

Jack burden's journey of self-destruction



Jack Burden, the chronicler and one of two possible protagonists of Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*, is anything but a static narrator. His character is quite possibly even more dynamic than that of Willie Stark, the novel's man of the hour. Throughout the adventures and misadventures Jack encounters on the capricious road of life, he ultimately destroys his original self, tries on numerous vaguely different personalities, and ends up an entirely altered entity. Although many factors shape the destruction of Mr. Burden's primary character and the shaping of his ultimate persona, the departure of his father when he is very young, his love affair with Anne Stanton, finding evidence of Judge Irwin's wrongdoing, the Judge's suicide and the revelation that he is Jack's father, and the deaths of Willie Stark and Adam Stanton are the five monumental events that have the greatest effect on his personality. Although he does not realize it at the time, Jack's life is first significantly impacted by an episode that occurs when he is a boy of six. Ellis Burden, the man Jack calls the "Scholarly Attorney" and believes to be his father for a sizeable portion of the novel, walks out on Jack and his mother for the life of a poor, street-corner evangelist. Jack does not find out the reason for this seeming abandonment until some years later. Until he discovers Ellis' motivation for fleeing, Jack interprets his departure from the viewpoint of the small child he is when the episode occurs. He feels rejected, angry, and does not understand why a man has discarded him and his infatuating mother. After this incident, Jack carries with him a sense of inadequacy and defect that shapes his mindset throughout adolescence and adulthood. Jack's denial of responsibility throughout part of the novel is also rooted in this event, as is his lack of understanding of human motivation. Jack considers that his "father" simply left, and does not take into account

the possibility that Jack's mother may have given him reason to leave. When visiting Ellis, believing that he is his father, a grown-up Jack is ashamed, even though Ellis is helping others and appears to be happy with his life. Jack feels that Ellis is "weak." As Jack sees it, he has not inherited the genes needed to succeed; it is futile for him to toil for any goal, and he is condemned to drift through life indefinitely. Jack refers to his own lack of ambition throughout the novel, which results from his observations of where the ambition to be successful has gotten his father-the street corner. Jack has no hopes and dreams partly because he has no father whom he may strive to emulate. Another influential event in Jack's life is the romantic relationship he shares with Anne Stanton in their youth. Anne, Jack's first love, changes him by allowing him to feel emotions unlike any he has experienced before. Loving a parent or parent figure and being in love with a peer are separate and very different emotions for him. The difference between these sentiments is especially distinct because Jack has had no peer love and little normal parental love until he and Anne fall in love. Jack's feelings for Anne are some of the purest, most honest feelings he expresses throughout the entire narrative. Jack's descriptions of Anne and their times together illustrate true love, rather than lust or infatuation. All images of Anne and their romance are idealized; however, and the indistinct, inconclusive end of their youthful relationship creates much cynicism in Jack's character. His picture of the perfect summer that simply drifts along forever is shattered, along with his impression that he is in the perfect relationship. Jack learns that there is no perfect relationship, nor perfect woman, and allows this knowledge to destroy his already scant idealism completely. As he and Anne fall out of love, Jack becomes even more

emotionally withdrawn, and ultimately resorts to a relationship with Lois based purely on physical attraction. Jack's personality is further transformed when he finds proof that Judge Monty Irwin, his father figure after the departure of Ellis, accepted a bribe to salvage his home, possessions, and position. When initially confronted by Willie to "dig up some dirt" on the judge, Jack is confident that he will find nothing. Adulating the older man for much of his life, Jack refuses to believe that Irwin is anything but lily-white until Irwin confesses to the entire scandal Jack uncovers. After his through search and this confirmation, Jack is amazed, disappointed, and shocked. Jack has now been disappointed by the second man he has looked up to. This event leaves Jack with even less faith in people than he had to begin with. If his father and Judge Irwin could both be susceptible to such disappointing failure, Jack is surely doomed. Almost immediately following his revelation about Judge Irwin, Jack experiences another momentous event. After considering the position he has been put in by the uncovering of his past sins, Judge Irwin commits suicide. In a state of horror and disbelief, Jack's mother reveals that Judge Irwin is Jack's father. Jack has been bombarded with two facts of great magnitude at once, and he must digest this new information as it pours into his character, changing him definitely and irrevocably. He weeps, showing the most candid emotion since his love affair with Anne. Knowing that Judge Irwin would rather kill himself than sell out his power, Jack appreciates a newfound reverence for the responsibility of men. Judge Irwin takes such accountability for his actions that he sacrifices his own life. Jack has no choice but to reject his "Great Twitch" theory in the phenomenal irony of the situation: Judge Irwin accepts a bribe to save the estate that Jack inadvertently inherits by exposing the bribe. Much as he

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might like to, Jack can no longer believe that life simply happens to men. Through Judge Irwin's suicide, Jack also learns that his mother is capable of love. She truly loved Judge Irwin, and that love produced Jack. Finally, Jack is somewhat relieved to know that he has a strong father rather than the weak "Scholarly Attorney," but he again recalls tender moments with Ellis and remains unclear about his feelings regarding his paternity. Needless to say, Jack's perception of life changes significantly in the instant that he finds out he has driven his father to suicide. When Willie Stark and Adam Stanton are gunned down essentially simultaneously, the final significant change in Jack's character transpires. Accustomed to Willie being in control of every situation, Jack is somewhat shocked when Governor Stark is fired upon in a cold blooded situation even "the Boss" can not control. Most importantly, Jack must come to terms with his own responsibility, specifically his role in the eventual death of Willie. Had he not begun to research the Judge, the ironic, tragic chain of events that unfolds in the final chapters of *All the King's Men* would never have been instigated. This cements the concept Jack begins to develop after Irwin's suicide-the theory that men have no responsibility for what happens to them is impossible. Because he blames Tiny for Willie's death, Tiny must have responsibility for something, and henceforth, so must everyone else. Jack must realize that he played a pivotal role in the deaths of the two most important men in his life. This epiphany shatters Jack's comfortable bubble of denial and self-righteousness, and awakens him to a more empowered, slightly more difficult to deal with, way of living in a world of accountability and possibility. Unmistakably, Jack Burden's character in Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men* evolves from impressionable child to irresponsible cynic to matured, complete adult

throughout the course of this respected literary work. The critical turning points in this destruction of his original self include the departure of Jack's alleged father, Jack's first love, Anne Stanton, finding proof that Judge Monty Irwin accepted a bribe, Irwin's suicide and the revelation that he is Jack's father, and the deaths of Adam Stanton and Willie Stark. By the time the novel concludes, our often unwittingly confused protagonist has found his true love, resolved his unfinished thesis, and accepted, " the awful responsibility of time."