recall, in addition to Caddy's virginity, Jason's allergy to gasoline, the change of Benjy's name, and Mrs. Compson's utter failure to be a mother to her children. In this final plea to his mother, coupled with other memories of loss associated with her, Quentin summarizes the major incidents of his childhood. Throughout Quentin's section lack of grammatical hierarchy, unfinished syntactical units, ambiguous pronouns, and repeated images reinforce the effects of merging memories, fragmented thoughts, and unresolved tension.

Haunted by a past to which he is inadequate, dogged by a present he cannot face, and doomed to no future, Quentin, through his diction and general point of view—both what he speaks and what he thinks—dramatizes a modern yet universal sensibility. Shortly before his suicide he thinks:

I seemed to be lying neither asleep nor awake looking down a long corridor of grey halflight where all stable things had become shadowy paradoxical all I had done shadows all I had felt suffered taking visible form antic and perverse mocking without relevance inherent themselves with the denial of the significance they should have affirmed thinking I was I was not who was not was not who. (211)

Imprisoned by his obsessions from which his only escape is suicide, Quentin can but agree with his father that "no battle is ever won. . . . They are not even fought. The field only reveals to man his own folly and despair, and victory is an illusion of philosophers and fools" (93).

The Pastness of All the King's Men

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Since the first publication of All the King's Men in 1946, readers have accepted as given the parallel between Robert Penn Warren's fictional "state" and the Louisiana of Huey P. Long. Scholars have documented many similarities between the political careers of

8 Kaluza, p. 73.

Warren’s Boss Stark and the historical Kingfish. But no one has pointed out a difference that may be as important as these similarities, and which illuminates the “pastness” of this novel of and about history. The difference lies in the dates Warren assigns to “past” events in a book which is particularly insistent about dates. Transferring the pattern of Huey Long’s career into All the King’s Men, Warren consistently advanced—usually by two years, once by four—the dates of important events. For example, Long ran for governor unsuccessfully in 1924 and successfully in 1928; in Stark’s career the campaigns come in 1926 and 1930. The impeachment and attempted removal of Governor Long by conservatives in Louisiana’s legislature culminated in April 1929; the impeachment proceedings against Governor Stark are dated April 1933. And Long was assassinated in 1935, while Stark is killed in 1937. The consistency of this pattern suggests that dates in All the King’s Men have a rhetorical significance beyond simple allusions to the career of a politician dead eleven years before the novel appeared.

Warren’s system of dating is tactical: it helps to set up a complex pattern of reverberations among Stark’s state, Long’s Louisiana, and above all the “great world” of the 1930’s and 1940’s—that world whose “forces and fatalities,” Warren has said, were much on his mind during the genesis of All the King’s Men. To take the most obvious example: while the plotting of Willie Stark’s victory over impeachment derives directly from Long’s similar triumph, the date—April 1933 instead of 1929—evokes another dictator who consolidated his power by destroying an independent legislature. It was in April 1933 that Adolf Hitler, newly installed Chancellor of Germany, used the occasion of his birthday to call out “the people”—as Stark does—to demonstrate support for their leader against legislative opposition; the Reichstag fire followed shortly. Warren increases the historical reverberations of Stark’s triumph over his opposition by placing its date—“the fourth of April, 1933”—immediately after the Boss’s speech to a roaring mob: “‘I have seen blood on the moon! . . . Buckets of blood, and boy! I know whose blood it will be. . . . Gimme that meat ax!’” The imagery of this passage refers ironically


2 “All the King’s Men: The Matrix of Experience,” Yale Review, LIII (Dec., 1963), 163–164.

3 All the King’s Men (New York, 1946), p. 156. All quotations are from this edition.
to a statement made by one of Huey Long’s opponents in April 1935,
five months before Long was gunned down in the capitol at Baton
Rouge: “I am not gifted with second sight, nor did I see a spot of
blood on the moon last night, but I can see blood on the polished
marble of this capitol.” But Warren’s extravagant extension of the
imagery, particularly in Stark’s call for a meat ax, carries the passage
beyond the obscure allusion to prophesy not so much a single assassina-
tion as the greater bloody cataclysms of the dozen years after 1933.
The impeachment speech thus brings into focus several references—
including earlier associations of Stark with images of marching feet
and of destructive machines—to historical awareness shared by War-
ren and the reader of All the King’s Men. That awareness is the de-
termining element of the “pastness” of this novel set in the 1930’s but
published in 1946. Warren’s rhetorical strategy incorporates, within
the experience of the novel, the knowledge of a reader who has lived
through what it anticipates—“the convulsion of the world.”

The reader’s historical awareness is not shared by Jack Burden, the
narrator of All the King’s Men, who speaks from a perspective close
in time to the events he describes. And so Warren’s tactic in dating
also serves to establish aesthetic distance, defined historically, between
the reader’s perspective and that of the first person narrator. The
effect of this technique is most clear with the last date given in the
novel—“the summer of this year, 1939”—which is emphasized in a
single-sentence paragraph. In the book’s final chapter, Jack Burden
is speaking early in 1939—he says of his dying stepfather that “he will
not last the winter.” Just over a year has passed since the death of
Willie Stark late in 1937—time for Burden to unravel the circum-
stances of the assassination, consider but reject revenge, and withdraw
to Burden’s Landing to come to terms with his experience and then
begin his return to life by marrying Anne Stanton. He “now” fore-
sees his departure from Burden’s Landing and his return to politics
as a worker for Hugh Miller, candidate of “clean hands [and] pure
heart.” This movement “out of history into history”—out of the past
into the future, out of retreat into the great world and its convul-
sions—is Burden’s anticipation for “the summer of this year, 1939.”
Warren has, then, set up his novel’s chronology so as to conclude An

the King's Men, not like Long's story in the middle 1930's, but on the eve of the Second World War. And the reader "knows," as Jack Burden cannot, what "the summer of this year" will bring.

Such distancing historical awareness on the part of the reader is a principal source of the rhetorical power of Warren's novel. The relationship between the setting, 1939, and the publication date, 1946, suggests that All the King's Men belongs to a tradition that Kathleen Tillotson has labeled "novels about the recent past." Warren's book follows the pattern that Tillotson detects in her nineteenth-century examples. Its setting is recognizably "past," but recent enough to be within the memories of the novel's first readers. Most important, it sets its characters and actions on the eve of crucial public events that are part of the historical experience (or at least awareness) of those readers. The World War looms over All the King's Men in much the same way, for example, that the Reform Bill of 1832 looms over George Eliot's Middlemarch. The characters' hopes, plans, and anticipations are set, with inevitable irony, against the reader's greater knowledge of history. Certainly, Jack Burden's "We shall come back, no doubt," his outlook for life beyond the summer of 1939, resonates ironically in the mind of a reader looking back on Burden's "future."

The result in All the King's Men is a rhetorical structure—the final three paragraphs are in future tense—that puts onto the reader ultimate responsibility for resolving the novel's questions about the meaning of history. "If you could accept the past you might hope for the future," Jack Burden says at the conclusion of his story—a tenuous statement of faith that holds poignant irony for a reader who "knows" that the great world is about to repeat, on a grandiose scale, the cataclysm that Burden has just, and just barely, survived. Such irony complicates the already fragile optimism of Burden's conclusion, making All the King's Men a darker book than it would be if its dates were less heavy in implications. But the nature of the novel about the recent past is such that, in the hands of a novelist with the technical resources and humanist values of George Eliot or Robert Penn Warren, the irony generated by its historical perspective can be put to more complexly responsible uses than merely to undercut characters' expressions of hope.

The basis of the rhetorical impact of novels in this tradition is that

5 Novels of the Eighteen Forties (Oxford, 1954), pp. 91f.
the characters are both distinctly "past" and recognizably contemporaries of the reader. (In nineteenth-century novels of the kind, a final chapter typically brings the characters into the present, a function performed in *All the King's Men* by future tense verbs in the closing paragraphs.) And so the characters can become, because of their human complexities and their ironic defeats, surrogates for readers living, like them, through the convulsions of the world. On this level, just as Willie Stark's state is analogous to the great world of twentieth-century events, so Jack Burden, surveying the ruins of Stark's world, can be a model for the reader standing in the ruins of 1946—or beyond. One can survive history, Burden's narration then suggests, perhaps even begin to understand it. Most important, one can experience the worst our century has to offer and still manage to hope. As the novel's last sentence puts it, the only way to proceed "out of history into history" is to confront, in action, "the awful responsibility of Time." The dates and historical allusions in *All the King's Men* make clear the analogy between Burden's world and the reader's, while Warren's rhetorical strategy places on the reader his own "awful responsibility" to confront, on two levels, the meaning of history lived through.

*All the King's Men* has been called "the first 'postmodern' novel," marking a renewed sense on the novelist's part of his responsibility to his audience. Warren eschews didacticism; Jack Burden is given to generalization, but the novel's complex irony, of which historical distance between reader and narrator is one source, places on the reader the primary burden of moral evaluation. In other words, Warren's sense of cultural responsibility is embodied in his book's rhetorical structure, which opens out to include a reader's wider historical experience, and thus to enlist that reader as a participant in history on both levels, fictional and factual. And a central determinant of this structure is Warren's system of dating events, linking through its resonances the analogous worlds of Huey Long's Louisiana, Jack Burden's fictional state, and the reader's twentieth century.