

The essence of ambiguity: the paradox of willie stark and dr. sloper



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Our society revolves around the question of what is good and what is evil. We usually characterize humans as essentially malevolent or benevolent. The world contains, however, a minority of people characterized by ambiguity, a unique emotional equilibrium that lets them be both good and bad. Throughout both *Washington Square*, by Henry James, and *All the King's Men*, by Robert Penn Warren, the dispositions of numerous characters are simultaneously humanitarian and corrupt. In both sagas, the genuine internal motivations and emotional fabrics of Willie Stark and Dr. Sloper remain disputable. The authors intentionally remain unclear about the true nature of each character in an attempt to convey that benevolence and integrity fall victim to the realities of life. Both Willie Stark and Dr. Sloper are presented as ambiguous; however, the progression of each plot shows their morality degrade. Each author suggests that societal pressures subsume his character's altruism, as if to suggest that the contemporary world leaves no room for compassion. Robert Penn Warren's mastery of literature manifests itself in Stark's complexity. Stark is a man of startling contradictions. He is loved and hated, devoted and disloyal, comforting yet abusive. Despite this ambiguity, Warren often depicts Stark as thoroughly admirable. The people of Louisiana commonly remember him as a compassionate man who pursued many beneficial initiatives for the people of his state. To be sure, Stark's government did improve living conditions in Louisiana and provide the state with better infrastructure. For the economically deprived, the improvements in roads, schools, and healthcare, prevail over their leader's moral shortcomings. The gem of his populist agenda was his grandiose hospital complex: "I don't care how fine they are, mine's gonna be finer...mine's gonna be bigger, and any poor bugger in this state can go there and get the

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best there is and not cost him a dime” (279). The people interpret Willie’s relentless effort to better the lives of his fellow “ hicks” as a genuine show of goodheartedness. Stark represents heroism in the eyes of the people, for whom he has provided tangible lifestyle improvements. Although Warren establishes Willie’s character as an equilibrium between evil and amicable, his capacity for effecting real progress safely gives him the support of the general public. Despite accusations of corruption and the advent of numerous scandals, the people express their loyalties to Willie via the ballot box and street demonstrations: “ The crowd began chanting, “ Willie, Willie, Willie – We want Willie!” (178). Too intense to be interpreted as desperation or the effects of propaganda, Willie’s popularity stems from results – results which better the lives of people previously disenfranchised. Warren clearly intends to depict Willie as a man who is at least partially devoted to the execution of good deeds. Yet Warren also devotes himself to establishing Willie as an unsavory fellow. He provides the reader with ample evidence that Willie is both pure and rancid. Willie’s administration is characterized by the employment of despicable tactics to achieve political goals. Although “ the boss” oversees massive infrastructural improvements in his state, it is impossible to ignore the blatant corruption of his administration. Willie uses exploitation and intimidation, among other troubling methods, to impose his political agenda on Louisiana: “ Willie Stark caused the event by corrupting and blackmailing the legislature” (183). Stark’s practices disgrace the integrity of American politics and destroy his image as a purely benevolent character. Moreover, the motive for many of Stark’s actions is self-gratification. While he does seem devoted to improving the lives of commoners, he also seems to be driven by a selfish desire for an iconic

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legacy. For instance, he declares that “ I’m building that place...the best in the world...and I’m going to call it the Willie Stark Hospital and it will be there long after I’m dead and gone and you are dead and gone...” (281). Willie’s infatuation with his legacy tarnish the benevolence which the Louisiana populous accords him. Warren shows that Stark provides for the people while implying that Stark’s true intent is to immortalize himself as a godlike figure in American history. Willie also displays a lack of honor in his private life. At the beginning of the novel, Warren portrays Willie as a dedicated partner to his wife, Lucy. However, Willie’s loyalty to Lucy deteriorates substantially as his political prominence rises. Willie becomes a sexual hedonist, unable to curtail his attraction to women. Willie’s extramarital encounters show he has nothing but disrespect for the concepts of loyalty and the vows of marriage: “...A bevy of ‘ Nordic Nymphs’ in silver gee-strings and silver brassieres came skating out...Then when the last act was over he’d (Willie) say ‘ Good night, Jack,’ and he and the friend of the friend of Josh Conklin would head off into the night” (169). Willie seems to think he is above the moral code, and his intimate desires lead him to betrayal. In sum, Warren strikes a delicate balance in the character of Willie Stark. Willie advocates the rights of the common man, and provides for them in such efficient fashion that he becomes one of the most beloved figures in Louisiana history. By contrast, his motivations are often selfish, his tactics include intimidation and bribery, and his disloyalty to his spouse is legendary. The well-initiated reader may recognize the contradictory nature of Willie Stark as one of the most prominent paradoxes of 20th century literature. In Washington Square, Henry James presents an intricate portrait of the wealthy urbanite, Dr. Sloper. Much like Willie Stark, Dr. Sloper is a man

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of ambiguity. Henry James delicately develops Dr. Sloper's character in a way which clearly achieves the desired balance between morality and malevolence. Many goodhearted qualities are attributed to him. One of the main pillars of the novel is Dr. Sloper's reaction to Morris, whose sole purpose is to take advantage of Dr. Sloper's daughter, Catherine. Dr. Sloper recognizes Morris as a conniving "gold-digger" and battles the man's intrusion with admirable skill. While some might contend that Dr. Sloper's crusade against Morris is purely to prevent financial loss, his true intentions are deeper – he will protect his daughter from corrupting forces at all costs. Dr. Sloper's financial assets are both plentiful and secure, so he would not dedicate the entirety of his time to extinguishing a purely economic threat. The premier catalyst in his campaign against Morris is the integrity of his child, Catherine. Dr. Sloper's dedication to his daughter is fundamental evidence for the humane component of his character. Dr. Sloper's commendable qualities go beyond the commitment to protect his daughter. He is also generous, using his considerable fortune for the benefit of others. His generosity, although not always fully appreciated, is ever-present. While on a European journey with Catherine, Dr. Sloper finances a slew of lavish gifts to award to loved ones in the Americas: "...she (Catherine) opened them and displayed to her aunt some of the spoils of foreign travel. These were rich and abundant; and Catherine had brought home a present to everyone..." (172). Dr. Sloper shows a willingness to indulge, and his generosity must be recognized as one of his respectable qualities. Dr. Sloper also recognizes that he by no means constitutes perfection. While many wealthy aristocrats refuse to acknowledge their miscalculations, Dr. Sloper is plagued by his own. As a doctor, he sees it as his foremost duty to protect

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his family from the evils of nature. He fails to prevent the death of his wife, thereby failing in the most fundamental of a physician's tasks. As a result, Dr. Sloper subjugates himself to a life of self-criticism. While conventional aristocrats are arrogant, Dr. Sloper is tormented by inadequacy: "Our friend, however, escaped criticism; that is, he escaped all criticism but his own, which was much the most competent and formidable" (6). As Dr. Sloper grieves the death of his spouse with intense emotion, his keen senses of love and anguish become apparent. This relentless self-criticism makes Dr. Sloper seem more genuine and humane. Despite this praise, not all is well within Dr. Sloper's character. He employs treacherous tactics in prying his daughter away from Morris's clutches. Dr. Sloper is radicalized by the ordeal with Morris and Catherine, and seldom spares the emotional stability of his daughter in his bid to achieve their separation. Dr. Sloper is the cause of much of Catherine's misery and depression. He embodies the image of a dominating father, and unleashes countless threats in an attempt to frighten Catherine out of her ties with Morris. Dr. Sloper's unfatherly behavior includes threats and intimidation: "You try my patience...and you ought to know what I am. I am not a very good man...at bottom I am very passionate; and I assure you I can be very hard" (165). Dr. Sloper makes it a priority to be feared by Catherine, rather than loved, and continues his policy of alarming Catherine by suggesting that doomsday scenarios will be the result of a union between her and Morris. He exceeds the realm of reality with his outlandish predictions, and asserts that even starvation will result from Catherine's irresponsibility: "Should you like to be left in such a place as this, to starve?...That will be your fate - that's how he (Morris) will leave you" (166). Dr. Sloper's willingness sacrifice the emotional health of his only

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daughter in order to achieve a single-minded objective is revolting. His use of fear and coercion portray him as a verbal cannibal, ruthlessly eating away at the happiness of his companions. Moreover, Dr. Sloper seems to take pride in his despotic way of ruling. He believes maintaining his lifestyle depends on firm rule, and takes great pride in his successful use of intimidation. Dr. Sloper's recognition that he is the source of much sorrow only increases his egotism. He lauds his authoritarian style, and his cockiness becomes increasingly noticeable as the novel progresses: "They are both afraid of me, harmless as I am...And it is on that that I build – on the salutary terror I inspire" (90). Dr. Sloper's disdain for human merriment results in open haughtiness and adds to his devilish characteristics. He commands respect through fear, not affection, and builds relationships on dependency, not mutual fondness. Henry James clearly performs a literary balancing act in the evolution of Austin Sloper – on one hand, Sloper is generous and genuinely concerned for his daughter's needs; on the other, he is a domineering force who does not spare Catherine's stability. Just like Willie Stark's, Sloper's personality is one of countless, truly riveting contradictions. Both Robert Penn Warren and Henry James succeed in their attempt to portray characters as neither solely evil or innocent. Further parallels between the characters' lives become evident as the plots go on. Whether both entities are defined by malice or purity remains vague at best, and the reader's psyche, desperate for definitive conclusions, is left wanting. The keen reader will swiftly wonder whether both authors deliberately leave the identities of each character in a doubtful state. Surely, the authors were not so overly indecisive that they were unable to provide their characters with concrete dispositions. On the contrary, the decision to leave the true

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identities of Willie Stark and Dr. Sloper to the sentiments of the reader was calculated. Both authors put their character in a position of vulnerability, in which outside forces constantly try to intrude upon the status quo. The challenges and conflicts of the world compel both Stark and Dr. Sloper to adjust and eventually abandon their ethical commitments. The cycle of life consumes the goodness most evident in them at the beginning of the novels. This transformation occurs in Stark in part because of the endless political opposition that climaxes with an attempt to impeach him. At the dawn of the novel, Willie clearly advocates a moral way of life. Ambitious Willie seems to embody human innocence, even refusing alcohol because “ Lucy didn’t favor [me] drinking” (62). As the story progresses, however, Willie is faced with countless challenges, and the realities of life force him to adjust. Willie is compelled to employ numerous forms of corruption, about which he often hints: “ You can forget about the vote side about it (the Willie Stark Hospital) ...There are lots of ways to get votes, son” (309). He acquires many nemeses as his career progresses and defends his political advantage with immoral actions, thereby risking his good reputation. As Stark realizes that he must reject any moral code that would restrict his political maneuverings, his former integrity becomes a figment of history. The society in which Dr. Sloper dwells is also characterized by shrewdness. Dr. Sloper is an admired professional and a member of New York’s elite. Like Stark, he appears largely benevolent at the beginning of the novel; challenges to his honor and legacy, however, force him to discard kindness in favor of authority. The man seeking to take Dr. Slope’s daughter forces the doctor to become increasingly hostile. He acts as though he is under constant threat, and one cannot ignore vengeful passages such as “ I am very angry” (164) and “ I

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have been raging inwardly for the last six months” (165). In effect, he enters a crusade against Catherine, aiming to frighten her into compliance. Dr. Sloper recognizes that the contriving realities of life leave no room for compassion. Both Henry James and Robert Penn Warren recognize the necessity of establishing complex personality traits in their characters. In both *All the King's Men* and *Washington Square*, the emotional tendencies of all characters are painstakingly catalogued; however, the dispositions of Willie Stark and Dr. Sloper are especially striking. Each author deliberately frames both characters cryptically: both Stark and Dr. Sloper display many positive traits along with a slew of contemptible ones. The result is emotional equilibrium – neither Dr. Sloper nor Willie Stark is entirely good or bad. However, each book is structured to suggest that malevolence subsumes goodness. The protagonists' positive qualities appear primarily at the beginning of the novels, then deteriorate as social pressures take their toll. The men's principles disintegrate as others threaten their accomplishments; apparently morality, according to James and Warren, cannot coexist with success.