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Twilight of the Boss:  
*All the King's Men* and Norse Mythology

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In *All the King's Men*, Warren's third novel, Jack Burden, a newspaper reporter turned political blackmailer, tells the story of his employer, Willie "The Boss" Stark, and his rise from naïve local politician to corrupt Southern governor. During the course of Willie's story, Jack also relates his own tale of innocence lost and faith in mankind regained. As the two stories intertwine, Warren illustrates the importance of accepting the past and one's responsibilities to the world. However, as James Justus points out, this is more than simply another novel about the Southern political machine:

Into this study of a southern demagogue, went not only the example of Huey Long but also Warren's wide reading in Dante, Machiavelli, Elizabethan tragedy, American history, William James, and his observation of the very real day-to-day melodrama of depression in America and fascism in Italy.<sup>1</sup>

Warren himself claims that he based the character of Willie Stark more on Shakespeare's Julius Caesar and Coriolanus than Huey Long.<sup>2</sup>

Noel Polk, in his afterword to the restored edition of *All the King's Men*, suggests that Warren was at least partially influenced by Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* when he originally gave Willie the surname of *Talos*, the name of Spenser's "mechanical man attendant upon the Knight of Justice." Polk further points out that *Talos* refers to the Greek myth of Talus, the bronze man whom Hephaestus created to guard the island of Crete:

<sup>1</sup> James H. Justus, *The Achievement of Robert Penn Warren* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State UP, 1981), 192-193.

<sup>2</sup> William Kennedy, "Robert Penn Warren: Willie Stark, Politics, and the Novel," in *Conversations with Robert Penn Warren*, edited by Gloria L. Cronin and Ben Siegel (Jackson, MS: U of MS P, 2005), 88.

[He] circled the island three times a day, throwing boulders at the ships that tried to land. He was thus the powerful protector of the island before he was outwitted and slain by Medea, who came to Crete with Jason and the Argonauts.<sup>3</sup>

In both cases, that of Spenser and that of Greek mythology, *Talos* seems a particularly appropriate name for Warren's protagonist. Remember that in Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, Talos acts as judge, jury, and executioner for whomever he perceives as unjust or sinful.<sup>4</sup> His sentence is always the same, regardless of mitigating circumstances: death. Thus the pursuit of justice for Talos always ends in bloodshed. Similarly, Talus tends to bring death to whomever he approaches. According to some myths, whenever a visitor did manage to land on Crete, Talus "would greet the visitor, becoming red hot and embracing the person to death."<sup>5</sup> Like these two metal men, Willie's efforts to bring justice to and protect the forgotten "hicks" of his state often end in political corruption, dissension, and bloodshed.

Since Warren changed the name of his protagonist, though, an in-depth examination of the significance of the former name proves moot. However, if Warren included references to classic Greco-Roman mythology in his earlier drafts, one wonders if he employed other myth cycles, and if they survive in the finished 1946 edition. The Cass Mastern story provides evidence that this is indeed the case.

Jack Burden, as he prepares to dig up dirt on his childhood father-figure, Judge Irwin, gives us the clue we need to begin looking for hidden references to myth: "When you are looking for the lost will in the old mansion," he says, "you tap inch by inch, along the beautiful mahogany wainscoting, or along the massive stonework of the cellarage, and listen for the hollow sound."<sup>6</sup> According to Burden, then, you find the weakest part of

<sup>3</sup> Noel Polk, "Editorial Afterword" to Robert Penn Warren, *All the King's Men: A Restored Edition*, ed. Noel Polk (New York: Harcourt, 2001), 636.

<sup>4</sup> Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. A. C. Hamilton (New York: Longman, 2001), V.i.12 1-6.

<sup>5</sup> Anthony S. Mercante and James R. Dow, *Encyclopedia of World Mythology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Vol. II, M-Z (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 2004), 810.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Penn Warren, *All The King's Men* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1946), 229; hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

the structure, the hollow sound, and, rather than assume a flaw, you look again for its purpose. The hollow sound is not a poorly constructed wall, but a hidden compartment concealing important information. The same is true of the Cass Mastern chapter.

On the surface, the Cass Mastern story seems a throwaway chapter. Other than thematic echoes to the larger narrative, it appears to bear no relevance to the rest of the plot. Civil War historian Clifford Dowdy, for instance, claimed that the story “seemed [. . .] to have no place in the novel.”<sup>7</sup> It has never appeared in any other form of the Willie Stark story: the stage versions, both the 1949 Robert Rossen and the 2005 Steven Zaillian film versions, and the 1981 opera *Willie Stark* omit the Mastern material. Even the first and second British editions of the novel expurgated the Cass Mastern chapter.

The chapter, however, is vitally important to Jack Burden’s narrative. Warren always insisted it was central to the novel.<sup>8</sup> More recently, critics such as James Perkins, willing to give the chapter closer readings, have agreed that the material is far more than just a good story stuck in the middle of a novel. And for our purposes, the Cass Mastern chapter is indispensable, as it gives us the first blatant suggestion that Warren uses Norse mythology as a basis for much of the action.

This chapter traces Jack Burden’s decision to drop out of graduate school when he could not finish his history dissertation on the journals of his great uncle, Cass Mastern, who died in the Civil War after the battle of Atlanta. Burden loses faith in the project when he fails to grasp Mastern’s understanding that the world as “all of one piece” and that one’s actions will invariably affect others (200). The bulk of this chapter tells the story of Cass Mastern and his journey to this revelation, and on the surface bears little relevance to mythology, except for one telling detail.

In 1846, Cass’s older brother, Gilbert, brings Cass to Valhalla, his plantation, to begin Cass’s education.<sup>9</sup> In Norse mythology, Valhalla, or “Hall of the Slain,” is where the

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<sup>7</sup> Qtd. in James A. Perkins, *The Cass Mastern Material: The Core of Robert Penn Warren’s All the King’s Men* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State UP, 2005), 4.

<sup>8</sup> Perkins, *The Cass Mastern Material*, 10.

<sup>9</sup> James A. Perkins, “Chronology of All the King’s Men” (September 22, 2007).

Valkyries take all warriors killed in battle. Odin, the chief god of the Norse pantheon, presides over the hall and watches as the slain warriors fight daily outside the hall in practice for Ragnarok, the Norse Apocalypse.<sup>10</sup> What strikes one about Warren's use of the Norse name is that it does not seem to fit symbolically in the story. Every explanation seems a stretch. Valhalla is the abode of the valiant dead, but neither Cass nor his brother constitute what one would ordinarily consider notable valor: one sleeps with his best friend's wife, thus causing his friend's suicide, and refuses to fire a shot the entire time he serves in the war; the other is a shrewd businessman who manages not to fight in the Civil War at all. One might also claim the name refers to Cass Mastern, whose fate is to die in the War, but then why not name Cass's plantation Valhalla instead of Gilbert's? Like the Cass Mastern material itself, the name Valhalla seems superfluous to the overall narrative. The idea of Valhalla, though, is not irrelevant to the rest of the novel, once the name of Gilbert's plantation encourages the close reader to look for other references to Norse mythology.

A second fairly clear allusion to Norse mythology occurs when Willie Stark first decides to build the free hospital: "I'm going to build me the God-damnedest, biggest, chromium-platedest, formaldehyde-stinkingest free hospital and health center the All-Father ever let live" (148). *All-Father*, here, seems almost as out of place as *Valhalla* in the Cass Mastern story. While the Christian god is frequently referred to as "God the Father," He is not often called the All-Father. That title belongs not to Jehovah, but to the primary Norse god, Odin.

Early in Willie's tenure as governor, Jack Burden presents yet another reference to Norse culture. When Willie goes to Chicago on business, he has a liason with a figure-skater who is one of "a bevy of 'Nordic Nymphs' in silver gee-strings and silver brassières" (149). As with Warren's use of "Valhalla" in the Cass Mastern story and of "All-Father" above, there seems no real reason to describe these skaters as "Nordic." However, with three very clear references to Norse mythology, the

<sup>10</sup> Gwyn Jones, *A History of the Vikings* (New York: Oxford UP, 1968), 317.

possibility of more subtle references becomes a near certainty.

For example, when Jack Burden learns of the affair between Anne Stanton, whom he loves, and Willie Stark, he travels West to California and lies drunk in a hotel room for days. During this time, he discovers The Great Twitch, the idea that whatever happens in the world occurs involuntarily, like a spasmodic twitch, and can therefore be no one's fault or responsibility, but in order to gain this "knowledge," Jack must give up part of his humanity by denying his feelings toward Anne. The next day, he picks up an old hitchhiker:

The only thing remarkable about him was the fact that while you looked into the sun-brittled leather of the face, [...] you would suddenly see a twitch in the left cheek, up toward the pale blue eye. You would think he was going to wink, but he wasn't going to wink. The twitch was simply an independent phenomenon. (332-333)

Burden's specificity here is noteworthy. The twitch isn't simply under the old man's eye; it's under his left eye. One may chalk this up to a reporter's eye for specific detail; however, Jack is not so specific in other similar situations. We do not know, for instance which eye Willie may have used when, in 1922 at their first meeting, "[Jack] could have sworn he gave [him] a wink" (18).

It is easy to miss the importance of the left eye here. Most critics might assume this is a reference (conscious or unconscious) to Warren's having lost his own left eye as a young man.<sup>11</sup> However, there is a mythological significance. According to Norse myth, Odin gave up his left eye to drink from the well of knowledge.<sup>12</sup> Odin also often travels the world disguised as an old man or beggar. In the Lay of Harbard, for instance, he disguises himself as a lowly ferryman and taunts Thor when the thunder god seeks passage over a river. In the Lay of Grimnir, Odin appears at King Geirrod's court as Grimnir, an old beggar,

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<sup>11</sup> James A. Grimshaw, Jr., *Understanding Robert Penn Warren* (Columbia, SC: U of South Carolina P, 2001), 2.

<sup>12</sup> John Carey, "Irish Parallels to the Myth of Odin's Eye," *Folklore* 94, no. 3 (1983): 214.

in order to test the king's hospitality.<sup>13</sup> In the *Volsung saga*, Odin takes the form of an old, one-eyed man and challenges Sigmund, destroying Sigmund's sword.<sup>14</sup>

The hitchhiker, then, represents an Odin figure symbolizing the knowledge Jack Burden has gained by sacrificing another vital organ: his heart. The hitchhiker, though, is not blind; he merely has a twitch under his eye. This suggests, that Jack's knowledge is flawed, as is made clear by the end of the novel when Jack has abandoned The Great Twitch theory in favor of the Web of Being, the idea that we are all connected and our actions necessarily have repercussions involving others.

There is, however, another character in the novel who shares many more similarities with Odin. In the above passage, Jack describes the hitchhiker as appearing like "he was going to wink, but he wasn't going to wink" (333). This phrase harkens back to another ambiguous wink, that which Willie may or may not have given Jack at their first meeting. When Randolph Runyon, in *The Taciturn Text: The Fiction of Robert Penn Warren*, refers to this wink as Willie's "one-eyed" text, one can't help but be reminded of Odin again, who is frequently referred to as "Odin One-Eye."<sup>15</sup> It is also interesting to note that in the 1949 film, Willie winks his left eye.

The Boss has other physical similarities to the All-Father. Since Odin represents the Norse Sky-god, he is often portrayed as wearing a cloud-gray kirtle and a blue hood as well as a wide-brimmed gray hat slanted to cover his missing eye.<sup>16</sup> When Jack Burden first meets Willie in Slade's poolhall, he is dressed similarly: a seersucker suit (which is most commonly either grey/white striped or blue/white striped), a blue-striped tie, and a grey felt hat (16). While Willie is not using the hat, obviously, to hide a missing eye, it is important to note that when the "wink" occurs, it occurs under the brim of this hat.

Willie also shares Odin's command of language. Odin

<sup>13</sup> Kevin Crossley-Holland, *The Norse Myths* (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 116-120, 59-64.

<sup>14</sup> Donald A. MacKenzie, *German Myths and Legends* (New York: Avenel, 1985), 311.

<sup>15</sup> Crossley-Holland, 248.

<sup>16</sup> Edith Hamilton, *Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes* (New York: Mentor, 1969), 308; Crossley-Holland, xxvi.

was the god of poetry and a masterful poet in his own right.<sup>17</sup> His uncle taught him the nine songs he would need to win the mead of poetry, and once he had drunk from the mead, Odin became the patron god of all poets.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, one of Odin's titles is God of Eloquence.<sup>19</sup> Donald MacKenzie, in his retelling of Norse myths and legends, reveals that when "Odin drank of the song-mead he composed poems which for sweetness and grandeur have never been surpassed."<sup>20</sup> Like Odin, Willie has a gift for language, as Sugar-Boy, Willie's stuttering bodyguard, points out after Willie's death:

"He could t-t-talk so good," he half mumbled with his stuttering. "The B-B-Boss could. Couldn't nobody t-t-talk like him. When he m-m-made a speech and ev-ev-everybody y-y-yelled, it looked l-l-like something was gonna b-b-bust inside y-y-you."  
(446)

Additionally, just as Odin learned the art of eloquence by double crossing the giants and drinking their mead of poetry, Willie's eloquence emerges after his first drunken binge and his oath of vengeance when he learns that the "fat boys" (as Jack Burden refers to them), in order to split the "hick" vote, have played him for a fool by convincing him he has a chance at becoming governor (89).

There are other references to Odin as well. One of Odin's other names is Father of Battle.<sup>21</sup> He is, therefore, the Norse god of war, and according to the Prose Edda, one of his greatest joys is spreading strife.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, strife seems to follow Willie throughout the novel. From the moment he is elected governor, Willie engages in strong-arm politics to force his policies and civic changes through the state congress. He is twice threatened with impeachment during his tenure and escapes through

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<sup>17</sup> Hamilton, 309.

<sup>18</sup> Crossley-Holland, 191.

<sup>19</sup> Robert Graves, *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1948), 260.

<sup>20</sup> MacKenzie, 26.

<sup>21</sup> Crossley-Holland, 248.

<sup>22</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1949),

blackmail and bullying. Even before his rise to power, when he was not The Boss but Cousin Willie from the Country, Willie shows signs of spreading strife when, as county treasurer, he accuses the local political machine of awarding the school contract to a construction company with ties to the Commission Chairman instead of to the company with the lowest bid. It is at this time that Jack's editor sends him to Mason City to interview "that fellow Stark [...] who thinks he is Jesus Christ scourging the money-changers out of that shinplaster courthouse up there" (55).

The reference to Jesus reveals yet another similarity, ironically, between Willie and Odin. Both Jesus and Odin represent sacrificial gods. In addition to sacrificing his left eye, Odin, like Jesus on the cross, hung spear-pierced on a tree, giving up his life as divine sacrifice.<sup>23</sup> Willie, too, sacrifices himself for his goals. Like Odin's first sacrifice of his eye, Willie's first sacrifice is a lesser one. He gives up his dignity when he allows himself to be run out of office instead of backing down on the school contract issue. However, the night before the Upton barbeque, when Willie swears vengeance against the "fat boys," he gives up something more than just his dignity.

Only Sadie Burke, Willie's campaign manager, seems to recognize this moment for what it is when she tells Willie, "[. . . Y]ou thought you were the lamb of God, [...] but you know what you are? [...] Well, you're the goat [...] You are the sacrificial goat" (86). The goat has long been associated with paganism.<sup>24</sup> Sadie's words here reveal a clearer recognition of Willie's character than anyone so far. He is not a Christ-figure, despite the words of Jack's editor; he is the sacrificial pagan goat. Before he can achieve his vengeance on Harrison, MacMurfee, and the other "fat boys," he will have to sacrifice more than just his pride.

When Willie discovers the truth of his gubernatorial campaign, Jack tells us that he "reached over to the table and picked up the bottle [of liquor] and poured out enough into a

<sup>23</sup> Crossley-Holland, 15.

<sup>24</sup> Mercante and Dow, 377.

glass to floor the Irish and drank it off neat” (87). Heretofore, Willie has been a staunch teetotaler, refusing even a beer in Slade’s pool hall when Jack first met him because “‘Lucy [his wife] don’t favor drinking’” (20). Taking the drink now implies more than simply turning his back on sobriety; it further implies turning his back on his own morality and, by extension, Lucy, his moral compass. In order to become governor, then, Willie quite literally sacrifices himself and emerges from his drunken stupor the next day a changed man. Like Odin, who sacrificed himself to himself on Yggdrasil the World Tree in order to gain knowledge and power over others, Cousin Willie from the Country must die in order to be reborn as The Boss.

Randolph Runyon acknowledges this in his discussion of this scene in *The Taciturn Text* when he refers to Willie’s drunken slumber as a “deathlike sleep” during which Willie’s “miraculous metamorphosis” occurs.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, when Willie passes out on the bed, he very much resembles a corpse laid out for viewing: he lies on his back with his “hands crossed piously on the bosom” as if he were “a *gisant* on a tomb in a cathedral.” Even more tellingly, Sadie asks Jack where she should “‘ship the remains.’” Until Willie rises for the barbeque a changed man, Jack even refuses to even refer to him as a person; instead, he is “the item” on the bed or “the carcass” (89-91).

The next morning, after a bath (The Boss’s symbolic baptism), Jack offers Willie another drink to shake his hangover (94). The willingness with which he drinks Jack’s liquor implies that Willie has emerged from his symbolic death a transformed man.

However, as Gwyn Jones points out in *The Vikings*, Odin “was no Christ who hung on the tree for others. He sought his own gain—dominion and knowledge.”<sup>26</sup> Here we see that despite the words of Jack’s editor, Willie, too, is no Christ. Like Odin, Willie does what he does for his own gain, as he admits in his first successful political speech when he tells his own story in third person: “He didn’t start out thinking about all the other

<sup>25</sup> Randolph Paul Runyon, *The Taciturn Text: The Fiction of Robert Penn Warren* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State UP, 1990), 65.

<sup>26</sup> Jones, 320.

hicks and how he was going to do wonderful things for them. He started out thinking of number one” (97). Later, even Jack comes to realize this, as he reveals when he tells his mother that ““Willie is interested in Willie”” (134).

Even the free hospital, Willie’s attempt to have one humanitarian accomplishment uncorrupted by politics, is at its heart one more example of Willie’s attempts to use his power for self-serving ends. All of his protests to the contrary notwithstanding, Willie wants the hospital to be the best in the world in order to give him a better image and to prove that he isn’t completely corrupt; otherwise, why name it the Willie Stark Hospital? He inadvertently admits his selfish ends when he awards the building contract to Gummy Larson, a politically influential building contractor, to keep his son Tom’s scandalous affair quiet, and warns Larson not to cut corners: ““For it’s mine,”” he declares, ““you hear—that’s my hospital—it’s mine!”” (385).

Even the deal with Larson underscores Willie’s selfishness. When MacMurfee, one of Willie’s “fat boy” rivals, offers to make Tom’s problems disappear in exchange for Willie’s endorsement of MacMurfee’s Senatorial campaign, Willie balks because he wants the Senatorship (352). Rather than make the deal with MacMurfee, rather than sacrifice his own political ambitions to save his son, Willie makes a deal with Larson, awarding him the hospital contract in exchange for his promise to call off MacMurfee. Even though Willie rails and whines and claims that he had to make the deal, that the ““sons-of-bitches”” made him deal (384), the fact remains that no one “made” him deal with Gummy Larson; his political career was simply more important to him than his uncorrupted hospital. As Jack Burden so succinctly puts it: “The fact was that the Boss was the way he was. If MacMurfee had forced him into a compromise, at least MacMurfee shouldn’t be the one to profit by it. So he did business with Gummy Larson” (381).

Which brings us back to Valhalla. While Warren’s use of *Valhalla* in the Cass Mastern episode seems inappropriate to his story, the name could certainly fit in the overall narrative of

Willie Stark. Remember that Willie envisions the hospital as the best in the world, with every convenience imaginable:

[. . .]

“I’m going to have a cage of canaries in every room that can sing Italian grand opera and there ain’t going to be a nurse hasn’t won a beauty contest at Atlantic City and every bedpan will be eighteen carat gold and by God, every bedpan will have a Swiss music box attachment to play ‘Turkey in the Straw’ or ‘The Sextet from Lucia,’ take your choice.” (148)

Odin, too, sees his structure as a wonder to behold. It has “glittering walls” and is “Strong and lordly,” “holy,” and “glorious.”<sup>27</sup> Jack Burden claims that Willie wants the hospital so that people will vote for him and “bless [his] name” (247). Similarly, Odin believes that Valhalla will provide “unending power” and “endless renown” to him and the other gods.<sup>28</sup> Willie expects that the hospital “will be there a long time after I’m dead and gone and you are dead and gone and all those sons-of-bitches are dead and gone” (247). Odin likewise considers Valhalla an “eternal work.”<sup>29</sup>

A similarity that is, perhaps, more integral to our purposes lies in how both structures came to be built. Though Wagner’s account of Valhalla’s construction differs slightly from the surviving myths, all sources agree that Odin hired giants to build his fortress. Admittedly, Willie wants nothing to do with the politically corrupt Gummy Larson who, as has been pointed out already, is a “fat boy” who can use his pull to keep other “fat boys” (namely MacMurfee) in line. However, in the end, Willie believes himself forced to deal with the “fat boys” and awards the contract to Larson.

Both Odin and Willie regret the deals they make and immediately consider breaking them. In fact Odin agrees to the bargain only after Loki, the trickster, guarantees that he will

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<sup>27</sup> Richard Wagner, *The Ring of the Nibelung*, trans. Andrew Porter (New York: Norton, 1976), 19.

<sup>28</sup> Wagner, 19.

<sup>29</sup> Wagner, 19.

ensure the giant fails to live up to his end of the bargain.<sup>30</sup> In Wagner's opera, *The Rhinegold*, though Loki doesn't promise to keep the giant from finishing the work, he promises that he will find a way for Odin to break the bargain.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, after Willie has made his deal with Larson, he promises Jack that he will destroy Larson once the hospital is built: "'I'll rip him. [...] I'll rip all of 'em. All of 'em who put their dirty hands on it. They do the job and when it's over I'll rip 'em. Every one. I'll rip 'em and ruin 'em. By God, I will! Putting their dirty hands on it. For they made me, they made me do it'" (386).

However, there is one very important difference between Willie's hospital and Odin's Valhalla, and thus between Willie and Odin. Valhalla is the abode of slain warriors, who represented the aristocracy of Nordic society.<sup>32</sup> The hospital is a place where "[...] anybody, no matter he hasn't got a dime, can go" (247). Where Valhalla provides a glorious afterlife for the upper class, the Willie Stark Hospital allows the poor, lower class respite. Odin, then, unlike Willie, acts as patron of the aristocracy and upper class (the Old Money of Jack and Willie's time).

If the inhabitants of Odin's hall imply his patronage of Norse aristocracy, there is other evidence as well. Helene Guerber, for example, describes Odin as the "progenitor[] of royal races."<sup>33</sup> Kevin Crossley-Holland cites the Lay of Harbarth as evidence that "Odin championed the nobly born—kings, warriors, and poets."<sup>34</sup> Indeed, the lay claims outright that Odin "Gets [...] all earls slain by edge of swords."<sup>35</sup> Willie, on the other hand, protects the rednecks, the hicks, and the rural farmers, the domain of Thor in Norse mythology.

In his history of Viking culture, Gwyn Jones claims that irascible and boisterous Thor "was a god with whom the peasant

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<sup>30</sup> Padraic Colum, *The Children of Odin: Nordic Gods and Heroes* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2006), 7.

<sup>31</sup> Wagner, 22.

<sup>32</sup> Crossley-Holland, xvii.

<sup>33</sup> Helene A. Guerber, *Myths of the Norsemen* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2006), 377.

<sup>34</sup> Crossley-Holland, xxvi.

<sup>35</sup> "The Lay of Harbarth," in *The Poetic Edda* 24.3, trans. Lee M. Hollander (Austin, TX: U of Texas P, 1962), 74-82.

[...] ranks could identify.”<sup>36</sup> This is borne out in the mythology. If the Lay of Harbarth specifies Odin as the protector of nobility, it is equally clear on Thor’s role. Where Odin receives the souls of slain nobility, Thor receives “the breed of thralls.”<sup>37</sup> According to Helene A. Guerber, these thralls received treatment in Thor’s hall equal to that of the warriors and nobles in Valhalla, much as the poor will receive equal treatment in Willie’s hospital.<sup>38</sup> Lee Hollander, translator of the Poetic Edda, claims that Thor illustrates his protection of the yeoman farmer when he takes umbrage at the mysterious Harbarth for “disturbing the work of the farmers” by bringing war to their shores.<sup>39</sup> So closely is Thor associated with farmers that many scholars and folklorists claim that he may have begun as simply an extraordinarily large and strong farmer around whom tales were woven until this figure reached godhood.<sup>40</sup> Even this supposed development of the Thor myth mirrors the story of Willie’s rise from a humble farmer ““who was just a human, country boy”” to the most powerful man in the state (98).

Like Thor, Willie concerns himself with helping poor farmers. His political agenda revolves around helping the rednecks and hicks of his state. As a lawyer, he often defends the lower class in “chicken-stealing cases and stray-hog cases and cutting scrapes.” Later he successfully represents “a gang of workmen [who] got hurt when some of the rig collapsed on a bridge the state was building [...] and some independent leaseholders” who are being exploited by an oil company (103). As governor, he constructs roads between the rural communities and the towns so the farmers can successfully get their crops to market, he improves the school systems in the outlying parts of the state, and, of course, he begins building the free hospital.

Willie shares more with Thor, though, than his championship of poor farmers. “Of all the gods,” writes Guerber,

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<sup>36</sup> Jones, 321.

<sup>37</sup> “The Lay of Harbarth,” 24.4.

<sup>38</sup> Guerber, 66.

<sup>39</sup> Hollander, 80.

<sup>40</sup> J. R. R. Tolkien, “On Fairy Stories,” in *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Ballantine, 1966),

“Thor was most feared by the Jötuns [giants], for he was continually waging war against the frost and mountain giants, who would fain have bound the earth forever in their rigid bands, thus preventing men from tilling the ground.”<sup>41</sup> Like Thor, Willie is on a crusade against the giants of his time: the “fat boys” — “the big boys who make a real lot of money” (77, 134).

Thor’s hammer, Mjolnir, is particularly appropriate for a comparison to Willie. In nearly all myths of Thor’s struggles against the giants, he slays them with his magic hammer. For instance, Jones claims that the giants “know [Thor’s] hammer well when it comes through the air, for it has cracked many a skull of their ancestors and kindred.”<sup>42</sup> Just as Thor uses his hammer to destroy giants, Willie vows to “nail [Macmurfee] up if he don’t deliver.” “Hand me the hammer,” he yells, “and I’ll nail him.” Nailing “them” becomes a slogan for his whole campaign:

“You ask me what my program is. Here it is, you hicks. And don’t you forget it. Nail ’em up! Nail up Joe Harrison. Nail up anybody who stands in your way. You hand me the hammer and I’ll do it with my own hand. Nail ’em up on the barn door!”  
(102-103)

If Willie so closely resembles Odin and Thor, it stands to reason that other characters have Nordic cognates as well. For example, Willie’s wife, Lucy, bears a startling resemblance to two Nordic goddesses: Freyja and Frigg. These two goddesses are often confused, not only among modern scholars; even ancient accounts often blend the two figures into one.<sup>43</sup> In Germany, for example, the two goddesses were considered one and the same.<sup>44</sup> This confusion is easy to understand when one considers that Frigg was Odin’s wife, but Freyja was married to Od, about whom literally nothing is known, and thus he is often equated with Odin.<sup>45</sup> Their resemblance to Lucy, however, goes beyond their being married to an Odin figure.

<sup>41</sup> Guerber, 251.

<sup>42</sup> Jones, 321.

<sup>43</sup> Crossley-Holland, xxxi.

<sup>44</sup> Guerber, 138.

<sup>45</sup> Crossley-Holland, xxx

For instance, Jack Burden describes Lucy as “birdlike” when he first meets her (67). Later, when she grows tired of Willie’s political and moral corruption, she moves to her sister’s chicken farm (166). This association of Lucy with birds underscores her relation to Freyja, who owns a falcon-skin cloak that transforms her into a bird whenever she wears it.<sup>46</sup>

Both goddesses protect home and hearth. Frigg was the Nordic personification of wives and mothers.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, Freyja’s hall, Folkvang, houses not only her share of slain warriors, but all “pure maidens and faithful wives, that they might enjoy the company of their lovers and husbands after death.”<sup>48</sup> Lucy, too, seems devoted to marriage and family. She despises anything that could threaten her homelife. She doesn’t “favor drinking” (20). Though she must know that Willie is less than faithful, she does not divorce him. She merely moves out to the country with her sister (166). When she learns that her son, Tom, may have fathered a child, her only solution is for him to marry the girl (355).

In Wagner’s *Ring of the Nibelung*, Fricka, Wagner’s blend of Frigg and Freyja, shows disdain for Odin and his attempts to cheat fate by orchestrating the affairs of man.<sup>49</sup> Lucy seems similarly contemptuous of Willie’s interference in others’ affairs for his own ends. When Jack explains that the pregnancy has caused political problems for Willie and that he is looking for other solutions to avoid a wedding, Lucy grows disgusted:

“Oh, God,” she breathed again, and rose abruptly from the chair, and pressed her clenched hands together in front of her bosom. “Oh, God, politics,” she whispered and took a distracted step or two away from me, and said again, “Politics.” Then she swung toward me, and said, out loud now, “Oh, God, in this, too.” (355)

According to many sources, Frigg “possessed the

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<sup>46</sup> Crossley-Holland, xxx

<sup>47</sup> Crossley-Holland, xxxi.

<sup>48</sup> Guerber, 139

<sup>49</sup> Wagner, 101-2.

knowledge of the future.”<sup>50</sup> In the matter of her son, at least, Lucy would seem to have a similar ability. When a drunken Tom wraps his car around a highway culvert, Lucy berates Willie for allowing their son to run wild and prophesies that Willie ““will ruin him.”” Then she adds, ““I would rather see him dead at my feet than what your vanity will make him”” (244). Later, Tom does indeed become ruined when he sustains a spinal injury during a football game that leaves him paralysed from the neck down and unable to care for himself (406). When Lucy, who must care for Tom alone, finds him dead of pneumonia, the rest of her prophecy comes to pass (449).

Freyja finds other representations in the novel as well. Despite her halls being the abode of virgins and faithful wives, Freyja personifies not wife and mother, like Frigg, but lover and mistress.<sup>51</sup> Since she takes a share of the battlefield slain, Freyja, like Odin, also represents war.<sup>52</sup> These two aspects of the goddess suggest Sadie Burke, Willie’s fiery mistress and political advisor, who orchestrates Willie’s murder.

Even the narrator, Jack Burden, represents multiple characters from Norse mythology. For instance, according to Norse mythology, Odin keeps two pet ravens, Hugin (“Thought”) and Munin (“Memory”), whose job it is to fly all over the world every day and bring the All-Father news of all that happens in the world of men.<sup>53</sup> At least two places in the novel equate Jack with birds. When they are young lovers, Anne Stanton’s pet name for Jack is ““Jackie-Bird”” (300). Much later, as an adult, Jack talks Adam Stanton out of resigning from Willie’s hospital by chattering “as gay[ly] and sprightly as bird song” (347).

However, textual evidence suggests that Jack represents more than a generic bird; he is quite literally linked with ravens. Besides “manservant” and “detective,” *jack* also refers to the male of many types of birds, including the raven’s cousin, the crow.<sup>54</sup> There are further similarities to Odin’s ravens specifically.

<sup>50</sup> Guerber, 46.

<sup>51</sup> Crossley-Holland, xxxi.

<sup>52</sup> Crossley-Holland, xxx.

<sup>53</sup> Guerber, 19.

<sup>54</sup> “Jack,” *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 1989.

As a student of history and thus a culture's collective memory, Jack represents Munin, but as an investigative reporter entrusted with discovering Truth, Jack must rely on critical thinking skills and thus represents Hugin. Additionally, Jack describes himself as "that newspaper fellow who is a sort of secretary to Willie" (265). However, Jack is far more than "sort of" a secretary.

While one may note that a secretary is a type of predator bird, when Jack refers to himself as Willie's secretary, he is clearly using the word's more prevalent denotation as one who does routine office work. In its purest sense, though, a secretary does not merely answer phones, file records, and make appointments. A secretary literally keeps the secrets of another; he is a confidante.<sup>55</sup> When the novel begins, Jack has "fill[ed] an awful lot of little black books [...] and put them in a safety deposit box when they [have gotten] full because they aren't something to leave around and because they would be worth their weight in gold to some parties" (23). Significantly, Jack's name, also implies that he is more than just a secretary for Willie. According to the *OED*, besides a male crow, *jack* may refer to either a manservant (a type of secretary) or a detective, whose job is the opposite of that of a secretary: instead of keeping secrets, he discovers them for others. This is certainly an appropriate name for Warren's narrator, whose job as Willie's secretary and personal detective is, like Odin's ravens, to discover all he can about Willie's associates and rivals and provide that information to Willie upon demand while helping Willie to protect his own secrets.

Clearly, then, Warren based many of his characters on figures from Norse mythology. However, the similarities to Germanic myth do not end with the characters. Indeed, much of the novel works as a retelling of the Norse Apocalypse myth, Ragnarok. At least two incidents reveal that Warren is working with the Ragnarok myth.

After Willie wins the Democratic primary in 1930, Jack describes the political scene in Apocalyptic terms:

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<sup>55</sup> "Secretary," *OED*, 1989.

But it wasn't a primary. It was hell among the yearlings and the Charge of the Light Brigade and Saturday night in the back room of Casey's saloon rolled into one, and when the smoke cleared away not a picture still hung on the walls. And there wasn't any Democratic party. There was just Willie, with his hair in his eyes and his shirt sticking to his stomach with sweat. And he had a meat ax in his hand and was screaming for blood. (103)

Anyone reading *All the King's Men* closely with a mind towards Norse myth must recall that Erda, the Seeress of the first poem in the Poetic Edda, says that Ragnarok will be an "axe-age" and a "wolf-age, ere the world crumbles."<sup>56</sup> The second reference to Ragnarok occurs when Hugh Miller, Willie's uncorrupted Attorney General, resigns from the administration, and Willie makes a subtle reference to the second part of Erda's prophecy by telling him "'You're leaving me alone [...] with the sons-of-bitches. Mine and the other fellow's'" (147). For Willie then, the axe age and the wolf age have come.

There were two versions of the Ragnarok myth available to Warren when he wrote *All the King's Men*: the "traditional" version as retold by 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century writers Snorri Sturluson and Saxo Grammaticus, and Richard Wagner's version as portrayed in his operatic tetralogy, *The Ring of the Nibelung*. Not surprisingly, he draws from both.

According to tradition, the death of Baldur, Odin's son and the god of summer, presages Ragnarok.<sup>57</sup> Similarly, the end of Willie's reign as governor begins with his son's actions:

So the summer went on, [Jack writes] and we all lived in it. It was a way to live, and when you have lived one way for a while you forget that there was ever any other way and that there may be another way again. Even when the change came, it didn't at first seem like a change but like more of the same, an extension and repetition.

It came through Tom Stark. (349)

There are some very important similarities between Baldur and Tom. Besides being favored sons of powerful fathers, both are

<sup>56</sup> "Voluspa," in Hollander, 1-13.

<sup>57</sup> MacKenzie, xxix.

well-loved by the masses. “Baldur,” writes Edith Hamilton, “was the most beloved of the gods, on earth as in heaven.”<sup>58</sup> Indeed, when Baldur dies, every being in the world—plant, animal, man, and god—weeps for his return with the single exception of Loki.<sup>59</sup> Just as Baldur is the fairest of the gods, Tom is “the damnedest, hottest thing there was. [...] Oh he was the hero, all right, and he wasn’t blundering or groping” (388). If Baldur represents the most beloved of the Norse gods and heroes, Tom Stark is similarly worshipped because of his prowess on the football field. Every Saturday, at every game, “[. . .] the stands cheered, Yea, Tom, Tom, Tom, for he was their darling” (391).

These similarities notwithstanding, Tom Stark actually seems a mirror image of Baldur. According to Snorri Sturluson, Baldur is the best of the gods and only good can be spoken of him; he is the wisest god, the most merciful, and the “sweetest-spoken.”<sup>60</sup> He never fights but prefers conciliation and peace. In short, Baldur is, according to Helene Guerber, “the pure and radiant god of innocence and light.”<sup>61</sup>

Tom, on the other hand, is anything but innocent. He is a cocky alcoholic and womanizer. As Jack explains, by the time Lucy moves in with her sister, Tom has “discovered that something besides pasteurized milk came in bottles and that approximately half the human race belonged to a sex interestingly different from his own” (166). He drives drunk and permanently disfigures his female passenger when he wrecks (243). Later, he and his teammates get in a bar fight with some locals, injuring one teammate so badly that he must stay out of football for several weeks, and with “a platoon” of others, he participates in communal sex with a co-ed, and possibly fathers her child (389, 351).

Even in the manner in which they bring about their fathers’ downfall, the two sons mirror each other. Baldur’s death begins a chain of events that leads directly to Ragnarok.<sup>62</sup> It is

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<sup>58</sup> Hamilton, 309.

<sup>59</sup> Crossley-Holland, 160-1.

<sup>60</sup> Qtd. in Crossley-Holland, xxviii.

<sup>61</sup> Guerber, 232, 214.

<sup>62</sup> Jones, 318.

not death, but new life, in the form of the child Tom may or may not have fathered on Sybil Frey, that begins Willie's demise. Since all other avenues for keeping Tom's reputation intact short of a shotgun marriage have been exhausted (or at least those options The Boss is willing to consider), he has no other choice but to once again compromise his principles and give the hospital building contract to Gummy Larson (380-381).

Which brings us once again to the hospital (Willie's Valhalla) and the second version of the Ragnarok story. In Richard Wagner's late 19<sup>th</sup> century operatic retelling of the Ragnarok myth, Baldur never appears. Instead, he retells the myth of Valhalla's construction. In Wagner's version, though, two giants, the brothers Fasolt and Fafner, build the hall. The deal is the same as in the traditional myth: the giants agree to build the hall within a prescribed time in exchange for Freia's hand.<sup>63</sup> However, in Wagner's version of the myth, the giants finish the hall, and Odin must find some way to cheat them of their reward without explicitly breaking their deal, which was sworn upon Odin's staff and is, therefore, unbreakable without dire consequences. Odin accomplishes this by stealing a cursed gold ring from the evil dwarf Alberich the Nibelung and giving it to the giants in lieu of Freia, and it is this act of theft which spells the doom for the gods in the shape of Alberich's revenge, for "if once the ring / returns to the Niblung / He conquers Walhall for ever."<sup>64</sup>

If the hospital represents Willie's Valhalla, then it is interesting to note that, just as Odin's breaking of his oath with the giants begins the downfall of the gods, Willie's breaking of the deal with Gummy Larson (one of the "fat boys") leads directly to Willie's murder, for it provides Tiny Duffy with a strong enough motive to betray him.

Tiny Duffy, himself, plays many roles in Warren's Ragnarok. As one of the original "fat boys" (literally and figuratively) who torment Willie politically, Duffy represents one of the giants who continually fight with the Aesir for the

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<sup>63</sup> Wagner, 20.

<sup>64</sup> Wagner, 108.

domination of Midgard. Indeed, when Duffy tumbles off the stage during Willie's first successful political speech, Jack Burden tellingly refers to him as a "five-acre tract of sweating humanity" (99). However, just as Willie represents more than one god, Duffy represents other Nordic antagonists as well.

After Willie's death, when Jack confronts Duffy about his part in Willie's murder, he compares Duffy to a poodle he heard about:

"There was a drunk had a poodle [Jack explains] and he took him everywhere with him from bar to bar. And you know why? Was it devotion? It was not devotion. He took that poodle everywhere just so he could spit on him and not get the floor dirty. Well, you were the Boss's poodle." (439)

To anyone familiar with Norse mythology, the image of a dog at the feet of an alcoholic should bring to mind Odin's wolves, Geri and Freki, "ravenous" and "greedy"—two adjectives that could just as easily refer to Tiny Duffy's character. When he sits at feast with the other gods, Odin does not eat food, wine being all the god needs to sustain himself. His food he passes down to these two wolves who lie at his feet.<sup>65</sup> Similarly, that Willie "spent almost everything he made" and died leaving little money suggests that, like Odin refusing food, Willie refuses to take bribes (451). Instead, he passes his "sweetening" (140) down to his "sons of bitches," including Duffy, whom even Jack Burden calls an "s.o.b" (19). Duffy, like the rest of the politicians surrounding Willie, represents one of the Boss's wolves.

Duffy also represents another, more important wolf in Norse mythology: Fenrir, the giant wolf born of the trickster god Loki and the giantess Angurboda.<sup>66</sup> During Ragnarok, Fenrir is one of the gods' major antagonists. As a cub, Fenrir was raised in Asgard by the gods, who hoped that he would thus grow tame; however, as the wolf grew in strength and girth, the gods likewise grew wary of him and bound him with a magic rope.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Mercante and Dow, 355.

<sup>66</sup> Mercante and Dow, 74.

<sup>67</sup> Guerber, 97-98.

Fenrir never forgets this betrayal and waits bound and fettered for Ragnarok and his revenge.<sup>68</sup>

Similarly, Duffy bides his time, enduring disgrace and abuse from the Boss, until he can take no more and rebels. Jack understands this when, after comparing Duffy to the spit upon poodle, he adds, ““And you liked it. You liked to be spit on. [...] That’s what I thought. But I was wrong, Tiny. Somewhere down in you there was something made you human. You resented being spit on. Even for money”” (439).

During Ragnarok, it is Fenrir who kills Odin, for Erda foretells that “the wolf will seize Allfather between his jaws and swallow him. That will be the death of Odin.”<sup>69</sup> Similarly, it is Duffy who is most responsible for Willie’s murder. Even though Sadie Burke gave him the idea, and Adam Stanton pulled the trigger, Tiny Duffy

had killed Willie Stark as surely as though his own hand had held the revolver. [...] Sadie Burke had put the weapon into Duffy’s hand and had aimed it for him [...] But what she had done had been done hot. What Duffy had done had been done cold. (436)

An obvious difference between Fenrir and Duffy arises here. Fenrir directly kills Odin by eating him. Duffy, on the other hand, acts indirectly, tricking Adam Stanton into shooting the Boss in the Capitol building. However, even this chain of events finds its parallel in Norse mythology and reveals yet another role Duffy plays in Warren’s retelling of Ragnarok.

Like Duffy, Loki, the trickster god and foster brother of Odin,<sup>70</sup> finds himself ridiculed and abused by the gods. For example, when Brokk the dwarf-smith sews Loki’s mouth shut, Loki runs away from the gods in pain; as he yelps from the pain of ripping the stitches out of his mouth, Loki seethes at the sounds of the gods laughing at his predicament. Understandably, Loki, like Duffy, grows to resent the ridicule and abuse he suffers

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<sup>68</sup> Crossley-Holland, 37.

<sup>69</sup> Crossley-Holland, 175.

<sup>70</sup> Mercante and Dow, 550.

from the gods. After he unstitches his lips and as he listens to the sounds of mirth at his painful expense, Loki “dream[s] of revenge, and slowly his lips curl[] into a twisted smile.”<sup>71</sup> Similarly, in Wagner’s Ring Cycle, after Wotan (Odin) sneers at Loki’s desire to keep his promise to return the ring to the Rhinemaidens and strides into Valhalla, Loki

Feel[s] a temptation  
To turn and destroy them;  
change to flickering fire,  
and burn those great ones  
who thought [he] was tamed.<sup>72</sup>

Like Duffy, Loki eventually gives in to this temptation, and the manner of his revenge closely mirrors Duffy’s.

Though Loki resents all the gods, Baldur catches most of his ire. Edith Hamilton claims that Loki “always hated the good and was jealous of Baldur.”<sup>73</sup> Helene Guerber is more specific, though. According to her, Loki “was jealous of Baldur [...] who so entirely eclipsed him and who was generally beloved, while he was feared as much as possible.”<sup>74</sup> Loki, though, is at heart a coward. When Loki decides to kill the object of his hatred, he manipulates another into striking the fatal blow.

When Frigg learns that Baldur will be killed, she takes oaths from every plant, animal, and mineral not to harm her son. She neglects, however, to take an oath from the mistletoe because it was “so small and weak.” When Loki learns of this oversight, he goes to Baldur’s blind brother Hoder, who stands to the side as the other gods throw spears and rocks at Baldur, watching them glance off him without a scratch. When Hoder admits that he has nothing to throw at his brother and no sight with which to aim, Loki gives him a sprig of mistletoe and offers to guide his hand.<sup>75</sup> Hoder tosses the mistletoe dart into Baldur’s chest, and his brother falls dead.

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<sup>71</sup> Crossley-Holland, 53.

<sup>72</sup> Wagner, 71.

<sup>73</sup> Hamilton, 310.

<sup>74</sup> Guerber, 221.

<sup>75</sup> Colum, 136-137.

Tiny Duffy's orchestration of Willie's murder almost exactly mirrors Loki's murder of Baldur. When Willie breaks the hospital deal with Gummy Larson (after months of Duffy's begging and cajoling the Boss to make the deal), he adds insult to injury by forcing Duffy to tell Larson himself:

"You tell Larson," he said. "Larson is your pal, and you tell him." He punched Tiny's front with a stiff forefinger. "Yeah," he said, "he is your pal, and when you tell him you can put your hand on his shoulder." Then the Boss grinned. I had not expected a grin. But it was a wintry and uncomfortable grin. It put the seal on everything that had been said. (410-411)

This proves to be the last straw for Duffy. Rather than lose Larson's bribe money and suffer more indignity from the Boss, he decides Willie must die. However, like Loki, Duffy lacks the courage to do the deed himself. Instead, just as Loki tricks Hoder into killing Baldur, he goads Adam Stanton, Tom's surgeon and the brother of Willie's mistress Anne, by telling him about Willie's affair and explaining that despite this Willie wants to fire Adam from the hospital for crippling Tom (414). In a fit of blind rage, Adam tracks Willie to the Captiol building and guns him down in the hall (420).

Warren's Ragnarok is in full swing, then. According to Norse myth, Odin will be killed by Fenrir the Wolf, Thor by the Midgard serpent. We have already discussed Willie's resemblance to both Odin and Thor and Duffy's relationship to Fenrir the Wolf. However, given Willie's role as Thor, it doesn't stretch credibility too far to see in Duffy, the snake in the grass, a representation of the Midgard serpent as well. Odin and Thor, though, will not be the only gods destroyed during Ragnarok. Almost all the gods will perish.

Again we see a parallel in Warren's novel. By the end of the novel, nearly all the major characters, the gods and heroes, have perished or been nullified: After gunning Willie down, Adam Stanton is in turn shot to death by Willie's body guard, Sugar Boy (421). Judge Irwin, Jack's childhood father-figure and hero, commits suicide shortly before Willie's death (370). A

few months later, Tom Stark, the Boss's son and college football hero, dies of pneumonia (449). Though she doesn't die, Sadie Burke checks herself into a sanitarium and later leaves the state. Sugar Boy finds himself unemployed after refusing to work for Duffy's administration. Even Duffy, who inherits the balance of Willie's term, is politically dead: he will never be re-elected, or even be nominated for a second term (440-441).

One of the defining features of Norse mythology, though, is its cyclic nature.<sup>76</sup> Ragnarok is more than merely the destruction of the world; it is a new beginning. A very few gods, including the returned Baldur and Hoder, survive the last battle, rebuild Asgard, take the names of their parents, and begin again to order the cosmos.<sup>77</sup> Ragnarok, then, ends on a hopeful note. This, too, is mirrored in Warren's novel, as evidenced by the the epigraph from Dante's *Divine Comedy* ("As long as hope still has its bit of green"), which directly refers to the ever-presence of hope.

The ending of the novel also has its hopeful bit of green. Just as the younger generations of Norse gods take on the names and roles of the older gods, Willie's grandson, the alleged child of Tom Stark and Sybil Frey, carries his grandfather's name (451). More importantly, Lucy Stark, who acts more like Willie's mother than his wife (89), is now literally Willie Stark II's mother and raises him in the same circumstances as Willie, himself: as one of the rural poor. Willie the Younger, then, like the younger gods of Ragnarok, seems poised to take over the role Willie left behind.

The gods are not the only beings to survive Ragnarok, however: mankind comes through the conflagration as well. During the final battle between the gods and giants, all of mankind is destroyed except for two people: a man, Lif, and a woman, Lifthrasir, who flee to Mimir's wood and take refuge from the raging fires destroying the world outside within Yggdrasil the World Tree, which nourished and protected the

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<sup>76</sup> Crossley-Holland, 234.

<sup>77</sup> MacKenzie, 184.

world through its creation and now its destruction.<sup>78</sup> After the fire dies and peace is restored, the two emerge unscathed from the charred Yggdrasil and rebuild human civilization.<sup>79</sup>

Similarly, only two of the major characters survive Warren's novel relatively intact. After Willie's assassination and during the ensuing fallout, both Anne Stanton and Jack Burden take refuge in Burden's Landing, where they both grew up and return throughout the novel for refuge from the world outside. When the dust has settled, Jack, now married to Anne, emerges from the sheltering arms of Burden's Landing to begin anew: he finishes his doctoral dissertation on Cass Mastern and has re-entered politics as an advisor for Hugh Miller, Willie's uncorrupted Attorney General, who plans on running for governor (462).

Warren's use of Nordic myth, then, serves to underscore the lessons Jack learns through the experience of his own Ragnarok. One cannot hide from the world by pretending that what one doesn't see likewise doesn't exist (Jack's Brass-Bound Idealism), nor can one simply pretend that no act is truly voluntary and therefore all acts are blameless (The Great Twitch). The only way to live in the world is to understand that all things are part of what Jack terms the Web of Being, that one's actions affect everyone.

Norse mythology, with its emphasis on personal honor, mirrors this idea. Because our fates are intertwined and dependent on the actions of others—gods, heroes, and common man—we cannot simply run away or refuse our roles. We can do nothing but act honorably in the face of difficulty. The aftermath of Ragnarok shows this: god and man working to rebuild what was lost and make it better. Just as Lif and Lifthrasir re-enter the world as it renews itself and starts over in order to rebuild, Jack and Anne re-enter “the convulsion of the world,” going “out of history into history and the awful responsibility of Time” (464).

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<sup>78</sup> Guerber, 367.

<sup>79</sup> Colum, 199.