

All the king's men: analysis of the cass mestern passage



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All the King's Men, by Robert Penn Warren is a novel of historical fiction. It is loosely based on the life of Governor Huey Long, who served as governor of Louisiana from nineteen twenty-eight until nineteen thirty-two and United States Senator from nineteen thirty-two until nineteen thirty-five when he was assassinated. Willie Stark, the protagonist and obviously the thinly disguised character of Governor Long even though Warren denied it, is an interesting character, but there is a framed story in Chapter Four that is intriguing of Cass Mastern that diverts from the any thing having to do with Willie Stark.

The narrator of All The King's Men, Jack Burden, is commanded by Stark to dig up dirt on a much loved man in Burden's life. It is then that he remembers the writing of his dissertation of papers that were his father's uncle, Cass Mastern. Mastern was a student at the University of Transylvania in Lexington, Kentucky during the eighteen fifties. He was funded by his older brother, Gilbert, a wealthy planter. Jefferson Davis, a neighbor of Gilbert, had sent letters ahead of Cass recommending him to a respectable couple, Duncan and Annabelle Trice.

Duncan was a young banker in Lexington and he and Cass quickly become close friends. Duncan was completely devoted to his wife and assumed that she was equally devoted to him. However, Cass and Annabelle Trice begin an affair that would change the course of life for all involved. The affair was passionate and was aided by Annabelle's half-sister. Duncan was out of town on business frequently which gave the lovers the house when he was away. Cass and Annabelle felt that they were safe in their romantic fun, but one day Duncan shoots himself in his library.

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He had staged it to look as if it had been an accident. Duncan knew both parties well enough to know that the guilt of their secret would destroy their worlds as they had destroyed his. After the suicide was discovered, Annabelle decided to go to bed. When her servant, Phebe, turned down her bed for her, there was Duncan's wedding ring. Annabelle immediately knew that he had found out about the affair. Phebe knew as well. After Duncan's funeral, Annabelle meets Cass in the She tells him of the details of the event and Cass is hit with what he has done to his friend.

Because Phebe knows about the wedding ring, Annabelle sells her in Paducah, Kentucky to be taken to New Orleans. It would be a bitter life for Phebe once she was in the Deep South. Cass was overcome with guilt and grief for the consequences of his frivolity. Cass searches in vain for Phebe while hoping to purchase her and bring her back to Lexington. His grief overpowers him at the failure to restore her with her family and the life where she had grown accustomed that he joined the Confederate Army.

It was there he was killed and he pays for his sins with his life. Jack Burden gives up working on his dissertation because he cannot understand the actions of Cass. It may seem that the Cass Mastern passage is a random story added to the novel for no reason. However, it has several purposes. It is the first glimpse that is seen into Jack Burden's sense of guilt. He has also allowed himself to be drawn into a political machine that will destroy the life of someone dear to him. The fact that he has no connection with Cass Mastern's guilt is foreshadowing.

One can only hope that by the end of the novel, Jack's character will grow to feel one of the most common of human emotions. The story of Cass Mastern is parallel to Jack Burden. He will grasp in the end, that there are consequences for an individual's actions even if that individual is convinced that he/she is doing it for the right purpose. He learns that people are not machines and cannot be turned on or off at will. Guilt will haunt an individual for the rest of his/her life just as Cass Mastern discovered.