

# On willie stark as political leader

[Politics](#)



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

ON WILLIE STARK AS POLITICAL LEADER Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*<sup>1</sup> tells the story of two men, Jack Burden, the book's narrator, and Willie Stark, Jack's friend and boss. Because my focus is on the politics of the novel, Jack Burden will appear only occasionally in this paper. This approach does not do justice to the richness of the novel, for as Jack himself says, his story and Willie's story are really one story. With this limitation in mind, I now turn to a review of Willie Stark's career. Willie Stark, the political protagonist of *All the King's Men*, was a reluctant but earnest young politician who had returned quickly to private life after his initial effort to achieve reform at the local level failed. Through a matter of chance, he returned to the public eye, became convinced to run for governor of the state, and was used by a political machine in an effort to undermine its opposition and ensure its continuation in office. During the course of this campaign "Cousin Willie," as Jack Burden referred to him, received his political education when he learned that he was being used. He turned the tables by becoming a spokesman for the "hicks" whose votes were necessary for election but whose interests the machine ignored. In the course of this revitalized campaign "Cousin Willie" was transformed into "the Boss." Subsequently Willie Stark was elected Governor of the state, and, after a turbulent administration and successful effort to fend off impeachment, was assassinated. The stages of Willie Stark's career and the details of his term as governor of the state provide the material from which we may examine the foundations and nature of his political agenda, and the grounds for his ultimate failure. The next two sections will examine Stark's rhetoric and his actions, respectively. The paper will conclude with an argument against searching for "the political teaching" of *All the King's Men*

<https://assignbuster.com/on-willie-stark-as-political-leader/>

(an argument that could be expanded to include other works of political fiction). Instead of seeking the teaching of the novel, I will suggest that it is more appropriate to consider the meaning of the novel, which is something considerably different. I: Willie Stark: Rhetoric Willie's youth might appear to have been undistinguishable from that of many others who grew up in rural America in the early twentieth century: he was raised on a farm, attended a year of college, was in basic training in Oklahoma when World War I ended, married, and fathered a child (67). The young Willie Stark exhibited many of the characteristics of talented but poor children who are committed to succeeding in life against great odds: single-minded focus, tremendous self-discipline, and an almost maniacal drive. He had been elected Treasurer in Mason County because Dolph Pillsbury, the Chairman of the County Commission, who was "a sort of second hand relative" of Willie's father, had had a falling out with his original candidate for Treasurer and needed someone to replace him (59). Having lucked into the position of County Treasurer, Willie Stark ran head long into the reality of local politics. Mason County was going to build a school-house, and the County Commission had selected as contractor for the project J. H. Moore, a builder who had not submitted the low bid and who had a reputation for using inferior materials in his work (60). Treasurer Stark was opposed to this decision, and he made enough of a fuss to attract the attention of The Chronicle, the leading newspaper in the state capital. While he received some statewide publicity, he also attracted the ire of the County Commission. Willie's wife, Lucy, was fired from her teaching job, and Pillsbury, the local boss, worked to ensure that Willie would be a one-term County Treasurer (58). Willie ran for re-election, but was soundly defeated by the county machine. In part Willie's

<https://assignbuster.com/on-willie-stark-as-political-leader/>

defeat was achieved through racial politics—the low bid firm used black laborers, and Willie was accused publicly of being a “ nigger lover” (57, 60, 53). In part it was achieved through use of strong-arm tactics—the local paper would not print stories on his campaign and would not even print his political flyers in their commercial print shop (60-61). Willie had his flyers printed out of town, but the kid he hired to pass them out was beaten up. Lucy and Willie reacted differently to Willie’s defeat. Lucy’s attitude was “ good riddance! ” She said, “ Now, honey, you didn’t want to be mixed up with them anyway. Not after you found out they were dishonest and crooked. ” Willie, however, brooded with redneck resentment: “ They tried to run it over me. They just figured I’d do anything they told me, and they tried to run it over me like I was dirt” (61). As I will show, this redneck resentment was to be an important catalyst in Willie’s success later on. [Important: Willie ‘ knows the heart of the people’ because his heart is just like theirs—note Upton speech, 91] After his defeat as County Treasurer, Willie farmed and sold household goods door-to-door during the day. At night he studied law (66). While he was preparing for the bar examination, an event occurred which would change his life forever: there was a fatal accident at the schoolhouse built by J. H. Moore. During a fire drill, the fire escape collapsed, injuring a dozen and killing three children (65). This event precipitated Willie’s political resurrection, not because he sought office in the immediate aftermath, but because his reputation for honesty spread throughout the county and beyond. Willie did exercise some political muscle by campaigning against the incumbent Congressman who had been Dolph Pillsbury's ally. Jack Burden thought Willie was effective in this campaign, but not because he was a good speaker: “ Willie’s speeches weren’t any good, at least the one I heard

<https://assignbuster.com/on-willie-stark-as-political-leader/>

wasn't any good. But they didn't have to be good. People didn't bother to listen to them. They just came to look at Willie and clap and then go vote against the Pillsbury man" (65). This reentry into the world of politics prompted the city-based political machine of former Governor Joe Harrison to attempt to take advantage of Willie's popularity to split the rural vote going to current Governor Sam MacMurfee in the Democratic primary, thus giving Harrison the victory. It was during this campaign that Willie articulated a political program for the first time, a program that could be characterized as a southern populist platform. 2 Willie's program included tax and economic reform, improved roads (especially in rural areas), efficient and economic administration, and better schools (78). Jack Burden recalled that Willie's speeches were " awful, " (71) and consisted of " a weird mixture of facts and figures on the one hand . . . and of fine sentiments on the other hand" (69)3. During the early phase of this first gubernatorial campaign Willie was both earnest and uninspiring. After listening to one speech, Jack tried to give Willie some advice: " Maybe you try to tell 'em too much. It breaks down their brain cells. " When Willie protested, " Looks like they'd want to hear about taxes, though, " Jack persisted: " You tell 'em too much. Just tell 'em you're going to soak the fat boys, and forget the rest of the tax stuff" (72). Despite the ineffectiveness of his speeches, it is important to note that the platform Willie articulated in this campaign remained the core of his agenda throughout the remainder of his political career. He may have refined it here or enlarged it there, but Willie never repudiated this initial formulation of his political program. 4 Willie also remained naïve. Initially he did not realize that he was being used by the Harrison machine to throw the election in its direction. So caught up in the grandeur of running for Governor, Willie never

<https://assignbuster.com/on-willie-stark-as-political-leader/>

wondered why he was courted to run by Tiny Duffy, a hack politician who previously wouldn't even give him the time of day. But as the campaign ground on, Willie inadvertently learned the truth from the political operative sent along by the Harrison people to run the campaign. (80) This revelation had a dramatic impact on Willie and the effectiveness of his campaign, because it led to the resurfacing of redneck resentment, not as something incidental to his campaign, but as its emotional core. When Willie arose to deliver his campaign speech in Upton, just after he has learned that he was being used, he jettisoned his stump speech and hit a note of populism that would remain with him throughout his career: " I have a speech here. It is a speech about what this state needs. But there's no use telling you what this state needs. You are the state. You know what you need. " (90) Willie then told the crowd his story, including his fight over the schoolhouse contract and Harrison's plan to use him to split the rural vote. He turned on Tiny Duffy, who was sitting on stage behind him, forced him off the edge of the stage, and then delivered his most powerful message: " Whatever a hick wants he's got to do for himself. Nobody in a fine automobile and sweet-talking is going to do it for him. " (93) Willie withdrew from the primary and supported MacMurfee against Harrison. Willie campaigned hard for MacMurfee, but it was not assistance designed to let MacMurfee rest easy—it was assistance that was simultaneously a challenge. Jack Burden described the speeches Willie made during this part of the campaign: " Go and vote, he told them. Vote for MacMurfee this time, he told them, for he is all you have got to vote for. But vote strong, strong enough to show what you can do. Vote him in and then if he doesn't deliver, nail up his hide. " (95) In these speeches Willie would intentionally stir up the crowd's anger by addressing

<https://assignbuster.com/on-willie-stark-as-political-leader/>

them as " Friends, red-necks, suckers, and fellow hicks. " Willie would then immediately identify himself with the crowd: " That's what you are. And me- I'm one, too. Oh, I'm a red-neck, for the sun has beat down on me. Oh, I'm a sucker, for I fell for that sweet-talking fellow in the fine automobile . . . . Oh, I'm a hick and I am the hick they were going to try to use and split the hick vote. " (94-95) After the call to support MacMurfee but to be ready to nail him, Willie would pound home his real message: " This is the truth; you are a hick and nobody ever helped a hick but the hick himself. Up there in town they won't help you. It is up to you and God, and God helps those who help themselves! " (95) He would then turn to a discussion of his program, but in this new presentation of his program he left out all of the facts and figures which had cluttered his earlier speeches: " You ask me what my program is. Here it is, you hicks. And don't you forget it. Nail 'em up! Nail up Joe Harrison. Nail up anybody who stands in your way. Nail up MacMurfee if he don't deliver. Nail up anybody who stands in your way. You hand me the hammer and I'll do it with my own hand. Nail 'em up to the barn door. "5 (96) MacMurfee won the election, and Willie went back home to Mason City to practice law. MacMurfee did not deliver, and four years later Willie was back to run for the gubernatorial nomination in the Democratic primary. When it was over, as Jack observed, " There wasn't any Democratic party. There was just Willie. " (97) Thus Willie Stark became Governor of the state. As Governor, Willie began to enact his program, a program that was supported neither by the old elite of the state nor by the remnants of competing political machines still occupying legislative seats. There was much opposition to Willie's programs, which were a litany of redistributionist reforms- establishment of an extraction tax, increased royalty rates, income

<https://assignbuster.com/on-willie-stark-as-political-leader/>

tax reform, a highway program, and a Public Health Bill. (136) The state Supreme Court, however, had upheld all of those challenged in court. As Judge Irwin, a member of the old elite courted by Willie but who finally opposed him, explained, Willie understood that “ You don’t make omelets without breaking eggs. And precedents. ” (136) Midway through his first term, Governor Stark faced an impeachment effort orchestrated by the MacMurfee forces in the legislature. The charges alleged that Governor Stark had attempted to “ corrupt, coerce, and blackmail the Legislature, ” and further alleged malfeasance and nonfeasance of duty. (145) The Governor’s strategy in defeating these charges was two-fold: first, to blackmail enough members of the Legislature to defeat the impeachment resolution, and second, to stump the state to build up popular support for his administration. Willie ratcheted up the level of rhetoric in his anti-impeachment stump speech by exchanging his hammer for a meat ax. “ I have seen blood on the moon. Buckets of blood, and boy! I know whose blood it will be. ”<sup>6</sup> He would then reach out as if grabbing something and shout, “ Gimme that meat ax! ” (146-47) With the meat ax replacing the hammer, the stakes of victory and defeat had become greater, perhaps a matter of life and death. In another part of this speech, Willie testified to the foundation of his political vision and the source his strength. Willie would ask the crowds, “ Have I disappointed you? Have I? ” He would then instruct them, “ Don’t answer until you look into the depth of your heart to see the truth. For there is where truth is. Not in a book. Not in a lawyer’s book. Not on any scrap of paper. In your heart. ” (146) The “ scrap of paper” Willie referred to was the state constitution. The source of Willie’s power was his knowledge of what was in the heart of the people. Willie emphasized the importance of this knowledge throughout his

<https://assignbuster.com/on-willie-stark-as-political-leader/>



career. His campaign posters featured his picture and signature, along with the following quotation: " My study is the heart of the people. "8 On the Eve of the impeachment vote Governor Willie Stark spoke to a rally on the Capitol lawn. In this speech he enlarged on his vision of health care for the state by announcing his plan for a new hospital. " I am going to build a hospital. The biggest and finest money can buy. It will belong to you. Any man or woman or child who is sick or in pain can go in those doors and know that all will be done that man can do. To heal sickness. To ease pain. Free. Not as charity. But as a right. It is your right. Do you hear? It is your right! "

(261) Stark then outlined the other rights he claimed for the people: a " complete education" for every child, a support program for the " aged and infirm, " free-access paved roads, tax relief for the poor and payment of fair taxes by the rich. The final right that Willie mentioned appears to be of a different order: " That you shall not be deprived of hope! " In tone, this right is reminiscent of Franklin Roosevelt's " fourth freedom, " the " freedom from fear. " After calling for the meat ax to " smite" his opponents, " Hip and thigh, shinbone and neckbone, kidney punch rabbit punch, uppercut, and solar plexus, " Willie returned to the source of his strength. " Your will is my strength, " he told the crowd. He concluded with the claim, " Your need is my justice. " Willie was able to defeat the impeachment vote, and he was reelected to a second term as Governor. After his reelection, Governor Stark was moving ahead on a number of fronts. Stark immersed himself in all of the details of the hospital, from working with the architects to handpicking the hospital's director. He was also making political plans, for he intended to run for the U. S. Senate. Willie's career and life were abruptly cut short in mid-course when Adam Stanton, the director of the hospital, shot him. II:

<https://assignbuster.com/on-willie-stark-as-political-leader/>

Governor Stark: Action In this section I will examine the operations of the Stark administration. As already noted, Governor Stark was accused of corruption by his opponents, and even faced impeachment based on these charges. Hence, I will examine the Stark administration with an eye primarily to uncovering the nature of the corruption found there. Lord Acton famously said, " Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely. "9 While this statement may resound true, in itself it does not give us any insight into the nature of the corruption to which power leads. It may be helpful to catalog examples of corruption found in *All the King's Men* in an effort to understand the nature of political corruption. Jack Burden provides a point of entry into this issue in an internal dialog on the sources of illegal activity. Jack says, " I . . . asked myself the following question: ' For what reason, barring Original Sin, is a man most likely to step over the line?' I answered: ' Ambition, love, fear, money'. " (193) Jack Burden's framework includes two levels of causality in understanding why men commit evil or illegal acts. The first level of explanation focuses on the general question of human nature. Jack's use of the theological concept of " original sin" suggests that man has an innate bent toward evil or selfish acts. 10 As Willie puts it in a conversation with Jack, " Man is conceived in sin and born in corruption, and he passeth from the stink of the didie to the stench of the shroud. There is always something. " (49) Jack's second level of analysis focuses the issue more narrowly and perhaps more superficially, than does the general question of human nature. This level of analysis attempts to uncover the specific trigger that leads to improper behavior, and Jack identifies four categories: ambition, love, fear, and money. One way to think of this list is to see these items as specific examples of the natural inclination

<https://assignbuster.com/on-willie-stark-as-political-leader/>

of the human heart toward evil. From another perspective, however, this list also comprises at least some of the temptations that might distract even the most virtuous soul from fulfilling its obligations. This level of analysis is essential in dealing with issues of individual responsibility, for responsibility only exists in situations in which we are confronted with a real choice. If "the devil-or if God-made me do it, " I can't be held accountable for "my" actions, for they aren't really my actions. 11 There are characters in *All the King's Men* reflecting each of these interests. Judge Irwin and Byram White are motivated by desire to acquire money. Ann Stanton and Sadie Burke act on love (or desire). Countless politicians, some named and some unnamed, are moved by fear of blackmail. Other political figures are driven by either big-time or little-time ambitions. "Original sin" is perhaps best represented by Tom Stark, Willie's son, who first appeared in the novel as a baby and left the novel as a quadriplegic after a football injury-Tom carried within himself the arrogance of total self absorption. Willie Stark, however, doesn't seem to fit easily into any of these categories. Willie does not easily fit into these categories both because of his admirable self-discipline as a self-made man and because he seemed committed to certain goals from the beginning to the end of his career. Stark did not "sell out" his principles, at least not explicitly, for political gain. As I observed above, he articulated a populist agenda throughout his entire career. John Burt writes, "The most difficult thing about [Willie Stark] is the sincerity of his devotion to his ends." (Burt, 142) In terms of pursuing his announced agenda, Governor Stark appears to have hit the ground running. In early 1933, just two-and-a-half years after his election, Willie outlined for Hugh Miller, his Attorney General, the accomplishments of his administration to date. (136) In this relatively short

<https://assignbuster.com/on-willie-stark-as-political-leader/>

time his administration had instituted five major reforms: 1) established an “ extraction tax” 2) increased the “ royalty rate on state land” 3) income tax reform 4) implemented a highway program 5) passed a Public Health Bill. While Willie’s overt commitment to his political program remained, once he was elected Governor his decisions reflected subtle changes at the level of practical politics. Governor Stark formed an alliance with the remnants of the Joe Harrison machine that initially tried to use him to split the rural vote (97). He selected Tiny Duffy, Harrison’s agent in the earlier effort, to be Highway Commissioner. (108) Later, he chose Tiny to serve as his Lt. Governor. While Will remained committed to his program, these moves suggest that he was motivated by something other than Lucy’s devotion to honesty. Willie has learned that to be effective in politics it is not enough to be merely right about ends and decent about means. “ Your need is my justice” was perhaps more than a rhetorical flourish, and pointed to the constant foundation for Willie’s ever-shifting political decisions. As the impeachment movement against Willie moved toward its climax in the third year of his first term, Willie added a specific new promise to his agenda, a promise that built on his general commitment to public health: a new free hospital. As Willie made clear to those around him, everything about this hospital, from its’ construction to its’ staffing, would be on the up and up, untainted by political considerations. For this reason, Willie resisted Tiny Duffy’s efforts to throw the hospital contract to Gummy Larson. Larson was a construction executive with ties to McMurfee, and Tiny thought giving him the hospital contract was a way to break McMurfee’s last base of power. Willie’s stance on the hospital led Jack Burden to reflect on an apparent contradiction in Willie’s thinking that Jack never resolved, a paradox that is essential in understanding the <https://assignbuster.com/on-willie-stark-as-political-leader/>

nature of the corruption in the Stark administration. Governor Stark told Adam Stanton, his choice to be director of the hospital, that one has to make good out of badness, “ because there isn’t anything else to make it out of. ” (257) After leaving Stanton and Governor Stark, Jack reflected on what the governor had said. So I lay back and thought of Adam and the truth. And of the Boss and what he had said the truth was. The good was. The right was. And lying there, lulled in the Cadillac, I wondered if he believed what he had said. He had said that you have to make the good out of the bad because that is all you have got to make it out of. Well, he had made some good out of some bad. The hospital. The Willie Stark Hospital, which was going to be there when Willie Stark was dead and gone. As Willie Stark had said. Now if Willie Stark believed that you always had to make the good out of the bad, why did he get so excited when Tiny just wanted to make a logical little deal with the hospital contract? Why did he get so heated up just because Tiny’s brand of Bad might get mixed in the raw materials from which he was going to make some Good? “ Can’t you understand? ” the Boss had demanded of me, grabbing my lapel. “ Can’t you understand either? I’m building that place, the best in the country, the best in the world, and a bugger like Tiny is not going to mess with it, and I’m going to call it the Willie Stark Hospital and it will be there a long time after I’m dead and gone and you are dead and gone and all those sons-of-bitches are dead and gone-” That was scarcely consistent. It was not at all consistent. I would have to ask the Boss about it sometime. (260) While Jack planned to ask the governor about this inconsistency (263), he never did. This is a key question, one that must be asked. I offer a tentative explanation of why Governor Stark appears to be inconsistent. Stark understood the different dimensions of meaning of “

<https://assignbuster.com/on-willie-stark-as-political-leader/>

public policy, " and he understood that these dimensions of policy could be in tension with one another. For purposes of this analysis, I differentiate two dimensions of policy: the statement of goals and the enactment and implementation of programs. <sup>12</sup> As previously argued, Willie was consistent throughout his career in his populist agenda—his statement of goals, arguing for economic and social reforms that would benefit the common man. Both Burt and Lane make this point forcefully, but fail to take into account the possibility that Stark's actions in implementing his program actually undermined his stated goals. <sup>13</sup> This will become clear in an examination of an encounter between Stark and Gummy Larson after the Governor had finally agreed to let the hospital contract go to Larson's company. The Boss stood directly in front of him, the bodies almost touching. Then he seized Larson by the lapels and thrust his own flushed face down to the gray one. "Arranged," he said, "yeah, it's arranged, but you—you leave one window latch off, you leave one piece of iron out of that concrete, you put in one extra teaspoon of sand, you chip one piece of marble, and by God—by God—I'll rip you open. I'll—" And still clutching the lapels, he jerked his hands apart sideways. A button from Larson's coat, which had been buttoned up, spun across the room and bounced on the hearth with a little click. (362) Willie Stark was a country boy whose rise in politics could be attributed to his opposition to corrupt contracting practices in Mason County, whose election as Governor could be traced directly back to the shoddy construction of the first brick schoolhouse in Mason County. And while his origins were always in the back of his mind, and while his heart remained with the simple country folks—the hicks and rednecks—who elected him, the day-to-day practice of his administration veered from "nailing them up" back to business as usual in <https://assignbuster.com/on-willie-stark-as-political-leader/>

most matters. The intensity of Governor Stark's threats to Gummy Larson if he should fail to put iron rods in the concrete he pours, or if he should use too much sand in the mixture, is an indication that Stark was reacting not only against the practice of previous administrations or against hypothetical but abstract dangers, but against the practices of his own administration also. John Burt recognizes that Willie's cynicism threatened to undermine his agenda, but argues that we don't know if this actually happened. 14 Stark's warning to Larson, taken with his irritation at Jack Burden's cynicism in regard to the hospital (260, quoted above), is evidence that at the implementation phase his program has been undermined in other areas. It is easy to imagine, for example, miles of concrete slab highway being poured without insertion of the iron rods necessary to hold the road together.

Willie's defense of the purity of the hospital was his one remaining tie to a full commitment to serving the common people who launched his career to begin with. What particularly seems to have irritated Governor Stark was the suggestion that he was building the hospital merely to win votes. Trading services for votes, or more cynically, buying votes, may be seen as the way politics is normally done—an unfortunate but widespread practice in politics.

15 But, if we are trading defective services for votes, we move toward the realm of corruption, for one party is no longer keeping its side of the bargain.

All the King's Men contains suggestions of and examples of this type of corruption, both outside and inside of the Stark administration. The defective schoolhouse that launched Willie's career is a prime example. A number of characters in the novel accuse Stark of "the grab"—skimming money from state revenues for personal uses. A primary example of this is the case of Byram White, the State Auditor who was caught with his hand in the till.

<https://assignbuster.com/on-willie-stark-as-political-leader/>

Governor Stark decides to protect White, not because White is innocent of the charges leveled, but because Stark thinks that removing White will encourage his opponents to come after his Governorship. I have shown that this type of corruption—poor quality of goods and services, skimming from the till, and the like—could be found throughout the Stark administration. Is this is all there is to the novel—the lesson that power almost invariably leads to petty corruption? Such a conclusion both belies the moral force of the novel and ignores Jack Burden’s unasked question concerning Willie’s seeming inconsistency. III: What Does it all Mean? After Adam Stanton shot Stark, the Governor told Jack “ it might have all been different" (400). Before he was shot, Stark had begun to make changes, both personal<sup>16</sup> and political, that reflected a renewed commitment to not just the rhetoric but to the reality of his populist vision. The deepest forms of corruption may be missed by the typological approach to the issue, whether the typology of political corruption is based on Jack Burden’s categories of original sin, ambition, love, fear, and money, or on the more scholarly standards of conflict of interest, nepotism, illegal conversion of public into private goods.

<sup>17</sup> The British political thinker Michael Oakeshott points toward the deeper, and subtler, forms of political corruption in his essay, “ The Claims of Politics. " A limitation of view, which appears so clear and practical, but which amounts to little more than a mental fog, is inseparable from political activity. A mind fixed and callous to all subtle distinctions, emotional and intellectual habits become bogus from repetition and lack of examination, unreal loyalties, delusive aims, false significances are what political action involves. And this is so, not because the politically active are under the necessity of persuading the mentally obtuse before their activity can

<https://assignbuster.com/on-willie-stark-as-political-leader/>



succeed; the spiritual callousness involved in political action belongs to its character, and follows from the nature of what can be achieved politically. Political action involves mental vulgarity, not merely because it entails the concurrence and support of those who are mentally vulgar, but because of the false simplification of human life implied in even the best of its purposes. (Oakeshott, 93) The ultimate corruption of politics, Oakeshott suggests, is in taking the realm of politics to be the most significant realm of human life, and converting everything in life into mere political material. In his introduction to the Modern Library edition of *All the King's Men*, Warren reflects on the internal tension of the novel as envisioned during the early stages of writing. The protagonist "was to be a man whose power was based on the fact that somehow he could vicariously fulfill some secret needs of the people about him. "18 As the politician was good at fulfilling these " secret needs, " he rose to great heights of power, only " to discover, more and more, his own emptiness and his own alienation. "19 Seen from this perspective, *AKM* is a novel about the idolatry of political life that places politics above all other aspects of human existence. 20 To say the same thing in different words, this is a novel about the natural limits of politics as a field of human endeavor. Willie Stark could save others, but he could not save himself. But even this view is illusory—it only appears that Willie could save others. This is shown clearly in an exchange between Willie and Lucy at the hospital with Tom when Willie decides to name the hospital after his now injured son Tom (rather than himself!). " I'm going to name the new hospital for him. For Tom. I'm going to call it the Tom Stark Hospital and Medical Center. It'll be named for Tom, it'll—" She was slowing shaking her head, and his words stopped. " Those things don't matter, " she said. " Oh, Willie, don't

<https://assignbuster.com/on-willie-stark-as-political-leader/>

you see? Those things don't matter. Having somebody's name cut on a piece of stone. Getting it in the paper. All those things. Oh, Willie, he was my baby boy, he was our baby boy, and those things don't matter, they don't ever matter, don't you see? " (381) While " those things" may not matter, for most humans most of the time, they seem to matter a great deal. This is the nature of idolatry—to place attention, and faith, in things unworthy of that attention and faith. This however, is the ultimate pull, and corruption, of political thinking. This is why Oakeshott concludes that " political activity involves a corruption of consciousness from which a society has continuously to be saved. " (Oakeshott, 95) One way for political scientists to approach literature is to treat a literary work as a kind of ersatz essay that contains a " teaching" or set of propositions to be learned in the form of a puzzle that must be solved in order to find the correct answer. This approach to literature confuses poetry with philosophy and misses the advantage that poetry has over philosophy: poetry can capture the complexity of reality by holding in tension the ambiguities and contradictions found in life. Rather than looking for the teaching of a novel, the lesson that the author intends the reader to take away from a reading, I suggest that we seek the meaning of the story. The meaning of a novel may entail many " lessons, " some of them in conflict with others—just as there are multiple and contradictory " lessons of history. "21 I have offered a reading of All the King's Men in this paper, or, to be accurate, a partial reading of this novel. I have intentionally narrowed my focus to Willie Stark's political career. I have ignored, except incidentally, Jack Burden, and the novel is as much Jack's as it is Willie's. I have ignored Willie's private life except as it touches on his political career. I have ignored most of the characters in the novel in order to trace Willie's

<https://assignbuster.com/on-willie-stark-as-political-leader/>

rise and fall. But in doing all of this, I have left out most of the richness the novel offers. And any search for the meaning of *All the King's Men* would need to reinstate to their place all of these elements of the novel I have ignored in this paper. I have argued that *All the King's Men* deals with the limits of politics, and I have placed this argument within the framework offered by Lord Acton and Michael Oakeshott. The Actonian insight that "power tends to corrupt" is an implicit criticism and challenge to the classical understanding of the efficacy of political action in shaping the virtuous soul, and suggests that regimes encounter continual slippage in achieving their political goals. But even this is not the ultimate position from which to view *All the King's Men*, for the novel is not merely a knee-jerk rejection of politics. Near the end of the novel Jack Burden hints that he may return to politics by assisting Hugh Miller, who had resigned his position of Attorney General in Willie's administration, in a run for office, and that possibility must also be kept in mind as one searches for the meaning of this rich and challenging story. 1 Robert Penn Warren, *All the King's Men*, San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company ("A Harvest Book"), 1974 [1946]. Hereafter all citations will be to this paperback edition and will be provided parenthetically in the text. 2 Willie was clearly a reformer and a populist, but not a progressive. He favored redistribution of wealth, state provision of basic services, and his primary appeal was to the masses, not to the educated elite. Progressivism was focused on urban life, and saw little or no value in traditional small farm America. See Eldon Eisenach, *The Lost Promise of Progressivism* (University Press of Kansas, 1994), pp. 147ff, 171-181. 3 Burden says Willie wanted his speeches to be "a second Gettysburg Address." (70) 4 This is a point rightly emphasized by both John Burt, Robert Penn Warren and *American Idealism* <https://assignbuster.com/on-willie-stark-as-political-leader/>

(New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 142, and Joseph Lane, "The Stark Regime and American Democracy: A Political Interpretation of Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*," *American Political Science Review* (Volume 95, number 4; December 2001), 814. 5 For some reason Lane does not include this new stump speech in his discussion of Willie's political rhetoric, nor in his inventory of Stark's speeches (Lane, 813). 6 "Blood on the moon" is an allusion to Revelation 6. 12. 7 At various times, Willie calls for a hammer, a meat ax, or a baseball bat- whatever the metaphor, politics for Willie is a contact sport! 8 Willie's emphasis on knowing the heart of the people can lead to either Edmund Burke's conservative approach to politics or to the radicalism of Jean Jacques Rousseau. Consider Burke: "The temper of the people amongst whom he presides ought . . . to be the first study of a Statesman." Edmund Burke, "Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents," in *Select Works of Edmund Burke, Volume I* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1999), 71. Compare Rousseau's discussion of the "General Will" (Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*, edited by Roger D. Masters and translated by Judith R. Masters [New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978], pp. 59-64), and especially the legislator's role in "changing human nature" (Rousseau, p. 68). 9 Letter from Acton to Mandell Creighton, editor of the *English Historical Review*, dated April 5, 1887. *Selected Writings of Lord Acton, Volume II: Essays in the Study and Writing of History*, edited by J. Rufus Fears (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1986), 383. Acton continues, "Great men are almost always bad men, even when they exercise influence and not authority; still more when you superadd the tendency or the certainty of corruption by authority." 10 On original sin, see Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man, Volume I: Human Nature* (Prentice Hall, 1964), <https://assignbuster.com/on-willie-stark-as-political-leader/>

pp. 241-264 ("Sin and Man's Responsibility"). For a political analysis of the same dynamic Niebuhr is concerned with, consider James Madison's argument in Federalist number 10: "As long as the connection subsists between his reason and his self-love, his opinions and his passions will have a reciprocal influence on each other; and the form will be the objects to which the latter will attach themselves." <sup>11</sup>On the complexities of responsibility and free will, consider Niebuhr, p. 260. Also see John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza, *Responsibility and Control: A Theory of Moral Responsibility* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 12-14, 238-39.

<sup>12</sup>Steven Kelman distinguishes between the "political" and the "production" stages of policy in his interesting *Making Public Policy* (Basic Books, 1987). A third dimension of policy, the assessment of outcomes, can also be identified, but is less important for my purposes here. See, e. g., Charles O. Jones, *An Introduction to the Study of Public Policy*, third edition (International Thomson Publishing, 1997).

<sup>13</sup>I would argue that it is a defect of the Straussian school in general to focus primarily or solely on the rhetoric of politics and to neglect the actions taken to achieve goals—or to understand speeches as the political action par excellence. This is especially true in the case of Lane's study of *All the King's Men*. In his discussion of "the rhetoric and substance of Willie Stark's politics" Lane seems to reduce the "substance" of Willie's politics to Willie's rhetoric (Lane, 813-817). Note that Warren suggests that Willie's "means defile his ends." Robert Penn Warren, "Introduction to the Modern Library Edition of *All the King's Men*," reprinted in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of All the King's Men*, edited by Robert H. Chambers (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1977), p. 93.

<sup>14</sup>"Willie describes himself as a man willing to break the law to serve justice. If we cannot take

<https://assignbuster.com/on-willie-stark-as-political-leader/>

this proposition seriously, it is not because Willie is disingenuous about his motivations but because his willingness to break the law muddies the philosophical waters to the extent of making justice difficult to discern; we doubt him not because we suspect his motives—for one way or another we are forced to grant them—but because we cannot be sure how much his compromises compromise them. " (Burt, 142) 15 Consider the following argument: " corruption, like violence, must be understood as a regular, repetitive, integral part of the operation of most political systems. In practice, this simply means that an analysis of who in a society gets what, when, where, and how that relies exclusively upon an examination of those political acts open to public view would seldom provide an accurate picture of political reality. Recurring acts of violence and corruption are thus more successfully analyzed as normal channels of political activity than as cases of deviant pathology requiring incarceration and/or moral instruction for the perpetrator(s). Just as social banditry and piracy must be viewed as integral parts of many agrarian and maritime economies, so, for example, must vote-buying and ' rake-offs' be seen as an integral part of United States urban politics at the turn of the twentieth century. Far from being pathological, patterns of corruption and violence may actually represent channels of political demands without which formal societal arrangements could scarcely survive. " James C. Scott, *Comparative Political Corruption* (Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1972), p. viii. 16 Lucy Stark had left Willie and moved to the country (155-56). Their relationship was reduced to occasional " photo ops" for Willie when he needed wholesome family pictures for publication (156). Willie's major personal decision was to return to Lucy and attempt to rebuild his marriage (391). 17 See, for example, the articles contained in " Part I: Terms, <https://assignbuster.com/on-willie-stark-as-political-leader/>

Concepts, and Definitions" of Arnold J. Heidenheimer and Michael Johnston, editors, *Political Corruption: Concepts and Contexts*, third edition (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2002). 18 Warren, " Introduction to the Modern Library Edition, " 93. 19 Warren, " Introduction to the Modern Library Edition, " 94. 20 It is worth asking the question, who is the " king" of the novel's title? Lane (" The Stark Regime and American Democracy, " 813) takes Willie Stark to be the king. If, however, the king is intended to be someone far more powerful than a mere state governor, Willie is just one of the men along with everyone else in the novel. Or, perhaps, Willie is Humpty Dumpty. See James Ruoff, " Humpty Dumpty and All the King's Men: A Note on Robert Penn Warren's Teleology, " in Chambers, *Twentieth Century Interpretations*, 84-87. 21 See Warren's important essays " The Use of the Past, " p. 46, and " Why Do We Read Fiction?, " pp. 60-62, in Robert Penn Warren, *New and Selected Essays* (New York: Random House, 1989).