

Final Written Report for

2015 Professional Development Grant

“Between Baton Rouge and Burden’s Landing in Robert Penn Warren’s *All the King’s*

Men”

Prepared April 2016

Deborah Wilson, Ph.D.

Department of English & World Languages

This final report addresses the results of a professional research project funded by an ATU Professional Development Grant. This report follows the instructions provided in the Guidelines for Professional Development Grants.

A. Title Page (see above)

B. Restatement of Professional Enhancement Opportunity

Abstract of conference paper presented:

This paper focused on a Louisiana city without pride of place in southern literature: Baton Rouge, the city that is not New Orleans. New Orleans is an exotic space, ripe for the imagination in too many ways to specify here, nor would you need me to do so. But in Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*, Baton Rouge is the city at the center, the state capital, the seat of government, the primary scene of Willie Stark's rise and fall, and of Jack Burden's multiple transformations as he champions, aids, and then distances himself from the Boss's political machinations. The novel presents what can be seen as a clichéd opposition of rural and urban, for Willie Stark's ascension to power begins at a remote farm where he performs lowly physical labor (like slopping the hogs), until he finds sufficient political power among the other hicks who continue to work the land he leaves behind, and is finally assassinated in the capital building in Baton Rouge.

Part of that opposition includes Jack's nostalgic view of the past he, too, has left behind, but his is not a rural past. He is from Burden's Landing, an insular, elitist space cut off from any urban/rural confrontation, for his family and friends who live on the bay never get their hands in actual dirt. They are wealthy and powerful, and they consider Willie Stark a dirty politician whose methods on behalf of the hicks he represents are

beneath their sense of pristine morality. But Baton Rouge, unlike New Orleans, may prove a city where such clichéd oppositions, at least in this novel by this author, prove more complex.

Warren's participation in the Agrarian manifesto, *I'll Take My Stand*, published in 1930, seems to situate him on the side of a Jeffersonian Democracy that considers dependence on the land far superior to the mechanization and industrialization associated with cities. Yet the manifesto must also contend with the ancient association of the land and of nature with the feminine, while maintaining the beset masculinity of its adherents. The novel begins on the side of mechanization and speed. Page one, 1936: "Mason City. To get there you follow Highway 58, going northeast out of the city [Baton Rouge], and it is a good highway and new. . . . For this is the country where the age of the internal combustion engine has come into its own" (1-2). We are speeding along a smooth concrete slab, one of Willie Stark's contributions to the new Louisiana, and in a Cadillac that tops 80 miles per hour. What is perhaps more significant, however, is what that Cadillac speeds by, the inhabitants of that rural space: the slow moving black man "chopping cotton a mile away," and further along a black child sucking its thumb and watching you go by; a landscape denuded of its pine forests by sawmills; a cotton gin, a power station, a row of "nigger shacks," all frozen into rural stillness and poverty, in spite of the new highway. Jack had driven to Mason City in 1922 on dirt and gravel in a Model T, but little has changed: "Time and motion [still] cease to be" (53).

Later, Jack travels to cover Willie's speech in Upton via another version of modernity, the train, and again he notes what he speeds past, a woman flinging a pan of water out her back door. He cannot make out her face, nor can he, after she goes back

inside, see “through the walls to the secret to which the woman has gone in. . . . But nothing happens . . . You forget her, and the train goes fast” (76). In both these scenes, Jack, who comes from a faux-rural background and works for a man who now drinks champagne instead of orange pop, is speeding past the anonymous marginalized black man, the poor housewife, and all the other disenfranchised hicks he claims to aid by supporting Willie.

Donald Davidson’s contribution to *I’ll Take My Stand*, “A Mirror for Artists,” flips the typical association of the rural and the feminine, the urban and the masculine, by means of a rather tortured logic: women are cannibalistic consumers whose demand drives the growth of industries and cities, sapping male virility in the process (Aaron Shaheen). The one character in *All the King’s Men* who seems to fit that logic is Jack’s wife, Lois, who is an almost laughable vision of the vagina dentata. But Anne Stanton, the love of Jack’s life, is repeatedly an image of frozen immobility floating in the bay of Burden’s Landing. Although Warren fairly quickly distanced himself from the more extreme positions of the Agrarians (Davidson’s surely among them), he does not entirely escape the flattening oppositions of rural and urban. However, in *All the King’s Men* he works toward seeing and rereading what his narrator passes on the side of the road running from city to country and back. Although at the conclusion he and Anne are married and living in his father’s house at Burden’s Landing, he insists that they will leave there soon, and that he will reenter the political world in Baton Rouge. Yet this time his candidate is Hugh Miller, an urbane man from his own class: “Harvard Law School, Lafayette Escadrille, Croix de Guerre, clean hands, pure heart.”

C. Brief Review of Professional Enhancement Opportunity

I attended the American Literature Association Symposium, “The City in American Literature,” in New Orleans, LA, and presented my paper there. I drove from Russellville, AR, to New Orleans, LA, on September 9, 2015, and drove back on September 13, 2015. I presented my paper on Saturday, September 12, in Session Three D: “Southern Cities,” as the first of three papers. Here is the link to the conference program: <http://americanliteratureassociation.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/ALA-Program-2015-DRAFT-as-of-Aug-10-2015.pdf>

D. Summary of Experiences

My primary teaching area within literature is American, primarily modern and southern. I teach a southern literature course every other spring. I have consistently included in the readings for the course *All the King's Men*, by Robert Penn Warren, and that novel is the subject of this paper. I was requested to submit a paper for this special symposium on American literature and the city, and that specified topic lead me to reexamine this novel in light of its gendered juxtaposition of urban and rural, as aspect of the novel I included in this semester's southern literature class. Not only did I manage to receive positive feedback on my paper, which helped in expanding my teaching of the novel, but also I was able to attend numerous other panels relevant to my teaching and scholarship.

E. Conclusions and Recommendations

I am working on a publishable-length essay of which this paper is a part. Without the funds I received from the ATU Professional Grant, I would not have been able to attend the conference.