

All the King's Men Study Guide

All the King's Men by Robert Penn Warren

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Plot Summary

The story is about Jack Burden, the right-hand man to the corrupt politician, Governor Willie Stark. As Willie's power and corruption grow larger, Jack's conscience becomes more eroded. He alienates his family and friends by working for Willie, but he resents himself for staying on Willie's payroll. Jack spends the novel narrating how he became Willie's lackey while unknowingly uncovering family secrets.

Jack Burden, Willie Stark, and Willie's political associates are on their way to Mason City for a press opportunity. It was Willie's second term as governor in the summer of 1936, and he was trying to get more publicity for another reelection. Willie tells Jack, his personal aide, to look into the history of Judge Irwin. The Judge had publicly defied Willie, so Willie wanted to find out some secret in order to blackmail the judge in revenge. Because Jack was a former newspaper reporter and research historian, Willie used him to do his dirty work.

Back when Willie was just the Mason County treasurer in 1922, Jack was working at a newspaper. He was sent to cover a scandal surrounding Willie; he had tried to stay away from corrupt politicians, but the politicians had framed him anyway. When a schoolhouse collapsed and killed a group of children, the public realized Willie was innocent. He won the support of the people and the 1930 race for governor. Jack, meanwhile, had entered what he called a "Great Sleep." He only awoke after Willie hired him.

Willie resisted the temptations of political power at first. It took three years before Willie succumbed to corruption. A member of his cabinet was caught in a scandal. Rather than firing him, Willie protected his associate. However, the rest of the state government officials wanted Willie gone after he proposed his wealth-sharing programs, and the cover-up was the last straw. However, Willie had Jack find incriminating evidence against each of his accusers. This is also when Willie started his affair with another woman after he and his wife had gotten a separation. Now that Jack had given Willie all the ammunition Willie needed to stay in power, Willie kept Jack on his permanent payroll. Jack was able to find out that Judge Irwin, formerly the state attorney general, was guilty of taking a bribe. He also found out his best friend's father had covered up the bribe.

Since Jack had found out information on Judge Irwin, Willie felt comfortable moving forward with his plans for a public hospital that would take care of its patients for free. Willie asked Adam Stanton, one of Jack's two best friends, to run the hospital. Adam wanted nothing to do with Willie or the hospital. However, it was his father who covered up for Judge Irwin years ago. Willie disclosed this information, and Adam was blackmailed into working for Willie. Jack then finds out Anne Stanton, Adam's sister, was the woman having an affair with Willie.

Jack is distraught by the news of Anne and Willie's affair, so he runs away to the West Coast in order to clear his mind. Anne was his first love, and they had a serious



relationship back in college. Anne, though, discovered Jack was lazy and cynical. She left him, and Jack soon dropped out of graduate school and began working for a newspaper. When Jack returns to the South, though, he is surprised to find things have taken a negative turn for Willie and his office.

Willie's son, a college boy, is accused of fathering a child out of wedlock. Willie's opponent in the election is using the news as a way of disrupting Willie's campaign. Willie then used the information on Judge Irwin to make the opponent leave the issue alone. Jack goes to visit Judge Irwin, his childhood father figure. Judge Irwin, refusing to be blackmailed, kills himself. It was only after the judge's death that Jack's mother let him know that Judge Irwin was his real father.

Because the threat to Judge Irwin didn't stop his opponent from dropping the issue about the child, Willie gives the hospital contract to a major supporter of his opponent. However, Willie's son goes into a coma after a serious football injury. Willie takes back the contract, angering his lieutenant governor, Tiny Duffy. Tiny finds Adam and tells him his sister was the woman having an affair with Willie. Furious, Adam assassinates Willie and is subsequently killed by Willie's guards.

The person who told Tiny about Willie's affair was his secretary and longtime mistress. She felt so guilty about Willie's death, though, that she checked into a mental institution. Willie's wife adopted her grandson soon after her own son died. At the end of the story, Jack marries Anne. He has stepped away from politics, and he is completing his book about Cass Mastern, Jack's Civil War-era ancestor. He had previously tried to write a thesis based on Mastern's diary, but Jack lacked the focus and drive to finish.



Chapter 1

Summary

Chapter 1 begins with Governor Willie Starks, his right-hand man Jack Burden, and Willie's political group in a car driving to Willie's hometown. Jack is reminiscing about the first time he met Willie. The men were in a bar and Jack was working as an investigative reporter for a newspaper. The first thing Jack had noticed was Willie didn't make an impressive politician. Years later, though, Willie still had his constituents in mind. He instructed Jack to find a lawyer for the son of a farmer. The boy had been accused of murdering a doctor's son. The case seemed impossible because of the doctor's social standing, but Willie wanted the boy have the best aide possible.

During Willie's photo opportunity at his childhood home, Jack became disgusted with how staged the pictures were. Willie leaves the photos and speaks with Jack. Apparently, Judge Montague Irwin had endorsed an opponent in the senate race, despite the fact Willie had wanted the judge's vote on his side. When the group went to Judge Irwin's house to talk to him, it was difficult for Jack to be there. Judge Irwin had been a father figure for Jack after his own father ran out on the family. But he stayed still while Willie threatened the judge with damage to his reputation. Later in the car, Willie instructs Jack to find incriminating evidence against Judge Irwin to use against him.

Analysis

It is apparent through Jack's thoughts and actions that he abhors working in politics. He even leaves Willie's photo opportunity to get away from the scene he sees as being false and representative of the facade politicians create. However, Jack lacks the will to leave Willie's side permanently. Rather than stepping up and facing the tough decisions in his life, Jack often retreats back to the past. He wants to figure out how and why he ended up on Willie's payroll, where he is now digging up incriminating evidence against politicians and making threats to the man who raised him after his father ran away. Jack knows Willie is doing the right thing by helping the poor people fight injustice; he is just wary of the methods Willie uses.

In the first chapter, Jack's unease is especially poignant because of his interaction with both Willie and Judge Irwin. Willie has given Jack a life; he gives Jack the means and opportunity to make a living. Jack also respects Willie's dedication to helping the poor and unfortunate. As for Judge Irwin, Jack looks at the judge as his own father. In his entire past, Judge Irwin was the man that raised him and believed in him. Now, though, the two men are at complete odds with each other, and Jack finds himself in a difficult and unpleasant position between the two male authority figures in his life.



Vocabulary

tarry, vitriolic, mirage, batiste, myrrh, canted, cholera, unvarnished, monstrously, amenities, tousle, glib, impertinent



Chapter 2

Summary

Back in 1922 when Jack was working as a newspaper reporter in Mason City, he was sent to investigate a story about many county politicians who had turned on each other. Willie, the county treasurer, had discovered his county-government peers had sold a building contract in exchange for bribes. Willie was trying to combat the situation, but he eventually lost his public office. After he went back to his family farm, though, the building collapsed and killed a handful of people. The county hailed Willie as a hero and he was persuaded to run for public office.

The first time he ran for office was nothing other than a ploy to split up the party vote. Willie always gave impersonal speeches, and the political figures decided to use this to their advantage. During this campaign, Willie picked up Tiny Duffy and Sadie Burke who both worked for the man who set up the campaign trick. One night, Sadie told Willie about the plan. The next day, he showed up drunk at a rally and threw his support behind the opposing candidate. From then on, he delivered entertaining speeches and was able to get the opposing candidate elected in spite of his “friends.” The next election year, though, he was able to win the vote himself. He begrudgingly placed Tiny and Sadie in his administration. Willie also asked Jack if he would join his payroll. Jack explains this conversation was the end of his third “Great Sleep,” a time in which he completely fell out of the present.

Analysis

Chapter 2 shows a complete difference between Jack and Willie. Both men have come a long way in the nearly ten years that Willie has been in office, and both men have changed radically. By comparing them to their personhood in Chapter 1, they barely seem like the same people. Willie’s political speeches are dry and impersonal; he wants the voters to see him as a plain, honest, and hardworking man who is looking out for their best interests. It is only after Sadie mocks him, though, that he realizes voters want zeal, passion, and extreme promises. Jack, on the other hand, shows a complete lack of morality. When Willie asks him to join his payroll, Jack finds no problem with hurting people for others’ political gain. This is a change from Chapter 1 when Jack was finding it increasingly difficult to keep ruining people’s lives.

The characters Tiny and Sadie represent a closer look at the dirty side of politics. Both are being used by a larger political power, and they see how their actions will benefit only themselves in the long run. Sadie’s sexual relationship with Willie also begins in this chapter. She believes, because she helped “make” Willie, she possesses a strong power over him. Tiny, on the other hand, eventually becomes Willie’s dumping grounds when Tiny works under Willie’s administration. Regardless of their positions within



Willie's team, they are willing to take any abuse necessary in order to climb the political ladder.

Vocabulary

oasis, wafted, apoplectically, marooned, diaphanous, savvy, dike, finagling, reprobation, sordid, quota, cageyness, wayfaring, irreconcilably, pestles



Chapter 3

Summary

In 1933, while Jack is working for Willie, he visits his mother and her new husband (whom he calls the “Young Executive”) in Burden’s Landing, a town founded by his ancestors. He also reminisces about his childhood friends Adam and Anne Stanton. In the present, he and his mother are at a dinner party hosted by Judge Irwin. Jack is accosted because of his political aligning with Willie. His mother also tries to set him up with a rich young girl; his mother is unsatisfied with Jack’s life, so she wants him to find a real job rather than working for Willie.

When Jack returns to Willie and his camp, Willie is in a fight with the state auditor, who was caught in a corrupt moneymaking scheme with the former governor. Willie made a deal with the man, though. Willie was about to have impeachment charges brought against him. In exchange for the state auditor’s support, he would cover up for the man’s indiscretions. As back up, Willie asked Jack to find incriminating evidence against each of the members of the impeachment committee; however, the impeachment charges were dropped almost immediately. Afterward, Willie returns home where his wife is angry. She hates that he protected the state auditor, and she hates that Willie is corrupting their son, Tom.

Analysis

Jack living in his home environment shows an interesting twist of character. He views his mother as a materialistic and uncaring woman. He explains this by stating her past three husbands have been “the Tycoon,” “the Count,” and “the Young Executive,” all terms that Jack uses to disassociate with them personally. He also explains she never gave him physical and emotional love when he was a child. Instead, she cared more about their social standing.

Jack also finds he is defined by the people he is around at the time. Jack is neither imposing nor passionate; he hardly has a personality all his own. However, he finds himself wanting the approval of the wealthy conservatives at Judge Irwin’s party. He doesn’t care as much that they respect his political leanings (because he doesn’t have any). He instead wants them to be impressed that he is a part of the current gubernatorial administration. This was the only reason he defended Willie and his actions; he wanted the wealthy conservatives to see he had insight and familiarity with both Willie’s personal and political life.

Vocabulary

preening, famished, spinets, embalming, isinglass, renege, hashing, candor, foggy, visage, adenoids, gallant



Chapter 4

Summary

While the beginning of the chapter begins right after Willie told Jack to find evidence against Judge Irwin, Jack reminisces about his time in graduate school. He had come into the possession of a Civil War-era ancestor's journal and other artifacts. The man's name was Cass Mastern. He was born poor, but his brother was able to send him to college. At that time, he became friends with Duncan and Annabelle Trice. Cass discovered he was in love with Annabelle, and the two began having an affair. Duncan found out, though, and committed suicide. Annabelle sold the slave that found his wedding ring. In her mind, she could not live with a person who knew about the affair.

Cass found out about the slave and vowed to bring her back. He tried looking for her, but she had vanished. Sullen, he returned and ended his relationship with Annabelle. He then tried to free all the slaves on his brother's plantation to make up for his debt to the one slave that Annabelle had sold. This project failed, and Cass joined the Confederacy even though he was an abolitionist. At first, he was upset nobody had killed him in war; however, he was then shot and died in an Atlanta hospital. After Jack had read this story, he wanted to use it as his thesis for his PhD. His problem, though, was he could not understand Cass's motives for any of his actions. He discarded the project and went into his first Great Sleep.

Analysis

This story plays an important allegorical role in Jack's life. Although he didn't recognize it at the time, his life was following the same path that Cass Mastern's life took. Like Jack, Cass only did things because they were handed to him. His brother paid for his college tuition, set him up in society, and allowed him to break free from poverty. Cass's brother is symbolic of Jack's mother. While the brothers' relationship was better than Jack and his mother's, Jack would be impoverished if his mother didn't support him financially. She is also the reason he went to college in the first place. She gave him connections, which allowed him to find the job capacity he currently fills.

The love triangle between Cass, Duncan, and Annabelle is echoed two times in Jack's life, and each of the two triangles results in a death. Jack briefly cites three victims at the beginning of the novel—Willie, Adam, and Judge Irwin. These three men all die because of their roles in a love triangle. The point that Jack has not quite reached, though, is Cass's discovery of personal responsibility. Even though Jack was not involved in any of the love triangles, he played a direct role in how they played out. In time, though, he will find and relate to Cass's motivations.



Vocabulary

sublunary, divan, antebellum, monastic, repudiation, Lucifer, arbor, vehemence, agile, somnambulist



Chapter 5

Summary

Back in the most present storyline, Jack is digging for incriminating evidence against Judge Irwin to give to Willie. Jack decides to look for money corruption because that's where most politicians flounder in their morals. Jack goes to visit someone he calls the "Scholarly Attorney" in a poor area of town. The Scholarly Attorney, as it turns out, is his own father who had become a missionary. Jack's father acts surprised his son showed up, but he acts aloof because of his extreme religious views. Jack then notices how the Scholarly Attorney interacts with his own "son," an invalid his father adopted, and Jack becomes jealous that the "son" got love and attention from his father. When Jack asks about the judge, the Scholarly Attorney tries not to give him any information. However, Jack gathers from the man's demeanor that he was, at some point, broke.

Jack then has a party with Adam and Anne Stanton. During the night, he asks them both about the judge, and they both deflect the question. Days later, Anne calls him and says the judge was broke at one time, but he was able to get out of debt after marrying his second wife. Jack then looks into the second wife and finds out she was poor as well. He finds out the judge, working under Governor Stanton (Adam and Anne's father), sold off 500 shares of his stock in a power company. He then left the attorney general position to work as their legal counsel. Jack remembers a headline in which the previous man in the position killed himself. He looked up the date and realized the man had lost his job to Judge Irwin. He also remembers the Judge had dropped charges against the company years earlier. He concludes the judge had taken a bribe not to charge the company in exchange for a lucrative job with the company.

Analysis

This chapter shows exactly how good Jack is at his job. Because of his background in history and research, he is able to piece together the past in small bits, blazing large trails out of small leads. His actions show he completely separates himself from his work, and he narrates his actions like a detective. For example, he calls his first lead the "Scholarly Attorney"; like how a 1930s gumshoe would give pseudonyms to his contacts, Jack uses them in his narrative for authenticity.

As good as Jack is about uncovering other people's pasts, he doesn't know how to untangle his own. His emotions of jealousy are extremely loud and strong, like when he is jealous of how the Scholarly Attorney treats his "son." He is gentle and loving, and it is obvious his father truly cares about the invalid man. This is not the case between Jack and his father. Jack's father left his mother, completely abandoning his role as the caretaker.

Vocabulary

brooding, disjunctive, berth, sparsely, masticated, bas-relief, gesticulate, wheedled, palpitating, senile, levee, supple



Chapter 6

Summary

While Jack was researching information on Judge Irwin, Willie was making plans to build a public hospital that would treat people for free. Tiny wanted Willie to give the contract to a supporter of their opponent. That way, the supporter would switch sides and support Willie and his party for reelection. Willie doesn't want to give it to the contractor, though. Instead, he wants Adam Stanton to run the hospital. Jack approaches Adam with this offer and Adam refuses. He hates Willie because of his corrupt methods, and he doesn't want to be a part of his schemes. Jack then speaks with Anne and tells her about how her father had covered up Judge Irwin's scandal. Anne was shaken by the information at first. But later, in favor of Willie's idea, she told Jack to use this information against Adam.

Jack didn't understand why Anne was on Willie's side. Her morals were the same as Adam's, but she instead wanted Willie to succeed. It wasn't until months later Sadie told Jack Anne and Willie were in a relationship together. Jack fell into a daze and confronted Anne about the affair, and Anne confirmed the rumor.

Analysis

This chapter features all of the characters who personify the Old South and the New South. Anne and Adam come from a rich, well-established family. They firmly believe in holding onto tradition and upholding appearances. The Old South is typified by Willie. He doesn't care about appearances, so he delves into corruption and greed to make sure things go his way. He is willing to put aside all friendships, even break them, if a person goes against his political sway. This dichotomy explains why Adam feels so strongly against Willie; he sees his methods as completely dishonorable even though Willie is, in the long run, helping out the poor people of the state.

In a way, Willie and Adam are foils of each other. They both represent something different, yet they both hinge on the premise they want to do the "right" thing. However, their methods differ considerably. It was only after Adam learned about his father's misgivings that he succumbed to working for Willie as the director of the hospital. He believed, because his father was a sinner, he could do nothing more than follow in his footsteps. This theme seems almost biblical, like the way many people believed sins were passed down through the parents. This is echoed when Willie quotes the Bible and then twists its message to pull Adam toward his side.

Vocabulary

sibilant, lapel, squalor, inane, doddering, perturbation, bunion, imbecilic, taut, bolster, saunter



Chapter 7

Summary

Jack is completely distraught after Anne confirms her affair with Willie. Jack leaves in his car and heads out West in order to clear his head. He remembers when he and Anne began a relationship while he was in college. The relationship was going well, but Anne was always troubled by Jack's lack of ambition. She wanted Jack to attend law school and follow through on his family name and legacy. He kept promising he would somehow support her, but he didn't realize she didn't want him for his money. Instead, she wanted him to realize his true potential. After he was kicked out of law school, Jack and Anne broke off their relationship.

Jack tried to go back to graduate school for history, but he dropped out because of his problems with the Cass Mastern journals. He became a newspaper reporter and married a woman named Lois. She was attracted to his family name, and he only stayed with her because they had a strong sexual relationship. Neither one enjoyed the marriage, though. Then Jack went into his second Great Sleep. He left her and maintained a bachelor lifestyle. Anne had a relationship with a lawyer, but they never married. She was thirty-five when she began the affair with Willie. Jack has an intuitive realization their relationship was never meant to be, so there was no point in finding fault in why it dissolved. He called this his "Great Twitch" theory.

Analysis

Many of Jack's relationships have been affected by his indifferent views on life. Jack only wants to scrape by; he doesn't care about pride or honor. This is a common point of contention for him and Anne during their entire relationship, not just during their romantic fling. Jack doesn't understand Anne wants him to be passionate about something, though she doesn't care exactly what. She recognizes his lazy traits and tries to push him toward being a better person. Present-day Jack doesn't recognize this either, so he comes up with a theory which lets him escape any responsibility for losing Anne.

The Great Twitch theory came about when Jack realized that people act on random emotions they have; Jack reasons because people can't control their emotions, they can't control their actions. His Great Sleeps are the result of his rationalization as well. Because of the actions "forced" upon him, he has no choice but to fall into complete despondency.

Vocabulary

toddle, biddy, pensively, teetering, bemused, harpoon, calliopes, myrtle, tentatively, seersucker



Chapter 8

Summary

Jack comes back from California and discovers Willie's opponent had tried to bribe Adam into giving him the contract for the hospital. Adam wanted to resign from the position, but Anne and Willie convinced him to press charges against the opponent for bribery. However, a scandal involving Willie's son erupted almost immediately. He was accused of fathering a child. The mother of the child was the daughter of a wealthy man who supported Willie's opponent. The opponent tried to use this information against Willie, which enraged him.

Willie decided that now would be the time to use the information about Judge Irwin against him so the judge would convince the opponent to drop his accusations. Jack approached the judge and things were extremely amiable. Jack threw the information at Judge Irwin, though, and it shocked the old man. He smiled and said he knew of a way to end the situation. That night, Jack's mother wakes him up and tells him Judge Irwin shot himself in the heart. She also reveals Judge Irwin was Jack's real father.

Analysis

Jack is shocked, but slightly elated, by the news his real father is Judge Irwin. However, he still realizes the judge was flawed; his actions caused a man to commit suicide, and he also fathered a child outside of his own marriage. When Jack's supposed father found out, it caused him to completely break with reality and become a religious fanatic. Jack, who had previously detested his mother, began to feel sympathy for her situation as well. He thought she was simply materialistic and vain. However, Judge Irwin was the only man she had ever loved; all her other husbands were substitutes because she could not have him. Jack still forces himself to see that none of these bad things came because of people's choices. However, his resolve is weakening.

Vocabulary

moorish, feeble, eminently, mesas, bustling, quizzical, gaunt, jaunty, transfusion, meninges, indulgent



Chapter 9

Summary

Now that Judge Irwin killed himself, Willie is upset he didn't have any leverage over his opponent. He decides to give the contract to his opponent and makes the necessary arrangements. One Saturday night soon after the transaction, Willie's son, Tom, is playing in his college football game. Tom is tackled and doesn't get up. The medics take Tom into the field house and Willie keeps focusing on the game. Near the end, Willie is called back to the field house. Jack waits in his office for news and Sadie calls. Tom is in a coma, and Willie is requesting Jack's presence.

Surgery reveals Tom's spinal cord was crushed and he will be permanently paralyzed. The news upsets Willie and he breaks his agreement with his opponents. Jack then receives a phone call from Anne. Apparently, Adam received an anonymous call saying Anne and Willie were having an affair. The caller also said Adam was going to be fired from his position because of Tom's prognosis. Adam confronted Anne and left in search of Willie. Later, Adam approached Willie in the Capitol building and shot him twice. Willie's guards immediately shot and killed Adam. Willie was taken to a hospital where he died days later.

Analysis

When Willie handed over the contract to his opponents, he sunk into a level of corruption he didn't think was possible. Willie knew that his ways were unconventional, but he threw all of his goodness and honor into the hospital. The reason he chose Adam to run it in the first place was because Adam represented morality and values, something he valued but did not possess. He was caught and had to make a decision in order to protect his family. After his son's coma, though, Willie tried to set things straight. He took back the contract in order to preserve the sanctity of the hospital.

The act of assassination represents Adam's complete devotion to the Old South. After learning about his sister's affair with Willie, Adam wanted to defend her honor. The only way he could do this was to destroy the man who had put her in a compromising position. However, Adam knew the act was a suicide run. He was alright with this, though, because he wanted to atone for his work with Willie and the hospital. He still couldn't get past the idea that Willie used corruption in order to build the hospital. He felt like he was enabling corruption by being in charge of Willie's pet project.

Vocabulary

equilibrium, jocularly, imperceptibly, billowing, crystalline, rutted, fetid, saffron, peremptory, teetotaling, boudoir



Chapter 10

Summary

After both Adam's and Willie's funerals, Jack and Anne spend a considerable amount of time together, though the relationship is awkward and strained. Jack asks if she knows who called her, and she replies she doesn't know. Jack finds Sadie in a mental institution, and she tells him she orchestrated the whole plot. She told Tiny of the affair between Anne and Willie, and she told him to call Adam after she fought with Willie. She felt so badly afterward she sought help. Jack goes and faces Tiny, who offers Jack a job. Jack threatens to expose Tiny's scheme. A letter from Sadie, though, convinces Jack to drop the matter altogether.

Jack goes to visit Willie's wife. She adopted her grandson and named him after Willie. Then Jack goes to see his mother who has divorced the Young Executive. She was too distraught after Judge Irwin's death to be married to a man she didn't love. At the very end of the novel, Jack speaks in the present tense and says he and Anne are married. He is working on a novel about Cass Mastern and is taking care of the man he thought was his father.

Analysis

Jack had a chance to hurt Tiny's political career. Tiny was directly involved in a situation that resulted in the death of two men, one of which was his superior. It could be argued Tiny wanted Willie dead so he could take over the governor's office. However, Jack would have been delving into the corruption he had so despised when working for Willie. He instead took the high road and left the whole problem behind him. This shows Jack had learned a lesson through the course of the novel that backhanded dealings never pay. Instead, they only cause more hurt.

This last chapter also shows Jack has dismissed the Great Twitch theory. He faces facts his involvement and actions caused hurt and suffering in many different people. He is also taking an active stance in his own life by completing his book about Cass Mastern. He understands Cass's motivations to do good after causing so much pain; because he can now relate, Jack has the maturity to create something wonderful.

Vocabulary

decorous, fastidiously, superfluous, stagger, mottled, perilous, pervasive, unwitting, stalactites, aqueous, encroaching, unguent, pustule



Characters

Jack Burden

Jack Burden is the novel's narrator. He is also the character that most resembles a protagonist. Burden comes from an affluent political family whose ancestors founded the town he is from. Regardless, Jack is extremely lazy and complacent. A college dropout, he begins working for Willie Stark after being a newspaper reporter for a short time. As Willie's "right-hand man," Jack uses his research and investigative skills to find incriminating evidence against Willie's political enemies. Earlier in his life, Jack believed life was causal; because so many things can happen to a person, nobody should take responsibility for his or her actions. However, he learns personal responsibility is essential in order to live a moral life.

Willie Stark

Willie Stark is a smooth-talking, powerful political figure. Once a lowly county treasurer, Willie inspires the poor people and wants to give them equal treatment. He grew up in poverty, and he shows people having wealth is possible. His policies include tax reform and welfare programs designed to help the struggling farmers make ends meet. Regardless of his generosity, Willie is a corrupt figure who uses his power to blackmail his opponents. Many people despise what he stands for, but he has Jack discover incriminating evidence against them so they will stop persecuting him. Willie also has many affairs with women. His relationship with Anne Stanton causes him to be killed at the end of the novel.

Judge Montague Irwin

Judge Irwin is an older man. He was also Jack's father figure when Jack was a boy. Because Judge Irwin supported Willie's opponent in an election, Willie had Jack find incriminating evidence against Judge Irwin. Although the whole situation makes Jack uncomfortable, Jack discovers the judge had accepted a bribe in order to keep his land from foreclosure. In return, he had to dismiss a case against the electric company. Willie confronts Judge Irwin with this information so the judge will call off the opponent from publicly criticizing Willie. Judge Irwin, however, commits suicide. It is not until the end of the novel that Jack discovers Judge Irwin was his real father.

Adam Stanton

Adam Stanton is one of Jack's closest friends. The two grew up together as both their fathers were powerful figures in the community. Adam became a successful surgeon with a strong future ahead of him. Adam doesn't approve of Jack's ties with Willie; Jack thinks that Willie is amoral and indecent. However, Willie blackmails Adam into being



the director of a hospital he is building. After he finds out Willie is sleeping with his sister, Adam assassinates Willie in the lobby of the Capitol building. Adam is then killed by Willie's guards.

Anne Stanton

Anne Stanton is one of Jack's closest friends as well as his first love. They dated seriously in college, but Anne left Jack because of his complacency. Anne begins an affair with Willie, but it is not kept a secret. After word of the affair gets back to her brother Adam, he kills Willie. At the end of the novel, she marries Jack.

Sadie Burk

Sadie Burk is Willie's longtime secretary. She is also his permanent mistress. Sadie believes that she is solely responsible for Willie's rise to power, and she tries to control Willie even though he is married and has affairs with other women. After Willie tells her he will not leave his wife for her, she flies into a rage and tells people about Willie's affair with Anne. After Willie is dead, she feels extremely guilty and checks herself into a mental institution.

Tiny Duffy

Tiny Duffy is the lieutenant governor while Willie is in office. He hates Willie, but he puts up with all of Willie's abuse so he can have unlimited power in the state government. Tiny is untrustworthy and is responsible for telling Adam about Anne's affair with Willie. After Willie is murdered, Tiny becomes the new governor.

Cass Mastern

Cass Mastern is one of Jack's Civil War-era ancestors. Cass had an affair with his best friend's wife. After the friend's suicide, he became an abolitionist. However, he still fought for the Confederate Army and died in the war. Jack wanted to use Cass's journal as the basis for his thesis paper. However, Jack couldn't figure out what Cass's motivations for his actions were. So Jack abandoned the project. At the end of the novel, Jack begins working on the thesis again.



Objects/Places

Burden's Landing

Burden's Landing is the name of the town that Jack grew up in. It was named after his ancestors.

The Hospital

Willie is building a public hospital that will treat its patients for free.

The South

The story takes place in the South, though an actual state name is never given.

California

Jack drives to California after he learns Anne had an affair with Willie.

The Schoolhouse

A schoolhouse built by corrupt politicians collapses and kills some people.

State College

Jack went to a state college rather than an Ivy League school like his mother wanted.

Cass Mastern's Journals

Jack used Cass Mastern's journals for his thesis and book.

Duncan Trice's Wedding Ring

Duncan Trice leaves his wedding ring on a pillow before killing himself.

Manila Envelope

Jack gives Judge Irwin a manila envelope containing incriminating evidence against him.

Angel Sculptures

The invalid that Jack's father cares for makes angel sculptures out of chewed-up bread.

Themes

Time

All the King's Men never stays in the same time plane. The novel begins in the past tense, but then it goes even further into the past to explain the first scenes. Then it comes back to the first scene and finishes out the scenario. Afterward, it jumps to the present as Jack is describing how his life turned out. There is also a Civil War-era story told through journal entries. Jack uses these different time planes as a way to judge himself and his actions. He perceives he identified with different morals and values in the past, so he wonders if his entire persona has changed.

Because he doesn't understand how time works, he doesn't know whether or not he should even try to comprehend it. At the end of the novel, Jack realizes he can merge the past, present, and future together and live a happy and coherent lifestyle. He learns not to be afraid of any one time plane, allowing him to make changes in his personality and forge better relationships.

The Changing South

One of the dichotomies that Warren sets up in All the King's Men is between the Old South and the New South. The Old South is personified by Adam and Anne Stanton, two characters who come from gentility and wealthy lineages. They firmly believe in an unbreakable moral code that admires honor and reputation. Even if there is an unpleasantness in the world (like poverty), the people who follow the moral code of the Old South refuse to change their ways to help because it might compromise their values.

The New South, though, isn't much better than the Old South in Warren's eyes. The New South is typified by characters like Willie Stark and Tiny Duffy. They both come from impoverished beginnings and see the problems that lurk in the public. However, they do good by committing evil deeds like blackmail and interrogation. People can't see these characters as "good" because their methods are questionable. Unlike the Old South where there is an unbreakable moral code, the New South is void of all morals.

The "Great Twitch" Theory

When problems arise for Jack, he finds comfort in the idea of the "Great Twitch" theory. In his rationale, people commit bad acts because it's in their blood; there is nothing they can do to help it. They are also facing insurmountable obstacles which force people into committing these acts. With this theory in mind, Jack is able to rest easy in thinking all the evil committed in the story has no real fault. According to the Great Twitch theory, Judge Irwin, Adam, and Willie's deaths were all inevitable.

However, scrutinizing Judge Irwin's death allows Jack to realize the Great Twitch theory is incorrect. Judge Irwin had a choice about whether or not to kill himself; he could have taken responsibility for his corrupt past. Instead, he chose not to face any responsibility and killed himself to alleviate the blame.



Style

Point of View

All the King's Men is told from Jack Burden's point of view. Jack grew up as the wealthy son of an affluent family, so he understands the genteel ideas and traditions that typify the South. However, Jack also works digging up incriminating evidence about the governor's opponents. He trades his life of sophistication for one of mistrust and greed. From this perspective, the reader sees both sides of the South from a knowledgeable source.

Setting

While the exact state is unknown, All the King's Men takes place in the South between the 1920s and the 1930s. This time period is famous for its political corruption, and the novel takes this entire setting and places it in the South. Because the South wasn't as progressive as the North, there was a larger divide between the new and old ways of life.

Language and Meaning

The language in All the King's Men is very modern for a novel written in the 1940s. Jack is speaking in narrative mode for the majority of the novel, so the entire plot is told in a very consistent way. There are a few southern words and phrases in the dialogue; this adds to the veracity of the setting and allows the readers to feel like they are truly in the South.

Structure

All the King's Men is divided into ten extremely long chapters. The novel is not told in linear form. The first chapter sets up the main action (although still told in past tense), and many of the subsequent chapters delve even further into the past to explain how Jack became Willie's right-hand man. There is also one chapter dedicated to a Civil War-era story about Jack's ancestor. The final chapter is told in the present tense years after the entire plot has dissolved.

Quotes

Man is conceived in sin and born in corruption and he passeth from the stink of the didie to the stench of the shroud. There is always something. (Chapter 1)

They ain't real, I thought as I walked down the hall, nary one. But I knew they were. ... when they got old they lost their reasons for doing anything and sat on the bench in front of the harness shop and had words for the reasons other people had but had forgotten what the reasons were. ... Oh, they are real, all right, and it may be the reason they don't seem real to you is that you aren't very real yourself. (Chapter 2)

They say you are not you except in terms of relation to other people. If there weren't any other people there wouldn't be any you because what you do, which is what you are, only has meaning in relation to other people. That is a very comforting thought when you are in the car in the rain at night alone, for then you aren't you, and not being you or anything, you can really lie back and get some rest. It is a vacation from being you. (Chapter 3)

Then one morning he went out into that world and did not come back to the room and the pine table. The black books, in which the journal was written, the ring, the photograph, packets of letters were left there, beside the thick stack of manuscript, the complete works of Jack Burden, which was already beginning to curl at the edges under the paperweight. (Chapter 4)

And all times are one time, and all those dead in the past never lived before our definition gives them life, and out of the shadow their eyes implore us. (Chapter 5)

Yes, I am a student of history, don't you remember? And what we students of history always learn is that the human being is a very complicated contraption and that they are not good or bad but are good and bad and the good comes out of the bad and bad out of the good, and the devil take the hindmost. (Chapter 6)

I had not understood then what I think I have now come to understand: that we can keep the past only by having the future, for they are forever tied together. (Chapter 7)

For either killing or creating may be a crime punishable by death, and the death always comes by the criminal's own hand and every man is a suicide. If a man knew how to live he would never die. (Chapter 8)

Maybe I wouldn't be rich-rich, but I figured I was going to be rich in a nice, genteel, Southern way. Nobody down here ever wants to be rich-rich, for that, of course, would be crass and vulgar. So I was going to be just genteel rich. (Chapter 9)

You meet someone at a seashore or on vacation and have a wonderful time together. ... you talk with a stranger whose mind seems to whet and sharpen your own and with whom a wonderful new vista of ideas is spied. Then afterward you are sure that when



you meet again, the gay companion will give you the old gaiety, the brilliant stranger will stir your mind from its torpor, But something happens, or almost always happens, to the gaiety, the brilliance, the communication. You remember the individual words from the old language you spoke together, but you have forgotten the grammar. So there you are. (Chapter 10)



Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

Who is Jack Burden? Why is his family important? Describe Jack's personality. What is important to him? Does he work hard to get things that he wants? Why or why not?

Topic 2

Who is Willie Starks? What was his childhood like? How did he become a politician? What events made him famous?

Topic 3

Who are Adam and Anne Stanton? What was their childhood like? How and why were they friends with Jack? What did each do with their lives?

Topic 4

Describe the relationship between Willie, Anne, and Jack. Is this kind of relationship present elsewhere in the book? Explain.

Topic 5

Describe the relationship between Judge Irwin, Jack's mother, and Jack's father. Is this kind of relationship present elsewhere in the book? Explain.

Topic 6

What is Jack's opinion about time? How does he describe it? How does the novel make use of time as a thematic device?

Topic 7

Describe Jack's "Great Twitch" theory. When and how did he come up with this idea? Does this theory prove to be true, or does Jack force it to be true?



Topic 8

Describe the setting of the novel. What makes the story unique about being placed in the South? What thematic elements are able to appear because of the setting?

Topic 9

Describe Jack's relationship with both Judge Irwin and his real father. How did both of the men treat him? Which was more "fatherly"? Which was more corrupt? How do both of the men's actions complicate Jack's feelings towards them?

Topic 10

How many times does Jack fall into his Great Sleeps? What caused all three sleeps? What brought him out? How do the Great Sleeps relate to Jack's inability to take responsibility for his actions?

Topic 11

Describe the use of past and present tone in the novel. What does each signify? How does each tone contribute to the thematic elements?