

The good, the bad
and the ugly: the
winding road to self-
discovery in robert
penn...



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In Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*, three major characters, Jack Burden, Willie Stark and Adam Stanton, embark on a whirlwind journey of self-discovery that leads to tragedy for some and optimistic enlightenment for others. Throughout the course of the novel, each learns something different about himself and must face realizations about their moral standing and role in the world. Willie Stark, political powerhouse and Jack's employer, is sadly enlightened right before his death. Throughout most of the book, Willie is both politically and personally corrupt, managing the state through manipulation and having many extramarital affairs. As governor, Willie treats people kindly as long as people listen to his views and support him. However, Willie is just as committed to punishing his enemies. A staunch supporter of the principle that the "end justifies the means," Willie resorts to blackmail and manipulation to do what he feels is best for the state and his administration. Willie tries to persuade moral Adam Stanton that goodness isn't simply "inherited." "You got to make it Doc, if you want it. And you got to make it out of badness... And you know why? Because there isn't anything else to make it out of" (367). Stark is trying to justify his bad actions because the end is good. Willie sustains this philosophy and continues to manipulate people up until his son Tom is paralyzed in a football game. For the first time in the book, Willie can't control the situation at hand and is at his weakest. Willie does everything he can to pretend the situation is within his grasp, continually saying that Tom will be fine and declaring his son's toughness at the hospital. Finally when Willie can control part of the situation, like when he decides to name the hospital after Tom, he jumps at the chance. He simply doesn't know how to act when he can't force circumstances to conform to his desires. After Tom's injury, Willie begins to turn over a new

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leaf by breaking off his affair with Anne and trying to reconcile with Lucy. He even wants to rid his office of corruption, canceling a dishonest building contract and telling Tiny Duffy and Jack that things were going to be done differently from now on. Unfortunately, Adam Stanton, who is distraught after hearing that his sister and Willie had an affair, shoots Willie that very day. Dying on a hospital bed a few days later, Willie tells Jack “ if it hadn’t happened (Adam’s shooting), it might have been different, even yet” (573). Adam Stanton, a skilled surgeon and Jack’s closest childhood friend, is the most moral of the three characters and possesses high integrity as well as high sensitivity. His high principles and desire to do good are easily upset by people he views as unscrupulous or possessing a lower standard of character. Thus, Adam naturally despises Willie Stark. When Willie offers Adam a position as director of the new hospital, Adam only accepts because he knows it’s a promising opportunity to help as many people as possible, his ultimate goal. From this point on, Adam receives blow after blow to his virtue until his morality is shattered and he breaks down. The first blow occurs when Jack exposes the dishonesty and bribery of Adam’s late father, a former governor whom Adam highly revered as an honorable man. Adam doesn’t take the news well, as his delicate virtuous outlook is beginning to crack. After an attempted bribe concerning the hospital and learning of the affair between Willie and his sister Anne, Adam is shattered. He believes he only got the hospital directorship because he was the brother of Willie’s mistress. This is the kind of corruption Adam cannot tolerate, and the fact that it involves both him and his sister pushes him over the edge. His ego as well as his sensitive spirit is crushed. In desperation, he kills Willie and dies himself when Willie’s friend Sugar-Boy shoots him. Tragically, what Adam

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learns about himself isn't positive; his enlightenment is only his realization that he simply cannot stomach the corrupt, darker aspects of life. Jack Burden, the novel's narrator and protagonist, is the political-right-hand-man of southern governor Willie Stark. He lacks initiative and enthusiasm to pursue his goals and acts merely as a puppet, conforming to surrounding people and whatever life deals him. For example, after months of work on a biographical study about his grandmother's brother Cass Mastern, he quits working and has no desire to finish it. Similarly, when he loses his job, he doesn't attempt to look for another one, simply because he doesn't feel like it, and fills his empty days with sleep and leisure. Future and responsibility mean nothing to Jack. While this doesn't bother him, his lack of initiative troubles companion and love interest Anne Stanton. Once she brings this to his attention, he mulls it over in his mind a little, but takes no action, and Anne leaves after their summer fling. Most of the novel follows Jack in his work for Willie, which consists of digging up dirt on political enemies and blackmailing. Never getting emotionally involved in his work, Jack stays detached from all feelings of responsibility. This detachment carries over into Jack's personal life, where he decides that anything that happens is the result of the whims of nature and not of any specific person's actions. By adopting this theory, called the "Great Twitch" (events are twitches, random and uncontrollable) Jack thus rids himself of blame and responsibility for his actions. Jack Burden is transformed from an unfeeling man to a caring individual only after the death of his close friend and mentor Judge Irwin. On one of Willie's blackmailing pursuits, Jack finds that Irwin had accepted a bribe because he needed the money to save his estate. After Jack tries to blackmail the judge with this information, Irwin shoots himself. Later, Jack

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finds out that Judge Irwin was really his father and Jack is the sole heir to the estate. After poring over the turn of events in his mind, Jack realizes with incredulity how undeniably logical the situation was. Judge Irwin took the bribe in order to save the estate, then fathered Jack, who tried to blackmail his father with information about the bribe, which caused Judge Irwin to commit suicide, which caused Jack to inherit the estate; had Judge Irwin not taken the bribe, Jack would have had nothing to inherit, and had Jack not tried to blackmail Judge Irwin, the judge would not have killed himself, and Jack would not have inherited the estate when he did. This incident proves to Jack that the Great Twitch theory must be wrong, and that people really are responsible for the actions they take. His ability to escape the idea of responsibility is shattered by this situation. Jack is genuinely sorry for his role in the death and cries, his first sincere emotional reaction. Another death has a great deal to do with Jack's inner enlightenment, that of Willie Stark's assassination by Adam Stanton. When Jack learns that Tiny told Adam about Willie's affair with Anne, he visits Tiny and threatens him with the information, the same way he used to blackmail Willie's enemies. However, Jack soon realizes that in blaming Tiny in full for Willie's death, he is acknowledging that someone was directly responsible for what happened. If someone is responsible for an action, then the Great Twitch theory cannot be correct, and if someone is responsible for Willie's death, Jack will be forced to face the responsibility he bears as well. After this incident, the Great Twitch theory is completely devastated. Jack finds this realization hard to accept, and becomes numb and withdrawn. Jack's mother eventually brings him out of his deadened state and softens his heart when she talks to him some time later. Coming to a realization herself, she is leaving her husband because <https://assignbuster.com/the-good-the-bad-and-the-ugly-the-winding-road-to-self-discovery-in-robert-penn-warrens-all-the-kings-men/>

she has finally recognized her lifelong love for Judge Irwin. This finally changes Jack's long-felt impression of his mother as an unfeeling woman, and helps him understand the value of love and relationships. Jack is finally a person with a heart instead of an unemotional machine. The road to self-discovery can be a rocky one, a concept that Robert Penn Warren makes very clear through the characters of Willie Stark, Adam Stanton and Jack Burden. In the cases of Willie and Jack, corruption and its consequences are sometimes the only way to get a person to realize his own faults, an important milestone that eventually leads to self-betterment. However, in Adam's case, the enlightenment corruption brings is more than the soul can bear.