CHAPTER IV

JACK BURDEN'S BURDEN IN ALL THE KING'S MEN
In an incisive critique of Warren's novels, Madison Jones argues that All the King's Men exhibits a structural flaw which originates in the author's determination to extend meaning beyond the limits that his material demands. Jack's narration of his early relationship with Anne Stanton and Adam Stanton is comparatively undramatic. When he causes the death of Judge Irwin, a serious personal problem arises in Jack's life. In interpreting the crisis, he reorients himself so as to get rid of spurious theories like the Great Sleep, the Great Twitch and tries to achieve wholeness and authentic self. Madison Jones says, "If Jack is the protagonist — which he clearly is, since he is the one affected, educated, by the full sweep of the novel — then what comes after the climax of his personal story must be anti-climactic. But the great moment, the assassination of Willie Stark toward which the really dramatic interest of the novel has been building, is still to come. The effect is precisely anticlimactic." But the

critic at the same time feels that, "the novel clearly survives the flaw I have described." One may wonder whether All the King's Men deserves the label "flawed classic." A re-reading of the novel outlined in the following paragraphs may not be an answer to the objections raised by Madison Jones. But a few observations on the structure of the novel seem to be appropriate in order to clarify the point. Following Conrad, Warren makes the narrator-observer and commentator, Jack Burden, an integral part of the story. Moreover, there is his personal involvement in everything he does for Willie Stark, which he tries to analyse in terms of political, philosophical, and moral norms available and accessible to him. It is in this sense that Jack Burden is a complex character and carries with him the formidable burden of knowing himself and others. In Warren's novels the word "world" recurs in crucial contexts. Each of us has a world and each of us is a world by himself or herself. In making sense of the inner world and the visible world one stumbles on things and events in an unpremeditated fashion. In escaping from his own burden, Jack stumbles on Willie Stark and gets personally involved in his success and failure. At the instigation of Willie Stark, he tries to unravel the past of
Judge Irwin, and the result is the shocking discovery of his own roots. This greatly helps him to reorient his perspective not only towards Willie but towards Stantons. In a narrative which is interiorized, I think it is appropriate to talk in terms of centres of consciousness. In a narrative in which there is discontinuity, it is seldom easy to be precise about climax and anti-climax. As an observer with academic training and scholarship, Jack Burden sees Willie Stark and Adam Stanton as polar opposites in the human frame. Facts and ideals ought to find a healthy fusion. Jack Burden could see that Willie Stark and Adam Stanton are truncated selves and hence incomplete. But this does not mean that they are ineffective. So he acknowledges the greatness of Willie Stark.

In the narrative Jack performs two functions, which are inseparable. He is a reporter of the events and an interpreter. He could not interpret Cass Mastern's life because he does not know him personally. A real cataloguing and reconstruction of past events is just history. A perspectival evaluation of events is the past which influences the present and shapes the future. This is what Jack Burden achieves in the novel. The novel survives not as a flawed classic but as a profound and penetrating comment on the human frame of which Willie Stark is acutely aware. The novel dramatizes
the chinks in the human frame at the same time suggesting that
the chinks are not irreparable.

Concluding his long, complicated and complex
narration Jack Burden confesses:

This has been the story of Willie stark, but it is my story, too. For I have a story. It is the story of a man who lived in the world and to him the world looked one way for a long time and then it looked another and very different way. The change did not happen all at once. Many things happened, and that man did not know when he had any responsibility for them and when he did not. There was, in fact, a time when he came to believe that nobody had any responsibility for anything and there was no god but the Great Twitch. ... But later, much later, he woke up one morning to discover that he did not believe in the Great Twitch any more. He did not believe in it because he had seen too many people live and die. He had seen Lucy Stark and Sugar-Boy and the Scholarly Attorney and Sadie Burke and Anne Stanton live and the ways of their living had nothing to do with the Great Twitch. He had seen his father die. He had seen his friend Adam Stanton die. He had seen his friend Willie Stark die, and had heard him say
with his last breath, "It might have been all different, Jack. You got to believe that."

The above citations from Jack's concluding confession bring to a central focus the narrative, thematic, and evaluative perspectives of All the King's Men. Willie Stark's final utterance to Jack, "it might have been all different; Jack. You got to believe that" (461), is a part of the conversation that took place between the two before Willie Stark's death. The words seem to imply an awareness which is not affirmative but positive in the sense that Willie Stark realized what was amiss with him. While this greatly helps the reader to analyse the evaluative perspective of the novel, Jack's earlier statement that, "the story of Willie Stark and the story of Jack Burden are, in one sense, one story" (168), facilitates the reader to reconstruct the scattered items of the stories in the novel and assess their thematic significance. From this it follows that the narrative and enunciative modalities of All the King's Men are heuristic in the sense that the protagonists of both the stories discover themselves and their identities. In the inner logic of Jack Burden's confession there is a transition from the Great Twitch to a conviction that Willie Stark's final utterance is an utterance of

2. Warren, All the King's Men, p. 461.
fidelity. It throws light on man's capacity, in spite of his imperfection, to know what perfection is, though he may fail to realize it. Jack Burden's burden consists in learning the ways and means in making sense of experience his own and others. In this context we are reminded of Cass Mastern's intense passion to know the mind of Annabelle after the death of her husband. But he is very much aware that it is human defect to try to know one's self by the self of another. One can only know one's self in God and in His great eye. Warren explains to Ruth Fisher the significance of Cass Mastern interlude as follows:

The narrator of the novel then got stuck (and I got stuck) with the problem of trying to make sense of his own feelings about his role in relation to Willie Stark, the political dictator in my novel. I could have stopped the action and made my narrator, Jack Burden, have a moral debate with himself: "I don't approve of all that's going on, and I must discuss this with myself, my God, and my kindly pastor." He could, in other words, have gone at the question abstractly. But this is not his character. He is, in fact, trying to live a life avoiding all moral issues. But anyway, the abstract way would have been death to
the novel. At this point I suddenly had an idea. I gave Burden a Civil War relative (about whom he had been trying to do a Ph.D. dissertation) -- Cass Mastern by name -- and invented a story for Cass, in which Cass struggles for, and finds, moral awareness. The Cass story stands as a kind of mirror image for Jack, but not, I trust, merely as a device. Jack responds to the contrast, it has a part in his development. What I was trying to avoid was the abstract approach. I wanted to give the reader the sense of meaning emerging from experience (emphasis added). 3

Cass Mastern's journal, his portrait, and the other details which Jack Burden received from the grandson of Gilbert Mastern did not help him to achieve the coveted academic distinction, his Ph.D., but they provided him with an insight into human nature and experience. Cass Mastern, in an awful moment of surrender betrays his friend Duncan Trice, who was a typical Southern gentleman. In turn he is betrayed by Annabelle Trice, who sells a woman slave down the river. As the facts demonstrate, Cass sacrifices everything for Annabelle. For Jack Burden the problem is to make sense

emerge from facts which are not part of his experience. He could read that, "He (Cass) learned 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 and is drowsy no more but springs out to fling the gossamer coils about you who have touched the web and then inject the black, numbing poison under your hide. It does not matter whether or not you meant to brush the web of things" (200).

The conflict in Burden seems to suggest that the philosophical, the historical and the existential perspectives, that are available for one to make sense of life and experience are not adequate by themselves. Each perspective has its own hazard in that it may drown the self in misery and darkness. Or, to put it in Burden's words, "Or perhaps he laid aside the journal of Cass Mastern, not because he could not understand, but because he was afraid to understand for what might be understood there was a reproach to him" (201). The reproach that may arise from any discovery associated with one's past seems to be totally unacceptable to Jack Burden, hence his reluctance in the initial stages to probe into the past of Judge Irwin.
After his failure to complete his research work, Jack becomes a newspaper reporter and meets Cousin Willy in the Mason County for the first time. Impressed by his simplicity, sincerity and honesty, he gives a good report of him to the Chronicle. The Chronicle engages him to cover Willie's electioneering campaign. When Willie wins the election, he becomes the hired hand of the Boss. It is not for love or for money that he works for the Governor but for the fact that he finds masculinity, unusual strength, and will power to achieve anything he wants in Willie Stark. Though he does not have faith in the dark philosophy of the Boss, he sets out "...to dig up the dead cat, to excavate the maggot from the cheese, to locate the canker in the rose, to find the deceased fly among the raisins in the rice pudding" (205).

Propelled by the Boss, Jack probes into Judge Irwin's past. Though he is sure that "He (the Judge) is washed in the Blood" (229), and though he believes in his widely revered integrity, he undertakes the quest largely to disprove Stark's theory that there is evidence of evil in the life of every man. To his great shock, he finds the Judge to be a corrupt man, who had taken a bribe and caused a man to commit suicide and the role played by Governor Stanton to save the Judge.
Refusing to bow down his head before Willie and with no desire to defend himself by pleading his paternal relation to Jack, the Judge commits suicide. The "bright, beautiful, silvery soprano scream" (370), the cry of agony of his mother accusing Jack of killing his father wakes him to reality. He accepts his noble but evil father and feels— not only pity for her (mother) but something like love, too, because she had loved somebody" (373). He heartily accepts his father, mother and the past. He decides not to dig out blackmail evidence any more and declares it before the Boss.

Adam Stanton and Anne Stanton, the children of Governor Stanton, lead an ideal life following the footsteps of their noble father. Adam Stanton has an"—idea that there was a time a long time back when everything was run by high-minded, handsome men..." (262), like his father. "He is a romantic, and he has a picture of the world in his head, and when the world doesn't conform in any respect to the picture, he wants to throw the world away" (262). Adam, who hates people like Willie, refuses his offer to run his hospital. At the request of Anne, to convince Adam that human beings"—are not good or bad but are good and bad and the good comes out of bad and the bad out of good" (263), so that he can understand that no one is perfect, Jack reveals the role played by Governor Stanton in Irwin's case.
Disillusioned, Adam accepts Willie's offer. The myth of purity being shattered, Anne sheds her moral restraints and becomes the mistress of Willie, the man she admires. When Jack learns that Anne Stanton had become the mistress of Willie Stark, he feels that, "somehow by an obscure and necessary logic I had handed her over to him" (329).

The discovery of his real father and the loving and loyal mother works profound changes in Jack's outlook. He considers it the moment of his rebirth. "It was like the ice breaking up after a long winter. And the winter had been long" (376). Jack feels that he himself has set the events in motion which culminated in the Boss's death. His independent detective work uncovers the complicity and he discovers that he is responsible for the deaths of Irwin, Willie Stark, Adam, and the fall of Anne. The news that his mother is leaving the Executive for good makes him love her more. She does not appear any more to him as a "woman without heart, who loved merely power over men and the momentary satisfaction to vanity or flesh which they could give her..." (458). Now she is a vital and beautiful woman. He says "She gave me a new picture of herself, and that meant, in the end, a new picture of the world ... my mother gave me back the past. I could now accept the past which I had before felt
was tainted and horrible" (458). So he tells Ann...'if you could not accept the past and its burden there was no future, for without one there cannot be the other, and how if you could accept the past you might hope for the future, for only out of the past can you make the future" (461). This revealing insight into life, he reaches after much deliberation and experience. At the very outset of his narrative he says:

The end of man is knowledge, but there is one thing he can't know. He can't know whether knowledge will save him or kill him. He will be killed, all right, but he can't know whether he is killed because of the knowledge which he has got or because of the knowledge, which he hasn't got and which if he had it, would save him. There's the cold in your stomach, but you open the envelope, you have to open the envelope, for the end of man is to know (12).

The ringing philosophical tone of the passage is slightly abstract. But as he involves himself in the gubernatorial activities of Willie Stark, he opens the envelope of life with very profound consequences. The foregoing observations on Jack Burden's burden constitute a perspective that may facilitate an interpretation of the rise and fall of Willie Stark.
In his "Introduction" to All the King's Men, Warren made it clear that the theme of the novel was suggested by the career of Huey P. Long and the atmosphere of Louisiana. But he declared that "suggestion does not mean identity... The book, however, was never intended to be a book about politics. Politics merely provided the framework story in which the deeper concerns, whatever their final significance, might work themselves out" (ix-x). Warren is not a political novelist like Disraeli. He neither belongs to any political party nor does he show any involvement in politics. It is evident that All the King's Men is not planned as Disraeli's trilogy Coningsby, Sibyl, Tancred - which may be labelled "The political condition of England trilogy." Their focus is on the political set up but it is not so with All the King's Men as the focus is more on the human frame than on the political frame. Though Warren deals with history and politics, the real subject is the nature of man. It may be said that Willie's rise is due to the existence of the political system, but his fall is because of human factors. The one who brings him down is not a political opponent but a doctor, a man of science, and an idealist.

Like Adam Stanton, Willie Stark in the beginning is an innocent idealist, who fights for the right. He is "Cousin
Willie from the country " (56), a young man burning with zeal, an honest "County Treasurer of Mason County" (15), who seems to think"...he is Jesus Christ scourging the money-changers out of that shinplaster courthouse up there" (55). He tries to awaken the ignorant countrymen to an awareness of their responsibility and extricate themselves from the exploiters. His attempts to open the eyes of the people to the corruption in the school building construction prove futile. His speeches on the streets, his trials to get a long statement of the case printed, his sincere efforts to enlighten them with hand bills moving from door to door publicizing the meanness behind the bid fail. "Snared in the toils of mortal compulsions" (57), they remain blind to Willie's sincerity and honesty. He becomes"...symbolically the spokesman for the tongue-tied population of honest men" (68). His wife Lucy gets fired from her teaching job and Willie is out of job too. Willie faces his opponents boldly and feels, "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" (66). Undaunted by rebuffs, he continues to tread the path of righteousness. Undeterred, he goes to his father's farm, milks the cows, works hard day and night, and becomes a lawyer. His simple and peaceful life gets disturbed with the sudden recognition of his nobility by the people, when the
schoolhouse fire escape collapses, killing three children and crippling a few more. Willie's presence at the funeral makes a bereaved parent burst out in tears expressing his regret for "voting against an honest man" (70).

Willie's sudden popularity does not bring any change in his life style. His life takes a new turn when the city politician, Tiny Duffy, requests Willie to run for Governor, praising him to be the saviour of the State. Willie, who believes that, "the plainest, poorest fellow can be Governor if his fellow citizens find he has got the stuff and the character for the job" (98), accepts the offer. "Bemused by the very grandeur of the position to which he aspired" (74), he fails to understand the mean intention of Tiny Duffy, canvases for himself vigorously, prepares speeches full of facts and figures, rehearses, and delivers them to the boredom of the masses. Unwittingly, Sadie Burke, one of the electioneering assistants, in a vindictive and triumphant tone tells him of Joe Harrison's plans and how he is made the "sacrificial goat" (86). He "busts" Tiny Duffy, resigns from the campaign in favour of MacMurfee against Harrison. Refusing to be called MacMurfee's man, he canvasses actively on his own and sees to it that MacMurfee wins. In the next election he stands on his own and gets elected Governor. It is not his success in
the campaign but the way he evolved a style of functioning commensurate with the dignity and responsibility of his office that appears to be significant. It is here that one can locate the temptation that leads to corruption and later to the fall. Though he appears to be somewhat stubborn and indifferent to what others say, there is a certain change in him once he becomes the Governor. This change is clearly brought out in chapter IV. In the company of Sadie Burke and Tiny Duffy, he becomes an authority on man's fallen nature. He tells Jack "there ain't anything worth doing a man can do and keep his dignity. Can you figure out a single thing you really please - God like to do you can do and keep your dignity? The human frame just ain't built that way" (43). His views on man, law, and nature undergo change. He knows how to manage human beings. He believes that "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" (54). The idea of human nature that emerges from this passage is something that we can associate with Hobbes or Machiavelli. He uses this awareness to bring down his opponents. His firm conviction in the maddening corruption of all human beings makes him face the honest Judge Irwin and talk to him in a threatening tone. To reach one's goal by honest means is difficult. So Willie learns short cuts to
success, and to him the ends matter and not the means. Once his sense of innocence is destroyed, he rises to great heights. He tolerates and even encourages corruption as long as it greases the wheels of action and does not cause one to lose sight of the ends. He forgets his ideals and regards men like Byram White as things.

In a short period he comes to know that mere honesty and sincerity do not pay. He becomes a part of the inhuman world full of people like Sadie and Tiny. "Tiny Duffy became, in a crazy kind of way, the other self of Willie Stark, and all the contempt and insult which Willie Stark was to heap on Tiny Duffy was nothing but what one self of Willie Stark did to the other self because of a blind, inward necessity" (105). This blind inward necessity cancels the awareness, and so Willie promotes the interests of Tiny, and Tiny rises to the level of Lieutenant Governor. When Hugh Miller offers his resignation as Willie Stark is bent on saving the corrupt Byram Willie politely but firmly points out his drawbacks. He says that, "The law isn't made for that. All you can do about that is take the damned government away from the behind guys and keep it away from 'em. Whatever way you can. You know that down in your heart. You want to keep your Harvard hands clean, but way down in your heart
you know I'm telling the truth, and you're asking the benefit of somebody getting his little patties potty-black. You know you're welching if you pull out. That is why it took you so long to do it. To pull out" (146).

Corruption sets in Willie's personal life too. The ideal husband in him undergoes a drastic change and he becomes a womanizer. He flirts with many a tart, engages Sadie Burke as his mistress and involves even the aristocratic Anne Stanton in infamy. Though his wife leads a virtuous life with unfailing integrity, his immoral life creates an unbridgeable gulf and he pays visits to her only to keep up appearances. He pampers his only son to such an extent that he becomes a spoiled child. His son's affair with Sybil Frey, and her pregnancy compel Willie Stark to act against his wishes, perhaps for the first time in his life.

Willie Stark, who speaks like an authority on human nature seems to have forgotten the fact that he is a human being too. Fixing his eyes on the ends, he never stops to think of his evil actions. Being convinced that, "if any man tried to run things the way they want him to half the time, he'd end up sleeping on the bare ground" (164), he takes his own decisions. Though he becomes worldly-wise and practical-minded, his forgotten ideals come to the fore now
and then and he decides to build a magnificent, immaculate hospital as a gift to the State, untainted by the usual corruption and graft. With great difficulty he makes Dr. Adam Stanton, an intellectual idealist, agree to run the hospital.

Tom's affair forces Willie to give the hospital contract to Gummy Larson, a corrupt but highly influential person. Tom falls on the ground, while playing. He is paralyzed and his days are numbered. This brings a drastic change in Willie, who holds himself responsible for his son's moral and physical disasters. He repents, and in his obsession with purity, he decides to revoke his contract with Gummy Larson. The thought of losing the graft provokes Tiny Duffy.

Willie's decision to clean up the mess and go back to his faithful wife enrages his mistress Sadie. Feeling neglected and embittered, she informs the infuriated Tiny of the illicit relationship between Anne Stanton, the daughter of a noble governor who is no more, and the Governor, Willie Stark. Tiny phones to Adam Stanton, the highly principled brother of Anne and an efficient doctor, and gives a provocative description of the connection between Willie and Anne attributing motives to it. The angry Adam takes revenge by killing Willie as he does not want to "be paid pimp to his
sister's whore" (413), and the very next moment is killed by Sugar-Boy. Willie's fall is not politically engineered, but it is the indiscretion in human affairs that brings it. It is not a political opponent or enemy who kills Willie, but the just revenge of a noble man whose sister is unjustly wronged by a hick, who rose to power by sheer luck and hard work.

The foregoing plot summary of All the King's Men suggests that the story of Willie Stark as narrated by Jack Burden is like the plot of any thriller. But what elevates All the King's Men to the level of a great American classic is the narrative and stylistic perspective. As Seymour L. Gross argues, Warren's finest novel owes a great deal more to Conrad's Heart of Darkness than to Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby. He points out that, "Warren's attraction to the Heart of Darkness (Which in his essay on Nostromo he cites more times than any other work of Conrad's except the novel under discussion) is even more understandable than Fitzgerald's, for Conrad's novelette is a brilliant study of one of Warren's own most persistent metaphysical preoccupations — the disparity in men between beatific vision and the ubiquitous evil which blights it." While narrating Willie's corruption and fall, Jack Burden constantly and meticulously evaluates his experience, thereby helping the reader to come to terms with

4. Seymour L. Gross, "Conrad and All the King's Men" Twentieth Century Literature, 3 (April 1957), 27.
the proposition that life is neither completely good nor completely evil. It is in this sense the Conradian perspective which Warren employs makes All the King's Men a creative comment on the human frame. From this it follows that it is neither Willie Stark nor Adam Stanton, who is at the centre of the narrative, but the narrator, Jack Burdon. It is Jack Burdon's burden that the reader is constantly made to see. The process of unburdening the burden, which is both interpretative and evaluative, is also a process of making meaning emerge from experience. But the meaning is so complex that it resists neat formulation like "the disparity in men between beatific vision and ubiquitous evil which blights it." But it can be safely concluded that the novel is about the making of the self. The oft-repeated word that Jack Burden uses is knowledge. Without a serious struggle, the self can not earn the knowledge necessary to interpret and evaluate life. It is in this context that the past is significant in human affairs. In Warren's fictional canon All the King's Men occupies a central place because a reading of the novel helps the reader see the earlier novels and the later novels in a unified, inclusive, and liberating perspective.