

## The Bildungsroman Tradition: The Philosophical Maturation of Jack Burden in *All the King's Men*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper aims to sketch out the transformation that Jack Burden—the main character in the novel—had gone through. With all the political leanings in Warren's *All the King's Men*, Jack Burden seems to have developed his own theories of dealing with life and people all through his life. He has always suffered an inferiority complex, rendering himself unworthy of being a real human being. This paper claims that Jack's philosophical transformation has passed through three distinct phases; he had changed from a carefree idealist to a man of moral responsibility much similar to a Bildungsroman style of character maturation. Difficult times that Jack Burden has gone through caused his awakening at the end of the novel ushering his maturation.

Jack Burden in *All the King's Men* begins as a stumbling idealist and ends up embracing moral responsibility after passing through a period where he conflates idealism and romanticism with determinism and naturalism. He eventually arrives at philosophical maturity through gradual progression from having a romanticized view of life into viewing life more as a process of personal and moral responsibility than a mere expedition of neutrality and unresponsiveness. Robert Penn Warren portrays Jack Burden's maturation in a Bildungsroman-like genre. We see him at the beginning of the novel indulge in a prolonged 'hibernation' that he dubs the "Great Sleep," characterized by uselessness, idleness, and heedlessness. He finds no genuine meaning of his life. He asserts his idealism in a nihilistic view of reality:

I had got hold of principle out of a book when I was in college, and I had hung onto it for grim death. I owed my success in life to that principle. It had put me where I was. What you don't know won't hurt you, for it ain't real. They call that idealism in my book I had when I was in college, and after I got hold of that principle I became an idealist. I was a brass-bound idealist in those

days. If you are an idealist it does not matter what you do or what goes on around you because it isn't real anyway. (Warren 151)

In his essay "Robert Penn Warren: *All the King's Men*," Arthur Mizener affirms the fact that "This idealism was merely Jack Burden's excuse of living as if the world of time-where people try to do their best according to their dim lights and fail and grow old- were not real ... It was a way of hiding from the knowledge of experience ..." (43). Jack escapism works as a barrier between him and truth. He seems to be afraid of finding that he is cataclysmically wrong. Thus, he stops working on his Ph.D. dissertation in history for the aforementioned reason. He veils his fears with a shroud of denial, nihilism, and a false sense of romanticism that proves futile at the end of the novel. He refuses his mother's money to study at Harvard instead of the state university as a romantic sign of his belief in the independency of the romantic hero of Byron and Shelley. Upon his reawakening at the end of the novel, he will value his mother as a faithful and truthful woman.

Jack's romantic view of life is rooted in his personality. Though he is a descent of an aristocratic family, he forsakes

the money in favor of his idealism. Unfortunately, he fails to shape his idealism properly because he lacks the agency to achieve his ambitions. His philosophical authority is laden with nothingness and futility. We don't see him gain anything lucrative from his romantic worldview; thus, all his deeds harm others and bring about their downfall without his realizing that he has done anything immoral. He has never thought that his past deeds have anything whatsoever to do with the present.

Though he is a graduate student of history, he has no genuine appreciation of time which is the very equivalent to history. He mediates on the concept of time: "And all times are one time, and all those dead in the past never lived before our definition gives them life, and out of the shadow their eyes implore us. That is what all of us historical researchers believe. And we love truth" (Warren 319). This conflation of time he embraces makes it difficult for him to realize that each period/history phase must exist in relation to other episodes of time. Unless he clearly demarcates borders of time, he will continue living in an illusionary realm where the concept of time is hazy and murky. This vagueness regarding his concept of time blurs his insight into the past, consequently distorts his very idea of both present and future.

He languishes in his life, especially at the beginning of *All the King's Men*, lacking real motivation and enthusiasm. The flagrant evidence of his disinterest and escapism is the fact that in the course of his life he falls into three periods of what he calls "Great Sleep" after each time he experiences failure. The first period is after his failure to finish his Ph.D. thesis in history on Cass Mastern; the second "Great Sleep" occurs after he breaks up with his wife, Lois; and third period of "hibernation" follows his quitting his job as reporter for the *Chronicle*. The "Great Sleep" delineates Jack Burden's escapist nature whenever he must face up to the circumstances of his life. He resorts to oblivion to flee reality. He lacks the power to act upon his mishaps. Never have we seen him really act out of his own will; instead we see him act only upon the request of Willie Stark.

He finds in Willie Stark the man of action that he lacks; thus, he would not question anything Willie asks him to perform. Jack Burden sets out on exhuming scandals about Judge Irwin oblivious to the dire consequences of his deeds, notwithstanding his respect and love to the man he has long perceived of as a father figure. He acts like a machine with no human sense or sensitivity to the feeling of others. His escapism, added to his lack of stamina, causes him to work in the shadow of Willie Stark. Though his attachment to "the Boss" is mysteriously conceived after the baffling wink of Willie, this relation has immersed Jack Burden further in guilt.

In his article "The Metaphysics of Demagoguery: *All the King's Men*," Baumbach explains Jack Burden's reasons of scrutinizing the past of Judge Irwin: "Jack has another naïve notion which justifies the political dirt-digging he does so that Willie can blackmail his opponents: that the truth, regardless of its immediate effects, is always salutary and that unadulterated fact constitutes truth" (68). This Machiavellian attitude foreshadows the conflation of both Willie and

Jack with the means; consequently, both men have become deeply immersed in their own machinations diving into the abyss of politics. They have partially abandoned the welfare end and indulged in the tricks and evils of Southern politics. The Machiavellianism of Willie deludes Jack into corruption and self-persuasion; in addition, it changes him into a catalyst that brought about the destruction of many people, regardless of whether they are innocent or not. The principle-the end justifies the means- in the world of public work is dichotomous; on the one hand, it may benefit the public, on the other hand, it lacks the moral aspect of the very good it breaches. Fortunately, enough, Jack Burden and Willie Stark are redeemed at the end, though in different manners.

Jack Burden is a prototype of the modern Man who lives in contradictions within himself and the world. He is unable to locate himself in relation to the forces at play in life, be they individuals or concepts. One can contemplate that Jack Burden is caught in a dilemma where he has fallen prey to the collision of two worlds, the past and the present. He must choose between the past where he highly valued the Judge and the present where he has been allured to the world of Willie. He contemplated slipping away from the present as when he walks out when the confrontation between Willie Stark and Judge Irwin drifts into personal issues; however, he soon is drawn back to Willie's world because he sees a vantage point in his association with him where can make up for his idealism through the pragmatism of Willie.

Jack Burden's perception of reality is distorted and painted with futility and nothingness. True to his determinism and naturalism, he finds that all people are not real simply because of his illusionary view of life. He lacks the knowledge of his own self; subsequently, he extends the nothingness he cuddles to those around him. Jack Burden should first question his own life. This will ultimately happen at the end of the novel when he realizes the dire aftermath of his negligence. Jack Burden's sardonic view of life causes him to stereotype other people, especially the corrupt politicians:

They ain't real, I thought as I walked down the hall, *nary one*. But I knew they were. when they got old they lost their reasons for doing anything and sat on the bench in front of the harness shop and had words for the reasons other people had but had forgotten what the reasons were.... it may be the reason they don't seem real to you is that you aren't very real yourself. (Warren 82)

Jack Burden's idealism paints his relationship with all around him, namely, Anne. This is evident by his refrain from having sex with her. It seems that he has created an idealized and romanticized image of her that he must not spoil by the mere act of corporal love. Furthermore, he marries another woman, Lois, because he thinks that she is sexually perfect for him. Yet he tarnished the platonic image of Anne Stanton via his digging in the past where he discovers that her father was corrupt; consequently, she engages in a love affair with Willie that ends with the death of both Willie and Adam. Jack's actions are extremely fatal and highly charged with violence for the people whom he encounters. Anne really loves him but his indifference and nihilism deeply affect her.

Jack Burden idealism is shaken upon learning about the love affair between Anne Stanton and Willie Stark; hence, he further dives deeper into nihilism and naturalistic determinism, formulating the theory of the "Great Twitch" which has it that all humans act on haphazard impulse and animalistic desires. In his article "The Assumption of 'Burden' of History in *All the King's Men*," Murray Krieger states that "Man's nature is inherently and in-corrigibly corrupt, indeed piggish; and man is predestined rather than free, so that he seeks only to fulfill his nature" (72). Jack's discovery of the love affair between Anne and Willie cause a kind of transition into determinism and absolutism in Jack's development. This transition does not necessarily constitute a new philosophical phase in Jack's philosophical development because he continues to act almost the same way with indifference to the feeling of others. It seems that that Jack Burden is amalgamating and reinforcing his previous philosophy with determinism and naturalism rather than embracing a different philosophy. Jack adds up a new naturalistic and deterministic view to his old heavy-handed idealism, that is the "Great Twitch" theory: "... all the words we speak meant nothing and there was only the pulse in the blood and the twitch of the nerve, like a dead frog's leg in the experiment when the electric current goes through" (Warren 432).

Jack Burden delves further into denial and irresponsibility: "First, that you cannot lose what you have never had. Second, that you are never guilty of a crime which you did not commit. So, there is innocence and a new start in the West, after all. If you believe the dream you dream when you go there" (Warren 434). He seems to declare the absence of free will and he breaches determinism. Jack flight from reality attests to his deterministic worldview. In his article "Burden's Complaint: The Disintegrated Personality as Theme and Style in Robert Pen Warren's *All the King's Men*," Jerome Meckier notes that "If life is nothing but a Great Twitch, a meaningless, spasmodic phenomenon, as another Burden theory argues, then Jack Burden need not wrestle with his burden, need not fuse past and present, idea and fact" (67). Jack rules out any connection between his past and present to assure himself that he has absolutely done nothing wrong in the past that may have caused any harm to anyone in the present.

The "Great Twitch" theory is formulated by Jack when he flees west to California upon discovering the love affair which is ironically made possible by his own device. By the "Great Twitch" Jack Burden reinforces his feeling of self-positivism and self-assurance. He absolves himself of any wrongdoing and he dissociates himself from the grave aftermath of his own acts. He comes up with this theory to escape the harsh reality that he continues to rebuff as something never existed.

In his article "The Past and its 'Burden'," Charles Bohner sheds more light on the "Great Twitch" theory of Jack Burden that he embraces to distance himself from responsibility. Jack opts for abstractions and generalities rather than concreteness and decisiveness:

The pressure of events forces Jack to abandon his position as a brass-bound idealist and embrace a philosophy

which, again with his tendency towards abstraction and generalization, he calls "the Great Twitch"... For Jack, it expresses the mindless, meaningless series of stimuli which provoke an automatic response. Man is but a collection of atoms which spin merrily, or not merrily (73).

Jack still sees life through the prism of futility, yet, we see that he is more inclined toward perceiving man as a part of an active world; however, he is controlled by forces that are beyond his reach. Jack's belief in the incapability ushers the way towards a new deterministic worldview that he fuses into his old idealism. According to Jack's dream, we are controlled by a "twitch of the nerve" (Warren 432).

Jack believes that human beings are subject to an apocalyptic force of life. People can not determine their destinies. This apocalyptic worldview, though not completely religious, lends itself to Jack's self-justification, self-absolution, and self-delusion. Man is a prey to determinism and naturalism and can not escape his destiny. This deterministic view allures Jack to rule out any consequences of his acts. He behaves as if he lives in vacuum in the first phase of his philosophical development. This worldview exonerates Jack from all charges. He resorts to Jack-made philosophies that suit his egotism. After Jack returns from the California, armed with his newfound philosophy, his emotions towards Anne are completely void and he is more nihilistic than ever before. He dashes into the Judge's house and confronts him with the evidence of the bribe. True to his determinism and existentialism, he cares less for what will come of his acts.

Jack Burden lives in a moral schizophrenia; that is, he does not believe that he has moral responsibility. He is an ambivalent character that lives in two worlds: A world of his imagination, and a world of reality in which he lives in social relations with other human beings; notwithstanding, he masks the latter world with abstraction and delusion. He must be shaken out of the former world for him to open his eyes to the reality of his existence, which is the latter world. Later in the novel, the reader senses the failure of the "Great twitch: theory. Jack is involved in the death of t Judge Irwin, who is revealed to be his biological father. Jack also discovers the true love between his mother and Judge Irwin. The death of both, Adam Stanton and Willie causes Jack to rethink his view of the bearing of the past on the present and the future.

Hugh Moore asserts that Jack's study of history has brought about the misery for the people whom and that Jack's digging up the past of others has brought about the death of Willie, Judge Irwin, and Adam (*Big Myth*, 137). However, Jack Burden embraces the idea that the past has no direct effect whatsoever on the present.

During his historical study of Cass Mastern, we sense a subtle change in Jack's attitude regarding the importance of understanding the past and its relation to the present. This change is yet to be crystallized and ripen. Jack embraces a new theory added to his many theories; that is the "Spider Web" theory to explain what he will ultimately discover as Cass's comprehension of the fact that that "the world is like an enormous spider web and if you touch it, however lightly, at any point, the vibration ripples to the remotest perimeter and the drowsy spider feels the tingle" (Warren 266).

The frame story of Cass Mastern is needed for Jack to understand the real meaning of responsibility an individual must have. The journals of Cass show how he ultimately learns his lesson the hard way after his friend's suicide and Annabelle's selling of Phebeas, and so does Jack at the end of *All the King's Men*. At first, Jack is unable to understand Cass's motivations; by the end of the novel, he says that he "now may come to understand" them. Jack can grasp the "awful responsibility of Time" after understanding the motivations of Cass and the bearing of the past on the present which he has always dismissed (Warren 608). In his article "Humpty Dumpty and *All the King's Men*: Robert Penn Warren's Teleology," James Ruoff indicates that Jack's understanding of the Cass Mastern's story signifies "...a gradual awakening of Jack's spirituality, the beginning of an unconscious application of Cass Mastern's story to his own tragic experience in life" (91).

Jack has finally starts to sense the interconnectedness of the world through the "Spider Web" theory. All things in the universe are intertwined. Humanity is interrelated. Jack begins to see that his actions influence other people. Jack's realization of the effects of his deeds on others precipitates his philosophical progression. Jack starts to question the consequences of both the past on the present and his own acts on others.

During most of his life Jack Burden is blind to reality. He seems to be chained in Plato's Cave where he can only see shadows of reality reflected by remote light. He will not see reality unless he casts the shackles aside and see the light outside the cave. He lacks personal courage to live up to his moral responsibility. He feels comfortable living in the darkness that he imposes upon himself as it relieves him from social responsibility towards his fellow human beings in general and towards the people who are touched directly by his irrationality. He lives in constant fear of the time. He does not want to understand the past because he senses that it may explain the present and the future: "I did not trust myself, and looked back upon the past as something precious about to be snatched away from us and was afraid of the future. I had not understood then what I think I have now come to understand: that we can keep the past only by having the future, for they are forever tied together" (Warren 433).

Upon his return to from his excursion to California, and the tragic death of Judge Irwin, Jack starts to sense that he might have had a hand in the death of his biological father; moreover, he feels a big relief that his father is Judge Irwin, not the weak Ellis Burden: "I had swapped the good, weak father for the evil, strong one ... I felt sorry for the Judge ..." (Warren 493). The irony is that Jack's ideological choice in the past was based on power rather than on morality. He chose to side with Willie Stark, the rising and powerful politician because he saw in him a man who can get things done. Willie Stark is a man of deeds, a realist if compared to Jack Burden the idealist and romantic. Henry Rago explains the attachment of Jack with Willie in his article "*All the King's Men*," by pointing out how Jack feels about this relationship with Willie: "Burden knows from the beginning that the frustration which drives him to live on Willie Stark's energy

worsens in an obscure guilt. But there is energy in Willie Stark, there is life there, for good or for bad" (37). At the end of the novel, Jack has been shocked by that guilt that he has indulged in all his life in part by his association with Willie. The death of the Judge and the reawakening of some sense of responsibility in Jack Burden indicate that the redemption of Jack will not occur smoothly; on the contrary, it must go through more violence that is evident in the death of two more people—Willie Stark and Adam Stanton in a very dramatic way.

The death of Judge Irwin marks the early phase of Jack's emotional reawakening; for the first time in the novel we see him seriously relate emotionally to the world around him. The suicide of Judge Irwin is the catalyst that triggered the sense of responsibility. Ironically also, Jack's return from his escape to California delineate his uttermost nihilism by confronting the judge with his past corruption; consequently, this same confrontation and the subsequent suicide marks the glimpse of hope that we detect of Jack's redemption from the abyss of his immorality.

Though unwarranted, Judge Irwin's suicide, coupled with the revealing of Jack's biological father, makes it possible for Jack to see the light at the end of the tunnel and stirs. He starts rethinking his past actions and to relate their impact on the present and the future. In his article "The Narrator's Mind as Symbol: An Analysis of *All the King's Men*," Heilman Girault notes that "Jack Burden's reorientation grows out of a combination of events that begin with the Judge Irwin's death. And after he has seen his friends die and his mother leave the Young Executive, he can see a justice in the injustice of a nature that man can never fully know. Like Cass Mastern, Jack has discovered that man cannot escape guilt" (35). Those events trigger the stagnant feelings of the idealist, determinist, and naturalist Jack and prompt him to question his moral ambiguity that he has sustained all his life. He starts to weigh things in a different moral as well as philosophical scale.

The epiphany of Jack purges his senses and soul enabling him to reconcile with his past and embrace a hopeful future. He no longer dismisses his mother as a covetous and disloyal woman. Her true love for the Judge opens his eyes to the real meaning of love: "For years I had condemned her as a woman without heart, who loved merely power over men and monetary satisfaction to vanity or flesh which they could give her, who lived in a strange loveless oscillation between calculation and instinct" (Warren 601). This revelation makes him reconsider his relation to Anne Stanton. He gets married to Anne, signaling his emotional as well as spiritual salvation. He is now a person capable of love and of treasuring the emotions and feelings of others, compared to his long embraced emotional and spiritual emptiness.

Jack further meditates on his mother's reaction to the death of Judge Irwin and how it impacts his reawakening: "The scream rang in my ears for many months, but it had faded away, lost in the past and the corruption of the past, by the time she called me back to Burden's Landing to tell me that she was going to go away. Then I knew that she was telling the truth. And I felt at peace with her and with myself" (Warren 601). Apparently, Jack Burden has the seeds of good

deep inside him, but they need to be nurtured enough to grow out of his nihilism, denial, and heavy-handed idealism

Jack's coming of age has been gradual, but fruitful in the sense that the man is eventually redeemed from his lack of knowledge of both himself and others. Warren really excelled in portraying the Bildungsroman process of Jack who matures throughout a long course of ups and downs from a passive, apathetic, and cynical person to a man willing to shoulder moral responsibility. The moral ambiguity, the kind that Jack experiences for considerable time, results in some catastrophic incidents in his life and lives of other people, yet Jack is able to come through positively at the end of *All the King's Men*. Tiny Duffy was the person who calls Adam Stanton to tell him about the affair of his sister, Anne, with Willie Stark and Jack knows this piece of information but he does not tell Sugar-Boy as Katherine Snipes points out, in her article "The Dream Sea of Ideas: Prose Period 1944-1943," "But he does not take the opportunity, for he realizes now the complexity of guilt that envelops him in all that has happened-and the fact that an act of vengeance is never the end of any story"(70). This clearly marks a big stride toward the rebirth of Jack Burden. He has eventually grasped the knowledge he has lacked all his life; the kind of knowledge that reveals his true self and enables him to understand the workings of the world around him. He is no longer isolated and detached.

Jack Burden philosophical maturation has arrived eventually at the point where he has accepted moral responsibility. We do not see him do anything that hurts others in his final stage of the philosophical development. He has inaugurated the last phase of his philosophical progression with acknowledgment of the bearings of past actions on the present. He has made up with his mother and with his own past. Although Jack's philosophical trek passes through some violent and turbulent situations, he emerges a responsible person. Leonard Casper contends that violence in Warren's fiction symbolizes "the of each man from and through his circumstances, the struggle of each man for self-consciousness" he also adds that man "reaches the understanding that his fullest definition can be achieved only through submission to the knowledge of his imperfections as human and as himself. He cannot be what he would without admitting what he was" (3).

At the end of the novel, Jack Burden recaptures his past, reveals his true identity, realizes that he is part of the corrupt political system that kills Willie Stark, makes up with his mother, understands Cass Mastern's motivations, and admits the bearing of the past on the present. We can clearly contend that Jack has matured philosophically and morally. He has passed through phases of prolonged period of idealism and romanticism conflated with determinism and naturalism

where he hurts a lot of people. He has finally arrived at and enjoyed the final stage of maturation; it is a period painted with moral responsibility. Jack Burden ultimately admits his mishaps and embraces moral responsibility and he refrains from hurting other people as he has done on several occasions.

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