

# At Heaven's Gate Short Guide

## At Heaven's Gate by Robert Penn Warren

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# Characters

The chief characters in the central action of the novel are the trio of ambitious young people seeking success and identity in the world dominated by Bogan Murdock's interests. These three, along with Windham, the hill-country murderer turned evangelist, and his polar opposite, the ruthless pragmatist, Bogan Murdock, are the central characters—even though Murdock is presented primarily through the point of view of others and through the impact of his actions.

Of these three young people, the most interesting may be Sue Murdock, whom Warren portrays as a rebellious woman ahead of her time, seeking emancipation from conventional roles. Unfortunately, Sue, who also represents the modern spirit in quest of values or a soul, is destroyed by her search, because she unwisely becomes the lover of Slim Sarrett.

Although Sue learns the weaknesses and flaws of Sarrett and Jerry Calhoun, the former football player trying to climb the ladder of success, her flight from her life as Bogan Murdock's spoiled daughter is a frustrated effort. It is true that she finds a certain stability in her relationship with Jason Sweetwater, an idealist with conviction; but their differences also destroy their relationship. At the end of her unhappy life, when she is strangled by the vengeful Sarrett, Sue seems to have become a passive and willing victim, who offers a curious complicity in her murder.

The two young male protagonists are less tragic, and perhaps not as interesting.

Sarrett's air of studied indifference and literary ambition manage to trick readers, as well as Sue Murdock. However, once his deception and malice become known, he often seems to be a caricature of literary opportunism, merely an ambitious teaching assistant and failed poet whose interest in Sue was partially motivated by his attraction to her father's influence.

Perhaps Sarrett was a character whose nature changed in the process of Warren's writing. At any rate, Warren missed the opportunity to make Sarrett a memorable portrait of jealousy and malice.

By contrast, Jerry Calhoun, whose ambition is at first merely to become another American success story modeled on that of Bogan Murdock, becomes a more interesting character when his moral nature is tested. As a remorseful puppet of Bogan Murdock, desiring to confess the truth and regain something of his integrity, Calhoun becomes a more sympathetic character. His final sequence of self-exploration, in which he faces the reality that he had sought to repudiate his father, is a powerful and impressive passage.

Unlike these three, Windham, the hillcountry "born-again" preacher, is something of an outsider, although his statement reveals much of the truth about Bogan Murdock. Windham's compulsion to atone for his crime and his unconditional commitment to his



brand of fundamentalist Christianity offers a strong contrast to the more intellectual and ambitious trio of young protagonists.

Warren's use of mountaineer dialect and idiom in Windham's narrative is impressive, and Windham's narrative often seems to gain in vividness and authenticity because of the language he uses.

There is a sense in which Bogan Murdock is a major character, yet he is "on stage" only occasionally in the novel. One learns of Murdock's character through its impact on others. Murdock's private self is not revealed, perhaps because Warren intends to show that Murdock, like Willie Stark in *All the King's Men*, sacrifices his private life to his unending quest for power. Most of the time, Murdock is depicted as a man trying to live up to a self-conceived image of power and authority, as in the novel's final scene in which Murdock seems to be justifying his actions, rather than showing that he has learned from the tragedy he has created.

Aside from its strong major characters, the lesser characters in *At Heaven's Gate* are also lively and memorable. Duckfoot Blake, Jerry's fellow employee, adds a note of amusing and colorful cynicism.

Private Porsum, based on the actual Sergeant Alvin York (whom Warren interviewed), is essentially a minor figure drawn into Murdock's chicanery; but his moment of soul searching is vividly rendered, as is also his memory of his moment of heroism in France. Jason Sweetwater, Sue's third lover, is a believable labor activist, a man of strong will and determination who might have stolen the book if Warren had given him more space.

Finally, Jerry Calhoun's father and Uncle Lew are impressive minor characters. The long suffering Mr. Calhoun is a kind and forgiving farmer, who accepts Jerry's mistakes. Mr. Calhoun's foil is his cynical brother, Jerry's Uncle Lew, who voices the world's sarcasm about Jerry and others who seek higher attainments.

Although Lew seems to be correct in his assessment of Jerry, the father asserts his authority and unconditional love for his son in his final scene, when Mr. Calhoun will not allow Lew to wake Jerry from a deep morning sleep, after Jerry's bitter ordeal in jail. Both characters, the father and Lew, are memorably drawn.

## Social Concerns

Robert Penn Warren's second novel is set in a more modern world than his first, *Night Rider* (1939), which deals with the Kentucky tobacco wars of the turn of the century. By contrast, *At Heaven's Gate* deals with the turbulent social world of the 1920s and 1930s, with its loss of respect for traditional moral values. A major concern of the novel is the amoral world of business and capitalism which had characterized America in the 1920s and which Warren had attacked as one of the Southern agrarian writers in *I'll Take My Stand* (1930). This type of corruption still has relevance since land development schemes and failed banks and savings and loan scandals have continued to plague the Sunbelt in recent years.

Although characterized more by his power and influence than by direct presentation of character, Bogan Murdock is the symbol of the ruthless and amoral spirit of the modern world. Warren's novel attempts to show how several lives are ruined, or at least damaged, by Murdock's financial chicanery and opposition to unions. Murdock's companies and widespread holdings eventually are revealed to be involved in many scandals: doctoring the company books; using the money of Murdock's bank (of which Private Porsum is the figurehead president) for questionable business purposes; using influence to get the state to buy some of Murdock's timber holdings and iron foundry in an illegal and profitable transaction; and, of course, unfair labor practices in Murdock's efforts to break the strike of the Massey Mountain miners. Nearly all the characters are touched by Murdock's actions, and the naive Jerry Calhoun is involved in a felony simply through following orders. Sympathy for the social activism of the loggers who, led by Jason Sweetwater, go on strike against Murdock's timber company is a lesser theme, but it reveals concern for economic and social justice, a theme Warren would develop further in later novels.

Another concern of the novel is the erosion of religious values in the twentieth century, a condition depicted indirectly through the statement of Ashby Windham, the committed fundamentalist visionary. While Windham's religion is one that Warren had rejected, Windham offers an indictment of the sins and the spiritual emptiness of the modern world.

An embodiment of the mean-spirited nature of literary opportunism is offered in Warren's characterization of Slim Sarrett, one of the most vicious characters in Warren's fiction. Sarrett has been seen as a figure of satire, or as a portrait of the jealousy and malice that may lurk in every man. On the other hand, Warren's treatment of Sue Murdock's quest for understanding and spiritual fulfillment offers some insight into the feelings and concerns of twentieth-century women. Rejecting her father's smothering love, Sue undertakes a search for a fulfilling role or vocation of her own; but she suffers a succession of disillusionments with the various men she takes as lovers. Moreover, Sue's tragic death at the hands of her rejected lover Sarrett may be seen as a vicious crime enacted by a possessive male against an independent woman.



Although Warren is often viewed as an author concerned with masculine themes, it is worth noting here that Sue Murdock occupies center stage of the novel, and is one of three impressive female protagonists in Warren's fiction (the other two being Amantha Starr in *Band of Angels*, 1955, and Cassie Spottswood in *Meet Me in the Green Glen*, 1971).

# Techniques

The novel makes some use of literary allusion, not only in its title, which is taken from Shakespeare. Warren abandoned his original title *And Pastures New* (from Milton) because the Shakespeare title seemed to suggest a more ironic and tragic work. Slim Sarrett, a bisexual literary opportunist who deceives all in the early sections and works a major deception on Sue before murdering her, is attracted to Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, and he sometimes appears to be a character drawn from John Marston (1574-1634) or John Webster (1580?1652?).

Indeed, Sarrett's sarcasm and cynical opportunism are reminiscent of courtiers in a Jacobean melodrama, like Marston's *The Malcontent* (1602-1604). Yet in his descent into violence with the murder of Sue, Sarrett suggests parallels with one of Webster's disillusioned villains, such as Flamineo in *The White Devil* (1609-1612) or Bosola in *The Duchess of Malfi* (c. 1613).

Warren's use of multiple protagonists, especially Sarrett, Jerry Calhoun, and Sue Murdock, gives the novel a divided focus, as does the lengthy embedded narrative, "The Statement of Ashby Windham."

However, the use of the Windham narrative with its treatment of the impoverished hill country white's perspective adds an additional dimension to the novel.

Moreover, Windham's uncompromising religious vision adds a moral perspective.

Warren's use of master images or controlling metaphors is impressive. At the end of the novel, readers are given a picture of Bogan Murdock's commenting on events and trying to rebuild his image, while a portrait of Andrew Jackson, another arrogant egotist, hangs on the wall in the background. The portrait of one egotist offers an ironic comment on the other. Ironically, the reader may conclude, Bogan Murdock has lost his inner self while creating his self-image.

# Themes

The corrupt actions of modern business, as represented by Bogan Murdock, and the resultant tragedy, is one important theme. Warren primarily shows the seductive and evil impact of Murdock's power in his influence on the trusting Jerry Calhoun. However, Murdock's inadequacy as a father figure to Sue also is an important theme. As both a dominating and a remote figure, Murdock has gained Sue's admiration, despite her youthful revolt against him. Yet there is no indication that Murdock would be able to share Sue's feelings or express forgiveness to her for her actions. Nevertheless, in her rebellion, Sue tends to measure her lovers against the image of her father. A related theme is Jerry Calhoun's betrayal of the best influences of his past in his choice of Bogan Murdock as a role model. His betrayal is underscored by Sarrett's deception of nearly everyone.

The tragic nature of Sue Murdock's rebellion and quest for fulfillment is another of the central themes of the novel.

However, this theme is balanced by a concern with moral redemption in the latter stages of the book; it is developed by Windham's statement, by Jerry Calhoun's repentance, and by Private Porsum's sense of remorse over the scandals created by Murdock's company.

Another theme that permeates Warren's early fiction is the contrast between the idealist or the "man of idea" as Warren called him, and the pragmatist. This conflict is given a central position in *All the King's Men* (1946; see separate entry), in the conflict between Adam Stanton and Willie Stark. But the same conflict between differing types is adumbrated in *At Heaven's Gate* in the clash between Windham, the born-again Christian, and the ruthless pragmatist, Bogan Murdock.

In some respects the novel affirms classic agrarian themes. Jerry Calhoun encounters disappointment and disgrace through abandoning the principles of his father, a farmer of great integrity, and by losing contact with the land where he grew up. Similarly, Private Porsum has been seduced by the temptation of wealth and a life of ease; but he recovers his sense of integrity when he acknowledges Windham as his cousin and decides to return to the values of his Tennessee mountain youth by denouncing Murdock and publicly acknowledging that Murdock has misused the funds in the bank nominally under Porsum's direction. Thus integrity is associated with a return to one's roots in the Southern land, and with acknowledging the ties of kinship and family, values strongly asserted by the Agrarians.



# Key Questions

Since *At Heaven's Gate* is based in part on historical events surrounding the scandal involving Rogers Clark Caldwell, a powerful but unscrupulous financier whose company became bankrupt in 1929, one member of a discussion group might take on the responsibility of doing some research on this scandal, in which the main figures went to jail. Another person might research the life of Sergeant Alvin York, who was also on the fringe of the scandal and who served as the model for Private Porsum.

At any rate, it is worthwhile for discussants to know that Warren based many of the events of his novel on actuality, and, following the lead of a reporter friend, he even managed to interview Sergeant York. However, discussants might also want to look at *At Heaven's Gate* in the light of interesting parallels with more recent scandals in Southern business and politics, such as the Whitewater affair which haunts the past of President William Clinton and Hilary Rodham Clinton.

Other scandals may also be cited for comparative purposes.

1. How significant is the historical background of *At Heaven's Gate*? Do we gain understanding of the novel from a knowledge of the history involving Rogers Clark Caldwell?

2. What is our point of view toward Private Porsum, the character based on Sergeant Alvin York? Has Warren done a creditable job of depicting a legendary hero? Does Warren's portrait tarnish the legend of Sergeant York? Why or why not?

3. Is Sue Murdock a forerunner of contemporary feminists? Why or why not?

What does Sue rebel against? Why is Sue's rebellion thwarted and frustrated?

4. What is our final opinion of Windham? Is Windham merely an eccentric, or can we sympathize with his moral view of events? How does Windham affect the outcome of the action?

5. Is Jerry Calhoun a sympathetic character? Does Jerry learn from his experience that his sense of values was mistaken and based on a bad model, Bogan Murdock?

6. If we encountered the character of Bogan Murdock, without the experience of the novel, how would we tend to judge him? Is Murdock a thoroughly evil man, or merely a fairly typical business tycoon?

7. What are the motives of Slim Sarrett? Is it possible that Warren may have conceived Sarrett as an example of the darker side of literary careerism?

8. How well does Warren dramatize the conflict between labor and management in *At Heaven's Gate*? Is the character of Jason Sweetwater believable? Is Sweetwater a



sympathetic character? Has Warren loaded the dice against Bogan Murdock in his portrayal of the conflict between Sweetwater's forces and Murdock's company?

9. To what extent is *At Heaven's Gate* a tragic novel? Does the novel offer any themes which may be seen other than pessimistic? Why or why not?

10. Does Warren attempt to deal with too many themes and diverse characters in *At Heaven's Gate*? Why or why not?

## Literary Precedents

Warren is somewhat indebted to American fiction of the twenties and thirties, especially that of F. Scott Fitzgerald and William Faulkner. Sue Murdock is perhaps reminiscent of Temple Drake in Faulkner's *Sanctuary* (1931; see separate entry): Both are rebellious young Southern women who come from a background of wealth only to fall among men who take advantage of them. However, Sue is more intellectual and more sympathetic than Temple, a circumstance which makes her death seem more tragic than Temple's retreat into a doll-like passivity.

Moreover the story of Jerry Calhoun, a poor boy from a rural background, setting out to become a robber baron like Bogan Murdock, has parallels in Faulkner's depiction of the rise of Flem Snopes in *The Hamlet* (1940) and *The Town* (1957). However, Flem Snopes lacks the conscience Warren gives Calhoun; in this respect, Calhoun is closer to Flem's brother, Colonel Sartoris Snopes, the protagonist of the short story "Barn Burning." The "Statement of Ashby Windham," written in the Kentucky-Tennessee mountain dialect familiar to Warren from his youth, would probably remind early readers of the experiment with rural white narrators made by Faulkner in *As I Lay Dying* (1930).

In some cases, however, Calhoun is reminiscent of the amiable young men dazzled by the prospect of wealth and social prominence in some of F. Scott Fitzgerald's stories. Even Fitzgerald's *Jay Gatsby* may be seen as a precedent, since Gatsby disavows his heritage and invents a new persona; moreover, Calhoun, like Gatsby, becomes involved in corrupt business activities. In one of the book's climactic sequences, Jerry is forced to admit to himself that he has wanted his real father dead. In essence, because of shame over his rural origins, Calhoun has tried to kill his father symbolically and to replace him with a surrogate father, the powerful Murdock.

The fiction of Theodore Dreiser, especially *An American Tragedy* (1925), may also be seen as a precedent, since there Dreiser tells a tale of a young man destroyed by his fascination with wealth and a wealthy young woman, a theme similar to Jerry Calhoun's beguilement by Bogan Murdock and his daughter.

Another precedent may be found in the protagonists of Sinclair Lewis, particularly the wayward idealist Martin Arrowsmith, whose deepest desire is to become a medical researcher. Although Arrowsmith ultimately fulfills his destiny by becoming a medical researcher, Arrowsmith often allows himself to be diverted by the siren call of those using modern business and advertising methods which tend to make the practice of medicine into a profitable industry.



## Related Titles

There are obvious parallels between *At Heaven's Gage* and Warren's later novel *The Cave* (1959), particularly in the characters of Sarrett and Ike Sumpter. Both are ambitious opportunists, thwarted by the rejection of a sweetheart, and both make use of others in their climb to power.

Sarrett's wounded egotism takes revenge by murdering Sue; Ike Sumpter might have saved Jasper Herrick and later—to exploit the sensationalism of the event—Sumpter cruelly fabricates messages from the dead Jasper that suggest that Jasper still lives in his retreat in the cave.

Sue also bears some resemblance to the seduced Anne Stanton in *All the King's Men*, and there are parallels between Sue and the victimized Cassie Spottswood in *Meet Me in the Green Glen* (1971). Sue's struggle to define her relationship to her father, though not very well articulated, is a precursor of Amantha Starr's experience in *Band of Angels* (1955).

Finally, Warren's negative and often satirical treatment of the twentieth-century moral wasteland of modern business may be seen as a preliminary effort for his descriptions, in the voice of Jack Burden, of the wasteland of twentieth century politics in *All the King's Men*.



# Copyright Information

## Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress  
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3.

Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994