

2001

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Lesa Carnes Corrigan

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Recommended Citation

Carnes Corrigan, Lesa (2001) "All the King's Men Revisited," *Robert Penn Warren Studies*: Vol. 1 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/rpwstudies/vol1/iss1/8>

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All the King's Men *Revisited*

LESA CARNES CORRIGAN

In *The Modern American Political Novel: 1900-1960*, published in 1966, Joseph Blotner posed a question that current critics may find rather reductive: "Why are there so few American political novels of any excellence?"¹ With very few exceptions, most novels about politics today are popular rather than critical successes. In fact, the term "political novel" seems rather outdated, especially since most theorists, regardless of their ilk, would argue that in this postmodern age the very act of writing itself—aesthetically and ideologically—becomes politicized. Yet all elitist assessments aside, the popular success of novels about American politics attests to the nation's continued fascination with political idealism gone awry, a perverse curiosity that persists despite the weary cynicism toward politicians and politics that has become almost clichéd since Watergate. Most Americans might argue that anyone who wants to be governor—much less President of the United States—must be either corrupt or crazy.

Given this attitude toward politics, novels like Joe Klein's *Primary Colors* (published anonymously in 1996) may be written off by "serious" literary critics as mass-market fiction designed to titillate the more prurient followers of American politics. Yet the popularity of this novel indicates that the impulse to look at American politics in terms of archetypal imagery still exists, despite the often seedy trappings. Readers who have never heard of Lochinvar or Machiavelli or even Jung or Freud discern elemental patterns of idealism, betrayal, suppressed desire, conversion, soul-searching, and Everyman's spiritual journey toward self-realization that supercede the boundaries of particular political administrations. Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men* (1946) is one of those novels that has captured both popular and critical acclaim, chiefly because it is, as

James Justus points out, a “novel of ideas” inasmuch as it documents the rise and fall of a political demagogue. Now, more than fifty years after its publication, *All the King's Men* stands as one of the great political novels of the twentieth century, and not just because of its timeless themes of idealism and corruption. While Southern politics may have provided Warren with a vehicle for exploring deeper issues, we cannot dismiss the “Southern-ness” of this novel. With the ever-increasing predominance of Southern politics within the American political arena, *All the King's Men* emerges once again as a timely and timeless document of a region's struggles and ideals.

When *All the King's Men* was first published in 1946, the nation was well aware of the stereotypes of Southern politics and politicians. In fact, in 1941, when W. J. Cash published *The Mind of the South*, he was able to define clearly the traits that distinguished not only the Southern politician but the attitude of the South as a whole: “Proud, brave, honorable by its lights, courteous, personally generous, loyal, swift to act, often too swift, but signally effective, sometimes terrible in its action—such was the South at its best.”²² The publication year of *The Mind of the South* indicates as well the portentous nature of Cash's description. On the brink of the Second World War, pinpointing what distinguished the South from other American regions took on particular urgency during a time of heightened nationalism. Looming larger than life, the figure of the Southern Demagogue dominated the national imagination as the region's central political image. Today, the modern South's political ascendance still bears the mark of singular movers and shakers, the Willie Starks of a new era in a region distinguished not by overwhelming and pernicious poverty (although this environment certainly remains) but by a cheery prosperity. Whereas the South depicted in *All the King's Men* was more akin to the benighted region so scathingly described by H. L. Mencken in “The Sahara of the Bozart” than the gleaming Sunbelt that currently generates more new jobs than any other part of the

country, Warren foresaw—perhaps even predicted—the coming rise of the South's influence throughout the nation's political culture.

Perhaps because of the current disfavor surrounding political novels, many Warren scholars hesitate to categorize *All the King's Men* primarily within this popular subgenre. In *The Modern American Political Novel*, Blotner begins his discussion of Warren's work by placing it in a category all its own, “[v]astly superior to others like it on the moral, philosophic, and symbolic levels.”²³ Blotner also appears torn between including *All the King's Men* within his examination of other, decidedly lesser, political novels, and separating it from the rest of the pack by virtue of its larger, more universal themes. He admits that “politics were, after all, a frame for the deeper concerns of the story,” but extends this assessment by adding, “These deeper concerns and this functional use of politics were paradoxically responsible for the stature of the novel, so much larger than that of its competitors.” Robert B. Heilman dismisses the emphasis on the historical and political dimensions of *All the King's Men* by arguing that “Warren is no more discussing American politics than *Hamlet* is discussing Danish politics.”²⁴ Likewise, in *The Achievement of Robert Penn Warren*, James Justus spends considerable energy discussing why *All the King's Men* is and is not a political novel, citing Irving Howe's and Blotner's arguments that most American political novels ultimately “fail.” By transforming the blunt label “political novel” into “the political variety of the novel of ideas,” Justus distances *All the King's Men* from “the potboiling novel about the mechanics of politics” and concentrates upon the “conflict between the public and the private self, the actual and the ideal, commitment and disengagement—primarily by concentrating on the uses of political power.”²⁵ Warren had explored these broad themes in his two prior novels, *Night Rider* (1939) and *At Heaven's Gate* (1943), but during his time as an assistant professor at Louisiana State University, he found a “flesh-and-blood political boss” to give singu-

lar form to ideas that previously had involved more abstract, ideological embodiments.

Even Warren himself danced nimbly around the connections that were established quickly between Willie Stark and Huey P. Long.⁶ While most of the early reviewers quickly pounced upon the resemblance between the two populist politicians, Warren equally as quickly denounced notions that his fictional creation was merely the biographical transposition of Louisiana's slain senator. While he concedes in "*All the King's Men: The Matrix of Experience*" that "the novel would never have been written" had he never gone to live in Louisiana or if Huey Long had not existed, Warren then immediately argues that "this is far from saying that my 'state' in *All the King's Men* is Louisiana (or any of the other forty-nine stars in our flag), or that my Willie Stark is the late Senator. What Louisiana and Senator Long gave me was a line of thinking and feeling that did eventuate in the novel."⁷ In his fiction as well as in his poetry, Warren often inter-fused memory with his most significant aesthetic and moral concerns, and although he left Louisiana in 1942, the history that he had watched unfolding definitely made a powerful impression upon the creative process of writing *All the King's Men*: "By now the literal, factual world was only a memory, and therefore was ready to be absorbed freely into the act of imagination." Thus the place that emerges in *All the King's Men*, in Warren's assessment, is not so much the Louisiana he experienced in the 1930s but rather "another country . . . even more fantastic than was Louisiana under the consulship of Huey"—the realm of the imagination, inhabited by an array of figures less actual than history, more aligned with the images created through the writer's quest for images in a paradigmatic act of mind.

Certainly, removing a literary work (to wit, taking *Hamlet* out of Denmark) from the immediate cultural and political trappings of its geographical place enlarges the scope and vision of that work, lend-

ing to it an aura of timelessness available to readers of any era. This concession, however, does not preclude the importance of place as well as political atmosphere in literature; surely no one could disregard the presence of South African politics in Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country* or of Russian politics in Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. One might suppose that one of the reasons so many Warren scholars have sought to insulate *All the King's Men* from the sensational and often comic morass of *Southern* politics has to do with the stigma of "local color" writing, a dubious appellation often relegated to folksy, anecdotal writings about the peculiarity of being Southern. Upon its release, not only was Warren's novel designated as a "political novel," faint damning praise in itself, but it was a "Southern political novel," an even more damaging classification, given the deeply imbedded prejudices surrounding the South then as now. Conscious of the disreputable and limiting nature of such labels, Justus steers his discussion of *All the King's Men* as a political novel toward a broader interpretation of the work's value: "More serious readers, however, directed us properly and acutely to the moral import of the novel. So successful were they that most of us now tend to regard *All the King's Men* solely as a moral fiction." However, Justus does not merely brush all Humpty Dumpty's pieces under the vast rug of Pure Idea—admittedly, he acknowledges, the "original reception [of *All the King's Men*] was not wholly misinterpreted; the political base of the novel is firm."⁸ We may extend this appraisal further, especially in arguing for the novel's revival in the late twentieth century: the political base of the novel is indeed *terra firma*, rooted as it is in the soil from which it sprang, that of the South.

Despite Warren's insistence on the domain of *All the King's Men* as "another country" of the imagination, his evident fascination with the figure Huey Long cut in Louisiana (and later, national) politics reveals itself in his descriptions of Long in "*All the King's Men: The Matrix of Experience*." Warren's obvious exasperation with well-

meaning attempts to establish exact parallels between Huey Long and Willie Stark seeps into his opening of this essay (“When I am asked how much *All the King’s Men* owes to the actual politics of Louisiana in the ‘30’s . . .”), but his subsequent account of the novel’s genesis exposes his awareness of Long’s mythical stature. On his way to Baton Rouge in 1934, Warren picks up a “nameless hitchhiker,” “a country man, the kind you call a red-neck or wool-hat, aging, aimless, nondescript, beat up by life and hard times and bad luck, clearly tooth-broke and probably gut-shot, standing beside the road in an attitude that spoke of infinite patience and considerable fortitude.” With lyricism befitting a Homeric bard, Warren waxes poetically about the demagogue who has earned this red-neck’s loyalty: “He was the god on the battlement, dimly perceived above the darkling tumult and the steaming carnage of the political struggle. He was a voice, a portent, and a natural force like the Mississippi River getting set to bust a levee.”⁹ This epic hero is none other than Huey Long, champion of the poor, enemy of the quasi-aristocracy of the “Old South,” and, perhaps most importantly, the embodiment of legend itself. Warren reacts to the melodrama of Louisiana politics with something akin to wonder, for in Louisiana in the 1930s, he writes, “you felt somehow that you were living in the great world, or at least in a microcosm with all the forces and fatalities faithfully, if sometimes comically, drawn to scale.” Perhaps, as Louis Rubin, Jr., asserts in “All the King’s Meanings,” this wide-eyed detachment allowed Warren to write the “best” book about Huey Long—and by extension, about the atmosphere of Southern politics in the Depression era—chiefly because Warren’s “lack of motivation and dedication to ‘tell the truth’ about Huey” enabled him to do just that.¹⁰

My purpose here, however, is not to rehash the controversy surrounding *All the King’s Men* and its possible or probable origins; many others far better suited to the task have explored repeatedly this area of Warren scholarship. Generations of readers evoke the same

elusive question, “Isn’t Willie Stark *really* Huey Long?” Even as recently as 1996, in the foreword to the fiftieth-anniversary edition of *All the King’s Men*, Joseph Blotner revives the issue of Warren’s indebtedness to the legacy of Huey Long. Again, as in 1966, Blotner maintains that if *All the King’s Men* “is judged as a political novel, it is certainly the foremost in American letters and ranks with the best in other literatures.” In accord with the prevailing climate in literary criticism, however, Blotner calls the initial labeling of *All the King’s Men* as a political novel a “quick judgment,” suggesting further that the political novel, like an aging and venerable (but assuredly dotty) patriarch, is “an ancient and honorable subgenre.”¹¹ Yet a newer, brasher version of this allegedly musty subgenre provides Blotner with the impetus for his foreword commemorating the fifty years that *All the King’s Men* has been captivating audiences in America. Joe Klein’s *Primary Colors* generated more publicity (or “spin,” in the current political parlance) upon its unveiling than any other novel in the 1990s, even eclipsing the releases of more “legitimate” literary works. A significant part of the mystique surrounding this novel stemmed from the writer’s anonymity, and readers inside and outside the Beltway pondered in conversations, e-mail, internet chat rooms, and op-ed pieces, “Who is ‘Anonymous?’” Even before Joe Klein stepped forward (or was dragged forward), reviewers noted the striking similarities between *Primary Colors* and *All the King’s Men*. Although Warren’s best-known novel had consistently enjoyed substantial critical as well as popular success, suddenly *All the King’s Men* was a hot property again, and American readers, many of whom were born after 1946, suddenly wanted to know more about the work that had inspired the new political bestseller.

One might argue that the renewed focus on *All the King’s Men* as not only a great novel but also a great *political* novel has more to do with the tendency of Americans to follow slavishly any trend deemed media-worthy—in short, Warren’s novel received “buzz” outside the

walls of academia, and, for better or worse, media sources exert a far greater influence upon most Americans than do college professors or literary critics. (A similar phenomenon occurred a few years ago after the release of the extremely disturbing film *Seven*: all of a sudden, my formerly apathetic freshmen students manifested an urgent interest in Dante.) The numerous comparisons between Warren's most lauded novel and Klein's thinly veiled re-creation of the 1992 Democratic primary race in such widely read magazines as *Time* and *Newsweek* not only introduced *All the King's Men* to a new generation of readers but also revived scholarly interest in Warren's "novel of ideas." In an early review of *Primary Colors* in *Time*, Walter Shapiro praises the novel as "the best aide's-eye view of politics since Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*" and remarks that the narrator, Henry Burton, is a "tip of the hat to Warren's Jack Burden." Also, in his review of Klein's recently published second novel, *The Running Mate*, Michael Upchurch of the *Seattle Times* categorizes *Primary Colors* as "one of the happiest marriages of best-sellerdom and literary merit in recent years," chiefly because of "its eye for campaign power-play subtleties and its doubting narrator," characteristics which, he argues, can be credited to the legacy of Warren's *All the King's Men*.¹² Upchurch links the main characters of each novel—Willie Stark of Warren's novel and Governor Jack Stanton of *Primary Colors*—by their common "urge to power that verges on the libidinal," a political drive that owes "more to supple instinct than consistency of policy."¹³ Prior to the revelation of Anonymous's identity as journalist Joe Klein, some reviewers expressed envy at this "artful thief's" skill in creating such a well-written and politically sharp novel (Shapiro wistfully concludes his review, "Words cannot describe how much I wish I had written it"), but as Blotner points out, "the literary loot" was easy enough to identify: "'the emotional infrastructure,' the narrative technique, even the narrator's voice rhythms" all came from *All the King's Men*.

The reasons behind the popular success of *Primary Colors* are obvious. With its deft and unflinching (albeit fictional) treatment of a sitting president, his wife, his aides, his speechwriters and image-makers, and numerous other Washington insiders, this borderline satirical novel exposed the byzantine and often vicious dealings involved in American politics at the highest level. In *All the King's Men*, Jack Burden narrates the rise and fall of Willie Stark. Similarly, in *Primary Colors*, aide Henry Burton reconstructs the scandal-ridden campaign trail of the hyperambitious Jack Stanton (another nod toward Warren). Just as readers sought a half-century before to establish clear links between *All the King's Men* and the regime of Huey Long, journalists scrambled to decipher Klein's characters and to connect them with real-life counterparts in the Clinton administration. Yet *Primary Colors* appealed to readers who had never even heard of James Carville or Harold Ickes. All point-by-point verisimilitude aside, one of the main reasons *Primary Colors* struck such a chord with American readers lay in the resonance of a much larger political fable. Of course, Governor Jack Stanton is clearly modeled on former President Bill Clinton, which necessarily entails that the fictional character is a Southerner. But what emerges not only from life but also from the mirror of art is a figure imbued with the myths of the past as well as the phoenix-like reemergence of a region with profound political and cultural influence.

The rough-and-tumble world of Southern politics is nothing new within the American imagination; surely historians may point to the Jacksonian era as a pivotal time in the shaping of national perceptions concerning Southerners in positions of power. One might argue, however, that the late twentieth century has offered an unprecedented surge in the prominence of Southern politics and politicians. No longer are Southern statesmen (and women) simply backwoods scrabblers lacking the finesse and savvy to make a significant legislative impact within national politics. Rather, Southern political fig-

ures such as Newt Gingrich, Lee Atwater, Trent Lott, Al Gore, and Bill Clinton have proven steadily—despite partisan conflicts—that the South’s phoenix has risen from the ashes of political ignominy. In *Dixie Rising: How the South Is Shaping American Values, Politics, and Culture*, Peter Applebome convincingly argues that “Conservatism, of course, has prospered to a degree that almost no one would have predicted three or four decades ago and along with it so has the South.” Surely the 1994 Republican takeover of Congress for the first time in forty years “reflected the transformation of white Southerners from diehard Democrats to reliable Republicans more than any other factor.”¹⁴ Demographic considerations play a significant role in this political shift, especially since so much of America’s population and wealth have moved South. Yet despite recent changes in the cultural and demographic landscape of the South, many facets of what might be termed the “Southern consciousness” have remained constant over the past hundred years. As Applebome points out, the South’s reputation as a region that is “bitterly antigovernment and fiercely individualistic” is now no longer isolated within strictly geographic boundaries. Today, as the South goes, so does much of the nation. In *The Americanization of Dixie: The Southernization of America*, John Egerton offers his assessment of the current South. Rather than a disappearing South, he depicts an “acquisitive, urban, industrial, post-segregationist, on-the-make South . . . coming back with a bounce in its step, like a new salesman on the route, eager to please, intent on making it.”¹⁵ In the South as well as across the nation, the increased focus on the needs of the middle class has brought back a sort of neo-populism, dominated not so much by the insufficiencies of a struggling lower class but rather by the vocal demands of middle-income Americans. Even in the most recent political election, George W. Bush and Al Gore both tried to shed their images of elitism, wealth, and privilege in order to court mainstream voters whose concerns focused upon crime, education, taxation, and

moral issues. *Nihil novum sub sole*, of course, but what the current political climate has also engendered is a re-examination of past political figures such as Huey Long and George Wallace. No longer are these men viewed solely as ignorant racists determined to maintain the agenda of the static past. Instead, thanks in part to renewed scholarly studies and made-for-television documentaries and mini-series, Long and Wallace have emerged as far more politically adept than previously recognized, far more complex than former caricatures allowed. Indeed, of these two figures, Long has received the most literary attention, in part because, as James Justus asserts, “Huey Long was not merely another in the familiar class of southern demagogue.” Robert Penn Warren could have selected from an array of “southern demagogues”—Theodore Bilbo of Mississippi or “Pitchfork” Ben Tillman of South Carolina, for example—but Long’s influence and stature, along with Warren’s close perspective on Long’s career in Louisiana, offered Warren the best generative influence for his most acclaimed novel, contributing to what Warren has called “the coiling, interfused forces” that go into literary decisions.¹⁶

Although Peter Applebome’s *Dixie Rising* makes only a passing mention of Warren’s contribution to the national perception of Southern politics (preferring instead to give a brief nod towards Warren’s place in the “pantheon” of great Southern writers), much of Applebome’s analysis focuses upon issues that Warren explored in *All the King’s Men*, especially the vision of a region with a legacy of poverty and struggle combined with a vibrant spirit of political progressivism. Although Warren personally detested the sort of “Common Man-ism” that held sway during the New Deal era and that has re-emerged at the turn of this century, he astutely recognized the future of Southern politics and politicians. As Malcolm ●. Sillars demonstrates in “Warren’s *All the King’s Men*: A Study in Populism,” inasmuch as this novel can and should be regarded as a “novel of

ideas,” the fusion of imagination and history, it also documents the social and economic conditions that have created and will continue to create the South’s history. As Sillars prophetically asserts in his 1957 essay, the conditions that produced Huey Long—and Willie Stark—“should be studied in a dispassionate light for insights into our future.”¹⁷

Warren’s Willie Stark has his literary and historical antecedents, but we must also consider him as a product of the region that gave him birth. As argued by Warren scholars such as Justus, Leonard Casper, and Louis D. Rubin, Jr., re-hashing the fifty-year debate over whether Stark is Huey Long’s fictional *doppelgänger* (a far more labyrinthine task than discerning that Klein’s Jack Stanton is clearly modeled on former President Bill Clinton) does not contribute any added significance to *All the King’s Men*. However, the best indicator of a novel’s longevity is often the degree to which subsequent generations of writers and readers embrace not only the themes presented but also their relevance to prevailing attitudes. After all, imitation is the highest form of flattery, and considering the number of recent political novels that claim such indebtedness to *All the King’s Men*, Warren’s “potlikker tyrannos” (to use Justus’s phrase in describing Huey Long and Willie Stark) will continue to be a model for future political novels, regardless of who holds the highest office in the country or the position of Majority Leader in the Senate. As Applebome predicts in the concluding chapter of *Dixie Rising*, “The American political world will not always be a triangle bounded by moderate Southern Yuppies like Bill Clinton and Al Gore, cultural conservatives like Pat Buchanan, and states’ rights devolutionists like Newt Gingrich and Dick Armey,” but the Southern politician of past, present, and future will continue to strut and fret his (or her) hour upon the stage of American politics. Meanwhile we, like Jack Burden, will “go out into the convulsion of the world, out of history into history and the awful responsibility of Time,” with Willie Stark’s

last words as both warning and hope: “It might have all been different.”

ENDNOTES

¹Joseph Blotner, *The Modern American Political Novel: 1900-1960* (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 1966), 17.

²W. J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1941), 428.

³Blotner, *The Modern American Political Novel*, 220.

⁴Robert B. Heilman, "Melpomene as Wallflower: or, The Reading of Tragedy," *Sewanee Review* 55 (January-March 1947): 154-66.

⁵James Justus, *The Achievement of Robert Penn Warren* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), 159.

⁶See Ladell Payne, "Willie Stark and Huey Long: Atmosphere, Myth, or Suggestion?" *American Quarterly* 20 (fall 1968): 580-95.

⁷Robert Penn Warren, "The Matrix of Experience," *Yale Review* 53 (December 1963): 161-67.

⁸Justus, 204.

⁹Warren, "*All the King's Men: The Matrix of Experience*," 162.

¹⁰Louis D. Rubin, Jr., "All the King's Meanings," *Georgia Review* 8 (winter 1954): 422-34.

¹¹Joseph Blotner, foreword to *All the King's Men*, by Robert Penn Warren (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1996), vii-x.

¹²Walter Shapiro, "Anonymous Should Take a Bow: His (Or Her) Novel about Clinton's 1992 Campaign Deserves to Sweep the Bookstores," *Time*, 29 January 1996; Michael Upchurch, "Joe Klein's 'Running Mate' Is Ambitious Political Fiction," *Seattle Times*, 28 May 2000.

¹³Upchurch also points out another significant parallel between the two works: "It comes as no surprise to learn that Warren was reading Machiavelli while writing *All the King's Men*—or to notice that the copyright of Joe Klein's two novels is assigned to 'Machiavelliana, Inc.'"

¹⁴Peter Applebome, *Dixie Rising: How the South Is Shaping American Values, Politics, and Culture* (New York: Random House, 1996), 7.

¹⁵John Egerton, *The Americanization of Dixie: The Southernization of America* (New York: Harper's Magazine Press, 1974), 25.

¹⁶Justus, 192.

¹⁷Malcolm O. Sillars, "Warren's *All the King's Men: A Study in Populism*," *American Quarterly* 9 (fall 1957): 345-53.