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### And All the King's Men

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## And All the King's Men

### Abstract

All the King's Men by Robert Penn Warren is primarily the story of Jack Burden's search for meaning. Jack Burden was born into a wealthy family. His friends as a child and through adulthood included the children of the state governor, Adam and Anne Stanton. Jack seems to float or drift through life, he holds onto nothing strongly. He drifted into college all the way up to his doctoral thesis on a distant relative, Cass Mastern, and found he couldn't finish it. He drifted into and out of a marriage without ever really seeming to have made a substantial commitment of himself. Finally, as a reporter, he drifts into the life of Willie Stark who starts out as a malleable "hick" from the sticks and ends up the beloved, however corrupt, governor of the people. His work with and for Willie leads Jack to the realization of the truth he has been unknowingly seeking.

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Willie Stark and Adam Stanton both seem to have a set of beliefs that are very concrete to them. Everything is very clearly delineated into black and white, good and bad. Willie believes that everything is bad and that we must make good from the bad. For him this justifies the use of illegal and immoral means to achieve his ends. Adam, on the other hand, does not believe that any good can come from something bad. If the means are tainted, the final product is also. Jack seems to be defined by his lack of belief in either system; rather he believes in any system which releases him from responsibility. Throughout his life he is constantly forced to reevaluate his beliefs. However, he hopes to develop new ones that will allow him to continue without accepting the fact that his actions have consequences upon others. Initially he believes in his brass bound idealism which allows him to ignore anything with which he is uncomfortable. The shock of finding out that Anne was sleeping with Willie forced him to discard his idealism and develop his belief in the Great Twitch. This idea nicely justifies Anne's actions because according to the theory of the Great Twitch, she was merely acting upon a predetermined impulse and could no more have refused to sleep with Willie Stark than the frog leg could stop from twitching. By the end of the novel, events compile to convince Jack that there is a fundamental flaw in each of his theories. The deaths of Judge Irwin, Willie Stark, and Adam Stanton force Jack to look both at himself and the connections between himself and others.

In the first reactionary moments after hearing about Judge Irwin's death, his mother repeatedly screams, "You killed him" (349). She very simply and unerringly lays the blame for his father's death directly on Jack's shoulders, an event that had likely never happened before. Jack's old theory of life cannot cope with this situation; therefore he throws it out and develops a new one. Though the new theory does not appear to be completely fleshed out at that time, Jack takes actions so that he will not be responsible for changing other people's lives by the use of blackmail. On his first day back in the office he tells the Boss "if you want any blackmailing done, get somebody else to do it ... even on MacMurfee" (356). Finally after the deaths of Willie and Adam he is able to see how people are connected to each other. He sees how the actions of one person can affect another, and how everyone bears the responsibility of their own actions. This realization makes him want to use Sugar Boy to get revenge on Tiny Duffy for both of his friend's

deaths. However, he was then able to see how his own actions contributed to Willie and Adam's downfall even before Duffy's did. In this way he was able to relate himself to Duffy as a flawed fellow human being. However by refusing to use Sugar Boy he stopped himself from completing the link between himself and Tiny Duffy.

Jack's new values seem to more closely resemble Adam's than Willie's. Willie thought nothing of using one man against another like he used Larson against MacMurfee. Sadie and Tiny Duffy did the same thing when they used Adam against Willie. Jack refuses to use Sugar Boy against Tiny Duffy because he realizes the repercussions of his actions. He sees the possible effects of his means as well as the effects of his ends. This contradicts Willie's belief that the ends justify the means. Jack's new beliefs cause him to analyze the people around him. For if everyone is connected, Jack can learn about himself by learning about other people. One person Jack has never been able to completely know is himself. In analyzing people he teams to look at their motivations, which is why he is able to be sympathetic to Sadie and yet retains his hatred of Tiny Duffy though they both had equal parts in causing Adam to kill Willie. He says "But what she had done had been done hot. What Duffy had done had been done cold. And, in the end, Sadie Burke's act had somehow been wiped out" (411). He uses this fact to both relate and differentiate himself from Tiny Duffy. Because he coldly considered using Sugar Boy to get revenge on Duffy, he found within himself a relation to Duffy. However the fact that he decided not to use Sugar Boy proved that he was not exactly like Duffy. Finding within himself that which was evil prevented him from going home. But his visit with Lucy Stark gave him what he needed to be able to face Burden's Landing. Lucy says that she has to believe that Willie was a great man, and Jack echoes her sentiment. He needs to believe this because in the same way that he found evil in himself through Tiny Duffy, he finds greatness in himself through Willie Stark.

Jack's new views seem best described by what Cass Mastern knew. Cass knew "that the world is all of one piece. He learned that the world is like an enormous spider web and if you touch it, however lightly, at any point, the vibration ripples to the remotest perimeter" (188). Jack could not finish his dissertation because he did not know Cass Mastern. He understood Cass's brother, Gilbert whose motives were generally selfish, followed the social customs of the time, and did not worry about his effect upon others. However he could not fathom Cass Mastern, who knew that everyone was affected by everyone else. Now that he has realized that everyone is interconnected and everyone bears responsibility for their actions he is able to return to the life of Cass Mastern and complete his dissertation. He is able to have a marriage, unlike the one he had with Lois where he abdicated responsibility to her and said "I forgive you for everything I did to you" (308). He is also able to work with Hugh Miller, a politician who believes in holding people accountable for their actions.

The tale of *All the King's Men* is the story of the development of a man's character. Jack is the product of a woman who never had to take much responsibility for her actions. She seemed to view husbands as an opportunity to redecorate. She did not seem to see or simply did not care about the ramifications of her actions on the other people in her life, even her son. Jack grew up with, and adapted this belief to fit his own life. Jack held onto

his escapist beliefs though the "stinking curdle of truth" (422) repeatedly wafted under his nose. When he failed to understand Cass Mastern, he said, "perhaps he [Jack] laid aside the journal of Cass Mastern not because he could not understand, but because he was afraid to understand for what might be understood there was a reproach to him" (189). Perhaps the reproach was directed at his refusal to accept responsibility for his own actions. Throughout the story he is forced to create new beliefs to replace the ones that have failed, until finally he faces and accepts the truth. All of Jack's convenient theories shatter, and the old Jack falls away, and even all the king's men couldn't put him together again.

### Bibliography

Warren, Robert Penn. *All the King's Men*. San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, & Company. 1996 [1948].