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## Race and Son-of-a-Bitch-ism in Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*

Mark Miller

Twenty-five years ago, at the third annual meeting of the Robert Penn Warren Circle at Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green, Kentucky, on April 24, 1993—Robert Penn Warren's birthday—I and the other persons in attendance at the afternoon session, on "Fiction, Criticism, and A Sense of Place," witnessed an unforgettable event: the ever-courtly Cleanth Brooks became incensed. The focus of his anger was a paper by Forrest G. Robinson entitled "A Combat with the Past: RPW on Race and Slavery," a version of which was published some two and a half years later in *American Literature*. Robinson's argument on that day in Kentucky to quote from his published paper, that "Jack Burden's failure, in *All the King's Men*, to acknowledge the existence of 'the race problem'" is a "conspicuous omission" that serves as "evidence of an underlying ambivalence, shared by Jack and his maker, on the score of race and slavery" (512). Opinions differ as to the exact wording—I think that we were all in shock—but my recollection is that Professor Brooks said, "So we are now to be held accountable for what we did *not* write?"

These events are fresh on my mind because during the Spring 2018 semester, I taught *All the King's Men* as part of a course entitled Critical Reading, and I also used Robinson's essay as an example. The course (as I teach it) requires English undergraduates to read collections of critical essays on a pair of primary texts—essays that illustrate important developments in criticism over the past several decades—and then to apply what they have learned about these critical approaches to a third primary text. I used *All the King's Men* as the third text. The

students do their own research in order to write a paper on Warren's novel, using whatever approach or approaches they wish, but this semester, I used Robinson's essay as an example of how a piece of criticism—even a piece of criticism that is a quarter of a century old—can spark new considerations of a text.

Of course, the long perspective of twenty-five years, from the vantage point of the present moment, has much to do with my own new vision of things, such as it is; but the issues raised by Robinson all those years ago seem to me more relevant than ever, and I want to address them here. It is difficult to summarize, but I suppose my general thesis is this: in *All the King's Men*, Robert Penn Warren *does* acknowledge “the existence of ‘the race problem,’” and so does Jack. The difference is this: Robert Penn Warren cares; Jack does not—at least not much.

As this last statement indicates, I think Robinson is wrong to identify Jack with his creator. Not that he *equates* them, except by implication; rather, Robinson says that Warren's “evasiveness . . . is closely akin” to Jack's. “Jack's silence” on the subject of “racial injustice in the South” is “profoundly telling,” Robinson contends. “And so is Warren's” (512).

Identifying Jack with his creator is a rookie mistake, as even my undergraduates could readily discern, and it is something that Warren himself explicitly warns against in his essay on Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, “A Poem of Pure Imagination: An Experiment in Reading,” calling it a denial of “the creative function of mind” (397). The absurdity of it is apparent in Robinson's own statements. For instance, Robinson says that “Warren brilliantly dramatizes the morally corrupting dynamics of slavery in the sequel to Duncan Trice's suicide” (516). *Warren* does. Robinson also says, “The Cass Mastern story

brilliantly dramatizes the strategies of moral evasion that slave culture—with its concealments, denials, and manifold fictions of law and custom—tended to produce” (517)—and *Warren* is the author of the Cass Mastern story. “It bears emphasizing that slavery is at the center of Cass’s anguish,” according to Robinson (519)—and *Robert Penn Warren* is the creator of Cass Mastern, just as he is the creator of Jack Burden. In this light, it is astonishing—no, *shocking*—to hear someone contend that Robert Penn Warren does not acknowledge “the existence of ‘the race problem’” in *All the King’s Men*, and this is quite apart from the whole, vast context of the rest of his works and days. As for Jack, well, he is Jack, and Jack is in denial about most things in his life.

Yet where Jack is concerned, one could go Robinson one better and argue that, insofar as Jack *does* acknowledge “the existence of ‘the race problem,’” perhaps he does so not simply to express his “indifference” to it (Robinson 521), but actively to embrace the Jim Crow South as an essential part of his being. In telling of his drive up to Mortonville, the county seat of La Salle County, in order to do research at the county courthouse there on the mortgage history of Judge Irwin’s plantation, Jack describes “the old Irwin plantation” as a place “where the cotton grows white as whipped cream and the happy darkies sing all day, like Al Jolson” (AKM 324). If this is sarcasm, as it seems to be, then it can be taken as a conscious acknowledgement of what Robinson says Jack fails “once . . . consciously [to] acknowledge” in the novel and what the Cass Mastern story “everywhere insists upon: that race-slavery is a sin, a profound injustice, a gross moral contradiction, and an unbearable weight upon the consciousness of those implicated in it who are strong and sensitive enough to face it squarely” (Robinson 520-521). One would *hope* that Jack is able to make such a conscious acknowledgement as he tries once again, at the end

of the novel, to work on the Cass Mastern material. Otherwise, he is not going to get very far with that writing project.

On the other hand, what if this racist jeer is *not* sarcastic? What if Jack is just a racist son-of-a-bitch? God knows he uses the N-word freely enough during the course of his narration. I raise this possible interpretation in part to underscore the shock value of what Forrest Robinson has to say even about Jack Burden, but especially about Robert Penn Warren. Perhaps the attempt to take Jack's comment straightforwardly will provide a sort of counter-shock, as it were, so that we can ultimately read that comment aright.

First, it is not "silence," on either Jack's part or Warren's, and while it may be an *indirect* statement and, to that degree, another instance of Jack's "evasiveness" (Robinson 512), to use Robinson's language, it is still a *statement*. Second, Jack knows that while the individuals now working to grow cotton on Irwin's plantation are not *slaves*, they probably *came* from slavery, and so their status now, as tenant farmers, is an aspect of that history. Third, Jack's sarcastic use of the word "happy" seems to be a conscious (if indirect) acknowledgement that the lot of these tenant farmers is *not* happy, while the racial slur that the word "happy" modifies seems to be a conscious (if indirect) acknowledgement that race is the root cause of this unhappiness.

Race—but racial injustice? That is, can we take Jack Burden's ugly remark as an indicator, through sarcasm, of awareness? I think we can, particularly if we interpret it in the context of the other kinds of awareness Jack at least *begins* to achieve in the course of the novel.

Yet this is just one comment, and it also exists alongside Jack's many uses of the N-word in the novel, as well as other racial and racist epithets. Moreover, it tends to undercut itself,

not only in its use of a racist term, but also in its double-edged, allusive simile. Jack says that the workers on the old Irwin plantation sing “like Al Jolson.” Does this reference to *The Jazz Singer* and to the blackface of minstrelsy indicate awareness on Jack’s part that the racism fueling racial injustice is the root of the suffering he sees, or is he merely revealing, unawares, a key source of his own racist attitudes, as well as the severe limits of his awareness? I do not want to give Jack too much credit here, because I do not think that Warren does; but there is *some* conscious acknowledgement here. *Some*. Clearly, though, Jack has a *long* way to go.

And Warren? Where was Warren in 1939—or, more to the point, in the fall of 1945 as he finished writing *All the King’s Men*? (Warren and Burden would be about the same age in the latter case: Warren was 40 in the fall of 1945, and Jack would be 41 or 42 in 1939.)

If we use the Cass Mastern vs. Jack Burden scale that Robinson adopts as a measure of relative positions on race slavery and racial injustice, it is safe to say that when he created these characters, Warren was much closer to the Mastern end of the spectrum than he was to Burden. Robinson himself makes reference to Warren’s uneasiness concerning his defense of the separate-but-equal doctrine in the 1930 essay “The Briar Patch,” his contribution to the volume *I’ll Take My Stand*, as well as his realization not long after—which he describes in a 1957 *Paris Review* interview with Ralph Ellison and Eugene Walter—that the segregation he had defended in that essay was “not humane” (quoted in Robinson 526). That would have been even *before* 1945—or 1939, for that matter. But perhaps we need only remind ourselves, once again, that Robert Penn Warren is the author of the Cass Mastern story, and having done that, we might well ask: what did Robinson hope to accomplish in his article?

For we know that, as Robinson himself puts it (quoting a phrase from the *Paris Review* interview), Warren changed “from the ‘orthodox and unreconstructed’ Southern perspective on race set forth in *I’ll Take My Stand* (1930) to the much more liberal sentiments voiced in his late[r] published writing” (Robinson 512). Is Robinson’s goal to damn Warren eternally for ever having held the wrong views in the first place? Is he trying to brand *All the King’s Men* as a worthless book because it does not say *enough* about racial injustice, or say it *directly* enough, *explicitly* enough? Does he wish to establish that Robert Penn Warren, his creation, Jack Burden, and the book that Jack Burden narrates are all irredeemably bad, irredeemably guilty, because none of them adequately confesses their badness and guilt as perpetrators of racial injustice? Is he, in fact, trying to *execute* them? As “Cass Mastern’s story makes clear,” according to Robinson, “The knowledge of race-slavery . . . is fatal knowledge” (Robinson 521). According to Robinson, “Jack lies and lives whereas Cass tells the truth and dies; that is the difference between them” (Robinson 520). By this logic, if *All the King’s Men* had been the “moral reckoning” (Robinson 521, 525) that Robinson clearly thinks it *should* have been, then it would also have been Robert Penn Warren’s last book.

I am not being facetious here. Two head notes precede Robinson’s essay, the first of which is a quotation from Toni Morrison’s essay, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature.” In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Morrison expresses her wish that her “argument for extending the study of American literature into . . . a wider landscape” will “open as much space for discovery, intellectual adventure, and close exploration as did the original charting of the New World—without the mandate for conquest” (Morrison 3). Robinson is clearly adopting Morrison’s

approach, as well as her thesis that “the very manner by which American literature distinguishes itself as a coherent entity exists because of” the “dark, abiding, signing Africanist presence” within it (Morrison 6, 5). However, Robinson seems to have forgotten or ignored her plea that “the mandate for conquest” be dropped.

In his “general overview of Warren’s oeuvre,” Robinson says that Warren only compounds his “guilt about Southern racism and slavery” when he tries to *deny* that guilt in various ways and so also becomes guilty “of trying to avoid the question of racial injustice altogether, or, having addressed it, of denying in various ways the moral gravity, or of insisting that the hated accusers share the blame, or of dissipating the guilt in essentially determinist constructions of history and human will” (Robinson 528, 527). However, in his own eagerness to fix blame, Robinson begins to sound like one of those moral zealots whose condemnation by Warren he lists among Warren’s own evasive tactics. Warren’s concept of a general human complicity, for instance, is just another means by which his own guilt is “extenuated,” according to Robinson, for “then all are guilty, not just Southerners” (Robinson 528).

Readers familiar with Warren’s oeuvre might conclude that Forrest Robinson is drawing very heavily on that vast store of self-righteousness that Warren defines in *The Legacy of the Civil War* as the “Treasury of Virtue” (Warren 59). They would be correct. Combine that with a failure to lay aside “the mandate for conquest,” and we get a very ugly result: criticism as a sort of bloodthirsty holy war. Robert Penn Warren’s reputation as a writer and as a man has suffered much from such criticism during the quarter of a century since Robinson first presented his arguments about *All the King’s Men* at the third annual meeting of the Robert



Penn Warren Circle. Both Warren and his works have been branded by such critics as “racist.” One result is that many people simply have not read Robert Penn Warren.

Suppose, however, that we follow Toni Morrison’s advice and *do* reject “the mandate for conquest.” We should see immediately that while Jack Burden’s acknowledgements of “the existence of ‘the race problem’” in *All the King’s Men* may be “oblique”—Robinson offers as an example the moment at the beginning of the novel when Jack “imagines himself dying in a solitary automobile accident on one of Willie Stark’s new highways” (Robinson 523) and a couple of black field hands, seeing the smoke from the accident, laugh at his demise—*Robert Penn Warren’s* acknowledgements of “the existence of ‘the race problem’” in *All the King’s Men* are very direct: he gives us the Cass Mastern story in Chapter Four. This puts the “dark, abiding, signing Africanist presence” at the heart of the novel in what seems to me a very overt way, and it would be a very different novel *without* that chapter. Indeed, for readers of the first edition in Great Britain, it *was* that different novel, for the Cass Mastern story was omitted.

Yet Robert Penn Warren, the creator of both Jack Burden and the Cass Mastern story, gives us more than just those acknowledgements of “the existence of ‘the race problem’” in *All the King’s Men*; he also gives us Willie Stark.

Near the end of Chapter Three, as a way of introducing, as it were, the Cass Mastern story about to be presented in Chapter Four, we get the following exchange between Willie and Jack, in which Willie, the Boss, uses slavery as a metaphor to describe the composition of the government. Tiny Duffy and “the boys” have just exited the room:

The Boss regarded the fine paneling of the closed door for a couple of minutes. Then he said, “You know what Lincoln said?”

“What?” I asked.

“He said a house divided against itself cannot stand. Well, he was wrong.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” the Boss said, “for this government is sure half slave and half son-of-a-bitch, and it is standing.”

“Which is which?” I asked.

“Slaves down at the Legislature, and the son-of-bitches up here,” he said.

And added, “Only sometimes they overlap.” (AKM 233)

This passage in the book, based on an overt acknowledgement of the history of race slavery in this country, opens “much space for discovery, intellectual adventure, and close exploration” as we consider its implications for the rest of the novel. Most importantly, it focuses our attention on what I want to call “son-of-a-bitch-ism.”

That Warren’s own attention was thus focused when he began the novel is apparent in the opening of the book’s original first chapter, which Noel Polk published in 2002 as an Appendix to his Restored Edition of *All the King’s Men* (611-629). The first paragraph of that chapter begins, “The Boss was a son-of-a-bitch, and I will not deny it. He was a son-of-a-bitch of purest ray serene. I will not deny it, for I do not wish to rob his name of any of its lustre,” and it ends, “For not to have seen a real son-of-a-bitch does grave discredit to your travels.” In between, the paragraph elaborates, sarcastically, on how “. . . the real son-of-a-bitch is one of the rarest works of God,” and the second, shorter paragraph continues that theme, asserting again that the Boss was “the son-of-a-bitch nonpareil, par excellence” (Restored 613).

Warren does not, at this point, have Jack provide us with a clear definition of “the real son-of-a-bitch,” but he does have Jack say what he is *not*:

Some pusguttred public servant dips his finger into the till or some snot two-times his loving wife or some punk who happens to be a deacon in the Presbyterian Church forecloses a mortgage on the widow of his best pal, and you say, the son-of-a-bitch. Alas, it will never do. It is a deplorable practice. Are there no standards? You ought to save that sacred name. (Restored 613)

Then, in the ensuing description of Jack’s first meeting with Willie in the back room of Slade’s place, we are introduced to Alex Michel as an example of someone who “wasn’t a son-of-a-bitch. He was just a poor mortal who aspired and worked hard to be the real thing but just didn’t have the natural gift. You can’t make a son-of-a-bitch out of a sow’s ear” (Restored 615). Presumably, Tiny Duffy is another such would-be son-of-a-bitch. To arrive at a definition of “the real son-of-a-bitch,” we must read the story of Willie as depicted in the novel.

As Jack tells us, though—both in the novel as it was published and in the Restored Edition (AKM 656; Restored 605)—Willie’s story is Jack’s story, too, which prompts us to ask whether Jack is also, like Michel and Duffy, just a would-be son-of-a-bitch, as his description in the Restored Edition of Willie as “a real son-of-a-bitch” would seem to imply. Yet even without that description, we are prompted to ask about Jack’s son-of-a-bitch status, in light of Willie’s division of the government into “half slave and half son-of-a-bitch” (this scene appears in both versions of the novel and in the same place, prior to Chapter Four and the Cass Mastern story). Is Jack “slave,” or “son-of-a-bitch”? Or is he one of those in whom the two types and the traits which characterize them “overlap”?

When we apply this question to other characters and situations in the novel, the landscape of interpretive possibility widens far beyond the history of race slavery at the heart

of Willie's "slave" or "son-of-a-bitch" distinction; yet this does not mean that the particular horror of chattel slavery in America is to be forgotten or denied in the broader consideration. It is always there in the novel, in the almost constant reminders of race slavery and racial injustice—in the many uses of the N-word, for instance—as essentially the ground or basis upon which the other manifestations of son-of-a-bitch-ism are founded. Race slavery and race-based oppression are the sine qua non of son-of-a-bitch-ism in *All the King's Men*.

Who is a "son-of-a-bitch"? In the abstract, the son-of-a-bitch is a man, not only because the label says so, but because the world depicted in *All the King's Men* is clearly a patriarchy. The fact that the phrase is based on a pejorative term aimed at women also betrays this bias. The son-of-a-bitch is also white, and not merely because *All the King's Men* is set in the South. Most of all, the son-of-a-bitch is *proud*—we remember that *All the King's Men* began as a verse play entitled *Proud Flesh*—and as Willie's son-of-a-bitch/slave distinction clearly indicates, this pride expresses itself as the son-of-a-bitch's willingness to subjugate, use, and even destroy others in service to himself and the fulfillment of his own needs. In his discussion of the nature of the Ancient Mariner's crime in the major critical essay on Coleridge's poem that he was writing at the same time that he was writing *All the King's Men*, Warren quotes a statement by Coleridge in *The Statesman's Manual* that is useful here: "But in its utmost abstraction and consequent state of reprobation, the will becomes Satanic pride and rebellious self-idolatry in the relations of the spirit to itself, and remorseless despotism relatively to others . . . by the fearful resolve to find in itself alone the one absolute motive of action" ("Imagination" 360). This is son-of-a-bitch-ism. Warren argues that in their shifting attitudes towards the albatross and its shooting, the titular character's companions in *The Ancient Mariner* have "made

themselves ‘accomplices’” in the act and have “duplicated the Mariner’s own crime of pride, of ‘will in abstraction,’” because they “make their desire the measure of the act” (“Imagination” 363-364). Many of the characters around Willie Stark do the same.

However, the dynamics of son-of-a-bitch-ism as defined by Willie suggest the variety and complexity of these relationships. In his Introduction to the Modern Library edition of *All the King’s Men*, Warren says that he envisioned Willie as “the chief character among those who were to find their vicarious fulfillment in the dynamic and brutal, yet paradoxically idealistic, drive of the politician” (“Introduction” iv). This paradoxical idealism reminds us that the “house divided” described by Abraham Lincoln was not half “slave” and half “son-of-a-bitch,” but half slave and half *free*. It is will—free will—that allows us to imagine and attempt to make a better world for ourselves, that more perfect union. If we do this at the expense of others, however, we *violate* union—the “One Life,” as Warren denominates this sacred unity in his essay on Coleridge’s *Mariner*. We rip “the web of things,” to use the metaphor Jack adopts to describe his understanding of the lesson Cass Mastern learned, “that the world is all of one piece . . . like an enormous spider web”—with the creator and maintainer of the web poised at the center of it, “with his great faceted eyes glittering like mirrors in the sun, or like God’s eye, and the fangs dripping” (AKM 283).

This image echoes something that Cass Mastern writes in his journal and that resonates throughout the novel in various images of eyes: “It is human defect—to try to know oneself by the self of another. One can only know oneself in God and in His great eye” (AKM 260). The guilt aroused by her slave Phebe’s eyes upon her causes Annabelle Trice to sell Phebe down the river. The eyes tell Annabelle that Phebe and the other slaves know her secret—not merely

that she betrayed her husband, which is what Annabelle herself focuses upon, but that she is a user, a consumer, of people, her participation in chattel slavery being the most blatant manifestation of this fact. The eyes of her slaves upon Annabelle Trice prefigure the “all-knowing, all-seeing eyes” of the cook and the maid at Jack’s mother’s house in Burden’s Landing during the scene in which she reacts “hysterically” to the death of Judge Irwin (AKM 525-526). These latter eyes serve as yet another reminder, quite late in the novel, that white prosperity—particularly that of the “genteel rich” (AKM 540) such as the crowd at Burden’s Landing—has its roots in race slavery, and is sustained now by a whole massive system of racial injustice in the Jim Crow South.

Yet race is not the only pretext for making someone a target of oppression and exploitation in a world dominated by son-of-a-bitch-ism. There is also gender. Women are used and abused in a variety of ways in *All the King’s Men*, though it is one of the great ironies of the book that, behind the scenes, women are often the movers and shakers, particularly Sadie Burke, who, in essence, both makes and destroys the Boss. Sadie raises in an even more dramatic fashion the question already implied by Annabelle Trice’s behavior as a perpetrator of chattel slavery, and that is: can a woman, paradoxically, be a son-of-a-bitch? Sadie is certainly a daughter-of-a-bastard—“a drunk no-good,” as she herself puts it (AKM 215)—and she is certainly the victim of son-of-a-bitch-ism, particularly at the hands of Willie. In fact, it is Sadie who first calls Willie a son-of-a-bitch. In a scene that occurs in the novel, shortly before Willie’s “house divided” remark about the government, the phrase is “iterated” by Sadie some five times as she vents to Jack her anger at Willie over the “Nordic Nymphs” escapade, prior to

confessing to Jack the terrible facts of her tragic childhood (AKM 211-213). Sadie hones her son-of-a-bitch skills under Willie's tutelage and then uses them to destroy him.

But despite the fact that “[s]he had been around a long time, talking to men and looking them straight in the eye like a man” (AKM 126) and that “[h]er hands were squarish and strong like a man’s” (212) and that she could down a drink “without any ladylike cough” (120), Sadie is still a woman. In a tone that suggests it was obligatory—which it is, in the macho realm of son-of-a-bitch-ism—Jack says of Sadie, “I made my pass, and it didn’t come to a thing” (127).

Because she is a woman, Sadie can only rise so high in the ranks of son-of-a-bitch-ism. She can never become a *real* son-of-a-bitch, like Willie, for the *real* son-of-a-bitch attains a level of power and influence that no woman, in the prevailing system, could ever hope to achieve.

In fact, we might regard Sadie as one of those in whom the qualities of “slave” and “son-of-a-bitch” *overlap*, to use Willie’s word. We only see her relationship with Willie as Jack does, from the outside, but it is clear that Willie fulfills in Sadie Burke certain needs. One of these might be the “vicarious” practice of *real* son-of-a-bitch-ism, as a way of striking back at those forces that have so wronged her. Another seems simply to be the need for someone to cherish the person behind “the white riddled plaster-of-Paris mask” that is her face, pock-marked by childhood smallpox (AKM 215). After Sadie tells Jack the story of her childhood, she offers him that face in an attitude also struck by his mother: she “lifted her face up, high, almost thrusting it at me,” Jack says, “as though she were showing me something I ought damned well to be proud to look at” (AKM 216). Anne and Lucy strike this attitude as well. But even the would-be son-of-a-bitch is apt only to regard a woman proudly in one way, as Jack does when he makes

his pass, and certainly the *real* son-of-a-bitch will “slap you in the face”—as Sadie says Willie has done to her (AKM 216)—after they have taken what they want from the face’s wearer.

But Sadie avenges that slap. To do so, she enlists the aid of another “slave” to Willie Stark, Tiny Duffy. Sadie recognizes—as Jack, for most of the novel, does not—that Tiny Duffy is human. Jack not only scorns Tiny for allowing himself to be enslaved and abused; he *blames* him for it. When Willie decides to purge his hospital project of corruption by removing Gummy Larson from it—and, thus, Tiny Duffy as well—Jack says, “Well, it doesn’t matter if you kick Tiny around some more. He is built for it. But Larson is a different kind of cooky” (AKM 583). He is wrong. Tiny is not a masochist, and he does not want to be enslaved and abused. He seems to be putting up with his own dehumanization simply because he aspires to be a real son-of-a-bitch himself. He is merely waiting for his chance, and Sadie gives it to him, or at least so he believes. He takes it, in any case, and so helps to destroy his master, the Boss.

Sadie, on the other hand—as a woman—cannot possibly become a real son-of-a-bitch, so in his fumbling way, Jack does not blame her, which in many ways would be blaming the victim. What she had done “had been done hot,” he concludes. “What Duffy had done had been done cold. And, in the end, Sadie Burke’s act had somehow been wiped out. It did not exist for me anymore” (AKM 619). He continues to blame Duffy, however, because he continues to deny that he is human.

Denying a person their humanity and treating them as “a thing,” as Willie does to Byram White (AKM 203), to Tiny Duffy, and, ultimately, to Sadie Burke, is the very essence of chattel slavery and of son-of-a-bitch-ism. Tiny may be more of a willing—or calculating—slave than Sadie, but in the end, he is a victim, too—a victim of the very system in which he aspires to be a



master. For like chattel slavery and like the racial injustice of “separate but equal” segregation, son-of-a-bitch-ism is evil. There is no way, ultimately, that such a system can be “humane.”

Indeed, it is so evil and so inhumane that it even tries to appropriate for its own use the endurance of the suffering it causes. Willie’s appropriation of the conditions of chattel slavery as a way to define the status of white men in the government is a final slap in the face, or lash of the whip, and an egregious instance of that human “defect” identified by Cass Mastern: “to try to know oneself by the self of another” (AKM 260). It is also an egregious instance of the thesis argued by Toni Morrison—egregious *and outrageous*, for the introduction of the idea of *choice* into the “half slave” and “half free” distinction is a gross distortion of the facts. But son-of-a-bitch-ism is driven by “the fearful resolve to find in itself alone the one absolute motive for action,” so it stops at nothing, and is certainly not fazed by facts. Its mandate is the conquest of *all*.

Jack finally *begins* to realize the evil and inhumanity of son-of-a-bitch-ism when he comes to see Tiny Duffy as human. “Somewhere down in you there was something made you human,” Jack says to Tiny in their final encounter in the novel. “You resented being spit on. Even for money” (AKM 625)—to which Jack should have added, in Tiny’s case, “or power and prestige.”

Even Willie, the master of son-of-a-bitch-ism, is finally a victim of that system, too, for it strips him of his humanity. This is rather obvious in the fact that his dehumanization of Tiny and Sadie leads to his own literal demise, but he begins to dehumanize and so to destroy himself long before he is shot by Adam in the capitol. Not only does Hugh Miller resign, but Lucy leaves Willie when he decides to “fix” rather than fire Byram White (AKM 203), thus

indicating that she fears that Willie is losing *himself*—dehumanizing *himself*—in dehumanizing Byram.

This recognition that Willie, too, is to some degree a victim of the very system he sought to master leads both Lucy and Jack to try to convince themselves that he “was a great man” (AKM 643); but it is a struggle. It is a struggle partly because the punishment, with such perfect irony, fits the crime: Willie dies by the very means he used to exploit and destroy others. However, it is also a struggle because—given the enormity of the crimes committed and the suffering of those who are the primary victims of the system—son-of-a-bitch-ism is, again, like chattel slavery or Jim Crow segregation: it is difficult to muster any sympathy at all for the perpetrators, much less any admiration.

That Warren wants us *at least* to make the effort—at least in *some cases*—is made clear partly by the presence of Judge Irwin in the novel. Willie describes Irwin as a “son-of-a-bitch . . . washed in whitewash” (AKM 323), and he is correct on several counts. However, the Judge apparently has done a considerable amount of positive good during his long career. The question is, at what cost, and to whom? Willie, too, does some good things, which raises the same question: at what cost, and to whom? “If Judge Irwin resembles any Mastern,” according to Jack, “it is Gilbert, the granite-headed brother of Cass” (AKM 660), who, Cass says, was, as an owner of slaves, apparently able “in the midst of evil [to] retain enough of innocence and strength to bear their eyes upon him and to do a little justice in the terms of the great injustice” (AKM 276). But the comparison forces us to ask of any good that Gilbert Mastern might have done within the system of chattel slavery the same questions we ask of any good done in the system of son-of-a-bitch-ism: at what cost, and to whom? This is particularly true since Gilbert

“died in 1914, at the age of ninety-four or -five, rich, a builder of railroads, a sitter on boards of directors” (AKM 240), and so went from being a literal slave-owner to being a son-of-a-bitch. All three of these men are *doers*, but at what cost, and to whom? The irony of means versus ends is here conjoined with the moral and ethical implications of reckoning “historical costs” (AKM 592-593). For Willie, those implications are both private and public, personal and political—as, indeed, they are for each of us, though generally on a smaller scale in the public and political sphere—and nowhere do we see this more clearly than in the fate of Willie’s son, Tom Stark.

Jack quotes Willie as screaming to him of Tom while watching him play football that he is “a fast son-of-a-bitch!” Jack then says, “He was fast and he was a son-of-a-bitch. At least, if he wasn’t a son-of-a-bitch yet, he had shown some very convincing talent in that line” (AKM 306). Willie’s fear that Lucy is going to make Tom “a sissy” (AKM 232, 345)—a fear Willie first expresses just before he makes his “half slave and half son-of-a-bitch” comment—clearly indicates that one aspect of son-of-a-bitch-ism is a hetero-normative sexuality tinged with homophobia. Of course, like everything else in son-of-a-bitch-ism, this heterosexuality is expressed in a self-idolatrous and exploitative manner, the “sordid” result of which, in Tom’s case, is the pregnancy of Sibyl Frey (AKM 496). According to Jack, Willie “had had a good deal to do . . . with making Tom what Tom was. So there was a circle in the proof, and the son was merely an extension of the father, and when they glared at each other it was like a mirror looking into a mirror” (AKM 550). It is fitting, therefore, that when Willie rails that the “sons-of-bitches made” him strike a deal with Gummy Larson and so besmirched his hospital project with political corruption, he seems to forget that the primary son-of-a-bitch responsible is his

own son. Giving the hospital contract to Larson is the only way to hush the scandal about Tom and settle the Sibyl Frey affair. When Jack observes that “Tom Stark had something to do with it,” Willie says, “He’s just a boy,” revealing one source of Tom Stark’s self-centeredness, immaturity, and irresponsibility (AKM 548).

It is also appropriate, then, that Tom should play a role in bringing about the death of his own father. Willie’s attempt to remove Larson and, therefore, Tiny Duffy from the hospital project gives Tiny additional motivation for wanting to destroy him, and it is largely Tom’s injury on the football field and its aftermath that sends Willie back to Lucy and so spurs Sadie to murder him. Again, it is Willie’s dehumanization and exploitation of Sadie and Tiny that feeds their desire to get back at him, but it is his dehumanization and exploitation of *Tom* that helps to keep him on the football field and otherwise endanger him. On the one hand, Willie excuses Tom’s reckless behavior, saying that he is just a boy. On the other hand, even after Tom is injured and facing long odds in the hospital, Willie says, “That boy is tough, he can take it” (AKM 563). In a sense, just as Sadie both makes and unmakes the Boss, so Willie both makes and unmakes his son, Tom, sacrificing him on the altar of son-of-a-bitch-ism.

Tom is aware of this, too—aware that his father is selfishly exploiting him. When Willie berates him at one point for breaking training, Tom retorts, “What the hell’s it to you? . . . What the hell’s it to you, or [Coach] Martin either, so long as I can put ’em across? And I can put ’em across, see. I can still put ’em across, and what the hell else do you want? I can put ’em across and you can big-shot around about it. That’s what you want, isn’t it?” (AKM 538). Lucy knows that it is “not just football” that threatens Tom but “everything that goes with it,” telling Willie, “I would rather see him dead at my feet than what your vanity will make him. . . . You will ruin

him” (AKM 345). Willie does ruin Tom. He makes him a young son-of-a-bitch. In doing so, he helps to destroy both Tom and himself.

Tom’s behavior (and therefore Willie’s) is also partly the cause of Judge Irwin’s death. The Boss’s rival and political enemy, MacMurfee, knows of the situation with Sibyl Frey and has her and her father, Marvin, “whisked off” (AKM 506) and put under wraps so that he can use them to put pressure on Willie. MacMurfee wants to run for Senator. “But the Boss . . . was figuring on going to the Senate himself” (AKM 499), so he tells Jack to confront Judge Irwin with whatever dirt he was able to dig up on him—the American Electric Power Company bribery scheme that resulted in the suicide of Mortimer L. Littlepaugh—for “[i]f MacMurfee would listen to sense at all, he would listen to sense from Judge Irwin” (AKM 507). When Jack reveals to Judge Irwin what he has learned, the Judge commits suicide. This forces Willie to try to get Gummy Larson to sell out MacMurfee: “If Gummy told MacMurfee to lay off, that he wasn’t going to be Senator, MacMurfee would lay off, because without Gummy, MacMurfee was nothing” (AKM 539). Thus, Tom, Willie’s own son, was among the “sons-of-bitches” who “made” him, who helped to bring about Judge Irwin’s death, and who helped bring about Willie’s assassination. Again, though, the Boss himself was another of those “sons-of-bitches.”

Willie, then, is also one of the “sons-of-bitches” he intends the hospital to outlast, as a sort of monument to the doing of good in the face of son-of-a-bitch-ism, a monument that will still be there, as Willie insists to Jack, “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” (391). Initially, Willie intends to name the hospital for himself, but after Tom becomes permanently paralyzed due to his injury, Willie decides that he will name the hospital and medical center for Tom Stark. “Those things

don't matter," Lucy says to Willie when he tells her of his plan. "Oh, Willie, don't you see? Those things don't matter. Having somebody's name cut on a piece of stone. Getting it in the paper. All those things. Oh, Willie, he was my baby boy, he was our baby boy, and those things don't matter, they don't ever matter, don't you see?" (AKM 574). For Lucy, the "historical costs" of son-of-a-bitch-ism, and even of Willie's attempts to *defy* son-of-a-bitch-ism, are much, much too high. What matters most is not being a son-of-a-bitch in the first place.

Since it is too late for Jack Burden never to have been a son-of-a-bitch in the first place, the knowledge he needs in order to be saved *now* is how to *stop* being one, or *trying* to be one. We could say that, like Alex Michel, Jack "aspired" to be "the real thing," but "aspired" is probably too lofty a word for Jack; for unlike Michel, he does not really work "hard" at it. He seems more content to remain a petty (or petit) son-of-a-bitch. Both Jack's pettiness and his deep need are made abundantly clear in a scene cut from the original published version of the novel, a scene in which Jack drives Miss Dumonde home from the dinner at Judge Irwin's house depicted in Chapter Three of both versions of the novel. In this scene in the Restored Edition, Miss Dumonde says that she was just trying to be polite at dinner when she asked Jack about his job, but that he "started to squirm like [he] had stepped in something." When she accuses Jack of thinking her a "fool" and he begins to plead ignorance, she says, "Oh, quit bouncing around inside yourself, and tell the truth. You jump around like a bird in a cage. If you don't stop it you'll have a nervous breakdown. . . . I had a nervous breakdown. And it wasn't fun. And you— . . . you'll have one. Oh, I can tell. If you don't tell the truth and stop jumping round inside. You'll have one too." Jack initially says, "The hell I will," but then he tries to talk to Miss Dumonde "soothingly." She says, "God damn it, don't be polite, you—you— . . . son-of-a-

bitch.” Before they part ways, she calls Jack “the bad name,” as he refers to it, three more times, at one point calling him a “high-and-mighty son-of-a-bitch” (Restored 177-179). When he returns home, Jack repeats “the bad name” twice to his mother as he, essentially, tells on Miss Dumonde (Restored 181).

When Miss Dumonde first calls Jack a son-of-a-bitch, he reacts in typical son-of-a-bitch fashion: with reckless anger and dangerous aggression. First, he responds, “Well, . . . that clears the air,” and then, as he himself reports, “I let my right foot come down on the accelerator without shame” (Restored 178). A bit later, when Miss Dumonde “quietly” brings up her nervous breakdown again, Jack responds with callous sarcasm: “I hope you can stave off the next one till I get you home, honey” (Restored 179). Jack’s “jumping round inside” and denying the truth, particularly the truth of his *feelings*, is one aspect of son-of-a-bitch-ism, but he is especially defensive and even cruel here because Miss Dumonde has his number: he *is* lying to himself about all of his own psychic wounds and vulnerabilities. Miss Dumonde’s confession about herself makes him particularly uneasy because it is so close to home, to the very truth she accuses Jack of evading.

The charge of *arrogance* Miss Dumonde attaches to “the bad name,” calling Jack a “high-and-mighty son-of-a-bitch,” still characterizes Jack very late in the narrative. This is partly because arrogance is itself a defense mechanism. At the beginning of Chapter Ten, a “squirt” newspaperman snaps a photograph of Anne as she is leaving the cemetery after her brother’s funeral. Jack confronts him, saying, “Well, son, . . . if you live long enough you’ll find out there are some kinds of son-of-a-bitch you don’t have to be even to be a newspaperman” (AKM 606). This is more hypocritical of Jack than the “squirt” even knows, but he retorts, “Jesus Christ, . . .

you work for Stark and you call somebody a son-of-a-bitch” (AKM 607). Like Miss Dumonde in the Restored Edition of the novel, the “squirt” here calls Jack out in his hypocritical arrogance and sense of superiority.

Anne Stanton calls Jack out on these things, too, though she makes it clear that Jack is hypocritically assuming a position of *moral* superiority. When she and Jack are confronted by a cop as they are walking out on a pier on the river, discussing how to get Adam to take the job as director of Willie’s proposed hospital, Jack pulls rank on the cop and humiliates him. Anne says, “Oh, you’re so wonderful, . . . —you’re grand—you bully the bullies—you cop the cops— . . . you’re so wonderful—and clean” (AKM 376). In this instance, Jack apologizes—but to Anne, not the cop. “I’m sorry I acted like a son-of-a-bitch,” he says (AKM 377).

As these incidents demonstrate, Jack is clearly one of those people in whom Willie’s categories of “slave” and “son-of-a-bitch” *overlap*. Jack is a well-educated white male with an affluent background and powerful social and political connections; but what does he *do* with the *freedom* all of this privilege affords him? He chooses to *relinquish* it by willingly dehumanizing himself, by submitting himself to be used as a thing, an instrument—in essence, as a weapon. This is partly another pathetic attempt to evade responsibility both for his actions and his inactions, as well to evade the truth about his feelings and needs. It is also an attempt to fulfill some of those needs: Willie seems to provide Jack with the direction and sense of purpose he lacks, in part by functioning as the “strong” father Jack felt he never had—a *real* son-of-a-bitch instead of his presumed “weak” father, the Scholarly Attorney, or the string of lesser sons-of-bitches he has had as stepfathers. Of course, Jack himself uses these two words, “weak” and “strong,” to describe, respectively, his presumed father, Ellis Burden, and



Montague Irwin, once he learns, upon Irwin's suicide, that Irwin was, in fact, his actual father. Jack describes Ellis Burden as the "good and weak" father, Monty Irwin as the "bad and strong" father (AKM 533), thus admitting that, in his mind, anyway, being *good* is a sign of *weakness*, being *bad*—or being a son-of-a-bitch—a sign of *strength*. This is precisely the thinking that Jack needs to change.

Sadie Burke is also able to read Jack "like a book" and calls him, not a son-of-a-bitch, but an "Eagle Scout." This makes Jack see "the eyes of the little squirt-face newspaperman at the cemetery gate" who *had* called Jack a son-of-a-bitch, "and all the eyes that had looked at me that way," he says (AKM 628). Jack then sees, in imagination, the "oyster eye" of Tiny Duffy, who winks at him "like a brother," indicating that he, too, according to Jack, "knew the nightmare truth, which was that we were twins bound together more intimately and disastrously than the poor freaks of the midway who are bound by the common stitch of flesh and gristle and the seepage of blood" (AKM 629). Jack had tried to see himself as superior to Tiny in every way, but after he receives the letter from Sadie Burke calling him an Eagle Scout, he realizes that, like Tiny, he is one of those in whom the designations "slave" and "son-of-a-bitch" overlap.

Jack could do worse than aspire to attain the qualities of an actual Eagle Scout, though as he is during most of the novel, he would no doubt "sneer" at that idea—at least until he learns to "pinch out that sneer" that he himself associates with being "proud" (AKM 557-558). This is despite the fact that, from early on in his life, Jack yearns to be "different," often speculating on how things might have been "different" if this or if that. Moreover, Anne Stanton repeatedly pleads with Jack to be "different," though she does not always use the word

that reverberates through the novel. For instance, Jack claims—years after the fact—that “everything would have been different” (AKM 447) had he not “hesitated” (466), for whatever reason, to consummate sexually the relationship that had blossomed between them the summer Jack was twenty-one and Anne was seventeen, yet he says he “didn’t try to know” why he felt then that the moment was “wrong, completely wrong,” nor does he understand or know the source of the “surprise” he remembers feeling when he fumblingly said to Anne, “it wouldn’t— . . . be right” (AKM 444). When they see each other again at Christmas, Anne says that she loves Jack, but she “wouldn’t marry me then,” Jack says, “and she wouldn’t go the limit.” When he asks her why, she says, “it’s just because you’re the way you are” (AKM 449). In a scene that is narrated earlier in the novel, Willie echoes these words as his explanation for why Jack works for him (288).

Jack is, among other things, aimless, and after a summer that “had not been like the summer before” and a first semester of law school that Jack “loathed,” Jack and Anne see each other again for Christmas break, and Anne urges Jack to “do what you want. Just so it is something” (AKM 452, 454). She repeatedly insists that her reluctance to marry Jack is not a matter of money. “I told you long back I’d live on red beans with you,” she says (AKM, 453). He comes to believe, years later, that her insisting he “do something” was a way of voicing her suspicion that, as Jack puts it, “I lacked some essential confidence in the world and in myself” (AKM 467). Ironically, Jack believes that Anne *does* have this confidence—“a deep inner certitude of self which comes from being all of one piece” (AKM 311)—but this is merely a dehumanizing “idea” (AKM 464)—or ideal—of her, as becomes apparent when she is attracted to Willie because “he does something” (AKM 312). These are actually Jack’s words about Willie,

just prior to Anne's revelation that she has just had lunch with Willie the previous week. Anne's own lack of confidence and certitude is also apparent when she says later in this scene, "I haven't done anything. I don't do anything. Not anything worth anything" (AKM 314). She no more has a "secret knowledge" than anyone else Jack says he "envied . . . who seemed to have a secret knowledge" (AKM 471), except perhaps that she knows that Jack needs to change. Jack needs to see Anne, like Tiny Duffy, as actually human, and not as some inviolate "image" in his head, whatever *its* truth (AKM 177-178), against which he judges the current, *different* Anne quite harshly.

Anne's apparent initial rejection of the troglodytic machismo of son-of-a-bitch-ism links her to Lucy Stark, and one indicator of that connection is their readiness to live on red beans. In a conversation just prior to Willie's "half slave and half son-of-a-bitch" comment, Jack says that Lucy wanted Willie to "throw Byram to the wolves" and then asks, "Did she want you to throw yourself to the wolves?" Willie responds, "I don't know what the hell she wants. . . . I don't know what the hell any of 'em want. A man can't tell. But you can tell this, if any man tried to run things the way they want him to half the time, he'd end up sleeping on the bare ground. And how would she like that?" Jack replies that he imagines Lucy "could take it." Willie confirms this and then says, "Lucy could sleep on the bare ground and eat red beans, but it wouldn't change the world a damned bit" (AKM 231). Willie obviously associates anything "worth doing," to use Anne's words, with the necessity of being a son-of-a-bitch—eating red meat rather than red beans ("Gimme that meat ax!" [220])—but Lucy rejects the necessity of this association, the cause and effect relationship. Anne's early comments to Jack about living

with him on red beans indicate that—initially, at least—she, too, rejects this necessary association.

However, when Jack tells Anne about the involvement of her father, Governor Stanton, in the corruption that helped his friend, Judge Irwin, but resulted in the suicide of Mortimer L. Littlepaugh, he changes “the picture of the world” inside of *Anne’s* head just as he—as they—had intended to change “the picture of the world” inside of *Adam’s* head (AKM 371). In her disillusionment, Anne apparently comes to believe, along with Willie, that the only way to make “goodness” is “out of badness,” because “there isn’t anything else to make it out of” (AKM 386). Late in the novel, Jack confesses that he once accepted a version of this fatalism himself in regard to the ability to “break out of the box” of the self and to become different. “We can only live in terms of the definition” we have made for ourselves, he says he once argued, “like the prisoner in the cage in which he cannot lie or stand or sit. . . . Yet the definition we have made of ourselves is ourselves,” he once said. “To break out of it, we must make a new self. But how can the self make a new self when the selfness which it is, is the only substance from which the new self can be made?” (AKM 529). We might answer the-Jack-that-was as Willie answers Adam when he poses this same question. “If, as you say, there is only the bad to start with, and the good must be made from the bad,” Adam asks, “then how do you ever know what the good is? How do you even recognize the good?” Willie responds, “Easy, Doc, easy...” You just make it up as you go along” (AKM 386). Similarly, we might answer the old, fatalistic Jack, you just make up the new self out of the old self as you go along.

Yet if this is done according to the dictates of son-of-a-bitch-ism—if the will resolves “to find in itself alone the one absolute motive of action”—then both the good and the self will be

subverted by badness. Willie dies because he thinks that, to do good, he has to be a son-of-a-bitch. By the time he tries to be otherwise—by purging the hospital project of all corruption—it is too late, just as Jack says that, “by the time we understand . . . the definition we are making for ourselves,” it may, at some point, become “too late to break out of the box” we have made for ourselves, and we are “hung up in justice to be viewed by the populace” (AKM 529). This is what happens to Willie.

It is worth pausing to note here that *All the King's Men* is finally a strenuous argument *against* “helpless degradation” and a “determinism” in which “guilt”—particularly Southern guilt for race slavery and racial injustice—is “extenuated,” which is the argument Forrest Robinson makes not only about this novel, but also about Robert Penn Warren’s “oeuvre” in general, his “larger view” (Robinson 528). In fact, the novel asserts, if anything, that a person of privilege, such as Jack Burden, who uses his talents and the advantages of his birth in the service of son-of-a-bitch-ism, is *especially* guilty of wrongdoing and *especially* needs to change, to be different. Even Willie *seems* to arrive at such an anti-deterministic position, as his last words to Jack are, “It might have been all different, Jack. . . . You got to believe that. . . . And it might even been different yet. . . . If it hadn’t happened, it might—have been different—even yet” (AKM 603).

For sure, Jack is drawn towards deterministic interpretations of the universe, such as his doctrine of the Great Twitch (AKM 472-473), for such explanations seem to free him of agency and absolve him of responsibility, leaving him blameless, which is his single most important motivation for most of the novel. For instance, Jack says that his “snotty” attitude toward war heroes in general and Judge Irwin in particular was the “fashion” when he was growing up. This

is nurture. He then says, “[p]erhaps if I had been in the Army everything would have been different.” This is nurture, too, only in this case, it is something that did *not* happen to Jack. However, he was refused by the Army, he says, “because I had bad feet” (AKM 180-181). This is nature. In any case, Jack was the way he was, according to these explanations, because of forces beyond his control, including biological ones.

This partly explains his fascination with the lobectomy that Adam performs. Adam explains that, after the procedure, the patient will have “a different personality.” When Adam describes the *expected* results, Jack says, “If you can guarantee results like that . . . you ought to do a land-office business,” but Adam replies, “You can’t ever guarantee anything.” The *expected* results give us an excellent picture of what Jack Burden is *not*: “He will be relaxed and cheerful and friendly. He will sleep well and eat well and will love to hang over the back fence and compliment the neighbors on their nasturtiums and cabbages. He will be perfectly happy” (AKM, 476). Adam sounds a bit like Jack here, but the tone underscores the point: Jack is *not* perfectly happy. He is not happy at all. He even “loathes” food (AKM 325).

When Adam says that the patient will have “a different personality,” Jack says, “Like after you get converted and baptized?” Adam replies, “That doesn’t give you a different personality. . . . When you get converted you still have the same personality. You merely exercise it in terms of a different set of values” (AKM 476). Victor Strandberg was one of the first critics, if not the first, to argue that Jack’s “conversion” is at the center of the novel (Strandberg 27-29), and this passage indicates as well as any the nature of that conversion: Jack must come to exercise his personality in terms of a different set of values. Most of the characters and events in the novel push him relentlessly towards this conclusion, one aspect of

which is the belief that Willie urges upon Jack with his dying words: Jack *does* have it within his power to *choose* to be different. Anne, for instance, tries to convince Jack of the same thing during much of the novel, as when she pleads with him to be something “different” from the way he is towards his mother and presumed father, which is “bitter,” unloving, and unforgiving (AKM 159).

But little in this novel is easy or simple, which is certainly another aspect of the view ultimately taken by Jack and ultimately dramatized in the novel itself. Anne, for instance, as we have seen, more or less blames *Jack* when he asks her why she took up with Willie: “you told me—you told me about my father. There wasn’t any reason why not then. After you told me” (AKM 489). This does not mean that she is *wrong* when she tries to tell Jack that he can choose to be different. It merely means that Anne, too, is only human and so is susceptible to various temptations and errors—in this case, the same kind as Jack. Indeed, as we have seen, this human complexity is one of the things that he needs to learn and accept about *her*. Moreover, Anne says to Jack of Willie, “You don’t know him. . . . You’ve known him all these years and you don’t know him at all” (AKM 490). Jack concedes, to himself, that he “had never really seen the other face” of Willie—that is, the face of the Boss, of the real son-of-a-bitch—because “the other face,” the “round face of Cousin Willie . . . above the Christmas tie,” had “always come between” Jack and the face of the Boss, so that he “had never really seen” that face (AKM 491). *Both* faces are *true*. In fact, it is out of this true yet paradoxical face that Jack hears, “it might—have been different—even yet” (AKM 603). However, the truth that Willie here urges Jack to embrace is the truth that, while there is breath, “[i]t isn’t too late” (AKM 582) to change, or at

least to *try* to change. Jack does not *have* to be either slave or son-of-a-bitch. Jack's seeing the complexity of Willie's humanity is, as it was with Anne, another step in the right direction.

Jack *does* begin to change—or at least he begins to *try* to change—and this is why we have and need Chapter Ten of *All the King's Men*. Chapter Ten is Jack trying to be different, trying *not* to be half slave and half son-of-a-bitch. Some critics have attacked those efforts as pathetic. Some of them are. For instance, when Jack lies to his mother about the cause of Judge Irwin's suicide, he clearly protests too much when insists, "savagely, 'it wasn't for me, it wasn't,'" followed by, "And that was true. It was really true." Perhaps it was. But what Jack speculates about himself—"how maybe I had lied just to cover up myself"—is also true (AKM 652).

Yet this and the other things that Jack either says (or does not say) or does (or does not do) in Chapter Ten are mainly "pathetic" in the sense of arousing *pathos*; for who among us has *not* done a thing for mixed motives? The *difference* with Jack in Chapter Ten, as opposed to the rest of the novel, is that he now has begun to live his life in "the agony of will" (AKM 657), and he himself dates that "difference now, in my own mind if not in the circumstances of my life," from his chance meeting with Sugar-Boy and his behavior at that time (AKM 637).

Jack realizes that if he tells Sugar-Boy that Tiny Duffy prompted Adam Stanton to murder Willie Stark, Sugar-Boy will, in essence, execute Tiny Duffy. "And the perfect mathematical irony of it—the perfect duplication of what Duffy had done—struck me," Jack says, "and I felt like laughing out loud" (AKM 633). Jack *refrains* from this act because, just as he is about to speak Duffy's name, he has a vision of "Duffy's face, large and lunar and sebaceous, nodding at me as at the covert and brotherly appreciation of a joke, and even as I



opened my lips to speak the syllables of his name,” Jack says, “he winked. He winked right at me like a brother” (AKM 634). They are brothers in the Fraternal Order of Sons-of-Bitches, or in that special order of those in whom being a slave and being a son-of-a-bitch overlap—the Fraternal Order of Overlappers—and if Jack *uses* Sugar-Boy as an instrument of vengeance, destroying him in the process, he will only confirm that fact, the fact of his brotherhood with Tiny. Jack’s refusal to use Sugar-Boy in this way is his first step towards resigning from that fraternity.

Significantly, Sugar-Boy himself provides some last, powerful evidence of part of the allure of son-of-a-bitch-ism. Freedom from either “aimlessness” (AKM 637) or “the agony of will” allows one to *do something* more readily and directly, and *doing something*—even something bad—makes one feel whole, complete, purposeful, confident. Jack says that he told Sugar-Boy to “suppose” someone “framed” Adam to murder Willie, and to “suppose” further that Jack could tell him who and “could prove it,” then asked Sugar-Boy what he would do. “‘I’d kill the son-of-a-bitch,’ he said,” and according to Jack, “he had not stuttered at all” (AKM 632-633). After telling Sugar-Boy that he was just kidding and momentarily fearing for his own life, Jack goes on to wonder if he had “done Sugar-Boy any favor after all in not telling him about Duffy and the Boss and allowing him to whang straight to his mark and be finished like a bullet when it strikes in” (AKM 637); but in terms of his own development, Jack at least understands that it was *not his place* to decide such a thing for someone else. His immediate responsibility is *not* to use Sugar-Boy, another human being, as a tool—in this case, a weapon—in the fulfillment of his own will.

So where is Jack as he and his wife, Anne, approach the summer of 1939 and their departure from Burden's Landing, on the eve of "the convulsion of the world" (AKM 661) we know now as World War II? He is finally writing "the life of Cass Mastern"—even though Mastern was apparently no relative of his—a life that he had sensed years ago was "a reproach to him" (AKM 284) but that perhaps now he "may come to understand" (AKM 660). If we are to judge by his *other* narrative, the novel, the narrative of his own life and the life and death of Willie Stark, he does not understand the life of Cass Mastern *yet*, for he is not yet fully awake to the racial injustice of his own time or his own hand in perpetuating it. He is still too absorbed in what he perceives to be the "terrific and fundamental injustice" (AKM 510) of certain aspects of his own life. *Perhaps* that awakening will come. The convulsion of the world war may help to open his eyes. Working for Hugh Miller may help to open his eyes. (He plans to work for him, not as a slave or a sort of machine, as he was with Willie, but as a kind of political manservant: "I'll be along to hold his coat" [AKM 658]). Assuming he lives into the 1950s, *Brown v. Board of Education* and other developments of that decade and beyond may help to open his eyes. As the novel ends, though, he is still not awake—is all but blind—to racial injustice.

Then again, Jack is blind to a great many injustices, especially those that he himself commits—though he is *trying* to change, as when he turns upon *himself* the "kind of sneer" that "flickered along the edge" of his mind as he thought about "the good times" that the "girls" in the office "had shut up shop and gone home for Saturday afternoon" to pursue (AKM 556-557). The N-word is not the only denigrating slur or degrading epithet he still uses, including the B-word in S.O.B. He says that he is trying not to be "complacent" (AKM 659-660), not to be smug, superior, and judgmental, but his language alone indicates that he has a long

way to go before his eyes are “burning and deep like the eyes of Cass Mastern,” and not “frequently vague or veiled, bloodshot in the mornings, brightening only with excitement” (AKM 424).

As for his creator, Robert Penn Warren: as the creator of the Cass Mastern story, Warren is certainly more clear-eyed than Jack on the issues of race slavery, race discrimination, and S.O.B.-ism; but in 1946, the year that *All the King's Men* is published and the year he is about the same age as Jack Burden is when the novel ends, Robert Penn Warren has still more living and writing to do and so still more growing and changing to do, as well. As I said some twenty-three years ago in an essay entitled “Faith in Good Works: The Salvation of Robert Penn Warren,” the experience of living into and through the creation of *All the King's Men*—an experience spanning about nine years, from 1937 to 1945—was a crucial event and a crucial time in Warren’s growth as an artist and a man, but it was not the *end* of that growth.

In *The Legacy of the Civil War*, published in 1961, Warren argues that the “Southern constitutionalists and philosophical defenders of slavery” denied “the very concept of life,” first, in defending the “inhuman” institution of slavery, and second, by refusing “to allow, through the inductive scrutiny of fact, for change, for the working of the life process through history” (33-34). By closing off “the possibility of criticism—criticism from the inside— . . . informed and morally based self-criticism, which could aim at practical solutions” (Legacy 34-35), those apologists for slavery left “little space for the breath of life,” according to Warren, “no recognition of the need for fluidity, growth, and change which life is” (Legacy 39).

If we fail adequately or accurately to scrutinize the works of Robert Penn Warren, or if we fail to take into account all of the facts of his life and career as we now have them, do we

not also run the risk of denying the “fluidity, growth, and change which life is”? Indeed, are we not guilty of the sort of “moral narcissism” (72) that Warren defines in *The Legacy of the Civil War* as the “Treasury of Virtue”? (59). Are we now, in 2020, so good and pure and clean—so virtuous—that, unlike Jack and Anne, we can *afford* to be “complacent”? Are we free to identify Robert Penn Warren with his creation and then blame him for his lack of enlightenment? Or is such smugness, superiority, and judgmentalism its own sort of fatalism and determinism? Certainly, as Warren himself points out in *The Legacy of the Civil War*, it is its own form of absolutism (20), and it suggests to me that, if we are to direct the “mandate for conquest” anywhere, it should be at our own scurvy selves.

*All the King's Men* is a devastating critique of S.O.B.-ism in all of its forms, with a special emphasis, in the Cass Mastern story, on race slavery. Racial injustice is everywhere apparent in the novel, as is injustice—or S.O.B.-ism—based upon other pretexts, particularly gender, but also ethnicity, education, class (socio-economic status), and sexual orientation. If Jack is not as conscious of racial injustice as he *ought* to be—and again, he *is* conscious of it—then this is part of the son-of-a-bitch-ism his creator wants Jack to understand and change. And, it is part of the S.O.B.-ism that Robert Penn Warren rejects in *All the King's Men*.

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