

Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*: Human Relationship Based on Communication

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Abstract

This article lays focus on the writings of Robert Penn Warren, whose writing testifies to the human relationship based on communication, and traced by the character of Warren like Jack Burden, Willie Stark, Judge Irwin, Adam Stanton, Anne Stanton. He projects the loss of identity through his characters and advocates a system for making their life meaningful laying focus on imbibing the past culture and values through the present trend lends approval and support to the glorious values of culture. He is the master in handling of themes like guilt, self-identity, rootlessness, psychological suffering, thereby providing a sense of fulfillment to the readers.

Key words: Robert Penn Warren, *All the King's Men*, Culture values, self-identity, nostalgic elements, social awareness, self-knowledge.

Robert Penn Warren, generally known as the national poet of America, was an admirable academician, a convincing fictionalist, a persuasive critic an intellectual achiever and a remarkable poet who had established himself as a prolific writer with a significant contribution to American Literature. Warren hailed from Kentucky in the Southern region of America and had a bright university career. He joined the "Fugitive" group and participated in the intellectual discussions. He published one major work almost every year and jointly authored several works. His early works are derivative but his later creations bear the distinctive and individual stamp of the author. He won the Bollinger Prize and the Pulitzer Prize.

Like William Faulkner, Robert Penn Warren was conscious of the Southern culture. As an outstanding spokesman of the South, he 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 Industrialism. The southern culture was glorious and the agriculturists enjoyed complete freedom and individuality. 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, 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 do focus on the unifying and perpetual theme of identity. He contends that man in his existence on earth confronts mysteries, doubts and indeterminacies. 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. He usually

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projects the loss of identity through his characters and advocates that redemption is possible by returning to the past values and by close communion with God. As he feels and writes, to make life meaningful, one must be true to oneself so that one can embrace the human community.

Truly speaking, Robert Penn Warren quite distinguished in every genre was a versatile genius who had established his literary reputation by projecting his mind creatively and effectively through all art of generic forms. With his high level of learning and intelligence, stream-lined scholarship, social awareness and his quest for self-identity and self-knowledge, Warren earned literary eminence and helped through the creative readers to find directions. Even at his prime age, he was attracted by the poetical creations of Blake, Keats, Coleridge, T.S. Eliot and Ransom and evolved into an outstanding creationist endowed with American ingenuity. He has to his credit publication of 1.*The Briar Patch*, 2.*Thirty six Poems*, 3.*All the King's Men*, 4.*The Circus in the Attic and other stories*, 5.*Brother to Dragons: A Tale in Verse and Voices*, a remarkable book with lengthy poem which proved him to be a poet of reasonable and convincing standard. 6.*Promises: Poems* which won the National Book Award for Poetry and his first Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. Warren won the coveted Bollinger Prize for poetry in 1967 and a second Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1969. He was awarded the National Medal for Literature in 1969. The notable works of Penn Warren which still attract readership and critical study are his fictional works like *All the King's Men*, *Knight Rider* and *At Heaven's Gate* and his collection of poems like *Brother to Dragons*. For his literary creations, the Government of the United States of America made him the nation's first poet Laureate. "In the midst of a distinguished literary career, this prolific writer was the unanimous choice for that regal title in 1985 by everyone" (Mc Gingley 1). He breathed his last at his summer home in Stratton Vermont at the age of eighty four.

It is said that Penn Warren was the only American who won the Pulitzer Prize for both fiction and poetry. His writing is highly dramatic and this quality perhaps accounts for his popular success. His moral earnestness however, sets him apart from most writers of fiction and his outstanding creation in the field of fiction is *All the King's Men* (1946) for which he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1947. Commenting on Warren's literary prominence, George P.Garrett 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)

Warren points out in his works that some problems are irremediable stemming as they do from the fundamental defects in human nature. *All the King's Men* is of course a political novel. But "it is so only as Oedipus and Shakespeare's tragedies are political plays. Out of the concern of their time, they rise to depict not a local society but the entire society of men" (Vogel 78). The moral and

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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*. 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 cordial virtues. The individual in an industrial society loses his integrity, self-respect, honour and individuality. Robert Penn Warren refers to the havoc caused by industrialisation 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 the company commissaries and paid a dollar a day” (AKM 2)

The solid agrarian base is found missing in the present century. There is environmental 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 and charity. Real love and compassion are essential to lead a peaceful life. The absence of these good qualities may result in violence, negligence and inhumanity. In the present century, people are governed by their obsessive greed for wealth. In the twentieth century, people are found to be highly interested in amassing wealth, as money has become an essential means for power and position. It gives greater social recognition. Indirectly Warren refers to the fact that power corrupts people and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Warren has brought out this idea in the following lines:

“.... Willie is interested in Willie you call it genius. It's only half-baked people 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 world is so topsy-turvy that the least valuable things have become the most valuable things. In the mechno-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)

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Their marriage was not a union of minds and so they got separated after sometime. Hedonism, 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 humankind” (AKM 136).

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 of the 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. Anguish and despair are common to all. 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:

“No, it was a fine, conscious surrender which was a participation in and a willing of the flood itself, and not a surrender at all but an affirmation and all that, like the surrender of the mystic to God” (AKM 286).

Total unconditional surrender to God is the only way to salvation. Modern man 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 in the following lines:

“I ought to have guessed that a person like her – a person who you could tell had a deep inner certificate of self which comes from being all of one piece, of not being shreds and patches and old cogwheels held together with pieces of rusty barbed wire and

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spit and bits of string, like most of us...” (P 207).

Warren is of the opinion that only through truth, one can make life meaningful. To achieve this, one must realise one’s self first, so as to embrace the entire humanity. Warren emphasized the transcendent vision through which one might perceive total reality with absolute certainty of truth. The modern man is entirely isolated within the society and suffers only from his own private agonies. 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 in store for him comes only after his self-hood is realised. Warren feels that the past is not in self, 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 rightly observes:

“The past is not separate and complete in itself but an ever-developing part of a changing present and future. Once this knowledge is learned, one’s individual life and all life may be seen to fall into coherent and individual patterns which give meaning to the past, present and future” (P 59).

The masterly handling of the twentieth century themes of guilt and need for expiration, self-identity, sense of the past, rootlessness, the power of love and psychological suffering in *All the King’s Men* provides the readers aesthetic satisfaction and a sense of fulfillment which reading of literature provides to all lovers art and art and literature. It is through choice of diction, form and technical excellence that Robert Penn Warren communicates universal and great truths. In *All the King’s Men*, there is an integrated form, structure and perfect organisation. Through technical excellences and structural fineness Robert Penn Warren engages the critically minded readers. In *All the King’s Men*, there is a rare combination of form and content and it is a fine literary achievement. Warren is said to be immeasurably unique and singularly famous. Through the right application of right words he introduces precision, perfection and complexity. James H. Justus describes Warren’s rhetorical possibilities thus:

“The rhetorical possibilities of another Dantesque device – the occasional stylistic shifts from elevated to the colloquial – strengthened. Warren in a tendency that he had already Exhibited” (P 82).

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Robert Penn Warren's novels are mainly about human relationship, which depends largely on communication – conversation plays a major part in the mainstream of the novel. For speech presentation, Robert Pen Warren uses different techniques – the chief among them is the different discourse. If *All the King's Men* has become a modern classic, Cushing Strout avers, "it is a To its remarkable energy and poetry of language" (P 170).

To conclude, *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". It moves like an express train, crackles with vitality and vibrates with emotional intensity. As Madison Jones rightly puts it, "The novel's great range, its subtlety and rhetorical brilliance, and above all its swarm of living human beings must give it substantial place not only in Warren's canon but also in our recent literature" (45).

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