Meet Me in the Semiotic Glen: The Evolution of Gender Communication in the Early Novels of Robert Penn Warren

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1993
MEET ME IN THE SEMIOTIC GLEN:
THE EVOLUTION OF GENDER COMMUNICATION
IN THE EARLY NOVELS OF
ROBERT PENN WARREN

A Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of the Department of English
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Lisa Beth Day
May 1993
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MEET ME IN THE SEMIOTIC GLEN:
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ROBERT PENN WARREN

Date Recommended April 13, 1993

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Acknowledgements

I want to express my appreciation to the Robert Penn Warren Committee of Western Kentucky University for providing me with a fellowship to study Warren.

In addition, I would like to thank my thesis committee for their involvement in my project. Dr. Will Fridy’s guidance was crucial during the process of this thesis, beginning with our analysis based on contemporary critical theories in the Robert Penn Warren Seminar to the completed, final document. Dr. Elizabeth Oakes, my mentor, encouraged me throughout my graduate work to aspire and gave a fresh perspective in her analysis of the thesis. Dr. Joe Millichap provided me with a careful critical eye and an accepting attitude toward my approach.

I also acknowledge my patient and supportive parents, Willis and Chloie Day, and my intuitive sister, Laura Day-Roth. Finally, I want to thank my extraordinary friends who gave me both verbal and wordless encouragement throughout my sometimes moody writing process.
Preface

Sexuality in the early novels of Robert Penn Warren is generally not appealing, intimate, or indicative of love between partners, in part due to the seeming coldness of the female characters and the near-asexuality of the males. However, when both social and personal interactions between the characters are analyzed semiotically according to the theories of Julia Kristeva, a pattern emerges which explains the discordant bond between men and women.

Warren’s portrayal of gender-specific behavior is especially intricate in his early novels. Beginning with Lucille Christian in *Night Rider* and Sue Murdock in *At Heaven’s Gate* and culminating in the more highly developed character of Anne Stanton in *All the King’s Men*, the major female characters in Warren’s early fiction represent three portraits in what Leslie Fiedler calls Warren’s "gallery of bitches" (29). Clearly, Warren depicts these women as sirens who lure the drifting characters of Percy Munn, Jerry Calhoun, and Jack Burden to varying levels of self-destruction; however, if these male characters had been able to communicate with Warren’s *femmes fatale*, their fates might not have been quite as pernicious. In fact, in *All the King’s Men*, Jack Burden eventually meets Anne Stanton on a semiotic plane, and the union is noticeably different in
perspective with this meeting being more erotic than physically sexual.

The semiotic nature of communication in Warren's first three novels is seen in the women characters' determination to avoid verbal exchanges; instead, they operate in a system of signs. For example, each woman places a finger on her lips to discourage conversation during intimate scenes. The male characters cannot comprehend this gesture; however, these same men successfully carry on a degree of semiotic communication with other male characters through the non-verbal language of hands (handshakes or hands placed on shoulders). Ironically, the women try to adjust their conversation skills to fit the symbolic realm, but the men are unable or unwilling to adapt their communication to the semiotic realm. The men also fail to interpret the women's confident sexuality, which is on a threateningly higher level than their own. Robert E. Scholes indicates that this "male fear of feminine sexuality" is an old, semiotic one, relating to the myth of Tiresias, which suggests that males often covetously assume that women (who are primarily semiotic) receive more gratification from the sexual act than men (who are primarily symbolic); thus, gender conflict is directly related to the clash between the semiotic and symbolic realms (131). Scholes' theory concerning this male fear works in the early fiction of Robert Penn Warren almost like a formula.
Warren’s New Critical viewpoints focus on "what the work says and how it says it" (Guerin 75), and the autonomy of the work becomes more important than "relating literature to life and ideas" (Guerin 118). Ironically, Warren states in an interview with Marshall Walker that his writing contains "personal stories, the moral and psychological stories of the individual characters" (156). Therefore, even though Warren certainly did not intend his work to be conducive to a semiotic analysis based in psychology, his keen observations of human behavior portray actions which are illuminated in the theories of Julia Kristeva. Additionally, when Warren’s work is analyzed from a semiotic critical viewpoint, focusing not on a new interpretation but on what Jonathan Culler calls the discovery of the "conventions which make meaning possible" (37), the writing opens to a greater scope of interpretation, showing the genius of a writer who can be analyzed from more than one perspective. Frank Lentricchia believes that "New Criticism and the literary needs it left unfulfilled placed us in a critical void" (4). However, Lentricchia adds that using a newer method of literary criticism "need not imply radical relativism, or subjectivism and egoism, or an unconcern with the past" (xiv); on the contrary, an examination of Warren’s writing using a semiotic model indicates that his work is able to transcend the critical ideas of the time during which he wrote and expresses a "variety of critical options"
Ross Murfin proposes his defense of contemporary critical perspectives and addresses the necessity to incorporate established critical research:

Critical thought . . . is occasionally more like a coiled spring than like a circle; it comes almost, but not quite, back to a place it has been before, but it is the "not quite," the difference, that gives it resiliency, strength--and a future. Great works of literature seem naturally to produce these unending, near-cycles of strong thought. (112)

Although a study of Warren’s corpus would be deficient without considering the interpretive work of established Warren scholars, Kristeva’s theory of semiotics acts as a necessary supplement to the existant Warren research on theme and subject by identifying the conventions and patterns in his use of the language.

Scholars have consistently agreed that the protagonists in Warren’s fiction commonly seek meaning for their lives by striving toward an ideal which they come to realize does not exist, but a study of Warren’s use of semiotic conventions reveals how this quest evolves. Percy Munn, in Night Rider, sets the paradigm for the rest of Warren’s novels as the protagonist is faced with this dilemma, part of a plot Randolph Runyon calls "variations on the same narrative" (14). This plot involves an epistemological journey of the
protagonist on a futile quest toward the prelapsarian and pre-Oedipal state of human existence, which marks the semiotic realm. The conventions of this state before verbal capability include communications through pulsions or instinctual drives which occur before the "differentiation from the body of the mother" (Gainey 19) or before the symbolic state occurs.

Semiotics, the science of signs, focuses on forms of communication through gestures, rituals, repetitions, and rhythms. The desire for functioning in the semiotic state is present in Warren's protagonists, from Percy Munn in Night Rider, Jerry Calhoun in At Heaven's Gate, to Jack Burden in All the King's Men. Jack Burden becomes the most highly evolved of these male characters as he finds the significance of the semiotic state within his life and is eventually able to communicate with Anne Stanton on a semiotic level. However, the other male characters in Warren's early novels do not achieve a similar symbiosis with their female counterparts. James H. Justus provides an explanation for this problem. Justus says that Percy Munn, like most of Warren's male protagonists, suffers from inarticulateness resulting from his "endemic failure to find communal salvation" (166), which is the inevitable inadequacy of humankind to return to the prelapsarian state.

Even though Warren's preferred style of criticism dictates that scholars analyze character without excessive
dependence upon other disciplines, the semiotic approach serves to "explain both characteristic actions and narrative strategies prevalent in the text," as Karen Wilkes Gainey points out in her semiotic study of four contemporary American women novelists (11). Hence, in a semiotic reading the prelapsarian, ideal state may be understood as the semiotic stage; the postlapsarian or actual state is symbolic. Therefore, the critical eye of the semiotician remains on the text, but extends the New Critical surface viewpoint to probe the pre-symbolic signs in order to assess the deeper meaning of the text.
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Sexuality in the early novels of Robert Penn Warren is generally not appealing, intimate, or indicative of love between partners, in part due to the seeming coldness of the female characters and the near-osexuality of the males. However, when both social and personal interactions between the characters are analyzed semiotically according to the theories of Julia Kristeva, a pattern emerges which explains the harshness of the bond between men and women.

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Even though Warren’s preferred style of criticism dictates that scholars focus on the text without excessive dependence upon other disciplines (such as psychology), the semiotic approach extends the New Critical surface viewpoint to probe the semiotic and symbolic signs in order to assess the deeper meaning of the text.
(E) Motionless Control:
Percy Munn's Semiotic Search in Night Rider

In Night Rider, Percy Munn desires but is unable to function at the semiotic level, which accounts for his communication difficulties. Munn's problems in obtaining self-knowledge as well as in communicating with others stem from his confusion of the semiotic and symbolic realms. He is unable to reconcile the two. Specific episodes in the novel are ironically pathetic when Munn recognizes the semiotic ability in another, draws the person into his life, and either repels or ejects the person from his life, much like the rejection of the parent by the child upon reaching the Oedipal stage.

A semiotic study shows that as a lawyer, Percy Munn should possess a general command of the symbolic realm, the "domain of position and judgment" (Kristeva, Desire 19); however, his problems in communication with women lie in the semiotic realm, which includes the "actual organization, or disposition, within the body, of instinctual drives . . . as they affect language and its practice" (Kristeva, Desire 18). Thus, because of Munn's difficulties in understanding the semiotic realm, his personal associations with others usually fail to achieve his needs. If Munn actually understood his needs, he might function more easily in his
interactions. In fact, those with whom he interacts seem to understand their agenda with Munn: the Association of Growers of Dark-Fired Tobacco needs him for legal counsel and as a replacement for Mr. Morphee; his wife needs him as an involved husband; and Lucille Christian needs him for what she perceives as his warmth. Munn’s primary needs appear to be homological ones, which are similarities stemming from common origin—in this case, masculine and paternal. Munn seeks these affinities through his interactions with the members of the Association. As a result, when Munn’s homological needs are disrupted, his inability to understand the intrusion results in violence. Munn’s communicative requirements with women, however, are not as symmetrical, which explains the incongruities in his relationships with May and Lucille. Since other-gender communications are what Julia Kristeva calls “more circuitous, complex, and invisible” (“Manic” 62), the confused Munn merely becomes distanced from the women instead of reaching out to them.

Warren establishes the general “semiotic disposition,” which is what Kristeva defines as the stabilizing need toward order (“System” 32), in the opening paragraphs of Night Rider. Kristeva indicates that order needs systemization (“System” 33), which Warren conveys through the rhythmic movement of the train bringing Munn to Bardsville. Munn needs presymbolic bliss, a desire
punctuated by rhythms and intonations, which are characteristics of the realm predating the separation of the blissful union between mother and child. However, because there is continual conflict between striving toward the ideal, semiotic state and the realistic, symbolic state, the novel does not begin with the constancy of the train’s movement but with the train’s jolting from its rhythm, causing discord among its passengers, especially Munn:

When the train slowed at the first jarring application of the brakes, the crowd packed in the aisle of the coach swayed crushingly forward, with the grinding, heavy momentum of the start of a landslip. (NR 1)

Therefore, the tone of the novel is set within the first few pages as one wherein the instinctive, semiotic realm is out of synchronicity with the brutal, postlapsarian, symbolic environment. Percy Munn’s reaction to the jolt presages his inadequate reaction to later, less metaphoric, jarring impacts:

Percy Munn, feeling the first pressure as the man behind him lurched into contact, arched his back and tried to brace himself to receive the full impact, which, instinctively, he knew would come. But he was not braced right. (NR 1)

This disruption of the semiotic is a pattern which Warren intermittently inserts as a reminder that the ideal is
Throughout the novel, Percy Munn has difficulty with other-gender communications. He cannot express his needs to women with whom he is involved, and the type of action-oriented communication which operates in the male-to-male interaction of the Association does not transfer to Munn’s relations with May or Lucille Christian. Munn’s relationships with these two women fail primarily because he does not operate on their levels; he does not meet them on common ground because he is not comfortable with his own instinctive semiotic needs.

May’s common ground is literal. Warren depicts May on several occasions in her garden, her hands embedded in the soil, feebly turning the dirt. In this natural setting she is archetypal earth mother and prelapsarian Eve, and Percy deliberately invades her semiotic environment in an attempt to see her “in the posture and stillness that must belong to her when she was alone” (NR 34). He realizes that May must create for him a facade as an adaptation to the rules of the symbolic world (Kristeva, "System" 25), which prompts him to encroach upon her instead of asking her for openness:

When he was with her she was not herself, not wholly; his presence, or the presence of anyone, must, like a single drop of some stain, tincture that crystal liquid that was absolutely herself. (NR 34)
May, the concerned wife, is genuinely interested in Percy's activities, as is evident in her tag questions ("You're early, aren't you?") and in other interrogatory phrasings; however, Munn does not want to expound on his activities. What she likely intends as consideration toward his ill humor, he classifies as nuisance:

"Why, Perse," she said, "what's the matter? Did anything else happen, something bad?"

"Nothing's the matter."

"Aren't you glad?"

"Yes," he answered, thinking, yes, he supposed he was. (NR 35)

Robin Lakoff finds that tag questions and rising inflectional endings are typical to the speech of women. These patterns, according to Lakoff, are used when the speaker wants to "avoid coming into conflict with the addressee . . . looking to the addressee for confirmation," to the extent that the speaker seems to have no individual views (16-17). Conversely, Percy is terse in his responses. Instead of voicing his discontentment concerning the Association to his wife, Percy walks away, leaving May confused and alone. Thus, in her self-denigrating, impulsive efforts to conform to symbolic communication, May's attempts to form a closer bond with her husband are not reciprocated by Percy, who refuses to adjust himself to the semiotic world of his wife.
May's upbringing has accustomed her to dependency; Percy Munn at first supports this dependence, but he severs the early intimacy of his marriage by becoming distant to his wife with her unintentionally submissive language skills by retreating into his phallogocentric world. Munn refuses to retain the comfortable aspect of their pre-Association relationship, when their love had been "for more than a year, a thing in itself, set off from other things by its fullness and completeness and poise" (NR 48). The deterioration of this bond is inevitable, due to Percy's reticence: "He had failed again in his attempt to explain himself to May, and to himself" (NR 48). Evidently, May needs from Percy a verbal explanation or some lexical evidence of his feelings. However, Percy cannot understand May's needs or her personality, and he admits that he "could not penetrate to her world [of] sober, sweet meditation" (NR 55).

Since Percy Munn notices that the language of hands works in his communication with the other inarticulate members of the all-male Association (evident by their patriarchal, repetitive handshaking and amiably placed, paternal hands on his shoulder), he transfers the gestures to May's environment; naturally, he fails once again. May does not respond in the way he expects. After returning from a visit at the Trevelyan home, Percy Munn yearns to penetrate May's world and reaches for her hand. Instead of
accepting his hand, May suggests a closer proximity: "She slipped her arm through the crook of his and walked close beside him" (NR 55). Therefore, May reaches further toward Percy's symbolic realm than Percy's attempts to meet May on her level. May does not need the petty conversation, contrary to Percy Munn's assumptions. In response to his comment of "It's a good crop," May does not verbalize her agreement: "She did not answer, but pressed his arm in acknowledgment of the fact that he had spoken" (NR 55). After general comments about the condition of their tobacco crop, May intimates her desire to go inside by commenting on the heat from the embers of the burning logs inside the barn. The placement of this passage indicates the state of the Munn marriage: May notices that enough figurative fire remains for purposes of rekindling; Percy is oblivious and misses the hint. His thoughts are elsewhere:

"It's hot," May complained. "I feel a little faint."

"Let's go," he said.

Before he got to the house he remembered that he had told the Trevelyan woman he would send some negroes out to cut her patch of tobacco and get the firing started. It had been standing too long already. (NR 57)

Percy's perception of his dwindling marriage begins much later as he becomes aware of their different breathing
patterns, a primary, semiotic rhythm of life. He and May are not at one with each other. He first notices the "pulsing roar" of his own heartbeat as he prepares for bed; then he becomes cognizant of "another sound, scarcely audible, another rhythm. It was the breathing of May" (NR 109). By noticing May's breathing (a semiotic, primary process), Percy realizes that May interrupts his life, but, more importantly, he recognizes that he cannot envision her sleeping form:

He concentrated on that sound, straining in the darkness, and it seemed to become more pronounced. He tried to imagine her lying there, her posture, the expression on her face, remote and rapt, but could not. The image would not stick in his mind. It would flicker and be gone. (NR 109)

Percy lacks knowledge of May's true character, as shown in his inability to imagine her face. Therefore, they have not formed a relationship based on symbiosis between the semiotic and symbolic realms.

Percy's inarticulateness, which comes after he realizes Senator Tolliver's need to "break what he had made" (NR 126), furthers the deterioration of his marriage. Percy has placed May in her solitary setting, distanced from her aunt and remote even from the servants while he is away on Association business. He comes upon her slyly again. He is conscious of his "cold sense of satisfaction" in not
responding to her vocalized desire to plant nasturtiums in her garden; consequently, he responds with talk of Association business, only bits of which he can reveal to her. May doesn’t want to hear talk of business. She wants to talk about her world, to share with her husband part of her life. The woman’s need to plant flowers signifies a desire for fertility or the need to produce beauty in her world, a feat she obviously cannot perform alone. Implying her need for a semiotic relationship with Percy, she tells Percy, "I’ll need somebody to help me . . . a man to spade up and all" (NR 129), fully knowing that the farm hands are busy with the tobacco. She wants Percy. Averting her request, Percy brutally refuses her, achieving a sadistic pleasure in her discomfiture:

He watched the expression of her face change from pleasure to surprise, then from pain to bewilderment; and then he continued: "Besides you don’t really want to have a garden. . . . Why do you want to start a garden? It’s very unreasonable, you know, under the circumstances. You being the way you are. About things." (NR 130)

Munn’s brutality increases as his own psychic turbulence through dealings with the Association escalates. After his uncertainty about his culpability in the murder of Bunk Trevelyan, Munn needs to regain a sense of control.
Clearly, his homological needs have been disrupted. Bunk Trevelyan has betrayed him, and his peers have confused him. The gunfire which follows shortly after his own gun's discharge muddles the identity of the actual assassin, making him unsure if his was the fatal bullet. When Munn comes home to May, she is vulnerable. Everything is inharmonious. The too-little amount of light comes from the flickering flame in the lamp; the too-large kimono covers May. May yearns to talk to Munn, to understand his foul mood, to be the compassionate wife. She resorts to the language of hands, "lifting one hand a little in an indeterminate gesture" (NR 205) and persists in imploring the source of her husband's disquietude, but he responds only in brusque repetitions of "nothing," ironically echoing the subject of his first speech before the crowd upon his arrival in Bardsville. Munn's ultimate infraction upon May occurs through his need for control:

After he had forced her past the table to the divan, she struggled with him with a strength which he had never suspected. Then, suddenly, she was as passive as a dead body, although her hands remained crushed against his chest as in resistance and revulsion. (NR 206)

Therefore, the "nothing" of his repeated speech pattern is valid. Munn feels nothing at all. Through raping May, Munn has brutally ejected her from her prelapsarian, semiotic
realm. He displays the violence in himself; consequently, May is figuratively and literally forced to flee her peaceful garden and home.

Because he misunderstands the passivity in May, Munn thinks he has conquered her; as a result, he loses interest in her and loses her. As a result of his failure with May, Munn is attracted to May’s presumable opposite, Lucille Christian. As a child, May’s chief parental figure was her aunt; Lucille was raised by her widowed father. Apparently, May’s aunt coddled her; Bill Christian provided his daughter with "tough love" to the extent of nicknaming her "Sukie," the name he gives to all females and farm animals (NR 100). This derogatory nickname is an attempt of the symbolic to belittle the semiotic. That Lucille tolerates her father without altogether submitting to him piques Percy Munn’s interest initially:

Mr. Christian was telling some tale, leaning forward with his hands on his spread knees and his arms bowed out like a bulldog’s legs. His glass was on the floor beside him. Lucille Christian was regarding her father with an air of affectionate amusement, which made Mr. Munn, for the first time, become aware of a real liking for her. (NR 102)

Many of Lucille’s actions are geared toward shock value, an effect achieved consistently with Munn. A joke
about Lucille's power in warding off suitors, called "bugaboos," is subverted into her ability to control horses. Bill Christian is proud of his daughter's prowess with both men and horses, as he expresses in suggestive terms, "What she mounts, I bet she rides" (NR 166). Percy Munn anticipates embarrassment from Lucille after the sexual innuendo of her father's comment, but he receives the opposite:

> When she turned around, Mr. Munn expected a blush, or some slight expression of embarrassment on her face, or a word of remonstrance. But there was none of these things. (NR 166)

Lucille's verbal allusions to her sexuality are compounded by her offer of significant refreshments to her father and his guest: coffee and apple pie. The suggested meaning of the sexually symbolic fruit returns to the Garden motif. Unlike May, who is similar to a prelapsarian Eve, Lucille is closer to the postlapsarian, sexually conscious Eve. Lucille is at home in the male-dominated, symbolic world while May is circumscribed by her semiotic environment. Nevertheless, she does not have full authority: Bill Christian first divides the pie, offers a large slice to Munn, who denies "anything like that much" (NR 166), and devours his own serving. Lucille's assimilation of her father's symbolic world has maintained her dependence upon him; thus, the parent-child
psychological separation has not fully occurred because Bill Christian takes over the suggestive scene which his daughter introduced. Even though Munn does not visibly partake of the pie, his curiosity is provoked, as he "wondered which room was hers" (NR 168).

Percy Munn is further surprised with Lucille Christian when she, like the adventuresome daughter of the Chaucerian tale of the promiscuous young woman, sneaks into the visitor’s room while her unsuspecting father sleeps in the other room. The seductive Lucille initiates a sexual relationship with Percy Munn, her father’s friend, while he stays with them while attending to Association business. Munn is amazed by her first coming into his room, then by her oiling the hinges of the door so that its creaking doesn’t awaken her father. She is the aggressor, a type of woman to whom Munn is not accustomed.

Lucille Christian introduces a common sign system into Warren’s novels upon her seduction of Percy Munn. Curiously, this is a woman who needs no verbalization; in fact, she discourages it. Upon entering Munn’s room, she institutes a behavior pattern of Warren’s *femmes fatale*:

The door would swing gently, carefully, open, and she would slip into the room, and stand with one finger to her lips in mock warning while she pushed the door shut and lowered the latch into place. (NR 237)
Lucille Christian poses a confusing complexity to Percy Munn. Unlike May, whom he reduced to a passive, one-sided personality whom he wanted to see her only during her solitary time because he doubted her instinctive semiotic ability, Lucille Christian readily provides more than one facet to her personality:

She was, it seemed to him, two persons. There was the person who came to his room, and stood with one finger to her lips while she gently pushed the shadowy white door shut behind her; and there was the person whom he saw moving about the house in the daytime, talking casually and easily to him or to her father or to Benton Todd, or humming a tune under her breath. The two persons seemed quite distinct to him. (NR 240-241)

Lucille Christian knows what she wants from Percy Munn, obviously not conversation. When he raises a dialogue with her, she silences him (ironically, as Munn had with May) and repeats her sign language, exemplified when Munn wants to discuss Benton Todd’s place in her life:

"What do you let him hang round for?" Mr. Munn demanded of her one night, when she lay beside him in the dark. They had been silent for a long time, staring up at the ceiling.

"Shh!" she said, and laid a finger on his lips. "Don’t yell. You’ll wake up papa, and then
Lucille’s syntax is also significant. She never uses the submissive intonational patterns typical with May, and when she does use an ending question, it is not a tag question in need of self-confirmation; on the contrary, it is more of a threat in rhetorical question form. Robin Lakoff’s theory is proven with May; however, the hypothesis does not apply to Lucille, because her upbringing in a masculine, single-parent environment inoculated her from the need for approval the tag question generates. Lakoff explains:

> Little girls are indeed taught to talk like little ladies, in that their speech is in many ways more polite than that of boys or men, and . . . politeness involves an absence of a strong statement, and women’s speech is devised to prevent the expression of strong statements. (19)

Even though Munn, in accord with masculine syntax, "demands" his question, surely his statement could not carry the volume sufficient to awaken Bill Christian; Lucille merely uses her father as an excuse, whose presence in the house makes her actions even more rebellious and assertive. Lucille’s sovereignty in their affair astonishes Percy Munn, especially since he completely controlled May. Ironically, Munn’s affair with Lucille begins soon after his rape of May. That Lucille is able to control Munn at all is amazing.
Expecting the typical from Lucille Christian always provides the converse. Munn slowly realizes that Lucille Christian has even more control than he at first perceived. Lucille is fully aware of the Association's dealings, which according to Munn is "not a thing for womenfolks to be messing in," to which Lucille responds, "If I were a man, I'd probably be in myself" (NR 247). He anticipates that Lucille will be aspiring toward marriage, but he is wrong. She deflects his efforts, even in daylight hours:

"Will you marry me?" he said.

"Shh," she cautioned, her fingers to her lips warningly, and motioned with her head toward the negro woman in the dining-room.

"Will you marry me?" he repeated, his voice the same as before.

"Maybe," she said, "but not if you bellow. You're worse than papa."

He had asked her that question before, and every time she had answered it evasively. (NR 250)

Lucille's evasiveness is part of her semiotic space which she refuses to allow Percy Munn to penetrate. Significantly, she never transfers the control of her sexuality to Percy Munn; Bill Christian's omnipresence, though unconscious, allows him to maintain his paternal domination over Lucille.
The degeneration of the affair between Percy Munn and Lucille Christian is marked by several precursory events of chaos and failed hopes: Benton Todd’s death, the incidents of arson, and the arrival of national guard troops in Bardsville. In fact, the burning of Percy Munn’s house metaphorically parallels the disintegration of his relationship with Lucille Christian. However, Percy Munn still has no control over the break-up; he has allowed Lucille to maintain her semiotic distance, even though her cryptic reserve has bewildered Percy Munn more than once. However, the cessation of the affair does not devastate either Percy Munn or Lucille Christian, indicating that the affair was not enjoyable or suggestive of intimacy past the physical level. In fact, neither partner expresses any kind of fulfillment.

Exemplifying the dominion over his daughter’s sexuality, Bill Christian is the violator of Lucille’s semiotic space of confident yet hushed eros. Unsuspectingly, intending to rouse his house guest from his sleep, Bill Christian awakens both Munn and Lucille in Munn’s room. After having heard her father’s approaching steps, the usually imperturbable Lucille is atypically frozen by the realization that her father has discovered her clandestine behavior: “The girl stood rigidly in the middle of the room, then she motioned toward the door” (NR 308). Curiously, her motion has changed from a finger on her lips
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The psychological separation of the parent and child which should provide a feeling of independence for Lucille has instead left her numb. She is accustomed to the semiotic; her father’s discovery of her adulterous affair with Munn propels her, involuntarily, into the postlapsarian, symbolic state. She reflects to Percy Munn the events leading up to Bill Christian’s seizure:

Her father had found her. He had come into the room where she was, there was no telling why, but it had seemed as though to look out the front window at Mr. Munn riding off, and he had seen her standing there. . . . She had screamed at him, and his eyes had suddenly popped and he had opened his mouth like a man trying to call out, but he hadn’t made a sound. (NR 313)

The knowledge of his daughter’s affair with his friend provokes Bill Christian’s seizure. Lucille’s response, a non-verbal, primal sound, is her semiotic reaction to the parent-child separation which marks the beginning of
symbolic existence. As a result, Lucille carries not only the guilt of her involvement with a married man but also the liability for her father’s stroke. Percy detects that the affair is truly over when she withdraws from his touch after revealing the details of Bill Christian’s stroke, even though while she has explained the break with her father, she twists the cloth of his sleeve with her “strong fingers” (NR 313).

After Percy Munn ceases going to the Christian place, he makes the Ball household his temporary abode. However, Percy notices a difference in his life. He reflects that "it had been a restricted, distraught, confused, feverish, and undirected life, but a life which was real, and his own" (NR 323). Lacking realization, Percy Munn is closer to the semiotic realm than ever before, but like the jolt from the train upon his entry into Bardsville, he has not braced himself adequately for the shock. Nevertheless, his awareness of the loss denotes some, if minor, growth in his life. This development in Munn’s character allows him to perceive Lucille Christian for the person she truly has become: an empty shell of a person who has lost her vitality. This change results from the destruction Lucille feels as she is forced to exist fully in the symbolic realm as well as the postlapsarian state of existence; her fault has not brought her happiness.

In place of the confident woman Munn once knew, a
hollow woman has appeared, but both of them remain enigmatic to Percy Munn. He does not know how to respond to Lucille since the change in their relationship, so he resorts to saying equally empty words in an effort to please her: "He tried to comfort her. He told her that he loved her and would love her always" (NR 325). Her hollowness influences him:

He knew a loathing, suddenly of himself for the emptiness of the act he had performed: a vicious and shameful pantomime. . . . He was affected by her emptiness. Or her emptiness had discovered to him his own. (NR 325)

His emotions have been expressed in the name of convention; his motions have been a masquerade, a motif in the novel.

When Lucille visits Munn at the Proudfit place, he notices yet another change. Her emptiness has evolved into a "quietness, the sense of an inner steadiness" (NR 429). Percy Munn has witnessed the rhythm possible between a man and a woman, exhibited by the relationship between Willie and Adelle Proudfit: "Their voices would rise and fall, slowly but in a living rhythm, one responding to another, fulfilling it" (NR 430). Percy notices the rhythm of their communication instead of their actual dialogue, and he is clearly envious. Lucille's arrival at the Proudfit place makes Percy Munn realize that he has been existing in a semiotic environment without knowing it:
Then his thoughts, he himself, had been absorbed into that dry, insidious vibration, which was a kind of life, but life reduced to its most sterile and unaimed rhythm, the ticking, as it were, of the leaves drying in the hot air, the ticking of the dry earth. Then he had drowsed off. (NR 433)

The repetitious rhythms of the natural world, like the lullaby communication of a mother and infant, soothe Percy Munn to sleep. The physical manifestations of his assimilation are such that Lucille remarks on his appearance: "when you first came in tonight, . . . I felt I didn't know you. You didn't look the way I remembered" (NR 436), adding that her lack of recognition was not merely due to his beard.

During the night of Lucille's sojourn, Percy Munn recognizes the pattern of their affair, but a significant aspect of Lucille's motions is missing:

He awoke, in the darkness, to the slight sound of the opening door, which, in the cramped room, was less than arm's-length from the head of the bed. He did not stir. Lucille Christian--for he was sure it was she--moved into the room, and cautiously pushed the door shut behind her. "Perse," her voice said, in a dry whisper, "Perse." (NR 433)

She speaks. She does not place her finger on her lips.
displacement from the semiotic realm has had the effect of verbalization. Because of her newly acquired skills of symbolic vocalization, she wants both words and light, finally realizing that they have not shared these two realistic components of existence, as she conveys to Percy her revelation: "You know, we've never talked, not really talked, you and me, in the light... I've thought of that sometimes, and I've felt all at once like I didn't know you" (NR 435). Ironically, his response is silence, a reversal of their previous roles. Since the semiotic ability to communicate non-verbally must blend with the symbolic need for verbal exchange to create a mature relationship, the affair between Percy Munn and Lucille Christian cannot be pursued with success.

Since the sexually cognizant woman traditionally must give penance for her crime of merely being an independent human, Lucille becomes a black widow character, the angel of death for Percy Munn. She has accepted the guilt for the deaths of two previous suitors, an English horseman and Benton Todd, as well as for her father. To try to save Percy Munn, she offers him the chance to go away with her, not in the name of love, but for convenience and escape. She confesses to Munn that she wanted him only for a missing quality in herself: warmth. Her former ambiguity is revealed. During their affair Lucille commonly complained of her physical coldness. Obviously, the recent events of
her life have allowed her the humble acknowledgement that she actually needed psychological warmth. Yet, she realizes that Munn, too, is cold and could never have been her completer after all, indicative of a subconscious need which Lucille desires to supplement her semiotic nature. Kristeva indicates an appropriate theory concerning a woman’s motivations in an illicit affair: "While in her avenging ardor against her own father or husband, the woman recaptures with her secret lover the unsuspected jouissances of maternal fusion" ("Romeo and Juliet" 211). However, Lucille’s stated purpose is obscure, as she tells Munn the reason for her attraction to him: "To do that you’d have to be warm, have to feel about something. To kill a man" (NR 441). Therefore, by killing the men in her life, she may have been trying to achieve warmth.

Black widow Lucille’s fatal bite of Percy Munn comes with her unintentionally venomous admission to him concerning Senator Tolliver:

All the time he was coming out to see papa.
Before the bust-up. He was after me. He’d put his hands on me every chance he got. He’d say, 'My dear girl, my dear Lucille.' (NR 443)

Percy Munn, who thought Tolliver’s paternal touches had been exclusive to him, is destroyed by Lucille’s acknowledgment. Once again, his homological, semiotic needs are crushed by betrayal and confusion; he must react.
The recurrence of a prominent symbol signifies that Percy Munn's world is dissolving. When Percy Munn listened to Senator Tolliver's speech on his first day in Bardsville, he noticed that "at a great height, a single buzzard hung motionless as though sustained in the incandescent blue of the sky" (NR 22). Percy observes a similar scene shortly before he flees the Proudfit farm:

He noticed the steady, black fleck of a buzzard which spiraled up, southward, into the area of his vision. He watched it for a while, then grew tired, and turned away. When he looked again, it had been lost in the central reaches of the throbbing brightness. (NR 448)

The buzzard, a carrion bird common in the Kentucky skyline, signifies Percy Munn's frozen state of motion at the beginning of the tobacco wars; the movement and disappearance of the bird signifies his spiralling idealism, then impending death in its complete disappearance.

Indicative of the homological ideal, Percy Munn apparently identifies with Senator Tolliver more closely than he bonded with either May or Lucille, a recognition which ultimately prevents him from achieving his murderous purpose with Tolliver. Recognition of the ideal or the self occurs through Percy's ability to see the man's face in fine detail from "the sunken sockets of the closed eyes" to "the wrinkles and tiny veining on the eyelids . . . like the
veining of leaves" (NR 457). The recognition of Tolliver’s face combined with the metronomic, semiotic rhythm of the clock "ticking with an unhurried, metallic sound" (NR 457) make Percy Munn aware of the homological fulfillment he shared with Tolliver. Upon the interruption by Tolliver’s sister Matilda, Tolliver says Percy "'was just getting ready to give [him] a glass of water’" (NR 458), a primary symbol of life. Upon transferring the glass to Tolliver’s hand, Munn cannot commit the Oedipal crime: he cannot kill his father figure as intended.

In Munn’s confusion of jealousy for betrayal, his emotions in turmoil with his vain attempts to destroy the man he cares most for, he flees a few steps ahead of a posse intent on his capture. Munn commits the final action of the novel: a suicidal discharge of gunfire into the air which provokes the "answering bursts" of the group behind him. In his dying moments, he is nearly returned to the presymbolic days of childhood, days without confusion, days of homological existence without distrust and suspicion:

Lying there, while the solid ground lurched and heaved beneath him in a long swell, he drowsily heard the voices down the slope calling emptily, like the voices of boys at a game in the dark.

(NR 460)

Especially in the symbolic, patriarchal world, patricide is not condoned. Thus, Percy Munn’s final violent
response to semiotic confusion leads to his own complete
destruction. Likewise, a woman who possesses sexual
confidence is not allowed prosperity in the post-semiotic,
phallocentric world; therefore, Lucille Christian must flee
the area as an act of contrition for the deaths of every man
who has been involved with her sexuality. The semiotic and
symbolic worlds never reconcile in Night Rider; thus,
because these two worlds must exist in harmony before the
human can achieve wholeness, the novel fulfills the notion
of the fallen American archetypes of Adam and Eve who are
forever banished from semiotic bliss.
"Love and Be Silent":
The Suppression of the Semiotic
in At Heaven's Gate

As Richard G. Law indicates, At Heaven's Gate, published in 1943, is another formative novel for Warren, including "the ideas and techniques which inform his later work" (87). These ideas and techniques establish a semiotic disposition both through subject (with the clear division between the semiotic, prelapsarian and symbolic, postlapsarian states) and through form (with Warren's repetitive deviations from the main narrative through the interpolated statements of Ashby Wyndham). However, the common Warren theme of the clash between the prelapsarian and the postlapsarian is most fully illustrated by the semiotic theories of Julia Kristeva.

In At Heaven's Gate, the symbolic, patriarchal world governed by Bogan Murdock fights for sovereignty and wins in a world where the semiotic realm is suppressed and confused as the weakness of femininity. This struggle is made apparent as Sue Murdock, the embodiment of sexual confidence, high self-esteem, and complexity of personality, is commonly misperceived. Her suitors especially do not understand Sue because of their own difficulty with the semiotic realm; hence, they are unable to communicate with
her: Jerry Calhoun recognizes but suppresses semiotic impulses; Slim Sarrett contains a combination of semiotic and symbolic psychological traits but is unable to find a balance between them; and Sweetie Sweetwater is self-involved, stuck in the symbolic world of patriarchal, misogynous attitudes, thus dismissing the semiotic altogether. According to Kristeva, a person is "always both semiotic and symbolic," adding that "one cannot be exclusively one or the other" ("Revolution" 93). Because of this combination, Sue's relationships fail due to the males' inability to acknowledge the necessary semiotic state within themselves; in fact, all of the characters in the novel make up "a scrap heap of destroyed lives," as noted by H. D. Herring (57).

Like Night Rider with its semiotic beginning of the rhythmic movement of the train and its rhythmic disruption, signifying the inability to maintain the semiotic state, At Heaven's Gate begins with Jerry Calhoun's airplane ride. The "triumphant and unremitting sonority" of the airplane lulls Calhoun into a state near sleep. This rhythmic lullaby of the mechanized world pulls him toward the pleasant, non-verbal condition, but he is "unable even to drowse" (AHG 7). Probably because the man-made world is not meant to maintain the semiotic condition, the plane experiences a "cushioned, retarded jolt" as it descends its altitude. The jolt reminds Calhoun of his childhood of the
"lurches and jerks" of the lane leading to his father's home (AHG 9). That Jerry Calhoun is able to connect these two combinations of the semiotic and symbolic indicates that he is somewhat aware of the presence of both realms, but he instinctively prefers the symbolic.

In accord with what Law calls "'dialectical configurations'--alternating and opposing perspectives" in Warren's work (91), Slim Sarrett is more aware of the combination of the two realms, and because he cannot escape from it as easily as Calhoun, Sarrett is perplexed by the semiotic realm. However, he typically confuses all of the dualities in his life, each of which corresponds to the semiotic/symbolic split: the masculine and feminine, violence and nurture, and the physical and intellectual. Sarrett's inability to find balance in these oppositions leads him to failure in his relationship with Sue Murdock, his partner whose personality is seemingly equipped with its own similar dualities.

Slim Sarrett clearly has not come to grips with his sexuality. He is androgynous, evident in the recurrent reversal of gender stereotypes whenever he and Sue are together. An early scene at a restaurant with Sue depicts Slim's androgyny, an atypical trait for a male character in Warren:

He had eaten his food with a fastidious precision, all the while watching her eat, watching her like
a farmwife who prides herself on her cooking and wants to see how the guest takes every bite, or like a subtle and courteous potentate who luxuriously entertains a friend and watches for the first effect of the poison which is in the sumptuous dish. (AHG 26)

Both a submissive feminine type and a dominant masculine type sit at this table, combined as extremes in Slim Sarrett.

Slim Sarrett’s complexity appeals to Sue Murdock, who is a woman confident in her sexuality and attracted to danger. Also somewhat androgynous, Sue has learned the facade of femininity from her passive mother to cover the actual hardness of her disposition learned from her domineering father. Jerry Calhoun notices this duplicity in her personality:

It had been that unexpected hardness, plaited and expert under the superficial flesh, which had stirred him, on the instant of contact, more than any incidental softness or surrendering seductivity had ever done. (AHG 16)

Like Percy Munn’s attraction to Lucille Christian, Calhoun’s attraction to Sue is for her masculine qualities.

Furthermore, Sue’s declaration that she “won’t be pawed” indicates that she will maintain the sovereignty in her dealings with men; she won’t allow herself to be treated
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like so much flesh.

Adding to Sue's more masculine qualities, Warren establishes Sue's attraction to danger as he depicts her driving, "doing sixty through the suburbs" with her car's tires "screaming on the pavement" (AHG 28). With this confidence and sureness, Sue seduces Jerry Calhoun in the patterned gestures of all of Warren's early female protagonists:

So she began to look at him, hard. Just the instant before he looked, she knew he was going to look, and she had her forefinger at her lips and was shaking her head warningly. Then when she was sure he saw her, she took her finger from her lips and beckoned peremptorily at him. (AHG 28-29)

More of Sue's control, sexual confidence, and attraction to danger is revealed in a flashback of Jerry Calhoun. Like Night Rider's Lucille Christian, who oils the hinges to the door and keeps the lights out in the bedroom of her affair with Percy Munn, Sue Murdock sets the scene for sexual relations by casually turning off the lights in the library as the signal that the sex act is to occur. Again, like her Night Rider counterpart, Sue initiates a sexual encounter with her father's presence in the house during his naivete of sleep. Yet, Jerry Calhoun, alone in a room with a woman he finds attractive, thinks of the next day's schedule. Maintaining his asexuality, Jerry still does not understand
Sue’s inclinations and manipulation of the setting: "Even when he had felt her sharp fingers upon his hand, and her hand, ice-cold, on his, he had not fully realized her intention." Jerry’s immature sexuality confounds Sue, causing her to react physically, shaking him "as one angrily shakes a child" (AHG 32). A typical sex scene in Warren’s fiction between an asexual man and a cold yet confident woman depicts their sexual relations as merely mechanical:

Then, in that room, straining for the sound of feet above or in the dimly, mellowly lit hall, with his eyes fixed on the windows to catch any glint of light from an approaching car, clasped in that unnatural, awkward, frustrating posture, almost impotent at first from anxiety, he had violated her, coldly, desperately, without pleasure. (AHG 32)

Because he obviously did not anticipate or desire this experience, Jerry Calhoun does not have to suppress any sexual impulse, a recurrent behavior for Calhoun in many of his future actions. However, he would like to express his dissatisfaction to Sue, but he refrains:

He had suppressed an impulse to speak the vindictive words which would have meant an open quarrel, which would have, at a clap, left him completely clean and free; but this impulse had risen, not in resentment and anger, but as an
instantaneous calculation, mathematical in its
dispassionateness. (AHG 33)

This repression of drive and Jerry Calhoun's lack of
pleasure in the act is the product of his stifling of the
semiotic, his conscious wish to remain in the symbolic
world; for, as Kristeva indicates, "disavowal is immanent in
the symbolic faculty" ("True-Real" 225). Calhoun prefers
the socialized, symbolic realm, and his inability to
confront the semiotic side of his personality haunts him and
eventually causes the dissolution of his relationship with
Sue.

In contrast with Jerry Calhoun, Sue needs a strong
partner to complement her own strength. Sue's actual needs
in a partner conflict with Bogan Murdock's idea of what a
woman wants, as he expresses in his earlier misogynous
generalization: "Fortune--who was it said it?--is like a
woman, and she surrenders easiest to the man who will take
her by the hair" (22). Calhoun, however, has not developed
the self-awareness necessary to welcome a companion into his
life. Nearly devoid of a semiotic component, Calhoun's
household included no mother; an emotionally detached
father; a crippled aunt ill-equipped for maternity; and a
misanthropic, cynical uncle; thus, Jerry is not prepared for
interaction conducive to relationships with others, much of
which must be semiotic.

Calhoun's next abode, college, typically a setting
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which promotes bonding between young men and women, does not even provide him with training in human relations. Instead, Jerry chooses to cloister himself within his dormitory room, experiencing the semiotic only vicariously through the rhythm of his cohabitants:

Or sitting in his room, his head in his hands, his book propped before him, forcing himself to focus on the page, while around him, echoingly, the boisterous, companionable life of the old dormitory surged until late at night—the card games, the wrestling matches with the tables shoved back against the walls, the endless smut and bellowed laughter. (AHG 51)

Indeed, Jerry Calhoun is a loner who refuses to bond with others, even in his status as football hero "Bull's-Eye" Calhoun. Unconsciously, Calhoun denies the semiotic homological need, the compulsion to be with those similar to him. Nevertheless, he is not quite an outsider. He has learned the survival skills, the "easy secrets," of male communication: "the friendly shove, the smiling insult, the shouted obscenity, the casual good-by" (AHG 51). Capable of only one motivation at a time, Calhoun cannot dedicate himself to his work and develop relationships, as he reflects upon his resulting unhappy years at college:

Now and then he would wonder what had sustained him through all those years. He had forgotten the
savage, joyless, implacable blind drive which, working itself out, was enough in itself, and which, in its very joylessness, was a kind of joy.

(AHG 52)

He consciously denies human interaction during his college years, denying even the brotherhood inherent in fraternity life with its emphasis on sameness and homology: "Despite the urging of some of the older men at the house, and despite the pull of the life there, he did not go there to live" (54).

In fact, Calhoun does not establish homology with other men until it is forced upon him by a more dominant paternal figure, Bogan Murdock. Calhoun, a college sports hero, is placed in Murdock's business among Murdock's other young sports heroes removed from their actual goals. Murdock, who likes "to have the young men around him" (83), imposes camaraderie into Jerry Calhoun's life, and the environment is an all-male, patriarchal one. This atmosphere is evident in the treatment of a powerful female mythological deity:

To the right of the gate, in the middle of the open patch, there was an iron statue of Diana the huntress, tunic looped lightly from the breasts, bow in hand, the greyhounds crouching before her. Men coming down the steps of the house at dusk sometimes cocked a hat on her head and stood back to laugh. (AHG 68)
This misogyny sets a tone for the treatment of all women, especially those who defy the stereotype of the socially acceptable, passive lady.

Sue Murdock, like the huntress Diana, is a woman who subverts the typical woman’s role. She prefers a reciprocally strong lover, as she tells Calhoun, "Oh, love me, Jerry, love me hard" (AHG 94). Calhoun does not understand her androgyny:

Perhaps she would slip from his grasp, with that effortless, easy sway of her body, a motion as perfectly timed and controlled as a boxer’s, a kind of fluent sway from the waist and shift of the shoulders that always inflamed him and at the same instant, set up in him a ground swell of undefinable unease. (AHG 94)

Connecting Sue’s motions to a boxer, Warren entices the reader to pair Sue Murdock with Slim Sarrett, who actually is a boxer. More androgyny is depicted in Sue’s inadherence to typical feminine physical space as Jerry sees her "waiting for him, her legs far apart, her hands jammed down into the pockets of her light coat" (AHG 99), a posture which is more like the masculine way of standing with feet apart, thus occupying a confident, wide personal space (Steinem 199). Indeed, this resolute stance is commonly seen in other male characters in Warren’s fiction, especially Bill Christian in Night Rider.
Sue Murdock reflects with admiration on her father's influence, lending explanation for her more masculine than feminine behavior:

He doesn't say things. He doesn't have to. He just doesn't say a word, and people do what he wants. Look at my mother. The way she is. God, I'd rather be dead. (AHG 104)

Akin to Lucille Christian again, Sue's maternity is ignored, giving her no positive female role to emulate. Another comparison with Lucille Christian is Sue's dangerous manipulation of horses, closely suggestive of her treatment of men: "she had risen in the saddle, as though releasing a great secret force of her own to be incorporated in the surge and lift of the animal's haunches" (AHG 108). This scene refers back to Slim Sarrett's generalization of anyone who likes to ride horses:

If you really did enjoy riding a horse, it was because it flattered your ego. It was because you controlled a brute. You felt fully man because a brute, much stronger than a man, was obeying you.

(AHG 4)

Indeed, Sue controls the brute with deft ease, leaving the horse "standing quietly, the sides lifting and subsiding with beautiful pulsing, piston-like regularity, like a machine." Meanwhile, Sue is unfazed by her intense excursion with the horse as she stands with "her hands lying
idly before her, and her face smooth and peaceful" (AHG 108). Her reaction to controlling the animal is similar to her manipulation of sexual interactions with Jerry Calhoun, though he is hardly a brute. Therefore, Warren establishes Sue as the sovereign partner in her relationship with Jerry and suggestively depicts her command over horses, a suggestion, perhaps, of Lilith, the first wife of Adam, who favored the female-superior sexual position and who coupled with animals "whose lovemaking evidently pleased her better," as described by Barbara Walker (541).

Having avoided the bonds with both men and women, Calhoun is affected by the homological, patriarchal influence of the Bogan Murdock group. Once defensive on Sue Murdock's behalf in response to his uncle's negative remarks, he gains a sweeping attitude toward all women as he imagines:

A vision of women, of old women in black silk, the black silk tight or baggy over their swollen or thin bosoms, old women leaning over the cards held in beringed fingers and whispering, whispering, and their eyes were all fixed on him. And of young women, in bright dresses, with cocktails in their hands, leaning their slick heads together. The bitches, he thought, stung and savage. (AHG 111)

Indeed, when Duckfoot Blake makes comments similar to ones
made by Jerry’s uncle, Jerry hardly notices, signifying that a homological connection has occurred. Not familiar with the even more "diabolical" Lilith, who was even more concerned with physical pleasure than traditional depictions of Eve (Kristeva, "About Chinese Women" 140), Blake calls Sue a "slice of Eve’s flesh," continuing his derogatory connotations by describing her posterior (AHG 112). Jerry’s only remonstrances to Blake’s comments are his denial of his love for Sue and his remark, "Sue’s all right . . . . She’s a good girl" (AHG 113).

However, Jerry’s impression of Sue has changed into fear of her, accounting for the change in his defense mechanism from Sue to himself. Like Adam and Tiresias, Jerry Calhoun is in fearful awe of feminine sexuality, typical of Warren’s male protagonists (Scholes 131). Sue’s "insistence on sexual intercourse at the most dangerous times and in the most dangerous places" (Justus 185), including her father’s library and her friend’s dormitory room, baffle Jerry; Jerry Calhoun catalogs Sue’s actions and their effects on him:

Provoking him, wheedling him with a shameless innocence, accusing his love, cajoling him, calling him a hypocrite, impugning his manhood, daring him, until . . . anger and desire and humiliation mixed in him. (AHG 116)

She controls him. She belittles him. She scares him.
Sue's most puzzling action in the novel occurs when she and Jerry visit his father's household. Sue baffles Jerry utterly as she kisses his Aunt Ursula directly on the mouth, a gesture made more grotesque by Warren as Jerry has previously noticed the "goblet of food" below the left corner of his aunt's mouth (AHG 123). Sue's behavior, made "with the most natural motion in the world" (AHG 124), would be understandable to Slim Sarrett, however, who knows Sue Murdock better than anyone else. Sarrett earlier gave Jerry Calhoun the clue to Sue's behavior:

She has a real instinct for drama; I use the word *instinct* because she does not have an intellectual grasp of the medium. But she can rise to a moment, with a kind of self-abnegation, which means that she can get a pure effect. (AHG 101)

Slim Sarrett knows this about Sue because he knows the same about himself, as he reflects to Sue about his life: "I was author, angel, producer, director, stage manager, and cast" (AHG 165). Slim and Sue, therefore, are indeed alike. They have learned to merge the semiotic (instinct) with the symbolic (intellectual). Thus, they can manipulate constructs of the symbolic order through affecting social practices like etiquette (Kristeva, "System" 25). By kissing the woman of the household and shaking hands with Jerry's father, whose hands are smudged with axle grease, Sue achieves her effect of scoffing her high upbringing, not
to genuinely appeal to the less socially fortunate Calhoun family but merely to see if she has the ability.

Her histrionic behavior complete, Sue Murdock exerts more control over Jerry Calhoun by announcing their engagement, formerly unveiled to him. Clearly, the engagement pleases Jerry Calhoun. First of all, feeling Bogan Murdock’s paternal hand on his shoulder gives Jerry a sense of belonging, more than the slaps on the shoulder by the men at the office, whose faces "he could not read" (AHG 128), implying that he needs paternity rather than fraternity. Bull’s-Eye Calhoun with the winner mentality achieves his latest victory: gaining Sue’s engagement. Jerry feels triumphant, yet Sue remains elusive to him:

She kept that even, almost abstracted smile, meant, as it were, for no one, and springing apparently from her own inner secret, which seemed to be happiness. It must be happiness, he thought. It had all been easier than he had expected, he would think victoriously, with her standing quietly beside him. (AHG 132)

In fact, as long as Sue remains silent, everyone perceives her as happy, seeming "to have lost that restlessness" (AHG 132). Without a doubt, Sue loses her temperamental spirit, replacing it with a facade she deems appropriate for the newly engaged debutante. According to typical feminine conversational style, she adds apologies and tag questions
to her conversational habits, but their impropriety to Sue's speech is apparent, seen in her response to a comment about a state park's being named for her grandfather as "mighty nice":

"Yes," Sue said, "isn't it?" But she did not say it in a very nice way. Then Sue smiled, as in apology, to take the sting out, but a perfectly artificial smile which made her look like a dummy in a store window but a damned expensive store.

(AHG 134)

Jerry eventually gives Sue reason to flee this scene, but she "very quietly" makes a decorous exit in accord with her recent demure affectations. Jerry still does not understand her and admits to himself a dark notion: "There were moments when I could have killed her, when it was in my heart to kill her" (AHG 141).

Once Sue Murdock escapes and drops her facade, she slips into her unaffected self, a rhythmic, semiotic, primary state. She welcomes the change:

She was not conscious of her body, just of the enormous expansion of the darkness which seemed to revolve slowly around her, of the distant heave of the horizon, and of the contact of her cheek with the stone. It was as though without that contact she would have not been herself at all, but simply a part of the unbreathing velvety motion of the
Day 43

dark. She felt very empty, very light, and happy.

(AHG 146-147)

In this state, she meets her counterpart, Slim Sarrett, moving in his own rhythm, "pacing back and forth with his almost prinking, elastic step" (AHG 147). Since Sarrett is more comfortable with the semiotic state of rhythms, he understands Sue and applies apt analysis to her actions, from her overtipping of a cab driver--an act of insecurity and guilt, he says--to her sexuality, which Sarrett describes in third person about a girl he once knew. However, since much of Sarrett’s rhetoric is fiction based loosely on the truth, he is describing the sexuality of Sue as well as most of the female characters in Warren’s fiction:

This girl confided in me that she was almost completely cold to the sexual act. It was not a question of frustrated desire, but simply a weakness of impulse. But she constantly practiced the act. . . . She had no personal attachments to the partners, for she was absolutely promiscuous and often had never seen her partners before and never saw them again. None of the relationships ever lasted very long, for she would break them off, and she was never faithful, even temporarily, to any one partner. But she said she got an enormous satisfaction from observing her partners.
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She said she couldn't describe it, but she absolutely lived for it. (AHG 148-149)

Sue averts his analysis, telling him after some banter, "You make me want to vomit" (AHG 149). However, Slim's advice to Sue is the best she receives from anyone, even though Slim's comments concerning the importance of learning "never to make up a picture of herself" (AHG 155) directly contradict his long, colorful tale of his parentage in his "meticulous, rhythmical voice" in the same conversation (AHG 168). Slim is the most unrestrained person Sue Murdock knows; he doesn't suppress his impulses, he listens to her without sparing his critical opinions, and he openly tells her about his own upbringing. However, once Sue discovers his dishonesty in the latter, she perceives him realistically and cuts off their relationship.

While talking with Sarrett, Sue recalls her part as Cordelia in a performance of _King Lear_, during which she related to Cordelia's lines, "What shall Cordelia do? Love, and be silent," which describes the ideal patriarchal woman and the style of affection preferred by everyone close to Sue; they do not want to see her for what she really is: a woman who has a distinct personality, not merely a child. Slim Sarrett analogizes Sue's predicament to first menstruation, the signifier in a female's life that childhood is over. These provocative conversations with Slim lead Sue to break from her Murdock boundaries into
independent territory, even changing her name, which is a label of the symbolic world (Kristeva, "True-Real" 234), for a pseudonym.

On her own, Sue Murdock affects none of her former pretenses; she is finally aware of her semiotic life, typically symbolized by Warren through water:

The water was so hot it was painful--or almost painful--but at the same time it sent through her body a tingling pleasure, which, with the rising steam, flushed her cheeks and made her lips moist. For several minutes she dawdled . . . , just moving her hands under the water enough to nurse and keep alive the pulsing stimulation, the awareness of her own blood, which it provided.

(AHG 108)

As is typical with Warren, a scene which should not be sexual at all--in this instance, washing dishes--is highly erotic, in an autoerotic sense. Alone, Sue Murdock abandons her sexual coldness as well as her sense of etiquette, a social construct. Just as she reverts to the primary form of sexuality, autoeroticism, she also regresses to a primitive state as she eats "ravenously . . . hunching over the platter," holding the steak bone and "[gnawing] the last shreds from it, her elbows planted on the table" (AHG 208). Social constructs are the mark of the symbolic world, according to Kristeva ("Revolution" 93), and Sue's primal
abandonment of these constructs blend with the rhythmic sounds of the city to create a semiotic environment: "The flow and hum of the city rose and penetrated to her with a sound like the pulsation of distant surf" (AHG 208). Thus, Sue Murdock feels at home in her self-created, semiotic world.

However, with her independence comes stark reality. When Jerry Calhoun visits her, they seemingly should have a sexual experience free and uninhibited without the typical presence of her father in the other room, but the failure of the relationship is made clear by the bad sexual experience and Sue’s realization that Jerry’s sole motivation is his effort to please her father, whose presence is still felt "like he was sitting over there all the time, all the time we were here, and looking at us" (AHG 232). As a result, Sue is repulsed by Jerry, who is obviously stuck in the symbolic order of pleasing the patriarchy.

Slim Sarrett’s refusal to be intimidated by Bogan Murdock provides the impetus for Sue to begin a physical affair with him. Slim Sarrett, an amalgamation of word (through his poetry and study of English literature) and action (through his training as a boxer) provides a mixture of the semiotic, a state based in non-verbal, impulsive behavior, and the symbolic, a state based in suppressed impulses and verbal communication ("Revolution" 95). Because of this dissonant combination, Sue begs him for more
analysis of her, based on her misperception that he knows himself: "Oh, Slim, you've got to make me know, know about me" (AHG 251). However, due to Slim's inability to reconcile these opposites in his own life, he is able only to soothe Sue in a nurturing way. Again, Slim reverses the gender roles: "Then he had held her head cradled against his chest, and leaning his head above her, had murmured, 'Hush, hush, hush,' like a nurse or mother" (AHG 252). Emphasizing the lullaby type of communication between a mother and child before their psychological separation and its coinciding wordless rhythms, Slim continues, semiotically easing Sue into relaxation:

He held her head cradled in his left arm, and murmured, "Hush, hush, my darling," while the long, steely, cool fingers of his right hand rhythmically smoothed her forehead and disordered hair, or rested upon her eyes. (AHG 252)

In addition to Slim's psychological combination of the semiotic and symbolic states of being, he also androgynously combines masculine and feminine into bisexuality, revealed by the brief but significant presence of Billie Constantidopeles, who also obliviously reveals the truth about Slim's parents, the fact which signifies the end of Sue Murdock's respect for Slim.

Sue Murdock's rescue from Slim Sarrett comes from Sweetie Sweetwater, who at first tries to provide comfort
but recoils at her command of sovereignty:

    As they walked along the street toward her apartment, Sweetwater gripped her tightly and clumsily by the arm, as though to support her. "Damn it," she said, furiously suddenly aware of his assistance, "I can walk! I'm not a child."

    So he released his hold, and walked along beside her, and a little behind her. (AHG 258)

However, like Jerry Calhoun, Sweetwater does not understand Sue, but unlike Calhoun, he does not even want to try. Sue, nearly destroyed by her break with Sarrett, attains the posture of her mother, a woman who has learned constraint, a social construct of the symbolic world. Jerry Calhoun earlier foreshadowed this quality in Sue's mother:

    She sat in front of the fire, the reflection of which gave her face a factitious glow. Like somebody waiting for the telephone bell to ring and can't settle back. . . . [Or] when her car spun easily down the open highway, and nothing in sight, her blue-veined hands, ungloved, might tighten on the wheel until the knuckles looked like alabaster. (AHG 132)

Sue's posture becomes a mirror of her mother once she starts a relationship with Sweetwater. If Sweetwater had been able to perceive Dorothy Murdock as Jerry Calhoun had, he might have been able to connect the two postures as the indicator
of a dissolving woman. With knowledge of her mother, Sweetwater might have noticed Sue’s entire physical presence turn into an antithesis of her previous demeanor:

She stopped and laid her hands together in her lap. Her ankles and knees were together, very straight, demure, almost, and she sat up very straight, and looked straight at him. He could see her hands slowly clench in her lap. (AHG 305)

Sue occupies the smallest personal space possible, a mark of low self-esteem, and represses her formerly intense feelings with the clasped position of her hands. However, Sweetwater does not perceive the change in Sue; he is more concerned with himself and does not provide Sue with any comfort comparable to Slim Sarrett’s nurturing. Instead, Sweetwater relates a misogynous tale about his violent treatment of a prostitute, which he counts as "among [his] greatest achievements" (AHG 307).

Sue, raised in a patriarchal, misogynous environment, does not recognize this side of Sweetwater and makes her second engagement announcement of the novel, prompted by her pregnancy. The result of Sweetwater’s denial of her is a relationship of struggle and conflict, a "wordless contest" as "when two wrestlers first lay hand to each other, and stand, motionless" (AHG 313). Violence, a non-verbal, negative mode of the semiotic realm, permeates Sue’s world. Inescapable, it is her learned impulse from the strain of
violence in the Murdock family. However, she turns violent against herself, the typical feminine way of showing harm. She mimics her mother’s method: she becomes an alcoholic. In effect, she uses violence against the only other person she has control over, the fetus inside her created by Sweetwater: "I, Sue Murdock, who am about to become a mother, have drunk a pint. It is one thing little Sue can do" (AHG 318). In addition, her threat of abortion is her final attempt to "win" her wordless battle with Sweetwater, an unemotional, patriarchal man she says is "just like my father" (AHG 320).

In the revelation uttered with unchanging vocal inflection that she will abort the fetus, Sue Murdock illustrates another pattern in Warren: a woman uncomfortable with maternity. She follows this admission with a highly metaphorical act of preparing a meal which includes scrambled eggs and a glass of milk, both symbols of maternity:

She scrambled the eggs lightly, and then dumped them into a plate. . . . Then, with an air of formality, she seated herself, picked up her fork, and tasted the first mouthful. She masticated it very slowly. . . . When she had eaten it, she lifted a third bite to her lips, and actually took a morsel into her mouth. She laid the fork down with most of the egg still on it. With her
tongue, she forced the uneaten morsel back to her
lips, and wiped it away with a paper napkin. She
inspected the smeared mass on the napkin, then
with a sudden positive gesture, crumpled up the
napkin and threw it to the floor. (AHG 356)

This metaphor of abortion signifies that Sue has already had
her fill of motherhood. She completes the meal with a
bottle of whiskey, soon slipping into a drunken reverie,
similar to her mother’s routine. The reverie is filled with
repetitions of "go to sleep," a self-induced lullaby to
regain relaxation she has felt before in the semiotic state
of rhythm and repetition.

With the interruption of Slim Sarrett’s arrival, Sue is
propelled first into the childhood state: "She laughed,
delightedly, like a child, seeming to be floating in the
dark" (AHG 361). Slim Sarrett nearly repeats the same
gestures of his formerly nurturing movements with Sue, but
unable to nurture anymore, he places himself fully in the
symbolic state by committing the adult sin of the
postlapsarian world: murder. Yet, he maintains the smooth
fashion of his character: "Sitting by the bed, on the
chair, Slim Sarrett gradually increased the pressure upon
her throat, until he strangled her" (AHG 361). Kristeva
observes that combining the pre-Oedipal urges of connection
with the mother with symbolic law generates a "destructive
wave," setting the person experiencing this drive on "the
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path of destruction, aggressivity, and death" ("Revolution" 95). Sarrett recognizes Sue narcissistically as his other half: the semiotic, female side of himself. By destroying Sue, he expresses his desire to be only in the socially acceptable, masculine, symbolic state, but killing Sue does not eradicate his feminine side.

Continuing the overall misogynous tone of the male characters in the novel, Jerry Calhoun’s uncle relates the typical patriarchal attitude toward the deserved murder of a woman who does not adhere to society’s idea of a lady: "Oh, it serves her right, her laying round with men, her high-stepping, her drinking likker and laying round with men and not caring who" (366). A woman who is sexually active and denies maternal inclinations is not held in favor by the world of the patriarchy; thus, she is punished through death for her sins in the postlapsarian world.

William Faulkner’s literary influence on Warren’, is seen in the episode where Slim Sarrett reacts coldly after the murder of his lover. Although a reversal of gender from the murder episode in Faulkner’s short story, "A Rose for Emily," Slim Sarrett is a caricature of Homer Barron, who is a "man’s man"; however, Warren subverts the same description with Sarrett. In his hotel room, Sarrett arranges his belongings like Barron’s in the bedroom of Emily Grierson, from the carefully placed "two suits on the bed" to the "silver-mounted set of brushes, which he placed on the
bureau" (AHG 377). The calculated insanity, reflected in Sarrett's actions is comparable with Emily Grierson's implied controlled insane actions:

Through all the violence of his movements, his face remained expressionless, except for a light parting of the lips, as though that chiseled face were, somehow, detached from, and superior to, the strains and contortions and rhythmic agonies of the glistening body. (AHG 377)

With this combination of character types, Sarrett once again reverts to his androgynous self. He tries to compose a poem, but his life is filled with nothing in a wordless existence: "He lay there, trying to think of nothing, nothing, nothing at all, while life stirred and swarmed and uncoiled in its dim, undulant, rhythmic, fulfilling roar" (AHG 379). Therefore, when he loses his masculine identity, he is reduced to a semiotic, rhythmic existence incapable of producing words. Like Percy Munn in Night Rider, "nothing" is pervasive in Slim Sarrett's postlapsarian life. Through his desire to murder Sue, who is the embodiment of the feminine side of Sarrett's personality, Sarrett illustrates patriarchal insanity, manifested in the effort to eliminate the natural, feminine side of himself. However, his crime results in the opposite effect: wordlessness. If he were fully situated in the symbolic realm, his efforts to compose a poem would not require as much deliberation and labor. As
indicated by H. D. Herring, Slim Sarrett's insanity stands as the archetype of the madness in everyone in the novel, all of whom are "tortured and destroyed" in a failed world (63).

The semiotic nature of life also affects Jerry Calhoun when he gains knowledge of Sue Murdock's murder. Acknowledging that he once held a murderous impulse for Sue, he realizes upon his release from jail, through his wordlessness and the swaying and lurching of the car's motions, that he holds within him yet another murderous impulse--this time for his father. He again suppresses his murderous intent because he is reminded, like Percy Munn, of the rhythm of life as he recognizes his father's presence:

    He became aware of the ticking of a clock. He listened to the clock, and knew that in a minute that big, sagging, creased old face would turn toward him, not in accusation, not in rancor, not even in despair, but simply in recognition and acceptance, which would be most horrible of all. (AHG 384)

The more horrifying realization is Jerry's recognition that he has fantasized Bogan Murdock as his father, and he has wanted to eradicate his own father, an Oedipal impulse. Therefore, Jerry Calhoun has respected a man who, like the portrait in the Murdock library, is "ruthless, vindictive, cunning, and headstrong" (AHG 391), unlike his nurturing,
actual father who prepares breakfast and allows his son to sleep late.

Perhaps if Jerry Calhoun had recognized the nurturing, semiotic aspects of his father earlier without dismissing them as weak, Jerry might have been more nurturant and open with Sue Murdock, providing her with the quality of Slim Sarrett she seemed to need without the psychological confusion and physical death that came in the Sarrett relationship. But Jerry Calhoun could not handle the complexity of a sexually confident woman in his life. Thus, the symbolic, postlapsarian world reigns, suppressing or killing the qualities of the semiotic world. Therefore, heaven’s gate, a place for prelapsarian innocence and forgivable sin, can be seen but never entered.
"A Conspiracy of Silence":

The Semiotic Communication of *All the King’s Men*

Robert Penn Warren achieves the highest level of complexity in depicting the clash between the semiotic and symbolic realms of human existence in his Pulitzer-prize winning novel, *All the King’s Men*, first published in 1946. James H. Justus has established the thematic importance of narrator Jack Burden’s struggle with the antitheses of idealism and realism (196); however, a semiotic analysis also illuminates the language which expresses this conflict. In *All the King’s Men* the struggle between the ideal and real world is most apparent in the rise of Willie Stark in the political arena, but on a more personal, human basis, the same struggle is intensified in male-female relationships throughout the novel. Confused by their complexity, Jack Burden perceives women primarily in generalizations, from naive and pure to physical and shrewish. However, once Burden experiences a semiotic state of existence, he begins to understand at least one woman, Anne Stanton, and they are finally able to communicate more effectively than most male and female characters in Warren’s fiction.

The significance of rhythm in the novel as an indicator of the semiotic realm begins with the typical Warren
technique of motion related to transportation. Jack Burden notices the mesmerizing effect of the middle line of the highway as he rides toward Mason City: "If you don't quit staring at that line and don't take a few deep breaths and slap yourself hard on the back of the neck you'll hypnotize yourself" (All the King’s Men 1). Burden senses that, if he becomes too heavily caught up in the rhythm of life, danger is near; however, this rhythm is everywhere, unavoidable as the "violent, metallic, throbbing blue of the sky" (AKM 1).

Unlike the beginnings of Night Rider and At Heaven’s Gate, however, the opening to All the King’s Men does not jolt the reader from a semiotic state into symbolic reality with an interruption of rhythm. Instead, the first-person narrator, a male occupant of the symbolic realm, warns that the semiotic, although enticing, should not be reckoned with; if one succumbs to the hypnotic effect of the highway, the result could be fatal:

You’ll come to just at the moment when the right front wheel hooks over into the black dirt shoulder off the slab, and you’ll try to jerk her back on but you can’t because the slab is high like a curb, and maybe you’ll try to reach to turn off the ignition just as she starts the dive. But you won’t make it, of course. (AKM 1)

With this warning, Jack Burden conveys the symbolic world’s idea that the semiotic is a realm to be feared and avoided.
Jack Burden tells the story mostly in a journalistic aloofness (Justus 196); he is intent on describing the facts leading up to the demise of Willie Stark, with whom he has formed a homological bond. This bond of sameness and paternity forms through a wordless, generally masculine sign of handshaking, but a more personal action occurs between Jack Burden and Willie Stark:

Willie’s hand had given mine three decorous pump-handle motions, and he said, ‘Glad to meetcha, Mr. Burden,’ like something he had memorized, and then, I could have sworn, he gave me a wink. (AKM 15)

Randolph Runyon indicates that Jack Burden perceives Willie’s wink as a paternal “gift” (63). Clearly, Jack presumes homology in the ambiguous action: “maybe you winked because you figured you and me had some views in common” (AKM 15). These “views in common” make Jack Burden the heir of Willie Stark’s ideas, especially those concerning politics but also his understanding of the “other”: in particular, of women.

The generalized depiction of women in the novel begins with Lucy Stark, Willie’s wife. She is content with the rhythms of her environment, a semiotic space shared with Willie’s father, who lives on his farm as an isolate:

So they sat there in their common knowledge, while the chunk on the hearth stewed and hissed and
crumbled, and were together in the down beat and
pause of the rhythm of their lives. (AKM 24)

Everything about Lucy is described in "nice" terms; she is a
good mother, an obedient wife, and a passive woman in that
she is not willing to fight to keep her teaching position.
Much like Night Rider's May Munn, Lucy Stark is a selfless
woman. She is content in her natural environment; her only
concern is her husband's career, not her own; and she lacks
confidence in her opinions, which is indicated by her use of
tag questions in her conversations with Willie:

"They tried to run it over me," he repeated,
sullenly, twisting his heavy body in the chair.
"Like I was dirt."

"Willie," she said, leaning toward him a
little, "they would have been crooks even if they
didn't try to run it over you."
He wasn't paying her much mind.

"They'd be crooks, wouldn't they?" (AKM 61)
Lucy Stark repeats the tag "Wouldn't they?" two more times
before Willie finally acknowledges her opinion. Lucy's
reassurance is complete, evident in the "confident birdlike
lift of her head" (AKM 62).

Willie Stark, however, is absorbed into his own
environment and hardly notices Lucy's presence. He sinks
easily into a narcissistic reverie, which Jack Burden
describes as "the distance which was not distance but which
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was . . . simply himself" (AKM 62). This immersion into self is a rhythmic one for him, one he exhibits frequently by pacing. While he paces, Willie formulates the ideas which make him "the spokesman for the tongue-tied population of honest men" (AKM 63). He has the verbal abilities required for success in the symbolic world, yet he acquires these skills through a semiotic, trance-like state. He perfects his speeches in a manner involving deliberate manipulation of repetition and gesturing: "If you were in the next room, you could hear him pacing and speaking, and when he stopped pacing you knew he had stopped in front of the mirror to polish up a gesture" (AKM 70). Like Narcissus’s gazing into the water to lovingly see and admire himself, Willie’s recurrent action of looking into the mirror conveys what Julia Kristeva says is "a defense against the emptiness of separation" ("Freud and Love" 257).

Willie Stark has felt a homological bond with his political affiliations, and he does not wish to sever this attachment. As a result, he becomes self-immersed to "throttle the suffering of emptiness" (Kristeva, "Freud and Love" 258). Willie thrives on the sense of belonging, and he feeds on the response of the crowd, which is a rhythmic fulfillment of his narcissistic drive:

There is nothing like the roar of the crowd when it swells up, all of a sudden at the same time, out of the thing which is in every man in the
crowd but is not himself. The roar would swell and rise and fall and swell again, with the Boss standing with his right arm raised straight to Heaven and his red eyes bulging. (AKM 146)

Since Willie Stark is familiar with both verbal and non-verbal forms of communication, he seemingly should be able to communicate with the women in his life more adequately. However, since he is narcissistic in his pre-symbolic state, he is unable to achieve connection with them. Yet, the women unconsciously sense his semiotic nature and remain dangerously attracted to him.

An early Warren technique in characterization is to provide opposites as "Jungian-like shadow selves," as James Justus indicates (4). As May Munn has her opposite, Lucille Christian, in Night Rider, Lucy Stark has her opposite, Sadie Burke. While Lucy is submissive and stereotypically supportive as the "good" wife, Sadie Burke is one of the king's "men." Sadie's features illustrate her brusque nature:

She had absolutely black hair, which she cut off at a crazy length and which went out in all directions in a wild, electric way. Her features were good, if you noticed them, which you were inclined not to do, because her face was pocked.

(AKM 73)

Sadie is masculinized by her worldliness, while Lucy Stark
remains "girlish" (AKM 59). Whereas "nice" is the common description for Lucy Stark's features; "wild" is the frequent descriptor of Sadie Burke. Sadie's actions are not feminine: "She took a drag of the coffee, and then a deep drag of the cigarette . . . , jabbing out the butt savagely in the cup" (AKM 75). However, Lucy occupies herself with her sewing and keeps her gaze pointed downward at her cloth while she talks. This demure presence contrasts highly with Sadie Burke, who makes her presence known and is not intimidated in the male-dominated arena: "She had been around a long time, talking to men and looking them straight in the eye like a man" (AKM 84). Like her actions, Sadie's language is equally rough. Her statements are commonly imperative ones beginning with "Listen," thus conveying a high level of confidence in what she has to say. Like Night Rider's Lucille Christian, Sadie Burke does not provide self-effacing tag questions at the end of her dialogue; instead, she condescends toward the usually lower intelligence of her listeners. For instance, when speaking to Willie Stark, she delivers her information in a harsh, direct way:

Listen, if you can get this through your thick head. They wanted you to split the MacMurfee vote. In the sticks. Do you get that or do you want a picture? Can you get that straight, you wooden head? (AKM 81)
However, Sadie's predicament is her femaleness. She is a member of Willie's exclusive circle, but since she is female, she cannot occupy a formal office in the Stark administration, unlike other, minor members of the group: "He was a man and was Attorney General. And Sadie Burke was just Sadie Burke" (AKM 97). Even though Sadie is more masculine than feminine in her character traits, she is nevertheless slighted because she is a woman. Through his description of her physical features, Jack Burden devalues Sadie's character by describing her with words like "crazy" and "wild." In addition, he provides hints that she has been and will be persecuted. The depiction of her face as "a plaster-of-Paris mask of Medusa which some kid has been using as a target for a BB gun" (AKM 141) provides one of clues which indicate that Sadie will be further exploited. Like the carelessly misogynous treatment of the goddess Diana in At Heaven's Gate, Warren's use of Medusa, a mythological female known for her power over men, establishes that a strong woman will not be respected in the patriarchal modern world.

Warren depicts in Anne Stanton the most complex female character of his fiction. Anne Stanton is a dynamic character incapable of being categorized. If Lucy Stark is the extreme domestic, nurturing woman and Sadie Burke is the extreme brusque, independent woman, then Anne Stanton is located between these two extremes. She functions at a
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semiotic level and forms semiotic attachments to males in her life, whether they are able to reciprocate or not. Anne Stanton retains this ability from childhood, when she, her brother Adam, and Jack Burden shared an innocent, prelapsarian existence. Living near the sea, their typical activity was a semiotic one needing no words: "We used to sit in the boat, under the hot sun, hour after hour, and never a word" (AKM 102). Their protected, fantasy world echoes the blissful one of Edgar Allan Poe’s poem "Annabel Lee," echoed by Warren’s conscious word choice:

Yes, Adam Stanton, Anne Stanton, and Jack Burden, back in Burden’s Landing, had a good time when they were children by the sea. A squall might, and did, pile in off the Gulf, and the sky blacked out with the rain and the palm trees heaved in distraction and then leaned steady with the vanes gleaming like wet tin in the last turgid, bilious, tattered light, but it didn’t chill us or kill us in the kingdom by the sea. (AKM 103)

Warren’s placement of Burden’s Landing near the Gulf of Mexico supports water as a primary symbol in the novel.

Anne Stanton figures most closely with this intricate image of femininity, and her special relationship with the water is obvious through the diving episodes in the novel. For Anne Stanton, diving is natural and methodical. This physical, non-verbal activity takes her away from a symbolic
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environment into the depths of semiotic bliss. Jack Burden recognizes her skill and tries to meet her on this level. Using the diving motif, Warren employs one of his recurrent techniques in the treatment of sexuality, which is making a non-physical scene highly erotic:

She lifted her head high for an instant, with the gracile motion a seal has, and smiled, then curled over forward in a clean surface dive. Her sharp small heels, side by side, flickered for a second above the water, then drew under. I caught up with her, and she did it again. Every time I caught up with her she would lift her head, and smile, and dive again. (AKM 117)

Significantly, Warren has Anne Stanton in command of this scene as she repeats her non-verbal movements and entices Jack Burden to duplicate her actions. Notably, Jack Burden's attempt to meet Anne Stanton on her semiotic level is highly evolved for a man in Warren's fiction, even if he is merely mimicking her actions. They achieve synthesis:

The fifth time I caught up, she didn't dive. She rolled over with a light, lounging twist of her body, and floated on her back, looking up at the sky, her arms spread wide. So I turned over, too, and floated, about five or six feet from her, and looked up at the sky. (AKM 117)

Nevertheless, when Jack Burden and Anne Stanton leave this
aqueous environment of semiotic communication, the natural world turns harsh, bringing an unpleasant conclusion to a psychologically passionate experience typical of Warren's naturalism:

Before we got to the beach, the rain had begun, big spaced, heavy, independent drops that prickled the yet glossy surface of the water. Then it was a driving gust of rain, and the surface of the water was gone. (AKM 118)

Since Jack Burden is able to communicate wordlessly with Anne Stanton, he wants the same type of communication with his mother, with whom he argues whenever he goes home. He wants to retrieve the state before the separation of the mother and child, a psychological event which replaces the wordlessness of the semiotic state with the often disharmonious verbalization of the symbolic. He asks his mother, "Why can't we just stop talking? Why can't I just come home for a day or two and us not talk, not open our mouths?" (AKM 128). Since Jack Burden yearns for non-verbal communication, it would seem plausible that he would be able to join Anne Stanton on her semiotic level. However, before Jack Burden can understand the reasons why he desires to achieve the semiotic, he must find significance in his own life.

Jack Burden begins to discover the components of a mutual and prosperous relationship by studying the
relationship of Cass Mastern and Annabelle Trice, who provide a model of negation in their unsuccessful affair. The ensuing love triangle, emphasized by Warren’s choice of Trice for the last name, resembles relationships between men and women throughout Warren’s writing. Like Night Rider’s Percy Munn, Cass Mastern wants to observe Annabelle during her time by herself in hopes of gaining a higher understanding of her: “I had the fancy that since she thought herself alone I might penetrate into her being” (AKM 173). Like Lucille Christian, Annabelle is “reckless and passionate of disposition, hating all mention of the future” (AKM 170). Annabelle relishes in the physical aspect of their affair, as Cass Mastern describes:

Scarce a corner, cranny, or protected nook or angle of my friend’s trusting house did we not at one time or another defile, and that even in the full and shameless light of day. (AKM 171)

Like Sue Murdock in At Heaven’s Gate, Annabelle is a sexually confident woman who takes risks, but she pays for them through guilt, a characteristic which relates her to Lucille Christian in Night Rider. Another shared trait with Lucille Christian is Annabelle’s acceptance of the responsibility for the unexpected death of another person. Bill Christian, Lucille Christian’s father in Night Rider, dies after finding out about Lucille’s sexual relationship with his friend Percy Munn; Duncan Trice, Annabelle’s
husband, commits suicide after discovering his wife’s affair with his friend Cass Mastern. After Duncan Trice’s death, Annabelle loses her former vivacity and turns cold; Cass Mastern also loses his passion, similar to Percy Munn:

I too was perfectly cold, as of a mortal chill. And the coldness was the final horror of the act which we performed, as though two dolls should parody the shame and filth of man to make it doubly shameful. (AKM 174)

Perhaps because Cass Mastern cannot penetrate to Annabelle’s world but most likely because Annabelle cannot cope with the guilt of her husband’s suicide, their relationship fails, and both partners lose their former determination to live. This pattern is typical of Warren in that a once-passionate affair turns cold and unfulfilling. Realizing the impact on his ancestor’s spirit, Jack Burden goes into a sympathetic, hypnotic state of inactivity. The point of view changes to a third-person narrative:

He would sleep twelve hours, fourteen hours, fifteen hours, feeling himself, while asleep, plunge deeper and deeper into sleep like a diver groping downward into dark water feeling for something which may be there and which would glitter if there were any light in the depth, but there isn’t any light. (AKM 189)

This episode of reflection provides Jack’s first careful
examination of the semiotic realm as he dives into himself after having immersed himself in the life of Cass Mastern. Kristeva postulates that by withdrawing from the constrained, social aspect of one’s life, he or she avoids the symbolic realm, which will later help in communicating with others who realize the semiotic realm ("About Chinese Women" 153). With Jack Burden’s withdrawal into himself, he begins his personal quest to find the significance of the semiotic realm.

Jack Burden’s confusion concerning gender roles is a major factor in his inability to communicate with women, especially Anne Stanton. His primary model is his parents’ interpretations of gender. Jack Burden’s mother is a mostly unemotional woman concerned only with acquisitions—new furniture and new husbands; most importantly, the Scholarly Attorney, who Jack Burden thinks is his father, is more maternal and nurturing than any woman in the novel. In addition, Jack’s ideas about relationships are also skewed. He believes, as do the models with which he is provided, that one partner must be domineering, but he knows that this arrangement does not work, based on his experience with his histrionic ex-wife. However, he has seen only dysfunctional relationships.

Even though Jack Burden and Anne Stanton have operated near equilibrium through semiotic rhythms, their relationship cannot prosper until Jack understands why he is
able to communicate on her level. Even when they are not officially involved in a relationship as a couple, their interaction remains rhythmic and non-verbal:

We kept step, not talking for a half block. I looked down, watching her feet flick out, one-two, one-two. She was wearing black suede shoes, very severe, very mannish, and she clicked the pavement with authority, but they were small and the fine ankles flickered, one-two, one-two, hypnotically. (AKM 242)

Jack Burden's ability to recognize Anne Stanton's rhythm indicates that he carries the potential to penetrate to her world. Now that they are beyond the childlike existence they experienced at Burden's Landing, they must develop their relationship into a mature one. Jack notices the evolution of his image of her:

But I kept on peering into her face, really looking at it for the first time, after all the years, for the close, true look at a thing can only be one snatched outside of time and the questions. (AKM 248)

As Kristeva indicates, time is a structure of the symbolic world, and like verbal communication, it is "legislating, paternal, and restrictive" ("About Chinese Women" 153). Therefore, since Jack's perception of Anne Stanton is wordless and "outside of time" (AKM 248), he is approaching
the semiotic realm. However, until he changes his perception of Anne Stanton as the innocent, undefiled girl of his youth, Jack Burden will not truly be able to reach her state of existence.

Jack Burden entices the reader’s curiosity by asking a provocative question about Anne Stanton’s innocence: "How had Anne Stanton known about the hospital offer?" (AKM 263). Sadie Burke provides the answer to Jack’s question, which shocks him because he has not actively researched the question, probably out of his fear of an unpleasant answer. The knowledge of Anne’s affair with Willie Stark numbs Jack and propels him into another semiotic, hypnotic state marked by textual repetition similar to the pace he noticed in Anne’s stride:

> For it takes the greatest effort to believe in their reality and to believe in their reality you must believe in your own, but to believe in your own you must believe in theirs, but to believe in theirs you must believe in your own--one-two, one-two, one-two, like feet marching. (AKM 268)

Even though Jack has made the discovery of Anne’s fall from innocence, he maintains a semiotic communication with her as she wordlessly confirms Sadie’s revelation: "Then I looked into her face. She met my gaze quite steadily. I did not say anything. And I did not need to. For, looking at me, she slowly nodded" (AKM 269). Anne Stanton’s ability to
meet Jack’s gaze without demurely looking down indicates that she is mature enough to deal with the situation instead of avoiding it.

Jack’s reaction to Anne’s postlapsarian activity provokes his escape to the West. Warren introduces Jack Burden’s journey through the repetition of "It is where you go" (AKM 270). Similar to his inward escape after the Cass Mastern episode, Jack Burden escapes to the West, a mythological place where one is seemingly free from society’s restrictions. During his Western sojourn, he reflects deeply and intensely on the evolution of his relationship with Anne Stanton and as a result comes to several clear realizations about himself.

First of all, as he reflects on the magical summer they spent together, Jack Burden realizes that he has perceived Anne Stanton nearly as a deity suitable for immortalizing: "it is too bad the Greeks didn’t play tennis, for if they had played tennis they would have put Anne Stanton on a Greek vase" (AKM 274). At twenty-one years old, Jack is the one who lacks the confidence to initiate the physical aspect of their relationship: "I kept assuring myself that I wasn’t timid, wasn’t afraid." Seventeen-year-old Anne, however, is sure of herself. When Jack interrupts their comfortable silence with the vocalization of Anne’s name, he asserts the symbolic into a semiotic environment. Anne preserves the semiotic by assuming the gesture of the
sexually confident woman in Warren's fiction:

She turned her face toward me, not lifting her head from the back of the seat, just rolling it on the leather cushion. She lifted a finger to her lip, and said, "Sh, sh!" Then she took the finger away, and smiled directly and simply across the thousand miles of leather cushion between us.

(AKM 275)

Ironically, Anne Stanton has kept the secret of her affair with Willie Stark from Jack Burden. Usually, the reader knows about the affairs of Warren's women characters, but other characters in the novel do not. Thus, Anne has been placing her finger on her lips (as the typical gesture of the sexually confident woman) toward Warren so that the reader does not find out the secret which provides such a dissonant view toward Anne Stanton's character.

Jack and Anne maintain a "wordless and handless" pattern at night, while during the day they perform an equally repetitive pattern of diving. The diving scenes are intense and passionate and become the most erotic scenes in the novel. Anne Stanton has full command of her ability and exercises it with confidence and a sense of risk:

She would go up high--she worked up higher and higher, day by day--and stand up there in the sunlight poised there at the very verge. Then, when she lifted her arms, I would feel that
something was about to snap in me. Then down she would fly, a beautiful swan dive, with her arms wide to emphasize her trim breasts and her narrow back arched and her long legs close and sweet together. . . . Then she would knife into the water, and her twin heels would draw through the wreath of ripple and the flicker of spray, and be gone. (AKM 279)

Adam, the protective male figure in her life, is apprehensive of her dangerous behavior, but Anne does not let him diminish her passion. Jack Burden watches her performance in awe and notices the way in which Anne takes confident pleasure in her repetitious, non-verbal ability:

Over and over again. I used to wonder what her face was like just at the moment when she entered the water. What expression was on it. (AKM 279)

Anne’s diving makes her days pleasantly repetitious; Anne’s experiences with Jack at night develop a similar routine, commonly ending with more rhythms with her habit of humming and repetitions of "Oh, Jackie, Jackie, it’s a wonderful night, it’s a wonderful night, it’s a wonderful night, it’s a wonderful night, Jackie-boy, say it, say it, say it!" (AKM 279).

Even though Jack Burden recognizes Anne Stanton’s rhythmic lifestyle, he does not fully understand it; thus,
he knows not to pursue their relationship further: "It was as though she was aware of a rhythm, . . . I myself was not truly aware of that rhythm and compulsion which bemused her" (AKM 287). At one crucial point, Jack meets Anne on her semiotic level as she completes a dive. The scene provides the most highly erotic episode of the novel:

Just as she entered the water, clean as a whistle, I plunged in, too, diving deep and drawing down with my stroke. . . . I pulled deep and met her as she began to rise. I put my arms around her waist and drew her to me and put our lips together. . . . We rose very slowly, or at least it seemed very slowly, and I was holding my breath so long there was a pain in my chest and a whirling dizziness in my head, but the pain and dizziness had passed the line over into a rapture. (AKM 289)

After having had a such a highly sensual experience in the water, Jack and Anne might have pushed their relationship to an actual consummation; however, when they decide to have sex, the experience is completely lacking in passion. As he thinks of everything else but Anne, who stands nearly naked in his room, Jack Burden becomes as asexual and complacent as Jerry Calhoun in At Heaven's Gate. The males fear that a sexual encounter might lead to a more highly developed relationship, which would provide a symbiosis between the
semiotic and symbolic realms of female and male interaction:

My mind kept flying off to peculiar things—to a book I had started and never finished, to wondering whether I would go back to the dormitory that fall or take a room out, to an algebraic formula I remembered which kept running through my head, to a scene, just the corner of a field with a broken stile, which I tried desperately to locate out of my past. (AKM 294)

Since an actual sexual experience apparently cannot be pleasant in Warren’s fiction, Jack observes that "everything was wrong, completely wrong," and he interrupts the scene with the vocalization of Anne’s name and the symbolic, socialized judgement of "it wouldn’t be right" (AKM 295).

Jack Burden’s interactions while he is in the West allow him to return to a prelapsarian, rhythmic state of existence for a short while, enough time to make him realize his misperception of Anne Stanton:

It was bracing because after the dream I felt that, in a way, Anne Stanton did not exist. The words Anne Stanton were simply a name for a peculiarly complicated piece of mechanism which should mean nothing whatsoever to Jack Burden, who himself was simply another rather complicated piece of mechanism. . . . I felt that I had discovered the secret source of all strength and
all endurance. That dream solves all problems.

(\textit{AKM} 311)

With this recognition Jack Burden illustrates Kristeva's idea that "[Woman] does not exist with a capital 'W,' possessor of some mythical unity." Kristeva adds that this archetype must be challenged to eradicate patriarchal stereotypes ("Women's Time" 205). Therefore, when Jack Burden realizes that he has perceived Anne Stanton in "that image of the little girl on the waters of the bay" (\textit{AKM} 311), he assumes a more mature perception of her; he realizes she is a woman, with a lower-case "w," and capable of human error.

Jack Burden now sees the bay of Burden's Landing in a different perspective as well. Since the body of water is a feminine symbol and is commonly connected with Anne Stanton, Jack's view of women as a whole can be seen as an evolved one. Even though Jack has always been aware of the potential dark side of the sea, the sea has primarily been a place of peaceful refuge for him. Upon his return from the West, however, Jack perceives the body of water in a tone similar to Matthew Arnold's narrator in "To Marguerite--Continued." Both narrators have had an estranging experience with the women they have idolized, and Warren calls on one of his many literary influences to describe the Gulf as "a corner of the great, salt, unplumbed waters of the world" (\textit{AKM} 339-340). Warren's lines are strikingly
similar to Arnold’s line, "the unplumbed, salt, estranging sea" (l. 24).²

As an indicator of despair and its connection to the diving motif in the novel, Jack Burden decides that truth is "like an undertow in a whirlpool" (AKM 343). Indeed, truth is a "terrible thing" and brings knowledge which destroys lives, a common theme in Warren. In All the King’s Men, Jack Burden’s knowledge of the Judge Irwin scandal provokes Irwin, Jack’s actual father, to kill himself, echoing the Oedipal theme of patricide found in Warren’s work. Even though Jack must deal with the responsibility of his role in Irwin’s death, he is relieved with the knowledge that a nurturing man was not his true father: "There was a kind of relief in knowing that that man was not my father. I had always felt some curse of his weakness upon me, or what I had felt to be that" (AKM 353). The symbolic world will not accept maternal qualities in a man; Jack Burden is comforted by the idea that he is not the product of a "maternal man."

Since both Jack Burden and Anne Stanton must deal with their guilt over the deaths of Judge Irwin, Willie Stark, and especially Adam Stanton, they share a sense of despair and humility. This shared complicity, unseen between the protagonists of Night Rider and At Heaven’s Gate, is important to the success of their relationship. Jack metaphorically describes this sense of symbiosis with Anne:

It was as though we each sat on the end of a
seesaw, beautifully balanced, but not in any tidy little play yard but over God knows what blackness... And if either of us should lean toward the other, even a fraction of an inch, the balance would be upset. (AKM 404)

In an attempt to restore routine to their lives, they avoid talking about the disruptive circumstances. Even though semiotic wordlessness is usually pleasant for them, their "conspiracy of silence" disturbs Jack, but he knows that words might upset their balance:

We didn't say a word, but some afternoons I read to Anne. I read the first book I had laid hand to the first afternoon when I found I couldn't sit there any longer in that silence which bulged and creaked with all the unsaid words. It was the first volume of the works of Anthony Trollope. That was a safe bet. Anthony never upset any equilibriums. (AKM 405)

When Jack pursues his concern over finding out who told Adam Stanton about Anne's affair with Willie, he sees in Anne's eyes "the recoil of fear and pain." Reading her semiotic message, he resumes "the conspiracy of silence" (AKM 406).

When Jack Burden visits Sadie Burke, he sees the results of guilt on that confident woman: voluntary confinement in a mental hospital. Her face is still the same, but Jack notices a difference:
Her chopped-off black hair was wild and her face was chalk-white and the afternoon light striking across it made it look more than ever like the plaster-of-Paris mask of Medusa riddled with BB shot. But it was a mask flung down on a pillow and the eyes that looked out of it belonged to the mask. They did not belong to Sadie Burke. There wasn’t anything burning there. (AKM 408)

Like the confident women in *Night Rider* and *At Heaven’s Gate*, Sadie Burke has received the symbolic, patriarchal world’s punishment for being sure of herself. Her acceptance of the responsibility for Willie Stark’s death as an act of revenge takes away her former cynical determination to live.

To complete the effect of the deaths on the women involved, Jack visits Lucy Stark, who has returned to her farm in an effort to eradicate fully the painful symbolic world from her life. To convince herself that the baby she has adopted is truly her grandson, she repeats, "It’s Tom’s baby. It’s my little grandbaby. It’s Tom’s baby." Later, she resumes the repetition with five more mentions of Tom’s paternity of the child (AKM 425). At the end of their visit, she repeats, "Willie was a great man" three times (AKM 427-428). She semiotically repeats what she most wants to believe, even though the symbolic, realistic world would probably disagree with her.
However, after seven months to heal themselves independently, Jack Burden and Anne Stanton are able to achieve a symbiosis. As they sit in a "motionless swing," they reconcile to a more pleasant balance after Jack tells her the story of his actual paternity. No more explanation is necessary for them:

We did not talk any more. I smoked another half a pack of cigarettes, sitting there in the swing in the dark with the summer air heavy and damp and almost sick-sweet around us, and trying to catch the sound of her breath in the silence. (AKM 435)

When they reach this contented stage of their semiotic relationship, they are mature enough to achieve a successful relationship after nearly twenty years of trying to achieve this state. Even the bay is a peaceful place again as Jack and Anne find solace in watching the "diving floats lift gently in the sun" (AKM 438).

Jack Burden realizes that his life is as important as Willie Stark's life, when he comments on the three years' time of the novel's events: "This has been the story of Willie Stark, but it is my story, too. For I have a story" (AKM 435). With this realization, Jack achieves a balance between the semiotic and the symbolic in his life and is able to reflect the balance through both a partnership with Anne and a new homological identity with Cass Mastern.

As one of Warren's protagonists, Jack Burden progresses
further in self-knowledge than any other male character in his fiction up to this time. Likewise, Anne Stanton deals with her punishment of being a sexually confident woman better than other women in Warren's work. Therefore, the ending of the novel does not paint as bleak a picture of human existence as is seen in *Night Rider* and *At Heaven's Gate*. Perhaps the key to these characters' ability to live in the brutalizing, postlapsarian world is that they recognize and acknowledge the co-existing semiotic pattern underneath the symbolic articulations. And even though Willie Stark was also aware of both states of existence, Jack Burden realizes he does not have to follow Willie's model exactly; instead, he adapts his final homological view with Willie from Willie's final words: "It could have been all different" (*AKM* 400), choosing an affirmative life decision to make it all different.
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Notes

1. In *The Achievement of Robert Penn Warren*, James H. Justus points out Warren's influence from Faulkner in *At Heaven's Gate* through the "occasional spurts of fancy writing, and the more self-conscious stylistic effects." Justus adds that there are "detectable echoes from The Sound and the Fury, The Wild Palms, and perhaps Sanctuary" (179-180).

2. Warren continues to exhibit evidence of Matthew Arnold's influence on him later in the same chapter. Jack Burden describes "the true cry of the buried soul," which becomes apparent to him as he "held the hand" of his mother and felt "something like love" (*AKM* 352). This conscious word choice echoes Matthew Arnold's lines from "A Buried Life":

   Only--but this is rare--
   When a beloved hand is laid in ours,
   When, jaded with the rush and glare
   Of the interminable hours,
   Our eyes can in another's eyes read clear,
   When our world-deafen'd ear
   Is by the tones of a loved voice caress'd--
   A bolt is shot back somewhere in our breast,
   And a lost pulse of feeling stirs again. (ll. 77-85)

Warren also conveys Arnold's influence as he depicts Jack Burden's ability to read Anne Stanton's eyes after they achieve a balanced relationship.