

Humpty Dumpty's Great Fall: Examining Power and Greed in *All the King's Men*

Kristen J. Ohaver

Introduction

Robert Penn Warren's masterful work, *All the King's Men*, has nine chapters. As a new AP Language Composition teacher several years ago, with something to prove in making her class "hard," I soon realized that I had exactly eleven days after the AP exam in May of 2004. Perfect. I could take that really long chapter and make it two days, plus one day for a test...sold, I thought to myself. Not quite the rationale on which a teacher would pride herself, but we have all been there. I haven't ever touched or taught the work again, until now.

The Course

American Studies was given a rebirth at my school. The course is an honors level US History course paired with an honors level English III, American Literature course. It meets for ninety minutes every day, all year. There are two teachers in the classroom at all times. Team-teaching is a luxury that doesn't exist much anymore. If the course is to remain at Myers Park, the students need to show growth on the end-of-course US History state test. There are roughly forty-five students in each section.

The School

Myers Park is a large, diverse public high school in an urban setting. With close to 3,000 students, it is one of the largest in the state of North Carolina. The school has about 40% of its population on a free/reduced lunch program. It is a neighborhood school with successful IB and AP programs. Honors level children are often missed in the grind to help the very top and very bottom find success. This course and this unit are designed for students who might not find success in an AP Language and Composition course or an AP US History course, but who still want to be challenged.

Objectives

The objectives for this unit stem from the connections students are asked to make between characters, literature, authors, and history in American Studies. For example, students listened to a lecture from a Poe scholar out of NC State. They had detailed notes on American Romanticism and were then asked to read Poe's "The Black Cat." Students returned the next day, asking if Poe always chose to have male narrators as the villain because his father abandoned his family and then died when Poe was young and his step-father hated him. With this unit, students will learn about the fictional Willie Stark and the real-life Huey "Kingfish" Long, but it is only in examining the literature and character traits that both men spring to "real" life. Moreover, students should synthesize the background information they receive on an author (usually via lecture or power point) with the historical context they receive about a work, and the work itself. Many of Warren's earliest pieces were considered autobiographical. His Modernist and Agrarian roots are important to understanding *All The King's Men*, and it is just as important that students learn about Huey Long (who is not nearly as beloved by historians and critics as was Willie Stark). There exists a triangle, much like the rhetor's triangle, between the author, his subject, and the historical context. Just like the triangle mentioned above, students will need a working background of the Populist Movement and Louisiana politics, which will hopefully be gained in a US History course, but covered by the co-teacher for my course.

Another objective for this unit is evaluating the point of view the author has chosen. History is a beautiful thing in that society has the benefit of hindsight and growth. A literary author does not always have that luxury and so must carefully choose not only how he will tell the story, but also whom he will choose to tell it. For example, in Fitzgerald's work, *The Great Gatsby*, Gatsby was incapable of telling his own story because his past was shrouded in mystery, lies, and illegal behavior. If Gatsby were to tell his own story, not only would he be an unreliable narrator, he would be unlikeable. But by choosing someone like Nick Carraway to tell Gatsby's story, Gatsby became tragic, and not hated. If only all politicians could have someone like Jack Burden in their life! Despite the greed, graft, cheating, and general disregard for human decency, Willie Stark emerged as a tragic character and this is due, in part, to the narrator, Jack Burden. The heart of this unit must be to listen to Burden and then decide what is that fatal flaw of Stark's? Power? Greed? Desire?

Warren afforded his readers a wealth of symbols, motifs, and themes to help uncover this flaw. A ubiquitous motif that students must examine in literature is transportation. It is a mark of modernization and wealth that both Fitzgerald and Warren were sure to

notice in their time. It must be noted that transportation is meant to include cars (of course), but also the root or part of the word—the transport. In *The Great Gatsby*, the journey from West Egg to East Egg was not so great, but things changed drastically in terms of status, class, and wealth. Nick and Gatsby could never and should never live anywhere other than West Egg. Driving into the city and taking the train are two very different things, and Fitzgerald made sure the reader experienced both. Students should take note of what it means to travel west also. By the end of *The Great Gatsby*, Nick returned west. He hated the East. In Warren’s work, students meet Highway 58. *Meet* is the appropriate word here, too, as transportation plays a huge role in the novel. Jack fled West once he discovered the affair. Jack knew before he knew: “Something about what she was saying disturbed me, like an offstage noise or something... But I couldn’t catch what.” And when Anne confirms his suspicions with a nod, he leaves for the West.

Students must also consider the idea of fact versus the truth. Jack Burden sought facts. Willie Stark wanted the truth. Students must see the mash-up in *All The King’s Men*, as well as in history, especially Long’s own life. To this end, is knowledge self-knowledge or historical knowledge? By the end Jack Burden saw the interconnectedness of everything, and Warren supplied the perfect metaphor, a spider’s web. Daniel Singal argues that, for Jack, “Instead of appearing as a jumble of unrelated fragments, the world now seems to him an ‘enormous spider’s web,’ which, when touched, even if inadvertently, carries vibrations to its ‘remotest perimeter.’” Again, students can reference Fitzgerald’s hopefully-familiar work. It takes almost the entire novel to learn the truth about Gatsby’s past and current dealings. The result was calamity. It would be difficult to argue that *All the King’s Men* resulted in anything different once the truth comes out, though Warren and Fitzgerald seemed to offer an olive branch of hope by the end of their works.

Finally, students must see and make connections with other literary texts. One need only examine a timeline, or ask a history professor, to understand that Warren must have been influenced by Fitzgerald’s work. I certainly was. The first time I taught *All The King’s Men*, I never even mentioned it. Now, I can barely get through a paragraph without a reference. Warren’s work is in many ways more challenging. It is longer and heavier, but that does not mean that timeless literary themes are not shared between the two. If students have a healthy understanding of *The Great Gatsby*, it can come as a tremendous help in not only making connections to other works, but to understanding those works as well. That is the more challenging connection to make. The most facile is the one to the nursery rhyme “Humpty Dumpty.” There is a touch historical merit to the

poem, which students will need to explore. They can then place *All the King's Men* into the context of poem, naming players if need be.

Rationale:

By the end of the unit, which should last approximately four weeks on a block schedule (and not as many days as there are chapters), students should have a clear understanding of Robert Penn Warren, Huey “Kingfish” Long, and *All the King's Men*. I hope students see the connections between *All the King's Men* and *The Great Gatsby*, and continue to find their own connections to other works of literature. I hope students raise the challenging question (and worthy point) that each text has more to do with Jack Burden and Nick Carraway than it does with Willie Stark and Jay Gatsby. Though *All the King's Men* is a challenging work, Warren places symbols and motifs right at the surface for his readers, making this a worthwhile text for teaching those concepts. Given Warren's background—agrarian, modernist, and existentialist—the challenging task becomes what to do with items such as Highway 58 and the spider web. The task of deconstruction is often left to the AP and IB courses of study, and not to an honors level course. It is important that all students are exposed to these concepts in more than short stories and the standard canon of American literature in high school English courses. I normally teach the AP Language and Composition course, which relies almost solely on non-fiction prose. Students grow as writers in that course, certainly, but they read short two to three page pieces. They are not required to read long sustained works, or at least, not very many of them (hence tacking one on after the AP examination). Finding myself back in the throws of a literature course, where students will read several novels throughout the year, is somewhat ironic. Students in the AP course have the supposed skills to break down these novels, yet they never do. And here we have honors level students reading novel after novel, with no skill set to move beyond recall and interpretation. This curriculum unit for *All the King's Men* attempts to upend that irony.

The curriculum unit is appropriate for an honors level course in American Literature or AP level course, in either Language or Literature. Even though I am teaching an honors level course. I am concerned about the success of all students. I am tutoring between five and seven students privately to prepare them for the AP Language and Composition course, despite the fact that they haven't taken it. Teaching them challenging works in class will only make the process of finding success on the AP Language exam in May easier. Moreover, I have encouraged my colleagues to consider this work and specifically this unit for their current AP Language and Composition students. There is a vast

discrepancy between our AP Language test scores, which boasts a pass rate of 89% and our AP Literature test scores, which currently has a pass rate of only 62%. It is difficult to discern where the fault lies in such wide margin, but administrators, teachers, students, and parents are interested in seeing that gap close. One can certainly argue that the AP Literature test is more challenging; however, that should only serve to prompt AP Language and Composition teachers to better prepare students for that next level. For too long now, we have happily lived in isolation, promoting the idea that since the AP Language course has such a high pass rate, the teachers must be doing fine. I am sure they are doing fine. I was, after all, one of them. But is it okay to stop at fine? Shouldn't we be pushing students to excel? And if they are meeting the standards set before them (as evidenced by College Board test scores), then shouldn't we as educators find another way to challenge those students? I have students in my honors level course with plans to take AP Literature next year. I have a responsibility to prepare them to be successful in that course too, not just mine. I will be asking my AP Language colleagues to do the same for their students, despite their already high scores.

Choosing challenging works like Warren's *All the King's Men* makes pedagogical sense (in a time when little else does in education). I think teachers are often torn between the "old-school" New Criticism and the more modern and friendly Reader Response views on Literature. Reader Response relies on journals and reactions to the text, which are certainly appropriate. A response journal can often help a student break down a difficult text, if done well. However, the trouble comes when teachers tackle a difficult text using only Reader Response methods. With the latter approach, students might be left with only "touchy-feely" tangential grasps on the novel. I spent a long time developing the objectives for this unit and paid only little attention to the North Carolina Standard Course of Study (I knew this unit would meet many of the state objectives, of course.). Instead, I thought about what a student would have to do with this text in an AP Literature course or even 100 or 200 level college courses, ideally New Criticism havens. There is probably a worthy argument in deciding whether *All the King's Men* is more plot or character driven. My unit probably argues that it is more character driven, given its heavy emphasis on analyzing character via quote/text explications. But, as long as the work in being taught in the most challenging fashions and most rewarding methods for students, the answer to that argument won't really matter.

Background Information:

It was in reading Chapter 11 “Robert Penn Warren: The Southerner as a Modernist” in Daniel Singal’s *The War Within: From Victorian to Modernist Thought in the South, 1919-1945* that I began to see Jack Burden and Adam Stanton everywhere in the author’s assertions about Warren and his texts. It was here that many objectives for this unit began to take shape. The following is an excellent example. Singal argues that “Invariably the principal test for Warren’s characters becomes the capacity to respond to the unceasing, unpredictable pressure of events—‘the blind ruck of history,’ as he calls it. Those who fail find themselves swept away on a floodtide of violence.” Here is Adam Stanton and why he found himself dead, prostrate below a government statue at the climax of the novel. Jack Burden did not perish in this manner. Why? Warren would have us believe it was due to actualization that comes from self-knowledge. Singal concludes that “To save himself, the denizen of Warren’s turbulent world must attain a sense of personal identity, taking into account the animal component of his nature, the innate human proclivity for evil, and the relentless flux of history”. It was this “relentless flux of history” that grabbed my attention here because it seems to be calling to the closing lines of Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, where Nick posited at the end:

Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that’s no matter — tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther. And one fine morning—So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.

It seems impossible not to note the striking similarities between the “relentless flux of history,” especially if the definition of flux is taken into consideration. Fitzgerald relies on the same water image: “borne back ceaselessly into the past.” It is now the task of teacher and student to sort out what view of history each is prescribing. Are we doomed to repeat it? Beat down by the ceaseless and relentless nature of history. Most see the closing lines of Fitzgerald’s work as cautiously optimistic. At least Jack Burden was keenly aware of his “animal component,” while Adam Stanton would prefer to ignore or suppress his, until it is too late and the “floodtide of violence” sweeps in instead.

Warren himself is equally intriguing as he “attached himself to compatriots far older and more experienced than he was” and threw in with Fugitive poets like Ransom, Davidson and Tate. That was not the cure to all of his ailments, certainly. Warren was deemed unfit for military duty, costing him a slot at the Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland. His vision deteriorated swiftly, and he feared blindness. Warren spiraled into a severe depression that ultimately resulted in a suicide attempt. This is worth noting, only because Fitzgerald never saw active military duty either, a fact that deeply troubled him

and appeared in his literature (Gatsby claimed he was well-decorated and attended Oxford for a short time on a GI bill after the war.). While military prowess was certainly present in *Night Rider*, it is more interesting to note that it is the imagery dealing with his illness that seems pervasive in Warren's other works. Singal describes that imagery "having to do with eyesight, blindness, darkness, and light, night and day would recur frequently in his writings." It is widely known that eyes are considered the window to the soul in literature, but given this background information about Warren, it is worth considering if there wasn't another reason that eye-color is not so dominant in *All the King's Men*.

Singal notes that a change in geography in 1927 "...brought Warren in contact with the mainstream of American literature," where he could safely test out theories of political violence, without involving the South. What is most striking about Warren's comment on John Brown (a character from another work) is that it sounds like he was describing Washington Irving: "that tight especial brand of New England romanticism which manifested itself in stealing guinea niggers, making money, wrestling with conscience, hunting witches, building tea-clippers, talking about Transcendentalism, or being an Abolitionist." Any students faced with this quote and some working knowledge of Irving's tale "The Devil and Tom Walker," should be able to pair the two immediately. Warren didn't trust the Puritan mentality, but neither did Nathaniel Hawthorne or Irving. Discussing Warren's move to Yale at this time and this quote should result in an interesting revisiting of American Romanticism, covered much earlier in the year.

Using a little bit from Warren's personal life (his eye condition) and some from his time in the North (geography), opens the door to explore his philosophical beliefs just in time for Warren to bear witness to the real Huey Long while serving on the English department at Louisiana State University beginning in 1933. Warren believed that it was "not abstract reasoning, but the continuous lessons of experience [that] must be his guide" in creating an identity, making *All the King's Men* "his first truly existential novel." It unfolded quickly from here. Willie Talos (later Stark) "is intended to represent the blind force of history; his power in fact derives from his ability to ride the crest of events." The word "crest" should recall the earlier statements of the "flux" and "current" of history. It is man's ability to conquer these experiences that make him great, or at least powerful, Warren contends. Including this very history makes Warren realize his story will need a narrator; enter Jack Burden. A man much like Warren himself, he brings with him a healthy dose of skepticism, but the reader soon realizes that much of it is there to cover up some residual innocence left over from childhood. There are few characters

more innocent than the two people Burden holds in the highest esteem, Judge Monty Irwin and Anne Stanton. Singal states that “At the deepest level of his mind, these two figures symbolize an unshaken purity and goodness that is almost mythical.” That goodness is not to last, however. Anne has an affair with Willie Stark, a fact so riveting that her brother Adam finally tapped into his animality to kill Stark, ending up dead himself. That left the judge. Irwin was like a father to Jack, which was good because it turns out that he was Jack’s father. It was not that news that killed him, though. Jack uncovers a bribe that the judge took early in his career, which resulted in the suicide of a bookkeeper. Irwin takes the noble route and kills himself. That could have been Jack’s undoing; however, he survives. The characters are not the only ones grappling with issues here—students will need a lot of help to unpack the material in this heady novel.

Learning a little bit about the real Huey Long may help. It is also easy to see how works from Fitzgerald might have intrigued Warren. Richard D. White, Jr. writes of 1920s New Orleans as though one could swap it out with New York, save for one item: it was actually easier to get a drink in New Orleans! “New Orleanians treated Prohibition as just another minor annoyance, like their pesky mosquitoes, and a stiff drink could be bought almost anytime and anyplace on aptly named Bourbon Street.” The alcohol and parties from *The Great Gatsby* often excite students. It would not be a difficult stretch to argue that Huey Long lived as though attending one long party--Not always in the sense that he drank (which he did), but in the sense of the energy that he brought with him all the time. That is to say that Huey Long always made a spectacle, wearing an impeccable white suit (He was not a small man.) and puffing on a large cigar as he entered the Louisiana Senate for his own impeachment trial. The crowds gathered, given that “[a]t the rear of the chamber, carpenters built wooden bleachers to accommodate over one hundred spectators, and tickets were issued for each seat.” The impeachment was to be short-lived, however. White’s answer to the question about what made Huey Long/Willie Stark fall is power. Long changed after the failed impeachment, became more secretive, more apprehensive, more political almost. “Now more than ever, acquiring absolute power consumed Huey. “I want power so that I can do all the things I want to do,” he admitted to a friend.” To increase control, Long increased jobs. “By 1931, Louisiana employed over 22,000 men working on highways, more than any other state in the country.” Early in the throws of the Depression, handing out state jobs meant security for both Long and his constituents.

With the impeachment behind him, and lots of men working on the roads, Huey got busy tallying how much “highway mileage” was being added. “[Modern roads] provided

symbols of his success as a governor. And success meant almost as much having the power in the first place. Long would stop at nothing. “Huey revived an archaic practice of farming out state prisoners from Angola as cheap labor for private contractors.” White must favor Long too much to call this for what it was: convict lease getting a rebirth. Fortunately, Long soon went back to the practice of handing over road contracts to his cronies. “He ignored accusations of graft in the Highway Department. ‘We got the roads in Louisiana, haven’t we?’ he snapped back at a reporter. ‘In some states they only have the graft.’” Long would stop at nothing, even stooping to running for senator to get his roads. “Huey knew that if he lost the race, his political career was probably finished. But his political ambition had begun to expand beyond Louisiana.” Long’s thirst for power could no longer be quenched by the Gulf, apparently. It was on the campaign trail where some of the most famous lines concerning Long were said (without notes, of course): “...If you believe that this is a state where every man is a king but no man wears a crown, then I want you to vote for Huey Long for the United States Senate.” While Warren’s Willie Stark rarely drinks, “According to a reporter at the scene, Huey not only gave a masterful performance but did so while being dead drunk.” Long really would stop at nothing, resorting to kidnapping to individuals with information that could damage his chance at the Senate. He won the Democratic primary election that year.

His power knew no boundaries, not even when it came to his nickname. Around the time of Senate election, Long began calling himself “Kingfish.” “Taken from the character who was the leader of the Mystic Knights of the Sea in the popular radio comedy *Amos ‘n’ Andy*, the nickname sarcastically fit Huey.” With his newfound power over the Ring, “Huey now maintained a majority control over the legislature and close to the two-thirds vote necessary for funding bills and changes to the state constitution.” Huey’s power became so great that even newspapers across the country had begun to take note. Huey took no notice of them, however. Instead, he chose to focus his attention on LSU (Louisiana State University). It would be during this time period that Warren (himself a member of the English department) would experience Long first hand. “Over the next few years, the university enjoyed an intellectual renaissance, attracting excellent young writers like Robert Penn Warren.” Long did love the university. He wanted sidewalks poured where students naturally walked. “The gently winding sidewalks of LSU still survive as a testimony to his lively and creative mind.” In many ways the “work” Long did to LSU served as a microcosm to what he did to the state of Louisiana. “To Huey, quantity implied quality, such as large marching bands, more athletic scholarships, more grand pianos, a longer swimming pool, but not intellectual freedom or a better library.” Long would create his thousands of miles of roads in Louisiana, but not

at quality, just a vast quantity of them. Louisiana football has long born the stench of corruption, but few probably know that the corruption began with one Huey P. Long. “During another of his pep talks, with LSU losing at halftime, he gave his Tigers extra incentive. ‘If you win,’ the governor of Louisiana promised, ‘I’ll give every slap damn one of you a job on the Highway Commission.’ LSU came back and won.” There wasn’t a non-academic aspect of LSU that wasn’t ripe with graft or corruption under Long’s tutelage.

It wasn’t long before Long’s ambition grew too great to be contained by the state of Louisiana. Should Long win the US Senate race, however, he planned to remain governor until the completion of his term. Naturally, he won. Yet, Long’s first taste of Washington was bitter. “Washington, D.C., was the ‘farthest spot from the United States I’ve seen,’ he remarked to reporters. ‘The Democrats seem like a whipped rooster with the victor pecking us on the head, and all standing there bleeding, taking it.’ Long soon realized that he needed to be physically present in order to keep his political machine running. He returned home once under the guise of helping his family move, but he needed to return for some damage control. And Huey Long was very successful this way as many noted; “‘I advise anyone who thinks he knows something about politics to go down in Louisiana and take a postgraduate course,’ Texas senator Tom Connally told his colleagues.” Initially Huey Long campaigned for Roosevelt, but their relationship was tenuous at best. “The redneck Louisianan and the patrician, blueblood New Yorker could never become friends or even loyal political allies, and both men knew it.” Long felt that he could promise and deliver more than the president. He believed that Roosevelt didn’t really believe in Long’s redistribution of wealth after all. “[Long] introduced wealth-sharing legislation several times in the Senate but never got more than fourteen votes from among the ninety-six senators.” In one of his best speeches, Long accounted for much of crude behavior:

Mr. President, I am not undertaking to answer the charge that I am ignorant. It is True. I am an ignorant man, he declared in measured tones. I have no college education. I have not even had a high-school education. But the thing that takes me far in politics is that I do not have to color what comes into my mind and into my heart. I say it unvarnished. I say it without veneer. I know the hearts of the people because I have not colored my own. I know when I am right in my own conscience. I do not talk one way back there in the hills of Louisiana and another way here in the Senate. I have one language. Ignorant as it is, it is the universal language of the sphere in which I operate.

The Kingfish mesmerized senators with the above speech, most of whom despised him. Long's speech showcases everything about Huey that was great: rhythm, tone, anaphora, cadence, self-deprecation, and (at least this time) honesty.

Though Long never really had the support of the US Senate on much of anything, his power over Louisiana soon spiraled out of control. In the beginning, Long kept most of his promises to the poorest people of Louisiana. But soon enough, he was so consumed with making money to run his political machine and earn more power that there wasn't anything left to give the people. Few noticed or cared though, with one man commenting, 'At least we got something,' said a north Louisiana farmer. 'Before him, we got nothing. That's the difference.' It is difficult to discern whom the farmer's quote says more about: the state of Louisiana politics or its people. Though, maybe one cannot be pulled apart from the other? Huey Long was so merciless to his enemies and the ruthless ruination he brought down on families and distant relatives was finally too much for one man. Long was shot in the gut by one Carl Weiss. Weiss had never even met Long. "The only apparent connection between the two men was that Weiss's wife, Yvonne, was the daughter of Benjamin Pavy, the judge Huey was gerrymandering from office during the current session." Huey died in the hospital thirty-one hours after being shot.

Strategies/Classroom Activities:

Paideia Seminars

Paideia discussions are entirely student-led. The teacher is there only to pose questions, not to field responses or provide direct feedback, and this forces student to move towards an autonomous classroom with shared responsibility. Everyone involved is engaged as an active listener, a valuable skill in today's interpersonal workplace. By listening and comprehending what a peer is saying, only then can the student respond. One student responded, "I learned there is often more value in listening than in speaking." Paideia students also learn to respond constructively and respectfully, making the classroom fair and equitable and providing another asset in the college or real world setting. Students learn to respond with statements like, "I agree with you because..." or the converse, "I disagree with you because..." and not with combative or argumentative comments that can often populate class discussions. Perhaps the most significant impact on learning that Paideia presents is that it mandates a partnership between the student and the text. Since Paideia questions are designed to be open-ended and textually based, a student cannot

respond if he/she has not connected with the text. This connection comes from teaching students the strongest reading skill available, annotating. Paideia makes clear that students have to interact with the text through annotations. Learning to annotate and then responding to peers using that textual evidence prepares students for AP and college level courses as well as the real world, where evidence for support is paramount. My students began to excel at annotating text and requested Xerox copies of stories to help with comprehension and to form questions, which promoted shared inquiry.

A Paideia practice forces integrated instruction, as it asks students to set goals as a large group, such as making eye contact with each other, as well as personal goals like speaking at least three times, or only speaking five times if a student tends to dominate a discussion. Since teachers are not directly involved in the whole class discussion, they have time to track the discussion and use it as an informal assessment or to help with reflective responses. Since I can see discussion patterns immediately, I can signal for students who have only spoken once to now take control of the discussion, which benefits the quieter students by ensuring that their voice and opinions are heard too. Each student contributes and learns from the discussion because the responsibility is on the student. Conversation mapping aids student performance because it raises awareness of which students were not speaking out in class discussion, which resulted in my ability to call on them in class and raise my accountability and expectations for all.

***All the King's Men* Opening Passages: Seminar Guide**

PRE-SEMINAR:

Content: Activate prior knowledge about Huey Long: Have students read several pages from his autobiography *Every Man a King*. Look specifically at Chapters 30 and 31. Instruct students to read and annotate the opening twelve pages of Warren's *All the King's Men*. Have students stop reading after the first full paragraph on page twelve.

Process: Review seminar discussion and behaviors. Set goals.

SEMINAR QUESTIONS:

Opening:

- Choose one word to describe Willie Stark. (round-robin) Why?
(spontaneous)

Core:

- Why does Warren choose to open the novel with a description of traveling down Highway 58 towards Mason City?
- Describe Stark's style (vocabulary, diction, sentences, etc.) in this selection. Does it help or hurt his argument? Why?
- On page ten, Stark quotes the Bible to the crowd gathered around him: "The Good Book says, 'There are three things that are never satisfied, yea, four things say not, it is enough—' and the voice was different now—'the grave, and the barren womb, the earth that is not filled with water, and the fire that saith not, it is enough.'" Consider what Willie goes on to say about politicians. Why do you think he uses this strategy? Do you think it is effective?
- Is Stark's speech grounded more in ethos, logos, or pathos? How do you know?
- How would you characterize Stark's relationship with his family? Be sure to use the text to support your response.
- Consider the closing paragraph of this selection. Of what does it remind you?

Closing:

- Compare and contrast Warren's Willie Stark to the real Huey Long. How closely do the two men resemble each other? How do you know?
- What can we learn about modern politicians from Willie Stark? From Huey Long? Examples?

POST-SEMINAR

Process: Display tracking chart from discussion so that students may compose a one-page written response critiquing the discussion and their role.

Content: Analyze in writing Stark's use of rhetorical terms and features in his speech. What purpose does Stark's use of paralipsis serve?

A tracking chart is a useful means to evaluate the discussion. Develop a legend to aid in tracking the discussion and to help students evaluate their role post-seminar. A successful Paideia is said to last between forty-five minutes and an hour. A block schedule would allow for immediate review and reflection (completing post-seminar questions in class). Teachers may choose to assess the discussion and assign a grade or score only the post-seminar questions. I usually score both the discussion and reflective pieces. When I began teaching, class sizes were small enough that every student was expected to sit inside the circle and contribute to the discussion. Classes that were once twenty-five and smaller are now between thirty-three and forty students. Paideia allows for this in that teachers can create an inside and outside circle. Students sitting on this inside are responsible for answering discussion questions on the spot. Students sitting on the outside circle do not speak during the discussion. Instead, they answer the discussion questions individually and are required to comment and critique the discussion of their peers inside the circle for each question as well. The beauty of a Paideia Seminar is that the responsibility falls to the student and there is no place to hide, even if sitting on the outside.

Characterization

Characterization is another strategy that will help students with Warren's work. At this point in their educational career, students are hopefully familiar with the many ways authors bring a character to life: how a character looks, what a character says, what is said about that character, heredity, etc. Below are two passages meant to help familiarize students with elements of characterization.

He would just leave the sentence hanging and twisting slowly in the air like a piece of frayed rope, and would look at me out of his clear, deep set, ice-water-blue, abstract eyes—the kind of eyes and the kind of look your conscience has about three o'clock in the morning--...

The above quote is about Adam Stanton. What does Warren suggest about this character? How does Jack feel about him? How do we know? Note the simile and significance of eye and eye-color.

Consider using the following quote about Sadie Burke.

She was built very satisfactorily but you tended to forget that, because of the awful clothes she wore and the awkward, violent, snatching gestures she made.

She had absolutely black hair, which she cut off at a crazy length and which went out in all directions in wild, electric way.

How do you picture Sadie? How does she contrast with Lucy Stark? Is it even possible for her to look any other way? (The answer is no.)

Review the tenets of characterization more in depth if needed, but otherwise move forward in asking students to examine setting and description as a component of characterization. Consider using the following pieces of description to aid in character analysis.

- “The shade of the window was up...he, of all the animals, has a fine thumb.”
- “So we walked...looked across the river.”
- “It was a beautiful morning in middle May...like the ocean chewing its gums.”

Ask students to identify the criteria that make these descriptions powerful.

Some of the fun in writing fiction is in getting to name the characters. Most authors and film directors claim to put a lot of thought and emphasis on the names of their characters. Consider *The Great Gatsby* once more and its narrator: Nick Carraway. The last name must refer to being “carried away” by the life and drama in East Egg. Ask students to consider the name symbolism for some of the major characters in *All the King’s Men*, like Jack Burden—what is his burden? Put a list of character names on the board and ask students to come up with the symbolic meaning of each.

Quote quizzes can be a helpful means to assess student’s understanding of the novel and to check for comprehension without relying on recall/understanding questions. I might include the following quote from the first three chapters of the novel.

“Yes, look,” she said, “and we lay up there in that God-forsaken-shack—both of us, my brother and me—we were kids—and it was the smallpox—and my father was a no-good—he was off drunk, crying and drinking in a saloon if he could beg a dime...”

Ask students to explain the context of this quote. Consider: What does Sadie reveal in this ramble—consider what she goes on to say. What prompted her to reveal this to Jack? How does the author let us know she is upset—examine the syntax. Answer? Sadie just found out that Willie cheated on her (though somehow his being married has never counted). She reveals that her brother died due to neglect and that she was abused by

men, including but not limited to, her drunken father. She sees this incident of cheating as a slap in the face from Willie (almost literally). The reader knows she is upset because of Warren's use of the dash—Sadie thoughts are interrupted, crying, jumbled phrases emerge around the dashes.

Multiple choice has its place in characterization also. Using a passage selected from Chapter 4, much can be learned about Jack Burden. Below are five multiple choice questions for the passage beginning "I have said that Jack Burden could not put down..." and closes with "...like the world of boyhood to which an old man returns."

- The enormous spider web functions in the passage as
- an analogy.
- a counter-example.
- dramatic irony.
- an anecdote.
- a definition.
- The point of the comparison between life and a spider web is that
- life is sticky and entangling.
- all actions have consequences.
- whatever you do you are bound to die sooner or later.
- we are helpless victims of more sinister forces.
- God's workings are those of a spider.
- Jack Burden's work on Cass Mastern irritates him because
- He is frustrated with his ancestor's fatalistic attitude.
- The pressure of his own work keeps him from finishing.
- He sleeps too much.
- He is unable to understand Mastern's spider-web theory.
- Key pages of the journal are missing.
- All of the following factors contribute to Jack's abandoning his

Ph.D. dissertation EXCEPT

- Cass Mastern's life may have been a negative commentary on his own.
- Jack is overcome by paralyzing lethargy.
- Jack found the tedium of research too extreme.
- Jack could not understand the significance of Mastern's life.
- He was daunted by the immensity of the task of capturing another's life.
- The Great Sleep as Jack Burden explains it is

- a euphemistic expression for death.
- a deeply spiritual state of mind.
- a pleasurable diversion, not unlike deep sea diving.
- a condition analogous to Cass Mastern's spider-web theory.
- a coping mechanism for dealing with failure.

Answers: a,b,d,c,e. These multiple choice questions prompt great class discussion concerning the characterization of Jack and offer a chance to examine Warren's metaphor more closely.

It is also important to examine Highway 58 and the surrounding countryside. The following multiple choice questions might be given as soon as the first twelve pages are read by the students, or saved until you are deep into characterization. Use the following passage from opening pages of the novel: "On up Number 58...more or less."

- The narrator's purpose for describing the poor conditions of the red hill country along Highway 58 is to:

- highlight the stupidity of the local inhabitants.
- contrast an earlier prosperous time with the depressed present.
- argue for a program of economic reform.
- show the improvements brought by the highway.
- provide information about the narrator.
- In paragraph two, the narrator's sentence structure changes from long and complex at the beginning to short and direct. One explanation for this might be:

- The narrator was no longer adding any new information to the development of either the area or the paragraph.

- The short sentences reinforce the sense of fragmentation taking place in the area after the closing of the sawmills.

- The shorter sentences signal a change in the narrative tone from sentimental to matter of fact.

- The short sentences convey the nostalgia associated with the narrator's arrival in Mason City.

- The short sentences capture the innocent and fresh perspective of a younger person.

- The narrator's attitude toward the local residents of this region appears to be:

- Kind and sympathetic.
- Hostile and uncharitable.

- Superior and condescending.
- Superior but sympathetic.
- Distressed and angry.
- According to the passage, the poverty of the region was caused by:
- Crass exploitation by northern timber companies.
- Severe drought.
- Stupidity on the part of the local residents.
- A combination of Yankee dollar and Confederate dumbness.
- A lack of thoughtful economic planning by local government.
- The extended narrative development of the depressed conditions along the upland stretch of Highway 58 is important for all of the reasons

EXCEPT

- It helps place the particular events of the novel in an economic context.
- It shows the reader particular conditions under which Willie Stark was born and reared.
- It reveals much about the narrator's attitudes.
- It explains how slavery contributed to current conditions in the South.
- It provides a contrast to other locales depicted in the novel.

Answers: b,b,d,d,d. These multiple-choice questions serve as a jumping off point for discussion of the importance of Highway 58 in the novel. Feel free to move on towards a discussion of transportation in the novel, as it pertains to Agrarianism and literary conceits i.e. motif of escapism, etc. Remember that Nick Caraway fled west at the end of *The Great Gatsby*, and Jack Burden does much the same.

“Humpty Dumpty” and *All the King's Men*

Pass out a copy of the poem to students and have them annotate it. Ask for a paragraph or two of reflection on how the poem might pertain to the novel. Students will easily see the connection to Willie Stark and Humpty Dumpty. Ask students: How do you see its (the nursery rhyme) application to the text—spell out the players if you must. There are several good websites that lend some historical legitimacy to the rhyme, and they are referenced on the bibliography. Feel free to go over this information with your students, or ask them to find it out for themselves. I often use this as a closing activity, as the title of a work usually bears some significance and it is easy to spot in Warren's work. You can do much the same thing with *The Great Gatsby* by posing the question: Is the work

really about him? Many believe it is much more a book about Nick Caraway than Jay Gatsby. There may be students who want to argue the same idea for *All the King's Men* and Jack Burden. Let them. This is also where I ask students about my own title for this unit and the question that started this whole unit in the first place. What was Willie's great fall? Greed? Power? Or something else entirely not so negative?

Annotated Bibliography for Teachers

"Humpty Dumpty Story and Picture." Nursery Rhymes Lyrics, Origins and History.

http://www.rhymes.org.uk/humpty_dumpty.htm (accessed November 7, 2010).

I like the ease of the information available on this website. Also, I had not seen the alternative words to the rhyme, which are worth considering for this unit, even though they remove the title line.

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. 1925. Reprint, New York: Scribner, 2004.

It is not mandatory that students read this work before reading *All the King's Men*, but I am convinced now that it should be required reading. The connections between the two works cannot be ignored, nor can Warren's own timeline (He was at a prime age when Fitzgerald released his book.). I contend it is an easier work and thus helps students understand the more complex (and longer) *All the King's Men*.

Long, Huey. *Every Man a King*. 1933. Reprint, Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1964.

I read chapters thirty and thirty-one during my seminar. They were an excellent choice by my professor as they dealt clearly with Long's belief about wealth. It is certainly interesting, given that people are using much the same language today, discussing a redistribution of wealth. Long's ideas were considered radical then and it is more than a little ironic that the same outrage exists today. More importantly, this was Long in his own voice, not a biographer trying to bring life to him.

Moorhen, Charles. "The Civil War Origin of the Humpty Dumpty Nursery Rhyme |

Socyberty." Socyberty | Society on the Web.

<http://socyberty.com/folklore/the-civil-war-origin-of-the-humpty-dumpty-nursery-rhyme/> (accessed November 7, 2010).

This is an excellent article detailing in-depth the historical root of the rhyme and some possible ideas as to what a “Humpty-Dumpty” actually is.

Singal, Daniel. *The War Within: From Victorian to Modernist Thought in the South, 1919-1945*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1982.

The chapter from this text was infinitely helpful to this curriculum unit. It included not only background information about the author, but also criticism of Warren’s works, which aided me in making comparison to Fitzgerald’s work and also to *All the King’s Men*. I also read chapters seven and eight and while they do not appear in this curriculum unit, the information in those chapters helped clarify the “name-dropping” I saw in this chapter. Moreover, from reading the other chapters, I had a much clearer understanding of the Fugitive Poets.

Warren, Robert Penn. *All the King's Men*. 1974. Reprint, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984.

This is the primary text for this curriculum unit. I love to force students to find supporting evidence, so it may be the only work appearing on their bibliography page. Many of the activities described and enclosed here rely heavily on this work. Students need to be able to back up assertions from the text. There are newer, more popular editions, including one that uses some of Warren’s original material including a different opening and calling Willie Stark, Willie Talos, significant name change, certainly. Feel free to check that edition out, but this is my favorite. I am not totally sure it can be located anymore, however.

White, Jr., Richard D. *Kingfish: The Reign of Huey P. Long*. New York: Random House, 2006.

The William's biography is the old standard, and it is old. I enjoyed this newer, shorter version on Long by White. It is ripe with quotations from Long and those who knew him and told in a manner almost as compelling as a novel. White has the talent to draw the reader into Long's Louisiana in the 1920s and 1930s.

Bibliography for Students

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. 1925. Reprint, New York: Scribner, 2004.

Long, Huey. *Every Man a King*. 1933. Reprint, Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1964.

Warren, Robert Penn. *All the King's Men*. 1947. Reprint, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984.

Materials for the Classroom

Literature can stand alone in that all a student needs is a copy of the text and a pencil. If possible, ask students to purchase the text so that they can annotate the work. If that is not economically feasible, then ask students to insert scraps of paper or sticky notes in lieu of annotations in the margins. Some students may prefer this method, even with their own copy. I work heavily with the text, so little worksheet printing is needed. It is usually helpful to provide each student with the passages and multiple-choice questions, instead of relying on a class set for those materials, but if copy paper is rare, by all means, make students write on their own paper. Annotating the text will help in achieving all of the objectives listed above, especially making connections to other literary works and comparing and contrasting Huey P. Long to Willie Stark.

Notes