Robert Penn Warren: All the King’s Men

I. Warren’s life
   A. Born in Guthrie, KY 4-24-1905
   B. Literate family: grandfather quoted poetry
   C. Farm was remote; schools not good
   D. Went to Clarksville High School; graduated 1921; accepted at Annapolis but
      his goal to become Commander of the Pacific fleet was thwarted because of eye
      injury that disqualified him
   E. Went to Vanderbilt; graduated 1925
      1. Roomed with Jesse Wills, father of Ridley Wills
      2. Joined the “Fugitives” (included John Crowe Ransom,
         Cleanth Brooks, Donald Davidson, Allen Tate): “poets and
         arguers” who turned him from engineer major to study of
         literature; he declared he wanted to become “a man of
         letters”
   F. University of California-Berkley for Masters; then Yale before
      being named a Rhodes Scholar; then on to Oxford
   G. Teaching career: Southwestern at Memphis (Rhodes), Vanderbilt,
      LSU
      1. At LSU he founded and edited with Cleanth Brooks the
         Southern Review, which significantly influenced writing
         throughout the US
      2. Developed New Criticism with Brooks, another way to
         examine literature. A work bears within itself its own
         structural and textural laws so that the work can be evaluated
         on its own terms. New Critics confined themselves to two
         questions: What did the author intend to do? How well did
         he do it?
      2. Lived in Italy for a time on a fellowship during the time of
         Mussolini
   H. On to University of Minnesota, where he wrote All the King’s
      Men
   I. Finally moved to Yale where he completed his career
   J. Never again lived in the South
   K. “I’ll Take My Stand” – a volume that opposed the coming of
      industrialism to the South and argued for an almost antebellum
      structure of society. RPW defended segregation, but later
      regretted his view.
      1. “The Briar Patch” 1930 declared that unless the southern
         agricultural tradition were reorganized, black would continue
         to defect to their dream in the industrial North, which RPW
         believed brought them misery.
2. “Who Speaks for the Negro?” 1956 he modified his position and talked about the vast potential of blacks in American society

L. First Poet Laureate for USA (1986)
M. Only writer who has won Pulitzer Prize for both fiction and poetry (and for two different books!)
   1. *All the King's Men* 1946

N. Died 1989

II. *All the King’s Men*

A. Set in Louisiana; modeled after the life and career of Huey Long
B. Much of plot directly parallels Long’s political career
C. Long assassinated in Capitol
   Huey P. Long, known as "The Kingfish," controlled Louisiana politics for some ten years, until he was assassinated in 1935. He was the law, he was above the law; he ruled with the force of royalty through an effective political machine while serving as governor of the state (1928-31) and U.S. Senator (1931-35)

III. Origin of novel

Robert Penn Warren began *Proud Flesh*, the unpublished verse drama that became *All the King’s Men*, in Italy during the days preceding World War II. Mussolini, Italy’s Fascist dictator, regularly marched his black-shirted thugs through the cobbled streets of Rome. Warren saw this display of force and was reminded of Louisiana governor Huey Long’s private army, called "Huey’s Cossacks," composed of members of the National Guard and the highway police. Impressed by both these leaders’ rise to, and adept use of, power, he sought to explore how and why a person obtains power. In particular, he was intrigued by the roles that time and geography play in the creation of such leaders who rely on strong-arm tactics to acquire and hold on to power. But Warren didn’t write about Italian politics; he set his story in the place he knew best, the southern region of the United States. Although Warren denied that the novel was about Long, he did admit that “without Huey Long there would be no novel.”
IV. Significance of title

A. Allusion to nursery rhyme
   1. “All the king’s men” – Willie’s staff, supporters
   2. Humpty-Dumpty image – character “falls” (Tiny Duffy literally from the stage at the barbecue, Willie’s political decline, Judge Irwin’s suicide, Adam Stanton’s death, Anne Stanton’s reputation, Sadie’s emotional breakdown); every important character is “double” with two selves

B. Structure of the novel reveals fragmentation of time

   CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS

   1850s  Cass Mastern’s college days and romance with Annabelle.
   1860s  Cass’s death from a Civil War wound.
   1914  Foreclosure proceedings on Judge Irwin’s plantation; Judge’s marriage and mortgage payment in full; Jack, Anne, and Adam’s youth in Burden’s Landing.
   1918  Anne and Jack’s romance begins.
   1920-21  Jack’s graduate studies in history and his marriage to Lois.
   1922  Willie and Jack meet.
   1924  The schoolhouse tragedy.
   1926  Willie’s first campaign for governor.
   1930  Willie is elected governor; Jack becomes his aide.
   1933  The Byram White affair.
   1936  Willie’s visit to Pappy’s farm; beginning of Jack’s research on Judge Irwin.
   1937  Anne’s affair with Willie; Jack’s trip to California; the Judge’s suicide; Willie’s assassination.
   1938  Anne and Jack’s marriage.
   1939  Perspective from which Jack narrates novel.

   Warren manipulates time in All the King’s Men. Making leaps from one time to another is consistent with the way a person’s memory generally works and, in this case, reflects the way that Jack associates events. The novel presents the structure of Jack’s thought, but it is also a showpiece for Warren’s belief that human action and meaning are a consequence of a complex interaction among the past, present, and future.

V. Jack Burden (note implication of his name)

   A. No ambition (p. 54)
   B. Series of father figures, all rejected
   C. “Historian”
VI. Themes in novel

A. Power and corruption
B. The search for a spiritual father
C. The search for knowledge (quote p.9)
D. Idealism vs. Materialism
E. Free will vs. Determinism
F. Goodness out of Evil ("Man is conceived in sin and born in corruption...") (p. 49)

VII. "Man of idea" Willie Stark vs. "man of action" Adam Stanton
"...doomed to destroy each other" (p.436)
A. Background
B. Personality
C. Viewed by others
D. View of hospital
E. As each other's doom