Huey Long," Oates writes, "Warren's Willie Stark, while far more than a caricature, is a generic creation manipulated by the author in the service of a plot that becomes anticlimactic after his death." The real Long was killed because of his slanders against members of his assassin's family. Stark is gunned down for an improbable romantic affair, which had no basis in Long's own life.

The most significant scholarly debate in Warren studies during the early years of the new

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century has been over the text of *All the King's Men*. In 2001 Noel Polk published a "restored" edition of Warren's great novel based on an examination of the author's typescript, which is preserved in the special collections of the Beinecke Library at Yale University. The novel that Warren originally wrote differs in several crucial respects from the one finally published in 1946.

While Polk has painstakingly accounted for many of the changes that transpired between typescript and published book, it is impossible to know how many of these changes Warren initiated or heartily approved. Polk seems to assume that Warren acquiesced to most of these changes either through duress or bad judgment. (The most significant of the hundreds of alterations that Polk identifies are changing the politician's name from Willie Talos to Willie Stark and dividing an inordinately long fourth chapter so that the novel became ten rather than nine chapters long.) Whether or not that was the case, Polk's alternative version of *All the King's Men* provides keen insight into both the creative and the editorial imagination. By revealing this classic novel in a new light, he reminds readers of its continuing power.

THE TASTE OF KNOWLEDGE

In his essay "Knowledge and the Image of Man" (1955), Warren comments on a theme that is central to *All the King's Men* and much of his other writing:

Man can return to his lost unity, and if that return is fitful and precarious, if the foliage and flower of the innocent garden are now somewhat browned by a late season, all is the more precious for the fact, for what is now achieved has been achieved by the growth of moral awareness. . . . Man eats of the fruit of the tree of knowledge and falls. But if he takes another bite, he may get at least a sort of redemption.

If each of the principal characters in *All the King's Men* partake of the "tree of knowledge,"

only Jack Burden survives to "get at least a sort of redemption."

Although Stanton, Stark, and Jack are fundamentally different in their attitudes toward life, each has been blindsided by unexpected encounters with evil. It is in these encounters that each man, in effect, falls from innocence and begins to determine his character and discover his fate. The destinies of Stanton and Stark are important in their own right, but their main function is to highlight the more complete spiritual evolution of Warren's protagonist. Jack Burden's story is a characteristically American parable about the dangers of innocence and the paradoxical blessedness of a fall into experience and knowledge.

THE MAN OF IDEA

As his name would suggest, Adam Stanton exists in a sort of psychic Eden—the moral equivalent of a germ-free environment. As an aristocrat and a gentleman, he is unable to comprehend the corruption and vulgarity of a Willie Stark. Cut off from the creative ambiguity of human experience, Dr. Stanton sees everything in scientific abstraction. At one point in the novel, Jack says to Anne Stanton:

When Adam the romantic makes a picture of the world in his head, it is just like the picture of the world Adam the scientist works with. All tidy. All neat. The molecule of good always behaves the same way. The molecule of bad always behaves the same way.

Stanton represents a common tendency of our age, one that Nathaniel Hawthorne foresaw a century earlier—the passion to eliminate imperfection at any cost. Hawthorne's "The Birthmark" is a story about Aylmer, an idealistic physician married to a woman whose otherwise spectacular beauty is marred by a slight rose tint on one of her cheeks. So obsessed is he with removing that tint that Aylmer operates on his wife, employing all the wonders of modern sci-

ence. Although he succeeds in ridding her of this one imperfection, he also drains the life from her now perfect body.

Like Adam Stanton, Dr. Aylmer is both a scientist and a romantic. Jack refers to Stanton as “the man of idea,” whereas Hawthorne writes that “Aylmer’s slender figure and pale intellectual face, were . . . a type of the spiritual element.” And just as Aylmer tries to “draw a magic circle around [his wife] within which no evil might intrude,” Stanton seeks to protect his sister, Anne, from the vicissitudes of life. Aylmer even appropriates a divine prerogative when he says of the birthmark: “I . . . rejoice in this single imperfection since it will be such a rapture to remove it.”

Commenting from her own specifically Catholic perspective, Flannery O’Connor argues that scientific hubris is characteristic of a secular age. “The Aylmers whom Hawthorne saw as a menace have multiplied,” O’Connor writes. “Busy cutting down human imperfection, they are making headway also on the raw material of good.” Similarly, because of his manic rigidity, Adam Stanton the healer becomes Adam Stanton the destroyer. An early indication of this rigidity can be seen in his categorical refusal to deal with the Machiavellian Willie Stark. Even though he would be in a position to do considerable good as the director of Stark’s hospital, Stanton is more concerned with maintaining a virginal persona. It is only after Jack (at Stark’s behest) informs him that his own sainted father has been involved in a political cover-up that Stanton relents and takes the job. He sees, no doubt for the first time, that the patriarch of his family was not immaculately conceived.

Even though he has consented to work for Stark, Stanton maintains his habitual sense of self-righteousness. When he discovers that the shady contractor, Gummy Larsen, is trying to swing a crooked deal to build the hospital, Stanton’s immediate impulse is to resign. Jack concludes that his friend “must have been in the grip of an instinctive withdrawal, which took

the form of moral indignation and moral revulsion, but which, no doubt, was different from either . . . and finally irrational.” (Whenever Stanton is confronted by bad news, he can be heard banging on his piano at all hours of the night.) Finally, upon discovering that his sister has been Stark’s mistress, Stanton goes berserk and murders Stark in the capitol rotunda. In the process, Stanton is himself gunned down by Stark’s bodyguard, Sugar-Boy.

Stanton destroys himself through a compulsive unwillingness to accept the flawed humanity of his sister. If unfallen innocence involves an ignorance of good and evil, then it is a particularly willful form of this innocence that bedevils Adam Stanton. When he can no longer blind himself to the existential knowledge of good and evil, he falls and dies unredeemed.

THE MAN OF FACT

If Adam Stanton is too much of a naïf to live effectively in a fallen world, one suspects that Willie Stark is flawed with too much cynicism. When Jack suggests that it might not be possible to dig up dirt on the patrician Judge Irwin, Stark replies: “Man is conceived in sin and born in corruption and he passeth from the stink of the didie to the stench of the shroud. There is always something.” Readers soon learn, however, that Stark has not always been of this opinion. At the outset of his political career, he is the naïve and idealistic “Cousin Willie,” a public servant who seeks to enlighten the populace and to govern honestly. It is only after he realizes that he is being played for a fool that Stark decides to operate as a ruthless pragmatist. His initial confrontations with realism, unlike Stanton’s, do not put him on a slippery slope to self-destruction. Instead of falling to pieces, Stark does what Stanton is incapable of doing—he changes the picture of the world that he carries in his head. Almost overnight, he ceases to be Cousin Willie from the country and becomes instead an opportunistic demagogue.