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## Maturing Jack Burden: The Responsibility of the Converted, Nihilistic Idealist

In Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*, the narrator, Jack Burden, is a fictionalized version of Warren himself. Jack expresses Warren's views, which are initially nihilistic, cynical, and escapist. He attempts to distance himself from any darkness surrounding him and his actions, yet simultaneously disclaims all responsibility. However, by the end of the book, Jack is transformed by four events: the departure of Ellis Burden, the Case of the Upright Judge, the deaths of three good men, and the youthful relationship with Anne. Forced to see the futility of his defense mechanisms, Jack becomes the man who accepts responsibility, believes the truth of the Spider Web Theory, and dismisses moral relativism and the "Great Twitch".

Jack's initial cynicism is rooted in his past. When he is six years old, Ellis Burden, the man Jack believes to be his father, walks out on Jack and his mother for the life of a poor, street-corner evangelist. His mother tells him that "he left because he didn't love mother," saying he should think of his father as dead (114). Until he discovers Ellis' motivation for fleeing years later, Jack interprets his departure as abandonment. He feels rejected, angry, and confused. The event leads to his consistent denial of responsibility, as well as his lack of understanding of human motivation: Jack does not take into account the possibility that Jack's mother may have given his father motivation to leave. The event also gives him a sense of inadequacy shapes his mindset throughout his life. When visiting Ellis, grown-up Jack is ashamed. Ellis is helping others and seems happy, but Jack feels he is weak. As Jack sees it, he has not inherited the genes needed to succeed; it is futile for him to toil for any goal, and he is condemned to drift through life indefinitely. Jack refers to his own lack of ambition throughout the novel, which results from his observations of where the ambition to be successful has gotten his father--the street corner. Jack even says near the end of Chapter 8 that all Ellis Burden's goodness showed Jack was not to live by it (353). Thus, Jack has no hopes and dreams partly because he has no father whom he may strive to emulate.

The life changes that shape Jack are so important to him that, as narrator, he frames himself as having three separate, standing identities. One such identity is Jack the Graduate Student who cannot care to understand anyone's motivations, including his own. For example, he left his PhD dissertation of Cass Mastern after one and a half years because, although he felt he "knew Gilbert Mastern," he "realized that he did not know Cass Mastern" (188). Without knowing the man behind the facts, Jack the Graduate Student could not compile an informed reality of Cass Mastern. Thus, as Jack the Graduate, even as he tries to retreat from the present into the past, he cannot examine and understand the past with either ambition or perseverance.

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Jack does not want to touch the past in such a way because it is a source of pain for him. Jack the mature, responsible adult, who is narrating this book, dares to examine and explain the past with the direction and courage that Jack the Graduate Student lacked. The earlier Jack could not put down why he did not know Cass Mastern, but Jack the Narrator, "(who am what Jack Burden became), look back now, years later, and try to say why" (188). To the younger Jack the words of those papers were "an accumulation of items, odds and ends" (189). Jack as an idealist treats his surroundings and all that inhabit the surroundings as nothing and imaginary; he is nihilistic and deconstructionist in nature. He even sees through the people who are close to him, such as Anne, Adam, Willie, and his mother. He had not been able to see the truth that Jack the Narrator can see. He was still trying to escape his past and his understanding of events in the lives of those who have impact on him, in both his study of history and his reverence of time. He had yet to learn the truth.

The truth of the spider web is the truth that Jack the Narrator has found--as Cass Mastern had found--and that Jack the Graduate Student cannot see. Jack the Narrator explains he can understand Cass's motivations because he now knows what Cass learned in his search to free the slave Phoebe. This world is "all one piece," like "an enormous spider-web, which if touched, ripples with vibrations, and signals the spider in rest. It prepares you for its meal, and it does not matter if you did not mean to upset the web, but the rippling effects lie in wait as the spider with dripping fangs" (188-9). This is the basis of the spider-web theory, underlining the themes of cause and effect and reaping what you sow. These ideas were beyond Jack for most of his life and he retreats from his failure and incomprehension, first with the Great Sleep, and then with the Great Twitch theory. The reason Jack did not understand Cass Mastern is because as Cass was responsible, Jack was not responsible. Jack has as much trouble reconciling the past and present as accepting and understanding cause and effect. His irresponsible actions return to hurt him in the second half of the novel.

Jack spends most of the novel living as Jack the Muckraker and Irresponsible Cynic, focusing on finding information reaped in "The Case of the Upright Judge" that will lead to the demises of several men and women throughout the second half of the novel. He starts with a hunch about the Judge needing money, but gains nearly nothing from his assumed father, the Scholarly Attorney, who speaks of "foulness, all foulness!"(202) when it comes to his past with Irwin and Jack's mother. However, Jack does leave with a hint that the Judge was once broke. Anne calls Jack to tell him that Irwin married into money, but further research into Mabel's past in Savannah reveals that Mabel Carruthers had been as broke as his first wife when they were married (218). Researching further, Jack finds a bounty of information on Irwin. Jack learns that Judge Irwin took 500 shares of American Electric Power Company stock as a bribe for dismissing a case against the Southern Belle Fuel Company, used the money made from selling the stock to save his plantation, received a job as counsel and vice president of the American Electric Power Company (219), and led Mortimer Littlepaugh to commit suicide when his

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services were refused and Littlepaugh had no options for getting justice from Stanton (221). Jack tracks down Lily Mae Littlepaugh to force the truth out of her through guile and bribery, as "[Jack] may not be alright, but [money] always is"(223-4). Learning the truth from her, he finds Irwin had "killed [Mortimer in a bribe]" (225) and that the late Governor Stanton also had concealed the events. The information will be used to force many unexpected decisions by those who see it.

Jack's transfer of the evidence of Irwin and Stanton's corruption to Adam and Anne leads them to Willie and sets them up for disaster. When Jack first comes to Adam with Willie's proposal, Adam firmly refuses to work in Willie's filth. Jack tells Adam that his failure is his need to "do good" and his Christ complex. Anne pleads with Jack to make Adam take the job, because Adam refuses to supposedly "touch filth." Adam's moral code pits him in opposition to Willie Stark, but Jack's decisions to tell Anne about the evidence and to give her the evidence lead to many changes for the Stantons. Jack tells Anne that her father covered up Irwin's crime (249), which goes against the appearance of moral absolutism which Governor Stanton had before his children. He sends her the proof for her and Adam to look over. This leads to Adam finally agreeing to work as chief of staff in Willie Stark's soon-to-be-built hospital, as Anne said "He told me to tell you that he would do it. To arrange it. That was all" (254). Adam's idealism is cut down by the evidence of his father's corruption, as he learns that his father was not infallible. The spider web shows that he has broken Adam to a point where Adam can accept working in Willie's hospital.

Jack harms Anne Stanton with his actions. Anne loses her idealism because of Jack's discovery. She is an aristocratic woman who prefers power and direction, and who was initially turned off by Willie and his methods. She asks Jack if what Willie promises to do in a speech he delivered would come to pass, to which Jack replies, "How the hell should I know?" (262). Willie's sheer willpower and action sway Anne, and she becomes engaged in an affair with him. Sadie congratulates Jack for bringing the new woman into Willie's life. Jack must leave to see Anne to talk to her. She confirms the worst; she has become Willie's new mistress. Jack's spirit is crushed by this knowledge. He is pained by the fall of one of his best friends, the woman he loved for her pure Old South ideals and morality. Thus, his actions not only hurt Anne, but cause his own physical and emotional pain.

Jack's past with Anne showed him what it felt like to have love and is the source for many of Jack's unresolved character flaws. Jack eventually falls in love with Anne at age 21, thinking, "you are in love" (277). He kisses Anne, confessing his love for her on their walk. She heads to her room to consider. Near the end of the summer, Anne asks Jack what he hopes to do; he says he will not let her starve and wants to give her what she likes. Jack lacks direction or ambition for the future, making Anne hesitant to become more serious in the relationship. The two fail to consummate their relationship and battle with one another constantly. When Anne

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returns from Maine, Jack realizes "it was not the way it had been" (300). Anne finds the direction and ambition she wants in her partner in Willie, accepting the new affair after seeing the evidence of her father's impropriety. Thus, Jack loses Anne to his paralysis and indecision. Jack comes to see all life as a "twitch in the blood," believing he has no responsibility for anything that occurs. He finds strength in the concept that "you cannot lose what you never had" and you are never guilty of a crime which you did not commit (311). This new misunderstanding of truth only makes him even more bitter, cynical, and indecisive.

Jack arrives at his ultimate defense against taking on the responsibility of the spider web. Jack comes to derive the Great Twitch Theory on his way back to Louisiana, when he picks up an old hitchhiker with a peculiar facial twitch. From this phenomenon he derives the Great Twitch, which states that all human actions are random phenomena, and so no one must bear any responsibility for anything that happens. With this understanding, you "are at one with the Great Twitch" (314). Under these auspices, Jack is free to do anything without feeling responsible or having to take responsibility for anything that happens. Being absolved of all worldly responsibility makes for cold interactions between Jack and those who are closest to him, Willie, Anne, and Judge Irwin. Jack decides to show the Judge the evidence his own way. However, his encounter will challenge his newly-founded comfort zone.

The encounter with Judge Irwin allows for Jack's eventual redemption and rebirth by challenging his newly-founded theory. He is ruthless to Judge Irwin when he brings the judge evidence of Irwin's bribe and its consequences. Irwin refuses to plea for Jack to spare his biological father, as Irwin says, "I could just... just tell you that...something...But I won't" (347). Instead, the judge commits suicide. Jack is forced to conclude that the judge brought his death upon himself, as he says, "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" (353). Jack gives up the "good, weak father for the evil, strong one," (354) as he is relieved that his father is not the weak Ellis Burden but the strong and flawed Judge Irwin. The judge sets an example of moral uprightness and courage. Jack lacks these traits, but can now try to follow them.

With his increased sense of responsibility, Jack gains new perspective. Jack finds new respect for his mother in her proven ability to love a man, as compared to his previous belief that she was incapable of love since the men and furniture in her home changed simultaneously (114). He feels a sense of pity for Ellis Burden's fate as he now understands the actions of the Scholarly Attorney, who was "cuckolded by [Judge Irwin]" (353) and driven from his home. Jack traded humble Old South morality for power through a cynical lack of ethical concern, but he is now beginning to realize and lament it.

Even so, Jack's ultimate redemption will not come peacefully. The fact that the Judge's suicide

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eats away at Jack's conscience prefigures the dramatic events of the next chapter. Jack weeps after learning of the judge's decision to give Jack the plantation, the most candid show of emotion since his relationship with Anne. The double meaning of Chapter Eight's final sentence essentially foreshadows what is to come: "It was like the ice breaking up after a long winter. And the winter had been long" (354). After reaching its coldest point, the ice of Jack's emotionlessness and carelessness has begun to break. Similarly, the Great Twitch will also break because of the consequences of the deaths of not only Judge Irwin, but also Adam Stanton and Willie Stark.

Jack is significantly affected by the deaths of the two men closest to him. His transformation is accelerated when Adam and Willie are gunned down, one after the other. Adam is called and manipulated into accepting the caller's story of the affair between Anne and Willie, and about Adam's up-in-coming replacement at the hospital, since Adam failed to fix Willie's son. He runs off after confronting Anne. Jack fails to find Adam, and cannot stop him from shooting Willie. He comes over to Willie and the group, not hearing Jack calling, "Adam!" Jack at first thinks that Adam is simply going to shake Willie's hand. Instead, Jack must witness Adam shoot Willie twice, and be shot twice by Sugar Boy and the State Trooper. Jack is accustomed to the Boss usually being in control of the situation, but this situation, not unlike the fate of Tom Stark, is something he has no control over. Willie pleads that "things could have been different" (400). He still has remains of moral relativism, opposing the moral absolutism for which Adam was willing to give up his life. That relativism is what Jack must also reject. Thus, Jack must come to terms with his own responsibility, specifically his role in the eventual death of Willie.

Jack's final transformation is based on his realization that people must be responsible. He must admit to having a hand in the many events and tragedies that occur in the second half of the novel. Had he not begun to research the Judge, the ironic, tragic chain of events that unfolds in the final chapters of the novel would never have been instigated. This cements the concept Jack begins to develop after Irwin's suicide--the theory that men have no responsibility for what happens to them is impossible. Thus the Great Twitch has been defeated. Jack blames Tiny Duffy for Willie's death (413-5), and so Tiny must have responsibility for something. Henceforth, so must everyone else. Tiny was sure Jack would work for him because Jack was just another cog in the political machine. Jack must realize that he played a pivotal role in the deaths of Willie Stark and Adam Stanton. This is the epiphany that shatters the Great Twitch and Jack's self-righteousness, and allows him to enter a world of accountability and possibility.

Jack can finally resolve all times as one. He understands now that "If you could not accept the past and its burden, there was no future...for only out of the past, can you make the future" (435). He can handle his transformation, as all Jacks are now one Jack. He will work for Hugh Miller, when he returns to politics, and he will travel with his wife Anne "out of history into history and the awful responsibility of time" (438). Jack is ready to take on responsibility for his actions

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and for his life. He has been converted and born anew, no longer cynical, nihilistic, or disillusioned. He has rejected the Great Twitch, and as the current narrator, he has the ability to understand Cass Mastern, write his thesis, and understand the truth of the spider web. Thus, Jack Burden a trinity: the impressionable, immature youth, the irresponsible, disillusioned cynic, and mature adult. He evolves from one person to the next--and ends up as the most complete, and good, version of himself.

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