

Robert Penn Warren Picturizing Men's Failure to Achieve Wholeness or Full identity

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Abstract

This research article has been projected with an aim to develop an overarching framework of the iconic writer Robert Penn Warren, who dexterously anatomize the life of twentieth century man on the rationale core (ie) the impoverishment of identity. This paper adroitly disclose the prowess of Robert Penn Warren, who engraves and sketches the modern man's dereliction to attain full identity with totality of complete and harmonious life. It also expertly analyses the experience based. Existentialism philosophy through the characters portrayed by Penn Warren in his novel, where they could not escape the universal denominators such as, loneliness, sufferings, strive for survival for their existence in the earth. An finally, it epitomizes the truth, that the modern man who wrestle for redemption, much have trust in God and must realize his self by compassionating other men and make his living in a trustworthy and assurance of the wholeness.

Keywords: twentieth, rationale, modern, identity, loss, existentialism, loneliness, suffering, strive, survival, redemption, trustworthy

Robert Penn Warren, the national poet of America, was said to be an admirable academician, convincing fictionalist, persuasive critic and a notable poet. As an American genius, he was out and out conscious of the fact that the serious problem facing the modern man in his identity which he loses because of corroding factors. Consequently, quest for identity is considered to be the primary focus in the Pulitzer prize winning fictional work *All the King's Men*. As a creative artist, he was regarded as the best spokesman of the Southern culture, being alive to the glorious nature of the past south and its present decadence. As an intellectual achiever, Pen Warren is said to have achieved as a prolific writer with a significant contribution to American literature.

Having hailed from Kentucky in the Southern region of America, he had a bright university career. He joined the "Fugitive" group and participated in the intellectual discussions. Being well versed in every genre, he published a major work almost every year and jointly authored several works. Though his early works are found to be derivative, his later creations bear the distinctive and individual stamp of the author. He is good at treatment of southern culture in the novel *All the King's Men*. Falling in line with the thinking and writing of William Faulkner, Robert Penn Warren, as an outstanding spokesman of the South, stood for an escape from industrialism and a return to cultural values which were found in the south when it had an agrarian base. His treatment of southern culture afforded him excellent opportunities to discuss the drastic effects of the civil war and

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Industrialism. The Southern culture was glorious and the agriculturists enjoyed complete freedom and individuality. Penn Warren felt that if the present trend was allowed to continue, the glorious values of the Southern culture would meet with extinction. So he wanted the readers to imbibe the past values. Thus, Penn Warren traced Southern culture with a functional idea and established a cultural continuity with the present.

To Penn Warren, the themes of birth, growth, decay, death and rebirth lay focus on the unifying and perpetual theme of identity. He is of the opinion that man in his existence on earth confronts mysteries, doubts and interminacies. Quest for identity and the identity crisis find its expression in detail here in *All the King's Men*. Truly speaking, anguish and despair are common to all. The thought of original sin becomes the cause of despair and this can be traced to warren's characters like Jack Burden, Willie Stark, Judge Irwin, Adam Stanton, Anne Stanton and others. Vividly projecting the loss of identity through his characters, Warren does advocate the point that redemption is possible by returning to the past and by close communion with God. To make life meaningful, one must be true to oneself so that one can embrace the human community, one should face the uncertainties with courage and enter the Afterward with hope. The narrator, Jack Burden, the protagonist, who is the principal character of the novel who is the principal character of the novel experiences the problem of identity. He is presented as being born again and this new birth leads him to a new identity – a new perception of the real identity. As an existential hero, Jack Burden experiences the frustration of every character rooted in history and becomes a self only when he comes out of history. Emergence of the self from the historical self is a necessary process in everyman's search for identity.

A close examination of his works brings home the fact that through Warren was essentially a regionalist, he evolved into a nationalist, universalist and spiritualist. Such a versatile genius was born in Guthrie, Kentucky to Robert Franklin and Anna Ruth Penn Warren on April 24, 1905. His father was a free-thinker and insisted on his reading the *Bible* daily. Robert Franklin's religious approach in dealing with his son had a great impact on Penn Warren's writings which are basically Christian. The religious atmosphere at home was further intensified by Robert Penn Warren's mother. So Robert Penn Warren delightfully remarks:

“My mother was no awfully intelligent woman,
awfully well-read ...” (Farrel 782).

He was fully absorbed in reading and writing poetry during both his school and college days. It was partly a means of escape from his secret fear. He was attracted by the poetry of Blake, Keats, Coleridge, T.S. Eliot and Ransom and evolved into an outstanding creationist endowed with American ingenuity. Warren graduated from Vanderbilt in 1925. The University of California at Berkeley conferred on him the degree of Master of Arts and later from the University of Oxford he obtained the Bachelor of Letters degree. It was during his days at oxford that Warren wrote “The Briar Patch” as his contribution to the Southern Agrarian Manifesto: “*I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*”. This work is a peculiar modern criticism of the effects of

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technology and a discussion of the race relations. He had to his credit publication of *Thirty Six Poems* (1935), *All the King's Men* (1946), *The Circus in the Attic and other Stories* (1947), *Brother to Dragons: A Tale in Verse and Voiced* (1953), *Promises : Poems* (1956), which won the National Book Award for poetry, the Edna St.Vincent Millay Prize from the Poetry Society of America in 1958, *Night Rider and At Heaven's Gate*. His outstanding creation in the field of fiction is *All the King's Men* for which he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1947. This novel has run into several editions and engaged the mind of critically oriented readers and scholars. George P. Garret observes:

“He / Robert Penn Warren / has intellect,
Sensitivity and critical acumen; he has
extra literary experience as a story
teller and dramatist; he belongs to a
strong, vital literary tradition; and
he has deep roots” (P 233).

The moral and intellectual welfare of man in the twentieth century has been the prevailing theme in Robert Penn Warren's works Twentieth Century themes are reflected in many ways in the novel *All the King's Men*. In the words of Dan Vogel,

“*All the King's Men* is a political novel,
of course. But it is so only as Oedipus
and Shakespeare's tragedies are political
plays. Out of the concerns of their time,
they rise to depict not a local society
but the entire society of men” (P 78).

The urbanization in the twentieth century has forced the intellectuals to think that the agrarian cultural past ensured values, whereas the materially advanced present denies human and cardinal virtues. The individual in an industrial society loses his integrity, self-respect, humour and individuality. Robert Penn Warren refers to the havoc caused by industrialization in the following lines:

“There were pine forests here a long
time ago but they are gone. The
bastards got in here and set up the
mills and laid the narrow-gauge tracks
and knocked together in the company
commissaries and paid a dollar a day ... “ (AKM 2).

“..... and the whole place, under the

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electric glare, hums and glitters and
sings like the eternal insides of God's
head, and the ship is knocking off twenty
two knots on the glassy, starlit sea" (P 34).

The solid agrarian base is missing in the present century. There is environment pollution. The idyllic setting has gone and 'the great green globe' has been spoiled by the industrial advancement. Robert Penn Warren bemoans the decadence in the culture of the Southerners. The modern world is devoid of theological virtues like faith, hope charity. In the present century, people are highly interested in amassing wealth, as money has become a means for power and position. It gives greater social recognition. Indirectly, Warren refers to the fact that power corrupts and absolutely. Warren has brought out this idea in the following lines:

"..... Willie is interested in Willie you
call it genius. It's only the half-baked
like Mr. Patton who are interested in
money. Even the big boys who make a
real lot of money aren't interested in
money. Henry Ford isn't interested
in money. He's interested in Henry
Ford and therefore he is a genius" (AKM 126).

The word is so topsy-turvy that the least valuable things have become the most valuable things. In the mechano-morphic civilization genuine love and affection are lacking. People are on the wrong track of love. They are committed to pre-marital sex, courting and love-making. Jack Burden, a character in *All the King's Men* marries Lois who was extremely good-looking.

"To Lois, who was damned good looking,
a lot better looking, I suppose,
than Anne ..." (AKM 303).

Jack and I are perfectly adjusted sexually",
Lois use to say primly..." (P 303).

Their marriage was not a union of minds and so they got separated after sometime. Hedonism, Epicureanism, Don Juanism, Stoicism are also among the twentieth century themes dealt with by Robert Penn Warren in the novel *All the King's Men*. Warren says:

"The law is always too short and too tight
for growing human kind" (AKM 136).

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Law cannot put man in the right path. Static law in a dynamic society poses problems. Man must analyse his 'self' and be good. Warren stresses the idea that morality is more important than legality. One important twentieth century themes which finds treatment in *All the King's Men* is the twin problem of finding identity and expiating guilt. In finding identity, man moves from non-time to time, from innocence to guilt. Robert Penn Warren teaches us that guilt is an inevitable property of identity. Redemption from sin is possible by communing with God, for He is the creator. One must feel sorry for one's sins and repent. Real identity exists only in the essence of God, in merging with Him. Existentialism is a concrete, experience-based philosophy which tries to see man in his relationship to the universe. The existentialist insists on the dignity and value of man and is of the view that man is responsible for himself. Man confronts mysteries, doubts, indeterminacies in his existence on earth. Loneliness, suffering, struggle for survival are common denominators and none can escape them. Robert Penn Warren projects the loss of identity in the twentieth century through his characters and advocates that redemption is possible by returning to the past and by close communion with God. Total unconditional surrender to God is the only way to salvation. Man, according to Warren, lacks integration. Separateness will not help one to understand the self. One can understand one's self only by understanding others. Warren conveys this idea here in these lines as:

"I ought to have guessed that a person
like a person who you could tell
had a deep inner certitude of
self which comes from being all of one
piece, of not being shreds and patches
and old cogwheel held together with
pieces of rusty barbed wire and spit and
bits of string, like most of us" (207).

Modern man is entirely isolated with the society and suffers only his own private agonies. They are solitary individuals discovering their own predicament, for the most part devoid of the responsibility for any historical or social representation. Warren deals with the necessity for balancing precariously between the abyss of nature and the abyss of self, in *All the King's Men*. He also explores the major conflict in the twentieth century – the conflict between public and private self, the actual and the ideal, commitment and disengagement in his works. In *All the King's Men*, the author presents the protagonist Jack Burden as coming out of history into history ready to meet the challenges of the future. Jack Burden's optimistic resolution to face the responsibilities time has store for him comes only after his selfhood is realised. Warren feels that the past is not in itself, independent of the present and future and that any event in time is meaningful only in relation to the past and the future. A.L. Clements observes:

"The past is not separate and complete
in itself but an ever-developing part
of a changing present and future. Once

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this knowledge is learned, one's individual life and all life may be seen to fall into coherent and inevitable patterns which given meaning to the past, present and future" (P 59).

The story of *All the King's Men* moves chiefly through the fabulous but completely credible political career of Willie Stark whose personality and language are a terrifying mixture of good and evil, scripture and blasphemy, purity and cynicism. "But Mr. Warren's hero ... is not Willie Stark, but the conscience of people – the novel is about the South, about America, and about all men in the "terrible division" of modern society – and he brings this conscience to its point of greatest awareness in Jack Burden who is with the Boss day in and day out as intellectual hatchet – man and stooge. It is Jack which tells the story and who suffers in it" (Rago 599). Marjorie Boulton remarks:

"Stories do not tell themselves; whoever is telling a story has to be somewhere in relation to the story, in order to tell it" (P 29).

The narrator Jack Burden omniscient is out and out an insider – the protagonist as well as commentator, communicating with a built-in allocator assuming differing identities. Plot, theme and point of view keep everything perfectly inter-related in *All the King's Men*. E.M. Forster points out that "... The basis of a novel is a strong and a story is a narrative of events arranged in time sequence" (P 44). The story of Jack Burden, interwoven with that of Willie Stark is the basis of the novel which so convincingly dramatizes "... the interconnected, communal nature of human guilt" (Snipes 71). Warren has indeed employed the flashback technique with the utmost skill. Commenting on Robert Penn Warren's characters, Paul West says:

"Warren is always to some extent, pretending that fiction is not a pretence: his characters baffle us just as our fellow-men sometimes do, and we have no sense of participating in a fictional world in which people are explained to us even if what they are is unbelievable" (292).

The reader of the novel happens to identify himself with one or another of the characters in the story. He feels that he is vivaciously living the fictional life of that character Jack Burden does not act till he learns of his true parentage. He is acted upon. But he grows all through the novel. Willie Stark grows too. Anne Stanton acts, but doesn't grow much. The variety of developing and flat characters that Robert Penn Warren portrays are a proof of his skill in characterization. The

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reflection of the Southern culture is a unique feature in *All the King's Men*. Warren depicts the qualities of the South such as stoic endurance, solitariness, independence, self-suffering, innocence and readiness to face difficulties. The clear thematic division of *All the King's Men* is what Jack Burden Calls "the terrible division of our age" – modern man's failure to achieve wholeness or full identity. Warren feels that the materially advanced present locks cardinal human virtues. Urbanization and identity crisis are touched upon in a marvelous way in *All the King's Men*. Among them, the theme of identity gets its superb treatment. When Jack Burden becomes involved with Governor Willie Stark's political party machine, he learns, as Paul West points out, that

"identity Is not a fixity but a studiously maintained transaction with other people. The means of self-establishment is also the prime agency of confusion...." (P 221).

Jack Burden's transformation at the end of *All the King's Men* is a kind of moral, second birth in contrast to Adam Stanton's surgical transformation of the schizophrenic personality.

To conclude, it may be said that *All the King's Men* has become a classic since its publication when it was received as "the finest American novel in more years than one would like to remember" and it moves like an express train, crackles with vitality and vibrates with emotional intensity and Penn Warren has proved himself as excellent writer-critic by making the point clear that man must learn and develop his own nature to achieve success in life and further adds that if man trusts in God and accepts Him as his Saviour, he can easily free himself from the frustration, disappointments, sorrow and tensions of this world and find life worth living and only through truth, one can make life meaningful. To achieve this, one must realize his self first so as to embrace the whole humanity. In a word, Warren emphasizes the transcendent vision through which one might perceive total reality with absolute certainty of truth.

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