CHAPTER – I

ROBERT PENN WARREN,
SOCIAL MILIEU OF HIS TIMES
Robert Penn Warren was born on 24 April, 1905, in Guthrie, Southern Kentucky - a town with a population of around 1,500 people. The country around was a mixed landscape with fine rolling farmlands, breaking here and there into barren lands, but with green woodlands and plenty of water. The streams seem somewhat shrunk now and the woodlands denuded of their shadowy romance, but certain spots, especially towards the western side, were the areas that Warren most vividly described in his work.

Warren went to school in Guthrie and in Clarksville, Tennessee, and then to Vanderbilt University exactly at that time when the Fugitives, a group of poets and arguers, were vociferously expressing their views on anything and everything. The group included such writers as John Crowe Ransom, Donald Davidson, Allen Tate and Merrill Moore. During his Vanderbilt period and graduation work at the University of California, Yale and Oxford Universities, Warren had been publishing a good deal of poetry in The New Republic and similar magazines.
Perhaps no other Southern writer battled more courageously with himself, and by extension, with his region, than Warren. And the pattern that developed from *I'll Take my Stand* to *Segregation*, no matter how unplanned, continued to guide his 'latter' works. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Warren stepped willingly and repeatedly into the 'awful responsibilities' of the race question. His work on the subject, especially in *Segregation*, remains one of the greatest legacies to America and Southern Literature.

It was in 1943, when his criticisms were published and he himself was a member of the Fugitives, that Robert Penn Warren expressed dissatisfaction with the whole species of novelists, who, he said, pretended to objectivity, while all the time writing from false, preconceived notions. He defined it as a kind of fiction that made science the source of method and philosophy. Human conduct, for this kind of novelists, he felt, had to be understood in terms of biology, bio-chemistry and other bio-sciences. The method was "professedly objective and transcriptive", because the novelist was concerned with facts and not values".
The modernistic movement was, by tacit definition, international. There were James Joyce, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot and Picasso, who wrote and painted in the background of Europe. Then for 52 slaughterous months, a war convulsed Europe and the flying machines grappled over France. In Zurich, James Joyce toiled on at *Ulysses*. Elsewhere, young Americans like William Faulkner and Stephen Hart were tinkering with the biplanes they hoped to fly. Earnest Hemmingway was driving ambulances and getting shot at. Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald marched onto transports and marched out of it again by the end of the war.

In around 1915, an American Renaissance, barely perceptible, could be seen to be stirring. It started with the publication of little poems in a Chicago magazine. In 1910, while he was in New York, Ezra Pound noticed the crowd. Unlike the populace in Europe, they had in them eager, careless and animal vigour. He found their imagination soaring to the sky, without any apparent grounding in the soil. This was the time of Edgar Allen Poe, Stephan Mallarme and Scott-Fitzgerald.
American writers create a peculiar twist for the critics. Along with their work, the writers invent the criteria by which critics and readers must understand their writing. That is why so much critical writing has been generated around American Literature, as though evoked by the poems and novels themselves. Even so apparently simple a writer as Hemmingway, has attracted a long critical bibliography because he invented a new kind of fiction. It is chiefly in this respect that he resembles a Wallace Stevenson, a William Carlos Williams or a Marianne Moore, who resemble one another simply because they have invented new kinds of poems.

At this stage, the Americans were preoccupied with America as the French were preoccupied with France and the Russians with Russia. American literature evolved into an immense panorama of futility and anarchy. At that time, it was considered that the difference between poetry and prose was that poetry leaps into and helps define that strange zone of imagination - and prose the emotions. Poetry liberates the words from their emotions and prose confirms them in it.
In Warren’s poetry, however, the critical and creative impulses are fused. *Twenty Six Poems* and *Eleven Poems of the Same Theme* are charged with intensity, a sense of terror bred by the corruption of the modern world and a sharing of its guilt. *Brother to Dragons* is a horror story in verse, relating the true story of a brutal murder, a psychological study of evil, in which Thomas Jefferson, the American President who championed the American Declaration of Independence, is one of the chief speakers. *Promises*, which won for Warren the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry as well as the National Book Award, and *You, Emperors and Others*, are rich proof of an unusual ability to join the narrative and the lyric.

Warren is at his best in a kind of rough balladry, macabre legends, half mad evocations and lurid folk tales mingled with boyhood recollections and wisps and strays of memory. The manner fluctuates between the tart and the tender. It is by turns casually ironic, painfully violent and grim, and in the poems to his daughter, unashamedly affecting. In spite of Warren’s productivity, there is a deep sense of reflection. 
experience, intensified and analysed through the medium of a keen and disturbing sensibility. To quote Clements:

Warren has essentially made the right choices which remind us of his association with the Fugitives, of the metaphysicals, particularly Donne and Marvell, and Eliot-like devices and diction remain, besides his own distinctive signature. Common to this poetic company are the much discussed complexity of attitude, psychological subtlety, strong dramatic sense, textural density, abrupt transitions and shifts of tone, juxtaposition of abstract meditative lines and concrete colloquial passages.

Warren's poetry is full of metrical alterations from smooth to harsh and from light to loose lines. Lines from the powerful early poem on the death of his mother, *The Return: An Elegy*, illustrates some of these characteristics:

It will be the season when milkweed blossom burns
The old bitch is dead
What have I said!
I have only said what the wind said.
Good Lord, he's wet the bed come bring a light*

Late in his life, Warren said that he was a Naturalist and that he did not believe in God. He, however, wanted to find meaning in his life. He refused to believe that life was merely a dreary sequence of events. So he wrote his own stories and poetry. Actually, Warren’s was the reaction of an incoming Modernist to an outgoing Naturalist. He was less interested in the philosophies and generalisations about fiction and poetry than in its craft. He felt that it was craft which made a piece of writing credible and memorable. What irritated him was lack of artistic fineness. He was in total agreement with the Editor of the New Orleans Double Dealer, who, in its January and June 1921 editions, declared that people were:

sick to death of the treacly sentimentalities. The stories of dreams, lassitude, pleasure, chivalry and Master loving Niggers no longer existed. No more potboilers. No more lynchings, beautiful belles and great benevolent planters".  

Both felt that a more virile and healthy literature must come in. And this was where Robert Penn Warren entered the scenario of American literature.

In recent years it has often been believed that Robert Penn Warren is America's foremost man of letters. In 1952, six years after the publication of All the King's Men and five years before the publication of Promises, Allen Tate ventured a definition about this man of letters:

. . . must create for his age the image of man, and he must propagate standards by which other men may test that image, and distinguish the false from the true. But at our own critical moment, when all languages are being debased by the techniques of mass control, the man of letters might do well to conceive his responsibility more narrowly. He has an immediate responsibility, to other men no less
than to himself, for the vitality of language. He must distinguish the difference between mere communication ... and the rediscovery of the human condition in the living arts. He must discriminate and defend the difference between mass communication, for the control of men, and the knowledge of man which literature offers us for human participation.

The opinion that Allen Tate, a novelist, poet and critic in his own right has given fits Warren to a perfection. Tate was, in fact, concerned with the relationships - the rhetorical, moral and aesthetic relationships - set up between the man of letters and the world. The man of letters takes upon himself some responsibility for the vitality of language and the rediscovery of the human condition. He must know and discriminate, he must be alive to the promises of his craft and the needs of his time - and show it. And it is in terms of vitality and rediscovery and constant participation that Tate's formulation fits Robert Penn Warren.

In the history of the American literature, certain regions have, in one period or the other, taken
Distinctive leadership. In the 1820s and 1830s, it was New York City with writers like Bryant Irving and Cooper. In the middle of the Century, leadership passed on to New England with Boston as the chief literary centre. When finally the leadership petered out, the inscription at their gravesite was, "We died only that every promise might be fulfilled." Later, in Promises, the skeleton granny who was devoured by hogs, repeats this acceptance of this sacrificial death: "I died for love." Well known writers of the period were Mary Freeman, Sarah Jewett, Edith Wharton and others. In the Twentieth Century, the centre shifted first to the Middle West in the first quarter of the century and was represented by such writers as Theodore Dreiser, Vachel Lindsay, Sherwood Anderson and Carl Sandburg. Subsequently, it moved to the South and later came to be called the Southern Literary Renaissance. Representative writers of the Renaissance were William Faulkner, Thomas Woolfe, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, W.E.B. DuBois, Randall Jarell and Robert Penn Warren.

Although the modern Southern Literary Renaissance could be actually identified only in th
In the second quarter of the Twentieth Century, it had its roots way back. While modern Southern Renaissance dwarfs the earlier southern writing, it is, in reality, a continuation from the time of Poe, and Simms. The long gap and deferment of recognition was primarily due to the fact, that in the South, writing was considered as a gentlemen's avocation, or an adornment during leisure - hardly as a profession or a means of livelihood. Poe and Simms were professionals but were hardly considered to have a 'good standing' with the southerners. Therefore, the best talents went into politics.

Another reason for the late beginning of the Renaissance in the South, was the industrial transformation of the South. Prior to Nineteen Hundred and Eighteen, industrial changes moved at a snail's pace. After that time, comparatively speaking, it has gone up by leaps and bounds. Southern literature has also kept up with those changes. Prior to industrialisation the southerners were so self-satisfied and complacent with their feudal lives, that they did not bother to keep pace with the rest of the world marching by.
The southern literature was provincial. Though provincialism has its own merits and provides a firm and deep understanding of the roots of a place, it certainly leads to narrowness of thought and limits vision. But then, after outside influence had played upon it, and vice versa, many important influences were exerted by southern writers upon writers and movements outside the South. This in turn, led to a widening of the vista of literature.

And, once the South jumped onto the bandwagon, at least of the changing literary scenario, they came up with their own distinct brand of literature. The southerner almost always grew up in the South and had his heart strings attached to the South, and could not rend them, even if he would. Consciously or unconsciously, he exhibited southern prejudices and drew heavily from the South for his material and theme. This trait may be seen in the writings of most of the southern writers, Robert Penn Warren, not excluding. Again and again, it may be seen, Warren goes back to the mountains of Tennessee, his home, to draw inspiration. Randy Woods, the setting of many of his narrations, is an exact
replica of the woods of Tennessee. Similarly, the entire story of the brutal murder of a slave, in *Brother to Dragons: A Tale in Verse and Voices* is based on the arrogance of the white master, taking for granted the life of his black slave - a thing that could happen only in the South.

One of the most deep-rooted feelings of the South was its patriotism. Thus Southern Literature is deeply steeped in strong love for the Southern land. The modern southern writers, in general, too display a strong love of the South and reveal a profound and loyal affection for the region, even while they display with complete candour, its imperfections. Under the surface, there was a passionate devotion for the old home.

Southern Literature has been persistent in its Protestant orthodoxy and humanism. Man is not an irresponsible puppet or an automation. He may not always behave ethically but he is powerful and responsible for his deeds. Warren makes this point amply clear in his writings. His Lilburn in *Brother to Dragons*, has acted devilishly, but none other than Lilburn is held
The author does not give him sentimental support or let him hide behind circumstantial situations.

Billie Potts in *The Ballad of Billie Potts* has been murdered by his own parents - albeit unknowingly. So the parents must face the horror of what they have done and Billie must also own up his part of the responsibility and pay the price with his life. If a character behaves like the Devil, his character is not cloaked in an amoral guise, but seen for what it is. In the Twentieth Century, this was taken for backwardness - for the author's inability to dress his characters in the proper hues. Today it has been accepted for what it was - the southerner's candid acceptance of truth in an age of error. The southern world was one where sin was still to be reckoned with and the distinction between right and wrong was not allowed to be blurred. Faulkner makes the southern stand clear with:

*Man is immortal...because he has a soul, a spirit capable of sacrifice and endurance. The purpose of literature is to help man endure by lifting up his heart.*
In spite of the fact that the people who settled in the South, were originally of the same European strain as those who settled in the North, there was a distinct contrast between the South and the North, in religion, social feelings, attitude towards sin and so forth. The South clung to the old forms of feelings and conduct that had been crushed during the French Revolution and yet had still retained bare, outdated memories of the original strain back in England. The Southerners still maintained amiability and consideration of manners. They still retained a code of honour. There was still that deep-rooted love for the land that kept the family together.

We see that even as Atlanta burned in Margaret Mitchell's spell-binding mirror of Southern America, in *Gone With the Wind*, the debonair Rhett Butler is in impeccable clothes with white lace at his chin, suave mannered and chivalrous even though he is waiting in a dirty barrack, to be hanged. Scarlet, the fiery vixen-like heroine whose womanly morals fluctuate from those of a white lily to a jezebel, strictly as per her needs, scandalises the prim society of the North.
Southern Literature is provincial, narrow in its outlook and poor. Yet, in spite of the unsettled character of the Colonial South, there was an opulence in the early Eighteenth Century that created leisure and indolence in the habits of the planters of the South. Owning a hoard of slaves right from the time that they could remember, southerners were less troubled with the necessity of hard work than their counterparts in New England. They were also more inclined to live in a luxurious manner in great mansions and large country houses, with many servants at their disposal. This created an atmosphere of grandeur and elegance that was reflected in their literature. The early books of the South, such as those by the likes of Daniel Defoe and Jonathan Swift, often mirrored this grandeur in their style and content. However, as the South developed and the economy changed, this atmosphere began to fade, and literature of a more realistic and pragmatic nature began to emerge.
about this time the slave trade in the South increased. So much so, that a single man was able to supervise cultivation of huge areas of land. The growth of the slave institution brought leisure into the lives of the planters and southern aristocracy and gave them time for entertainment, philosophy and literature.

The South produced many talented scholars during this period. Yet, they took very little part in the American Literary Renaissance that had its centre in New England. This was not difficult to understand as nearly all the publishing centres were in the North, creating a literary monopoly. If Southerners wrote with the viewpoint of a southerner, they had difficulty in getting their work published; and once published, a market for it. The Southern writers had centres only in Charleston, South Carolina. So there was very limited scope of getting Southern literary works printed. Some of the better known writers of the period were Hugh Swinton Legari, William Gilmore Simms, Henrey Timrod, Paul Hamilton Hayne, William John Grayson and Edgar Allen Poe.
Then came the Civil War. The destruction of the South at the close of the Civil War was beyond comprehension. Tens of thousands had died. Tens of thousands more were without the necessities of life. Homes had been destroyed. Lands had been devastated. And the Negroes - suddenly free and displaced - had become indisciplined and wild. They went on prolonged vacations and sometimes stole supplies from the meagre stocks of the whites. The situation was aggravated when politicians tried to get laws passed to make the Negroes socially, politically and legally equal to their former masters. Many of the southern states were placed under military law. In order to persuade the Negroes to vote for the Republican Candidate, many lands owned by the southerners were seized by the Freedman’s Bureaus and given to the Negroes. Ultimately, corruption became so rampant that the Ku-Klux-Klan was organised.

The South, alone among American regions, has known defeat and occupation. In a society that places great value on success and progress, only the South had come to taste the bitterness of failure. Consequently, they brooded upon the tragic dimensions of life.
closed was the Southern society that the nurturing atmosphere became stultifying. Even while rebelling from his region, the Southern writer has found himself compulsively drawn to the South to find the meaning of life and existence. Thomas Woolfe rebelled furiously against the South. Ellen Glasgow rebelled and was reconciled. Robert Penn Warren found the tension generated by the opposing forces of nurturing and stultifying, within the Southern society, an important theme for his work.

But the South was, as yet, not ready to forget or forge ahead. It kept licking its wounds and enjoying its status as underdog. After the war, came the rebuilding. The South was frontier country, as it had been earlier. Only, now, instead of the Indians, it was the Carpetbaggers and Scallywags who were in the saddle. Who would raise his voice for the South against that of the powerful Northerners? The only poet of any magnitude that the South produced in the post Civil War years was Sidney Lanier.
Lanier wrote a novel, *Tiger Lilies*, (1867), and a respectable body of literary criticism. His poetry is considered to be the best produced in America between the time of Walt Whitman and Edward Arlington Robinson, excepting the work of Emily Dickinson. His greatest contribution to Southern Literature is his poetry.

The loss of the Civil War, to many southerners, in 1865, was a tragedy beyond comprehension. They were numbed with the fact that their slaves had been emancipated and much of their land had been pillaged. They were so angry that they burned down the university buildings because the teachers were few and the students even fewer.

Southern writers had continued to find their principle theme in the Civil War and its aftermath. The basis of modern Southern Renaissance writing is founded in the everlasting imminence of death - to the society and to the individual. Mortality might be considered to be great underlying theme, for the simple reason that it is a universal experience.
Belief in the past is another important element of the Renaissance. The Southern writers have been loath to discard the ideals of past generations. These ideas took on almost the fervour of religion. Even when someone did not believe totally in the beliefs of the older generation, he felt he had to at least write to defend them as worthy in their own times.

Though the Southern writers had turned their faces towards the moderns, their writings reflected the decaying old society. Their convictions had gone—but their tastes and habits still lingered. At this juncture of time, when the old order was dying, there was a prolific burst of writers and literature, a thing not seen during the days when the South, in its strength, bloomed so luxuriantly.

The Southern Renaissance might never have occurred without the vigorous movement in criticism which preceded it and which has continued to parallel it—criticism of not just Southern Critics, but that of academicians like Stuart P. Sherman, Paul Elmer More, Irving Babbitt and W.C. Brownell. Also very much a force
were creative talents such as Henry James, T.S. Eliot, Ford Madox, etc. The literary magazines of the south have played an important role in the shaping of Southern Literary History and Thought during the period after the First World War. The majority of the Southern writers, particularly the poets, first won recognition through their contribution, in one or the other of these magazines and periodicals. In the difficult years following the Civil War in America, literature produced in the South continued, as prior to the War, to be mainly fiction.

There was one writer, who wrote about the life in Mississippi. *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), were to Southern Literature, to say nothing about the rest of American Literature, such that not mentioning of the author's name, would have been unthinkable. Samuel Langhorne Clemens (1835-1910), universally known as Mark Twain, derived much matter from southern humorists and wrote masterpieces about the life of two boys in Mississippi.
Both the stories are widely recognized as classics of American Literature and hymns to boyhood that recounted the boys' progress through life. Clemens uses Huck as the narrator to focus the story of all mankind's perilous advance towards self-realisation and made the account a universal paradigm. Huckleberry Finn remains, beyond doubt, the greatest single achievement in Southern Fiction. Though he wrote about the south, Clemens was an American author, not to be hedged in by any region or province.

The most significant preparation for the South's assumption of a permanent place in American Letters at mid-century, occurred during the intervals between the two World Wars, at Vanderbilt University, a place where, no one of the time would have predicted extraordinary literary activities. The catalyst for much of that activity was a single person - John Crowe Ransom, who sparked the imagination of slightly younger men and prompted developments that were to have a shaping effect on the course of southern writing and perhaps on the course of American Literature as a whole.
Robert Penn Warren was perhaps the most versatile man of letters identified with the Southern Literary Renaissance. He was a poet, critic, novelist, short-story writer and dramatist. His themes were of man's personal history or conscience, of Time, Violence and of the lost innocence that the frail ego of childhood never permits the restless and acquisitive adult to forget. As a novelist, Warren has dealt primarily with the problems of the twentieth century civilisation. His theme is the problem of Evil. All of Warren's modern characters seem to be doomed. The characters that seem to preserve a sense of integrity are the ones who are moored to tradition.

During the years of Renaissance, it was assumed and accepted by all that the South was the defeated, failed, poor, un progressive part of the United States. But an irony of Southern Literary History, to go along with all other Southern ironies, is that this legacy of defeat and failure served well the writers of the South. They wore this legacy of defeat and failure as a badge of honour. It provided them with a tragic fulfilment.
Faulkner and the great fiction writers of the Renaissance, have written with the assumption that the South was defeated, guilt-ridden, backward-looking and tragic: much of the power of their fiction came from that assumption. It was difficult for the writers of the seventies and eighties to deal with a suddenly superior South - optimistic, forward-looking, more virtuous and now threatening to become more prosperous than the rest of the country. Success would require a new voice. But certainly that voice did not emerge all at once. And, after the Nineteen Seventies, that new voice was hard to miss.

The contemporary Southern writers such as John Pendelton Kennedy (1801-1874), Joel Chandler Harris (1848-1908), Thomas Nelson Page (1853-1922), Charles W. Chestnut(1858-1932), George Washington Cable (1844-1925), Kate Chopin nee O'Flaherty (1852-1904), and Mary Noallis Murfee (1850-1922), better known as Charles Egbert, like their contemporary American writers, lived in a post modern world - a world in which order, structure and meaning were being constantly called to question.
According to Raper, "... the southern writer in a post-modern world is not usually a post-modern writer". ⁵

That is to say, that with the exception of a few writers, Warren's contemporary writers accept their world rather than invent it. They were not given much to fantasy, were not in the habit of questioning the assumed relationships between the narrator and the narrative, and in fact, did not question the nature of fiction itself. They usually wrote and depicted incidents as per the old rules and accepted forms of literature.

Two themes are very distinct in Warren's works - the need for self-fulfilment that can be achieved only through self-recognition and the inevitability of contamination by the world when a person steps out of the prison of self. Usually these themes are used in conjunction. For example, in *Night Riders*, Percy Munn is reluctantly drawn into the Tobacco War, on the side of the growers, for the best of reasons. But as he becomes deeply involved, he commits acts that, earlier, would have horrified him. In the end, he is annihilated, but not until he comes to some understanding with his 'self'.
placing the people of the South in a more acutely sensitive relation to history and its underlying foundation—time. The realm of temporal time-limits generates two identifiable subjective reactions in the collective Southern psyche, each of which is grounded in a dialectical dependence on desire and fear. The identity of the American South is characteristically invested in history and identity is intimately related to time due to the power of memory. Memory makes it possible to remember one’s self and one’s culture. But memory itself is possible only within the context of a temporal system. Since temporal bindings characteristically provide a sanctuary from the forces of time, it is, as a result, not an escape from identity as well.

The analysis of time has been polarized into two distinct methodologies. The first of these approaches engages in an author-by-author analysis of time, thereby, precluding the possibility of generalisation and application to a body of literature larger than the course of a single author. Many such analyses circumvent the complexity and diversity of modern Southern Literature. This hinges on the
exploration of the dynamics of Time exclusively to a particular author or group of authors— at the expense of other notable authors of the period.

Robert Penn Warren’s novel, *Meet Me in The Green Glen*, provides a particularly striking example of this dynamic boundary between the desire for a normative time and the fear of temporal liberation and temporal fixity.
References


