

Coming to grips



Jack Burden is far more than a narrator describing the rise and fall of Willie Stark in Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*. Intertwined in his description of The Boss's political machinations and personal dilemmas is an account of his own thoughts and aspirations. The novel not only chronicles the downfall of a political giant but also the emotional development and maturation of a man who has not yet mentally reached adulthood, despite being nearly forty years old. In fact, Jack notes at the end of the novel, "This has been the story of Willie Stark, but it is my story, too. For I have a story" (Warren 656). Though Jack Burden lacks the maturity of a developed adult for much of the novel, reconciling each of his three father figures — Willie Stark, Judge Irwin, and Ellis Burden — to his life helps him mature and accept responsibility for his actions. When Jack begins telling the story, he observes the world from a safe distance. This distance allows him to feel superior and disconnected from humanity, shields him from "messy commitments" (Sanderson 1), and positions him to exhibit the sarcasm he so often does. When he drives to Mason City with Willie and the others in 1936, he is along for the ride, literally jammed in the back seat between two adults like a small child. As the car approaches Old Man Stark's farm, Jack peers out the dusty car window and imagines the people inside the houses he is whizzing by. "She listens to the flies cruising around the room, and then she listens to your motor getting big out on the road, then it shrinks off into the distance" (Warren 33), he thinks to himself, illuminating the image of his arrival and departure without a significant impact. This image resurfaces numerous times in the early part of the novel. One evening before Willie is elected governor, Jack views and connects with the world through the thick glass of a train window. He studies a woman in her backyard, and as the train pulls

away, he thinks, “ She’ll stay there. And all at once, you think that you are the one who is running away” (Warren 114). Seconds later he sees a cow and becomes forlorn, commenting, “ And all at once you feel like crying. But the train is going fast and almost immediately whatever you feel is taken away from you, too” (Warren 114). Jack’s tremulous relationship with the world is as delicate as that of a young child, whose emotions are also evanescent. He is so emotionally delicate that for much of the novel, he thinks of himself as a piece of furniture. When the reader meets Sadie and Willie, Jack narrates, “ I had been a piece of furniture a long time, but some taint of the manners my grandma taught me still hung on and now and then got the better of my curiosity” (Warren 49). This sentiment is elucidated when Jack recalls a visit with his mother, who is obsessed with furniture, with “ spinets, desks, tables, chairs, each more choice than the last [littered across her home]” (Warren 159). When she sees Jack, she treats him like furniture, too. She made Jack “ lay on [his] back, with [his] head on her lap... She let her hand lie on [his] chest... and her right hand on [his] forehead” (Warren 157). Jack is thirty-five years old at the time of this scene, significantly old for his mother’s lap. When Jack hears his stepfather, Theodore, coming up the stairs, he tries to stand up, but his mother holds him down until her husband sees them in that position. As such, it is not surprising that Jack feels objectified. Similarly, Jack’s emotions lead him to the study of history. Whether he is reporting for *The Chronicle*, investigating suspects for Willie, or working toward a Ph. D. in American History, Jack is buried in history. When he was in college, he comments how he took “ refuge in the past” in an effort to “ hide from the present” (Warren 240). Ironically, for most of the story, Jack is ashamed of his own history. Heavily

impacted by outrageous claims concerning his father, Ellis Burden, Jack thinks that the man isn't a "real man" (Ealy 2) if he abandoned Jack's mother. In Jack's eyes, if Ellis is not a man, he cannot be one either. As a result, he hides in the histories of others to try to forget his own. Jack's conception of reality is so deluded that when he is faced with a real, live person, his response is hardly one of an adult. While leaning against the fence and surveying the sunset at Old Man Stark's farm in chapter one, he hears someone walking up to him but does not turn around to see who it is: "If I didn't look around it would not be true that someone had opened the gate... I had got hold of that principle out of a book when I was in college, and I had hung onto it for grim death... It does not matter what you do or what goes on around you because it isn't real anyway (Warren 44). Jack's reaction here is similar to that of a child who tucks his head underneath crossed arms and believes that if he cannot see something, it does not exist. This ontology serves him well as Willie's chief investigator. Jack "views his job simply as being Willie's errand boy" (Bohner 3) and doesn't believe that his actions have any influence on the world surrounding him. His choices and actions are devoid of meaning, and that is how he prefers it. He does not see any complicity on his part in unveiling Judge Irwin's acceptance of a bribe from the American Electric Power Company twenty-five years ago, even though he readily accepted Willie's request to dig up the dirt and pursued the quest with some relish. When Anne is upset at learning about the bribe and her father's collusion, Jack insensitively and immaturely responds, "I only told her the truth... and she can't blame me for the truth" (Warren 454). Jack's relationships with women are equally sophomoric — he does not have a clue how to act around them. He "feels absolutely no warmth for his

mother" (Sale 3), and while he finds her to be a beautiful woman, he considers her alien, " something which was so precious that it couldn't be tied down to God's green globe" (Warren 156). He criticizes his father for leaving his mother but, at the same time, talks of her as if she always " has something up her sleeve" (Drake 4). His and Anne's relationship is stagnant and faltering, delayed for nearly twenty years when Jack could not muster the courage to make love to her. After his romantic relationship with Anne disintegrates, Jack marries Lois, a wealthy girl whose only asset is her sexual connection with Jack. In chapter seven, he recalls, " as long as I hadn't begun to notice that the sounds she made were words, there was no harm in her and no harm in the really extraordinary pleasure she could provide" (Warren 440). The detachment he feels from society and women is emphasized in his frustrated comment that Anne, Lois, and all women are the same. In addition, Jack's behavior when making decisions about school and a career highlight his desire to forever remain a child. Irritated when Anne asks him what he intends to pursue after college, Jack defensively exclaims " law school" (Warren 128) even though he is not the slightest bit interested in it. After attending law school briefly, he gleefully accepts his expulsion. He then re-enrolls in the university as an American history graduate student, works toward his Ph. D. for some time, but then, when the pressure builds, begins one of the three periods of time he calls the Great Sleep. To avoid making decisions and taking action, Jack sleeps " twelve or more hours per day, days on end" (Beebe 3) not doing much of anything else. Moreover, Jack evades reality through his other theories, like the Great Twitch. While the Great Sleep and the Great Twitch have their roots of creation embedded in bouts of depression, Jack's tendency to revert to reclusion when life demands

decision or action emphasizes his immaturity. Nonetheless, by the end of the novel, Jack has come to terms with his mother, accepted culpability for Judge Irwin's death, married Anne, and taken in his ailing father — a man whom he had long shunned and abhorred for “ being weak and foolish” (Cullick 2).

What precipitates this radical change? Literary critic Jonathan Cullick contends that “ Jack's connection to history [helps him] surrender his pose of objectivity [and become more involved in the world]” (Cullick 1). This argument could not be farther from the truth, since Jack's connection to history serves as an escape route, not a path to involvement. He submerges himself in the history of others to forget his own, not to connect with his own. Mr. Cullick's argument is nothing more than a paradox. As the novel progresses, it becomes increasingly clear that Jack must come to grips with each of his father figures — Willie Stark, Judge Irwin, and Ellis Burden — before he can become more connected to the world and embark on his journey toward adulthood. Willie is “ a man of action” (Beebe 5), something Jack always reprimanded Ellis Burden, whom he thought was his father, for not being. Jack thinks that Ellis left his mother because he could provide for neither her wants nor her needs. Judge Irwin, on the other hand, was a great influence on Jack's childhood years, both before and after Ellis left the family, and Jack holds many fond memories of spending time with the judge. Like many tragic heroes, Jack must come to terms with each of his father figures before he can be viewed as an actual adult and member of the community of Burden's Landing. It is an incident involving Willie that helps Jack clarify where he stands. Upon discovering Willie and Anne's affair, Jack begins to understand that even his inactions have consequences. While on a sudden trip to the West Coast provoked by the shock of the affair, Jack recalls and

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examines the events and choices that sowed the seeds for the ending of his relationship with Anne. Even though he flees from reality to the West, into a land “ at the end of History” (Warren 467), the trip forces him to overcome the fact that “ his lack of decisive actions has handed Anne over to Willie” (Sanderson 4). Jack observes a change in the few days between Tom’s paralysis and Willie’s assassination, and he learns from it. Willie’s last words to Jack are, “ It might have been all different, Jack” (Warren 603), alluding to the possibility of choice. In the context of Jack’s maturation, though, Willie must die. With Willie alive, “ Jack would have probably continued as Willie’s errand boy” (Bohner 7), eluding responsibility and observing life from a distance. But immediately after Willie dies, Jack receives the opportunity to make a decision and understand its consequences when he chooses not to inform Sugar Boy of Tiny’s involvement in Willie’s assassination. Thinking back on that experience, Jack notes, “ But there was a difference now, in my own mind if not the circumstances of my life” (Warren 637). In addition, Willie teaches Jack how to start and maintain a meaningful relationship with a lady. Throughout the novel, Willie is the center of female attention. His wife continues to love him despite his infidelity. Sadie and Anne have a similar story, convincing themselves that Willie is one of a kind. His power, courage, and ambition make him appealing to women, most notably Anne. Jack’s lack of direction, on the other hand, frustrates Anne, and her efforts to inspire him prove to be futile, nudging her toward a man like Willie. Wanting a strong man that is destined to succeed, Anne has an affair with Willie because of his sense of purpose and aura of confidence. She has swung from dating a directionless boy to pursuing a relationship with a motivated, goal-oriented man, and Jack comes to understand that in his inability to find a

healthy middle ground, he lost Anne. Willie had to die, so Jack could apply this lesson to his life. Had he not passed away, Anne would have likely forgotten about Jack. Willie's death permits Jack to prove to Anne that he is now a grown man and lays the foundation for his success later in life. Just as it was necessary for Willie to die so that Jack could grow, Judge Irwin's death serves a similar purpose. Even though Jack's story does not completely parallel the ancient tale of Oedipus, enough similarities exist to warrant some mention. In fact, much like Oedipus's discovery of the identity of his father, Jack does not learn that Judge Irwin is his father until after the judge's death, when Jack's mother screams, "Your father and oh! you, killed him" (Warren 487). "But the result is the same; the father moves out of the way so that the son may fulfill his own role in the world" (Sale 6). In addition, the judge's death highlights the relationship between act and consequence; Jack's information about the bribery triggers the steps that culminate in Judge Irwin's suicide. Jack's epiphany comes when he realizes that he is weeping, noting how the judge's death "was like the ice breaking up after a long winter. And the winter had been long" (Warren 533). After Willie's assassination and Judge Irwin's suicide, Jack is far along the road of maturation. Jack's acceptance of Ellis Burden, the man whom he had presumed to be his biological father for nearly forty years, marks the completion of Jack's transformation to adulthood. "The curse of Jack Burden [was that] he was invulnerable" (Warren 227), and when he takes Ellis into his home, it symbolizes his overcoming the fact that he is not invulnerable after all — not to history, pain, life, love, or compassion. Indeed, *All the King's Men* is far more than a political novel. "It is the story of a man who lived in the world and to him the world looked one way for a long time and

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then it looked another and very different way" (Warren 605). Jack's experiences turned his world upside down, but they eventually brought him full circle. At the end of the novel, he finds himself married to Anne and prepared to leave Burden's Landing, never to return. With this step, Jack, the man who began as an observer of the world, is now ready to embrace it.

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