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Warren’s *All The King’s Men: A Study in Populism*

ALL THE KING’S MEN, Robert Penn Warren’s novel of the Southern demagogue and the men and women around him, has been examined from many points of view. It may be worthwhile to examine some of the too often overlooked socio-economic implications of the novel. All the king’s men, and the king himself, can be clearly seen to represent the great American tradition of Populism that swept the poorer agricultural areas of the Middle West and the South in the late 1930’s. It is surely far more than the narrow context of the life of Huey Long, as too many have mistakenly supposed. The spirit of Willie Stark has reared itself in many states and in many forms; in Bloody Bridles Waite of Colorado, Sockless Jerry Simpson of Kansas, William Jennings Bryan of Nebraska, Alfalfa Bill Murray of Oklahoma, Kissin’ Jim Folsom of Alabama and many others. The political elements of *All the King’s Men* are rooted in the past and yet are all, in one way or another, degenerative of the tradition they represent.

There are four such elements which should be isolated and their interrelationships known in order to see more clearly the novel’s meaning. The hill people of the South represent a particular economic group who are now, as they were in the days of Willie Stark, and earlier in the days of Pitchfork Ben Tillman, set apart from the more aristocratic and proper conservative people of the flatlands. Willie Stark is an example of the leaders produced by the hills to do battle on their behalf. The political position of the aristocrats of the Delta illuminates Stark’s rise and fall. Jack Burden is an aristocrat who loses, then finds himself in trying to bridge the gap between the hills and the Delta.
Essential to the understanding of Willie Stark is an understanding of the social construct which produced him. The hill people are a crucial phenomenon in the economic and social structure of middle-western and southern agricultural areas. The geographical dividing line between hills and black belt only serves to draw into sharper focus, in the South more than elsewhere, the economic battle. These hill people are holders of small plots of poor red farmland from which they eke out an existence with the assistance of amazing stubbornness, and an evangelical Protestant code of ethics. They see themselves as the chosen people who do battle with the more prosperous, and evil, Delta planters. They are fiercely individualistic.

They were less inclined to favor the Civil War because they had less interest in Negro slavery. They were more susceptible to Populism with its interest in freeing the small farmer from the control of the bankers, railroads, elevator operators and other more well to do elements of the society. They were more likely to break from Al Smith on the issues of Catholicism and Prohibition because the economic issue was less pronounced in 1928 and so provided them with a chance to vote religion and liquor. They supported the New Deal and in the election of 1948 they endorsed the Democratic party more than did the Delta, which found the politics of the New and Fair Deals threatening their power position by raising the standards of the Negroes and the rednecks of the hills.1

The same Populist sentiment was strong in the Corn Belt and for similar reasons. In the South it was rocky red soil; in Kansas and Nebraska it was rainfall. In the late nineteenth century there was real correlation between the amount of rainfall and the intensity of Populist fervor in western Nebraska.2 *All The King’s Men* is the product of a socio-economic vortex which reduced a proud people to desperate action.

The hill people have a concept of good and evil by which they see themselves as the chosen people who have had their birthright stolen. To the Populist, as to most liberals, good and evil are concentrated. One attribute is found in one group and one in another. Or, the individual is good and governments, or corporations or bankers or what have you, are evil. Thus, reasons the liberal, return the society to its natural owners and there will be peace in the land. The hill people, with Presbyterian rigidity, see the inhabitants of the Delta living a riotous life of drunken orgies, during which

2John D. Hicks, *The Populist Revolt* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1931), pp. 30-35.
time they spend on booze and vain, heartless women, the money that the
tax collector, the banker, the railroad agent and the grain elevator operator
steals from the children of the hills. Their strong religious backgrounds also
cause them to be more susceptible to the Messiah. And this Messiah, they
believe, will always rise from among them (a false conclusion if we examine
the backgrounds of the men who have actually acted positively for these
people—Jefferson, Jackson and F. D. Roosevelt).

One of the lessons to be learned from *All The King’s Men* is that these
conditions still exist and this latent evangelical liberalism is always present.
In 1948 Henry Wallace (a curious combination of populist and aristocrat)
tried to exploit this agrarian liberalism with his “Gideon’s Army” and his
promises to the “little people.” His liberalism had lost its roots, however,
and the stronger urban liberalism which dominated the Wallace campaign
was not acceptable to rural people. Further, in 1948 Wallace had in Harry
S. Truman, an opponent who better fit the picture of the hill people’s
leader. The conditions—economic, social and religious—which formed the
amalgam producing Willie Stark are a significant part of American his-
tory. They should be studied in a dispassionate light for insights into our
future.

II

Willie Stark, the leader produced by the conditions and prejudices of
the hill people, is the second of the important social elements in Robert
Penn Warren’s novel, for while Willie Stark is an individual, he is also an
institution. He has all the background and beliefs of the hill people men-
tioned earlier. As county treasurer he sacrifices his political life in a fight
to see that the courthouse gang in Mason City does not make the new
schoolhouse a political plum. His opponents tell the people that the company
submitting the lowest bid would bring in Negroes from the lowlands and
thus deprive the local people of jobs. Incidentally, they tell the people that
the Negroes would be the semi-skilled workers and the hill people that were
hired would be the common laborers. Essentially this is the point at which
the hill people always break with the Negroes. They do not have as many
to contend with as in the flat country and so do not fear their political
power as the aristocrats do. But when the Negro threatens them economi-
cally, race becomes an issue. Willie fights but loses. Other real life Willie
Starks are destroyed politically in just such a manner.

The fire escape of the schoolhouse, built of inferior materials, falls during
a fire drill and three children are killed. Willie is thus made a political
power. He had warned them about what the courthouse gang was trying
to do and he was right. With this he advances to the second step in the
rise of the redneck leader, what Professor V. O. Key calls the “friends
and neighbors" politician. In the hills around Mason City he is a political power. His is the protest for the inarticulate people of the area.

His rise to statewide prominence comes when Willie again sacrifices himself politically. Convinced of his popularity he is induced to enter the race for Governor by Tiny Duffy, the perfect stereotype of the smalltown political boss. During the campaign, Stark discovers that he has been nominated to take votes from MacMurfee, a candidate who is also popular in the hills. Willie goes to the political rally, rather symbolically pushes Tiny Duffy off the platform and reveals his part in the act. He tells the people to vote for MacMurfee and not for him. He tells them to sit in judgment on MacMurfee and remove him if he is wrong. MacMurfee wins the election. Willie, by this sacrifice, becomes a state-wide figure. He fits the standards of honesty that the hill people want and becomes their champion. He was duped as they had been, time and time again.

Probably of interest here is the change in the spoken rhetoric of Willie Stark. Previous to this time Stark talked about issues, about specific problems of taxes, education and roads. His speeches were clearly dull and unemotional. When he speaks at the rally he speaks to the emotional needs of the hill people. One might reflect that this was Willie's awakening, or rebirth if you will, to the realities of political power and the first step to his destruction. I do not, however, place such an interpretation on the act. Willie is here telling the truth and in the language the Hills understand.

MacMurfee, of course, fails to live up to the promises of the election and the inevitable wave of the future sweeps Willie into the Governor's Mansion. But Willie is different from the rest. He cannot be bought by political machines. Instead he forms his own machine and like too few others who rose in a similar manner, he actually goes about attempting to solve the problems of the hill people. He builds highways, schools and hospitals. He raises the taxes of the rich (the lowland aristocrats) and defends the hill people in the courts.

The greatest fight is the one which Willie goes through in relating his past to the realities of politics. He finds out that there is both good and evil in all men. Byram B. White, as State Auditor, dips his hand into the till and Willie is shaken up. The little man from the hills is just as capable of evil as the folks of the lowlands. Not that putting one's hand into the till is so bad—for Willie had come now to realize that this is an essential part of the machinery of political power, but White does it behind Willie's back. In short, he is disloyal to the cause which Willie represents. And White's willingness to write an undated resignation deepens Stark's realization of his power over men.

*Key, Southern Politics, p. 37.*

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“I gave him every chance," the boss said glumly. "Every chance. He didn’t have to say what I told him to say. He didn’t have to listen to me. He could have just walked out the door and kept on walking. He could have done a dozen things. But did he? Hell, no. Not Byram, and he just stands there and his eyes blink right quick like a dog’s do when he leans up against your leg before you hit him, and, by God, you have the feeling if you don’t do it, you won’t be doing God’s will. You do it because you are helping Byram fulfill his nature.”

Out of his experiences there grows the conclusion that life is not just a clash of good and evil but rather (returning selectively to his fundamentalist Sunday school) all evil. As Willie Stark puts it, “Man is conceived in sin and born in corruption and he passeth from the stink of the didie to the stench of the shroud.”

This conviction influences Willie’s concept of progress profoundly. His real concern is with the problem of producing that which is good. He reveals this in his exchange with the intellectual and idealistic Dr. Adam Stanton.

“There is one question I should like to ask you. [Said Stanton.] It is this. If, as you say, there is only the bad to start with, and the good must be made from the bad, then how do you ever know what the good is? How do you even recognize the good? Assuming you have made it from the bad. Answer me that."

“Easy, Doc, easy,” the Boss said.
“Well, answer it."
“You just make it up as you go along.”
“Make up what?”
“The good,” the Boss said. “What the hell else are we talking about. Good with a capital G.”

His political philosophy thus completed, Willie runs roughshod over everyone who gets in his way.

Indicative of his change in philosophy, there is a degeneration in Willie Stark’s oral rhetoric. The genuine Populist cry for justice is dissipated into demagoguery. Observe Theodore Bilbo in actual life as cited by V. O. Key in *Southern Politics.*

In 1934, Bilbo brought into play his genius for rough-and-tumble campaigning. He wore, from an earlier campaign, a scar won in his oratorical battles for the people. He had been rapped over the head with a pistol butt by an opponent whom he had described as a “cross between a hyena and a mongrel . . . begotten in a nigger graveyard at midnight, suckled by a

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sow, and educated by a fool.” In the 1934 campaign as in others, Bilbo—who had earlier done a little Baptist preaching—salted his oratory with bastard King Jamesian orotundities, long familiar to his audiences from the sermons of their evangelical preachers: “Friends, fellow citizens, brothers and sisters—hallelujah. —My opponent—yea, this opponent of mine who has the dastardly, dwelapped, brazen, sneering, insulting and sinful effrontery to ask you for your votes without telling you the people of Mississippi what he is a-going to do with them if he gets them—this opponent of mine says he don’t need a platform . . . He asks, my dear brethren and sisters, that you vote for him because he is standing by the President. . . . I shall be the servant and Senator of all the people. . . . The appeal and petition of the humblest citizen, yea, whether he comes from the black prairie lands of the east or the alluvial lands of the fertile delta; yea, he will be heard by my heart and my feet shall be swift, . . . your Senator whose thoughts will not wander from the humble, God-fearing cabins of Vinegar Bend, . . . your champion who will not lay his head upon his pillow at night before he has asked his Maker for more strength to do more for you on the morrow . . . Brethren and sisters, I pledge . . .”

There is further degeneration in Willie. It is exemplified by his infidelity to his wife, Lucy. Lucy, the prime mover in Willie’s earlier high moral purpose, is relegated to the position of a publicity piece. She is used for the furtherance of the Governor’s political ends. For sexual satisfaction Willie turns to a collection of women who are not the product of the hills. In short, Willie falls into the very pattern of life in his personal affairs which the hill people have hated (or perhaps envied) in the people of the lowlands—heavy drinking and infidelity. In the end it is Anne Stanton’s brother Adam who kills Willie when he finds out that his sister had been Willie’s mistress. Thus, Willie’s failure to do the impossible and fulfill the picture which the redneck has of his leaders caused his downfall.

Despite Stark’s actions, the wool hat boys never desert him. Even more significant, the clear-thinking Lucy doesn’t either. When their wild-living son Tom is paralyzed in a football accident—a symbol of Willie’s attempt and failure to construct a pleasant world—Lucy is there to help Willie on with his coat and take him home. After the deaths of Willie and Tom, Lucy adopts a child born to the promiscuous Sibyl Frey with a conviction born of faith that it is Tom Stark’s illegitimate son. The name for the boy: Willie—Willie Stark. With all that she has been put to personally in Governor Stark’s rise and fall, she knows as the hill people know that there is something in Willie which must be preserved. Thus, as the novel ends, Lucy Stark represents the inarticulate hill people who must have faith in their Willie Stark because experience has taught them that there is no other source for their salvation. And Willie knows also, perhaps for

*Key, Southern Politics, pp. 242-43.*
the first time clearly, on his death bed as he says—"It could have been different."

Thus, in death, Willie Stark returns to his roots. There is a solution to the evils of the society in which the hill people live and the solution is in the conquest of political power by an articulate spokesman who will act. Whether or not this belief is correct is not an issue. The real point is that the hopes and aspirations of these people are genuine and Willie's attempts to meet these needs are also genuine. It is in the red dirt and man's weaknesses that Willie's failures are rooted. The fallacy of Populism, and perhaps of all liberalism then, is the fallacy of not understanding nature.

III

The third social element in the novel is the aristocracy of the Delta. Like the geographical division between the hills and the plains, the aristocracy of the deep South is more clearly defined than in other sections of the country. On the plains of the deep South, the plantation owners have built a tradition of aristocratic conservatism. They use political power to protect a social system which is grounded in stability and respect for law. It is from this area that most of the great leaders of the South have come to contribute to American government in the fields of finance and foreign policy. But with all of their respectability they have almost always been lax in their willingness to help the poor farmers of the hills. They are the evil which the hill people see and react to. Because of the code and tradition of these people they do not understand Willie Stark. In All the King's Men Judge Irwin of Burden's Landing is the personification of this school of thought. Judge Irwin is the best of his tradition. He, unlike many of the more complacent men and women of the area, sees a need for social improvement. However, the judge is in a dilemma. The society which he represents will not allow change without the overt pressure of Willie Stark. Thus, there is no conservative way to solve problems, it seems. There is only Willie Stark's way and this is unacceptable to the judge.

Robert Penn Warren goes beyond this weakness, however, to show that even the people of the plain, when the hard crust of conservative respectability is removed, are not without corruption. Judge Irwin, while he was Attorney General, was involved in a kickback scheme which eventuated in the suicide of Mortimer L. Littlepaugh, Counsel for the American Electric Power Company. Governor Stanton had known of the action and shielded Irwin. The rectitude which is so lauded in the aristocracy is really only a façade. They are not above corruption when they find it necessary. This element dramatizes the sin of the aristocracy. Their real sin is their failure to recognize and alleviate the economic conditions of the poorer
people of the hills. Thus, in the South as well as elsewhere, the aristocracy has a respectable legal conservatism. They contribute greatly by giving powerful and intelligent leadership to the nation. But their conservatism is seldom respectable in dealing with the real socio-economic problems of the area and their legality is constructed to control such socio-economic improvement.

IV

The fourth element in the novel is Jack Burden. From the standpoint of the political nature of the agrarian areas he is significant as a touchstone moving between the hills and the black belt. Jack Burden is a product of the aristocracy. His early association with Judge Irwin makes a great impression on him. His youth is spent with Anne and Adam Stanton. All the elements of his life are linked to the Delta, but his realization that there is something unsatisfactory in this self-satisfied existence sets him adrift. Given the chance to work for Willie Stark, he accepts and quickly falls in with all the activities which characterize Willie. His actions in working to find ammunition for Willie’s plans eventually bring him to attack the very roots from which he sprang. Through his revelation of Judge Irwin’s and Governor Stanton’s actions he destroys the very people who had previously meant the most to him, Adam Stanton, Anne Stanton and Judge Irwin. Anne Stanton becomes Willie Stark’s mistress, Adam Stanton kills Willie and is killed himself by Willie’s bodyguard and Judge Irwin commits suicide.

Burden seems lost in his conviction that there is no code of ethics or morals but only the “big twitch.” Although Willie feels that Jack is the only person who really knows him, Jack realizes that he does not understand Willie at all. Perhaps the products of the aristocracy can never really understand the hill people and their kind of leadership.

As the novel draws to a climax, Jack Burden looks through the cloud of action without purpose in which he has been existing and begins to see clearly. He does, in the end, bridge the gap. There can be, he seems to know, a connection between the hills and the Delta. There can be respect for law and at the same time socio-economic progress. As the novel ends he is telling the reader that he may get back into politics. If so, it will be to help Hugh Miller who resigned as Attorney General when Governor Stark refused to fire Byram B. White. Miller is the symbol of the very leadership which is necessary, a man of respectability who wishes to use the law to help the people.

V

In surveying the rise and fall of a Populist politician and the people who support and oppose him, All The King’s Men leaves the reader with the
hope of Lucy Stark. Another Willie will come along and he will not fall into the snare of demagoguery, blackmail and thuggery. Contemporary politics would seem to show us that this is possible. George Norris in Nebraska and Bob La Follette in Wisconsin are clear examples of this tradition. And in the South, examples of respectable Populism like John Sparkman and Lister Hill of Alabama prove that agrarian democrats can be law abiding. Further, the enlightened conservatism of such men as Fulbright of Arkansas adds awareness to respectability. It is also true that shortsighted conservatism still exists in the agrarian areas in the personages of Thurmond, Byrnes, Byrd and the like. It is further true that Populism has gone sour of late not only in Huey Long and Theodore Bilbo but most recently in Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin. But the gap can be bridged either by a Populist who climbs up or an aristocrat who bends down. This is the essential lesson of All The King’s Men and perhaps of America.