

Robert Penn Warren's Search for Identity in
All the King's Men

Dr. S. Chelliah, M.A., Ph.D., D.Litt.

Professor, Head & Chairperson

School of English & Foreign Languages

Department of English & Comparative Literature

MADURAI KAMARAJ UNIVERSITY

MADURAI – 625 021

Tamil Nadu, India

Cell: 9442621106 / 7339129324

schelliah62@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper is a humble attempt to project Robert Penn Warren as an intellectual achiever and an American genius who had established himself as a prolific writer with a significant contribution to American literature by publishing a major work almost every year and jointly authoring a good number of books and also participating in all types of intellectual discussions and getting well-versed in every genre as a literary artist and also shows how he emerged as a convincing fictionalist and the best spokesman of the Southern Culture projecting search for identity as a major theme in his *All the King's Men*

Keywords: American genius, convincing fictionalist, southern culture , search for identity , intellectual achiever, significant contribution.

As an intellectual achiever and an American genius. Robert Penn Warren had established himself as a prolific writer with a significant contribution to American literature by publishing a major work almost every year and jointly authoring a good number of books. Hailing from Kentucky in the Southern region of America, he had a bright university career and joining the “Fugitive” group, he participated in all types of intellectual discussions and got well-versed in every genre. His growth as a literary artist and his literary stances won him the Belington Prize and the Pulitzer Prize. His early literary works were found to be rather derivative, but his later literary creations did bear the distinctive and individual stamp of the author.

As a creative artist, Penn Warren projected himself as the best spokesman of the Southern Culture. Being alive to the glorious nature of the post south and its present decadence, he time and again argued that the best way to more out of the present malaise is

to embrace the past values of innocence, purity and faith and the capacity to endure and prevail over circumstances. As a creative artist, he was out and out conscious of the fact that the serious problem facing the modern man is his loss of identity due to corroding factors. Rather consequently, quest for identity is the major theme in the Pulitzer Prize winning fictional work *All the King's Men*. He was not only an admirable academician and persuasive American genius but also a convincing factionalist tracing Southern Culture with a fictional idea so as to establish a cultural identity with the present. As an outstanding spokesman of the South, Warren stood for an escape from industrialism and a return to cultural values found in the south. His treatment of southern culture offered him excellent opportunities to discuss the drastic effects of the Civil War and Industrialism. The Southern Culture was glorious, and the agriculturalists enjoyed complete freedom 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 post values and cultural stances.

Penn Warren's treatment of the search for identity and identity crisis faced by modern man deserves appreciation. To him, the quest for identity, is an important theme behind the portrayal of almost every major character in *All the King's Men*. According to Warren, man in his existence on earth confronts mysteries, doubts and indeterminacies, anguish and despair which are found to be common to all. The thought of original sin becomes the cause of despair and anguish and this can be traced to Warren's characters like Jack Burden, Willie Stark, Judge, Irwin, Adam Stanton, Anne Stanton and others. By projecting the loss of identity through his characters, he does advocate that redemption is possible only by returning to the past and by close communion with god. The search for identity is projected as a major theme in this novel *All the King's Men*. For making life meaningful, one must be true to oneself so that one can embrace the human community. One has to 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 does experience the problem of identity. He is presented as having been born again. This new birth leads his life new identity – a new perception of the real identity. Jack Burden is an existential hero who 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.

Though he had to his credit publication of many such works as *Thirty six Poems* (1935), *The Circus in the Allie and other Stories* (1947), *Brother to Dragons: A Tale in Verse and Voices* (1953), *Promises Poems* (1956) (for which he was given the National Book Award for Poetry: in 1958). 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 little in 1985 by everyone but himself" (James 1). Among his works like *All the King's Men*, *Knight Rider* and *At Heaven's Gate* which still all-act wide readership and critical analysis. *All the King's Men* perhaps accounts

for his emergence as a popular factionalist. In the words of James H. Justus, “Warren is committed to the orthodox view of man and the world” (P 2). Paul West observes:

“Against vast forces of nature, he works his own vast-sounding concepts. But the quarrel with himself remains, a process of self-study conducted in public, and his paradoxes, large or small, sometimes stifle one another. Not finding answers, Warren proves the value of keeping alive, a needed attitude and the discomfort of being a resolute participant rather than the spectator.” (P 204)

Warren clearly points out through his works that some problems are irremediable stemming as they do from the fundamental defects in human nature. “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” (Vogel 78). The moral and intellectual welfare of man in the twentieth century has been the prevailing theme in the Warren’s world especially in *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 cardinal virtue. The individual in an industrial society loses his integrity, self-respect, humour and individuality. 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 norms –
gauge tracts and knocked together the
company commissaries and paid a dollar
a day ...” (AKM 2)

He further writes:

“.... and the whole place, under the 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
a glassy, starlit sea” (AKM 34)

The said agrarian base is 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 found to be devoid of theological virtues like faith, hope

and charity. Real love and compassion are essential to lead a peaceful and contented 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, for people are highly interested in a massing wealth as money has become a means for power and position giving greater social recognition. Indirectly, Warren refers to the fact that power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Warren brings out this idea in these lines:

“... Willie is interested in Willie you call it genius. It’s only the 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 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 ... Jack and I are perfectly adjusted sexually Lois used to say primly ...” (P 303).

Their marriage was not a union of minds and so they got separated after sometime. Warren says that

“The law is always too short and too tight for growing humankind” (P 136).

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 current 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 Warren is of the view that guilt is an inevitable property of identity. Redemption from sin is possible by coming 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. According to him, total unconditional surrender to despair are common to all on earth. Loneliness, suffering, struggle for survival are common denominators and none can escape them. Modern man lacks integration. Separateness will not help one to understand the

self. one can understand one's self by understanding others. Warren conveys this idea here in the following lines:

“I ought to have guessed that a person
like her - 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 cogwheels
held together with pieces of rusty barbed wire
and spit and bits of string, like most of us.” (AKM 207)

Warren was 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. The 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 present 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 selfhood is realised. Warren feels that the past is not in itself, independence of the present and future and that event in time is meaningful only in relation to the past and the future:

“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 inevitable
patterns which give meaning to the past, present
and future” (Clements 59).

Treatment of self-identity, sense of the past, power of love and psychological suffering in *All the King's Men* no doubt, provides aesthetic satisfaction to the readers. Such major themes as Hedonism, Industrialization, Urbanization and Identity Crisis are touched upon in a convincing way in the novel *All the King's Men*, out of which 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, thus:

“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 the novel *All the King’s Men* is a kind of moral second birth in contrast to Adam Stanton’s surgical transformation of the schizophrenic personality. As Cushing Strout put it,

“How a self becomes a new self is really the burden of Burden’s story, the major chord of the novel, including Willie’s search for identity within it ...” (P 166).

According to Warren, man requires spiritual light in this materialistic world. Real identity exists only in comprehending God’s design and in merging with Him. If man trusts in God and accepts Him as his Saviour, he can easily free himself from the frustrations, disappointments, sorrows and tensions of this world and find life worth living. To conclude *All the King’s Men* has become a classic for it is the finest American novel in more years than one would like to remember” (P 91). It moves like to an express train, crackles with vitality and vibrates with emotional intensity. Madison Jones concludes that “the novel’s great range, its subtlety and rhetorical brilliance, and above all its Swam of living human beings must give it substantial place not only in Warren’s canon but in our recent literature” (P 45).

Works Cited

1. Clements, A.L. “Sacramental Vision: The Poetry of Robert Penn Warren”
South Atlantic Bulletin 43 No-4, 1978. P.59.
2. James A. McGinley. “A letter from the Publisher
SPAN Knox, 12 Dec. 1986, P.1.
3. Jones, Madison. “Robert Penn Warren as Novelist”
A Southern Renaissance Man
(ed.) B. Edgar New York: OUP, 1980.
4. Justus, James. H. *The Achievement of Robert Penn Warren*
Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1901.
5. Strout, Cushing. “All the King’s Men and the Shadow of William James.”
Critical Essays on Robert Penn Warren
(ed.) William Belford Clark.
Boston: G.K. Hall and Co., 1981.
6. Vogel, Dan. “The Mask of Oedipus Tyrannous”
The Three Masks of American Tragedy
Louisiana: S Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1974.

7. Warren Robert Penn. *All the King's Men*
San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984.
8. West, Paul. "Robert Penn Warren" (Ed.) George Wright.
*Seven American Literary Stylists: From Poe
To Mailer*
Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1956.
-