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The Collapse of Morality and Power Abuse in Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men* (1946)

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Abstract

This paper attempts to offers a comprehensive overview of the socio-political argument about interconnection of power abuse, moral collapse, and class conflict as represented in Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men* (1946). This study at examining Warren's novel with the corrupting influence of power abuse through the moral variation presented by the central character, Willie Stark. Framed through theoretical lenses of Marxist literary criticism and Gramsci's theory of Hegemony, this study examines the populist politician whose moral collapse reflects the broader deterioration of personal and societal values. The novel tries to describe the intersection of personal ambition and political hegemony, signifying the manipulation of power and populist ideology. This study critically examines the complications around political life and its ethical consequences to situate *All the King's Men* within the context of broader literary composition, highlighting the exploration of power dynamics and social structures. The study concludes that Warren's novel remains significant to contemporary debates by disclosing how specific factors as corruption within power structures, the manipulation of

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public narratives and prioritizing political expediency over moral principles lead to both personal and societal collapse. These forces undermine genuine human values and replace them with empty political promises, highlighting the important contrast between rigid ideological thinking and pragmatic approaches to governance.

Keywords: Power abuse, Moral collapse, Class conflict, Hegemony, Marxist criticism

انهيار الأخلاق وإساءة استخدام السلطة في رواية روبرت بن وارن "كل رجال الملك" (١٩٤٦)

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المستخلص

تقدم هذه الدراسة نظرة عامة وشاملة حول الترابط بين إساءة استخدام السلطة والانهيار الأخلاقي والصراع الطبقي، كما هو مبين في الصراع الاجتماعي والسياسي الذي تصوره رواية روبرت بن وارن "كل رجال الملك" (١٩٤٦).

و يدرس هذا البحث رواية وارن من حيث التداخل بين سوء استخدام السلطة والتحويلات الأخلاقية للفرد في ضوء التحويلات والممارسات اليومية للشخصية الرئيسية في الرواية، ويلي (ستارك)، وذلك ضمن إطار نظرية النقد الأدبي الماركسي والهيمنة لغرامشي، وتتضمن الدراسة نظرة سياسية شعبية لتحليل الشخصيات المهمة التي تعكس التدهور الأخلاقي الفردي على المستويين الفردي والمجتمعي. كذلك تصف الرواية التداخل بين الطموح الشخصي والهيمنة السياسية، مما يدل على التلاعب بالسلطة والأيديولوجية الشعبية. كما تتناول الدراسة بأسلوب نقدي التعقيدات المحيطة بالحياة السياسية وعواقبها الأخلاقية الوخيمة على الفرد والمجتمع في الرواية من خلال سياق التكوين الأدبي الأوسع فكرياً، مسلطاً الضوء على ديناميكيات القوة والسلوكيات الاجتماعية. تخلص الدراسة إلى أن رواية (وارن) لا تزال تحظى بأهمية في المناقشات المعاصرة، إذ تكشف كيف أن العوامل المحددة كالفساد داخل هياكل السلطة، والتلاعب بالروايات العامة، وتغليب المصلحة السياسية على المبادئ الأخلاقية تؤدي إلى انهيار الأفراد والمجتمعات، وهذا يعني أن هذه القوى تقوض القيم الإنسانية الأصيلة وتستبدلها بوعود سياسية جوفاء مما يكشف عن تناقض بين التفكير الأيديولوجي، والنهج البراغماتي للحكم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: إساءة استخدام السلطة، الانهيار الأخلاقي، الصراع الطبقي، الهيمنة، النقد الماركسي.

1. INTRODUCTION

Robert Penn Warren (1905-1989) was a twentieth-century American writer. His literary style bridges several literary genres, including poetry, fiction, and literary criticism. He was a formidable figure of mid twentieth century in America who exhibit his intellectual depth and interaction with American history and culture (Millichap, 2023). This view is further supported by Grimshaw (2001) who states that Warren won all the top literary awards across America, and wrote almost in all literary genres, as well as changing the way literature was taught in American universities before the mid-20th century. Flora and Vogel (2006) as well as Scotchie (2023) describe how Warren joined and educated at Vanderbilt University as well as, how after being disqualified from joining the Naval Academy, he joined the Fugitives, a group of writers who backed the peoples of the South. However, as his career progressed, Warren began to distance himself from the more conservative ideas of the Fugitive movement, and eventually, he became one of the advocates for civil rights (Millichap J. , 2023).

Not all but only some of the American writers were able to address the details of power abuse, its influences and moral collapse as profoundly as Penn Warren did. His literary style, career and life bridged a rich period of American literature. He was among the few who hold such a unique literary position (Hendricks & Perkins, 2013). Nakadate (1981) and Turner (2023) have both shown and further states that Warren depicts a variety of themes, while his works are marked by deep engagement in politics and social life, with many of his novels and poems exploring human conditions, culture, nature, pressure of modernity and history. His works, earned him numerous honors, including three Pulitzer prizes two for poetry and one for fiction.

Butts (2023) has pointed out in his poetry he disclosed many themes, including the meaning of existence, identity, time, place, making sense of history, addressing black community and many more that can be found in his volumes. Turner (2023) showed that Warren has been successful in distinguishing himself as one of the most productive and wide-ranging poets of the twentieth century. Madden (2000) supports this view and outlines that, “Warren's poetry is a dialectic of change, of internal hammers and tongs and scalpels and sutures and wrecking balls and dynamite all trained inward, challenging its generating and presiding ethos” (p. 39). Meanwhile, in his novels, he captures the complexities of political and personal relationships, often examining the tension between realities and ideals. Butts (2023, p.158) states that, “Warren’s fiction, expresses the truth of man's increasing alienation from nature and by extension from himself, and affirms the value of finding some way to balance our desire for material gain and our need for communion with the world”. Both, Blotner (1997) and Grimshaw (2001) further elaborates on this and highlights that Warren’s novels are considered to be profound because in his novels he captured and engaged with timeless themes that have captivated people in the past and continue to be influential for the future. In addition, Warren has written sixteen volumes of poetry and published ten novels; he has written two collections of critical criticism in addition to a book of short stories.

2. SUMMARY OF THE NOVEL

The themes in Warren’s novels that are mostly depicted include individual responsibility, the significance of place and time, the power of self-knowledge, the importance of history, and the power of redemptive love. Cullick (2018) shows that, among Warren’s world of fiction, *All the King’s Men* 1946 (hereafter abbreviated *AKM*), stands as his most influential novel, which represented American political literature of the 1930s, and this earned him the Pulitzer Prize for fiction writings. The novel provides a penetrating examination of power, corruption, and moral collapse and idealism in government. His ability to weave together those complicated psychological, political, and moral themes has solidified his status as one of the most influential chroniclers of human determination and productiveness (Blotner, 1997). Although Warren’s

career was varied and rich, *AKM* remains as his most widely read and critically analyzed work. While his early works have remained focused particularly on Southern agrarianism, *AKM* marked a significant thematic and stylistic shift. The novel reflects on Warren's growing interest in moral and political dimensions of power, particularly in the post-World War II period when America was dealing with issues of political leadership and moral responsibility (Nakadate, 1981).

In terms of the plot, *AKM*'s style of narration is divided between historical reformation and literary recreator and it is featured around a dual protagonist that follows the rise and fall of Willie Stark, a Southern politician roughly based on the Louisiana governor Huey Long, and Jack Burden, a former journalist who became Stark's right-hand man (Millichap, 2021). He begins as an idealistic figure who fights for the rights of the common people, but as he rises to the position of power, he abandons his principles and lets corruption take over the very strength he once used for good (Nakadate, 1981). The novel captures the complexity of Stark's character, depicting him as both victim and perpetrator of a corrupt system, with his political climb being punctured with moral compromises. Warren accurately traces how power, once obtained, corrupts Willie and those around him. Willie stands against other's corruption and makes bad use of their power and position, but eventually, he repeats the same action that he once criticized and stands against harshly.

The novel is based on the political events that took place during those days when Warren worked in Louisiana, Grimshaw (2001, p. 43) points out that the reason and backdrops behind those thematic presentations in the novel are backed by the political events in Louisiana State University while Warren served there as a teacher. Willie's rise to power is through assistance for the poor, fighting against established elites. However, as his power grows, he justifies his increasingly immoral behavior through the banner of achieving the greater good, which that even for noble reasons power leads to moral collapse (Warren, 1946, pp. 365-370). Taking this further, Runyon (1990) showed that Warren disclosed that power corrupts the system not just individuals Willie transformed from an idealist person, who sought to bring social, political and individual reforms but changed to a cynical and power-hungry immoral politician as he imposed others through blackmailing and violence.

AKM tries to demonstrate the story of Jack Burden as well, the child of one of the state's aristocratic families. He also turns his back against his noble background and becomes Willie's right-hand man. Here, he has used him as a tool through which to blackmail, threaten, and punish others, by unearthing hostile secrets about the past of his opponents. As an historical researcher, he disclosed that Judge Irwin, a father figure of Jack's past has accepted a bribe, and this leads Irwin to commit suicide. As well as Jack also pushes Adam Stanton to accept the position of director in the hospital that Stark built, and he leads Anne to begin an affair with Stark as well (Nakadate, 1981).

3. THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK

The theme of power and moral collapse in *AKM* has hardly ever been discussed even though it is a dominant theme that walks step by step along the narration. This study explores how individuals abuse power, become corrupted and ultimately morally collapse. It analyzes the text through the lens of two influential thinkers whose impact on literary analysis is unquestionable; Karl Marx and Antonio Gramsci's Hegemony. Marx (1818-1883) was a German critic and philosopher, who dealt very much with the problems of class and society. Bressler (2011) outlined that his literary theories originated in [his] philosophical, critical books in the nineteenth century, to some extent his ideas in literary criticism were not established and fashioned till the end of the twentieth century (pp. 166-167). Marxist criticism refers to class conflict and mainly expounded in the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848 and *Das Capital* of 1867. His books provide a foundation for understanding power struggles and their outcomes through social and economic links as he shows that the means of production wheels society's foundations and principles.

Tyson (2006) points out that, according to the Marxist theory, the bourgeois (ruling class) dominate resources and capital, whereas the working class (proletariat) is exploited both socially and economically. This is driven by the bourgeoisie's control over the means of production, thus socioeconomic class divides society into "haves" and "have-nots" with unity among the oppressed necessary to challenge systematic inequalities and oppression (pp. 53-45). Moon (1999, pp. 100-101) supports this idea and elaborates that people act and think in any given society as it is determined by economic factors, first through employment conditions and then through imposing their values, perspectives, and beliefs onto other groups. Furthermore, the conflict arises further when the proletariat, who lacks power and ownership, must sell their labor to survive while the ruling class seeks to preserve and increase their power (Dobie, 2012)

This study clearly illustrates class conflict through Warren's protagonist Willie Stark, while his rise to power is shown through populist rhetoric the aim of which is to mobilize the working class against the established elites. His manipulation of class struggles highlights the nature of exploitation and confrontation that is dominant in Marx's class conflict theory. Both Marx and Engels (1848) agree that "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle" (p.6). Through Willie's rise and moral collapse, Warren describes the evocative potential of a class struggle once power is controlled in the hands of a person who deceives the very populace he primarily wants to empower. The importance of the class conflict theory lies in the fact that it provides several arguments to examine the socio-economic bases of power and corruption in the novel. This paper empowers a deeper understanding of how economic differences and class antagonism drive political actions and moral modifications, to show the reasons contributing to moral collapse and endurance of power inequities in the novel.

Antonio Gramsci's theory of Hegemony on the other hand, expands on Marxist ideas by examining how ruling classes maintain power not only through economic control but also through cultural dominance, hegemony, and ideological system. In his famous work *The Prison Notebooks* Gramsci (1971) argues that hegemony is a process by which the ruling class secures its dominance over the working class by obtaining their consent. Expanding on this, the ruling class creates an ideological dominance by implementing their norms, values, and beliefs to seem natural and felt by common sense. This ideological control ensures that power remains unchanging without the need for constant coercion, as a society collectively supports values that preserve existing power structures. Bressler (2011, p. 172) further develops the concept and states that, "The assumptions, values, and meanings that shape meaning and define reality for the majority of people in a given culture".

AKM explores hegemony through Willie Stark's political power, which depends critically on the control of public perception and the use of institutions to secure and maintain power. His ability to garner support from the masses is indicative of Gramsci's notion of cultural hegemony, where the ruling ideology is internalized by the populace, making resistance appear unnecessary or even counterintuitive. Gramsci's theory is crucial for this analysis because it demonstrates how Willie, through ideological control, can manipulate cultural narratives to legitimize their authority to create and sustain his power base. By applying Gramsci's theory, the study will clarify the mechanisms through which power is culturally rooted and how this entrenchment leads to moral collapse.

This paper, therefore aims to explore moral collapse as one of the main consequences of political distortion as a result of power abuse. This theme is plainly depicted in the novel.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

Both Marxist and Gramsci's hegemony theories are foundational to the exploration of power abuse and moral collapse in *All the King's Men*. Mazlish (1984) states that Marxism views the society as the battleground of competing class interests (pp. 96-97). Building on both theories a layer of ideological control can be added, whereby dominant groups would not maintain their way of dominating society through force or economic means only, but through shaping cultural

values, socially constructed concepts, and beliefs. These ideas are well documented in Gramsci's prolific work *The Prison notebooks* (1971). For him hegemony is maintained not merely through force but through consent, as the ruling class establishes and normalizes its values, which the governed class adopt as their own (Jones, 2006, pp. 45-51). In contrast, less critics tried to explore *AKM* in the light of Gramsci's concept of hegemony particularly the character of Willie Stark's manipulative domination of his personality and others around him.

The theme of power and moral collapse has been presented in the novel, by those who have investigated Warren's presentation of political corruption and moral compromises. Grimshaw (2001, p. 25) points out that the main concern for Warren was to disclose the effect of power on those who gain power or those who hold important high-ranking positions. He further elaborates on this by explaining that the one who gains power, often changes the way they act, usually in negative ways. They use manipulation or control of others to keep their power, and sometimes they betray others close to them, which does not only affect the person in power but it also has consequences for the people around them, who are for sure harmed by these behaviors. Similarly, Ruppensburg (1990) believes that Willie, as the main character in *novel*, is willing to take advantage of people's weakness and willingness to corrupt, as he uses this to gain power and control; this helps him create a complex and deceitful system that affects everyone, whereas the main reason why he rose to power and was elected as a governor, was due the popular dissatisfaction over corruption and dishonesty.

The discussion in his paper entitled, *All the King's Men; Power Corrupts*, Smith (2022) pushes the explorations of power in the novel and points out how Warren explores the dangers of power and its potential to dishonesty. Adding to Smith, Warren in the novel uses the main character, Willie, to demonstrate the risks of unrestricted political power. His journey from an idealistic leader to a ruthless politician discloses Warren's warning about the consequences of power without moral guidance, which eventually hurts not just themselves but others who are supposed to serve. The article emphasized that Willie's actions are motivated by self-interest, not justice, noticeably no theoretical frameworks have been used.

Moreover, in his dissertation, Berryhill (2000) entitled *Political and Philosophy in the Writings of Robert Penn Warren*, looks at how Warren includes political ideas in his writings. He argues that Warren's role as a philosophical novelist allows him to put together complex political concepts in his works, particularly in *AKM*, as he shows ethical issues tied to political ambition and pragmatism. In this study Berryhill shows that the selected novel for this study discloses a deep understanding of the struggle in trying to follow a political idea, pointing out how focusing on one value can hurt others, like legality and legitimacy. Furthermore, Lane's (2001) article entitled *The Stark Regime and American Democracy: A Political Interpretation of Robert Penn Warren's All the King's Men*, explores power through the character of Willie Stark. This article interprets the novel as a reflection on the political risks within democratic societies, especially how these societies can substitute nihilism and moral ambiguity among its citizens. Furthermore, no specific theories have been used rather it follows some classical political analysis that is inspired by Plato and Aristotle to examine the power and its impact on characters.

While those studies have addressed the themes of power and corruption in the novel, there remains a notable gap in the field, particularly concerning exploring moral collapse and using class conflict theory by Karl Marx as well as hegemony theory by Antonio Gramsci. No Marxist and Gramscian interpretations have been found of the novel by scholars. This gap suggests a need for studies that examine how class struggle and hegemonic influence operate instantaneously within the novel to affect characters' moral paths. Additionally, although scholars have paid attention to Willie's character, less attention has been given to show how the misuse of power or being in a position of power creates corruption and this corruption leads individuals to be morally collapsed. By doing so, this paper aims to examine novel's complex view of authority and therefore attempts to offer a dual perspective of Willie's character and the social context that gives birth to and shapes his actions.

5.CORROSIVE DYNAMICS OF AUTHORITY AND MORALITY

AKM depicts how economic power can push the wheels of political corruption. In the novel, this is shown through the character of Willie Stark, who has controlled the resources of the state. It is through such manipulation of economic systems and exploitation of the lower class that Willie demonstrates a dangerous crossing of money and power. This intersection can be shown through the lens of Marx's theory, which states that the control of economics under capitalism necessarily leads to the dominion of one class over another, permitting exploitation and corruption. As stated in the novel, "The gentlemen from the city persuaded Willie that he was the savior of the State" (Warren, 1946, p. 94) – that is to say, initial manipulation of political elites who see him as a pawn to serve their interest. By distributing resources selectively to the state, he consolidates power, positioning himself as a benefactor with the use of public projects to keep him in firm control and to further his political ambition. Jack goes from the beginning of the novel and states this indirectly:

The end of man is knowledge, but there is one thing [Man] can't know. He can't know whether knowledge will save him or kill him. He will be killed, all right, but he can't know whether he is killed because of the knowledge which he has got or because of the knowledge which he hasn't got and which if he had it, would save him (Warren, 1946, p. 13).

This extract speaks to Willie's realization that, in his quest for knowledge and power, he does not come closer to moral clarity and salvation but is led to destruction. The ambiguity in knowledge retells that economic power would always blind one's moral judgment to make decisions against society, as his knowledge of manipulation comes from his control over an economy which has already created corruption. Willie's actions and words father goes as Irwin says:

Politics is always a matter of choices, and a man doesn't set up the choices himself. And there is always a price to make a choice. You know that. You've made a choice, and you know how much it cost you. There is always a price (Warren, 1946, p. 479).

These expressions and ideas reaffirm the idea that Willie's political actions are determined by economic interests represented by him, not by moral principles. Saying and recognizing that a "price" for decision is evocative, suggesting perhaps that choices by him are constantly made at the cost of the lower classes as their exploitation through the hands of economic power. To generalize his occupation over the masses, he enlarges the proposition at his hand he states that:

[I have] a speech about what this State needs. But there's no use telling you what this State needs. You are the State. You know what you need. Look at your pants [...] Listen to your belly. Did it ever rumble for emptiness? Look at your crop. Did it ever rot in the field because the road was so bad you couldn't get it to market? Look at your kids. Are they growing up ignorant as you and dirt because there isn't any school for them? (Warren, 1946, p. 127).

This account shows how Willie skillfully uses economic hardship to influence the people, citing their hangar, poverty, and the lack of infrastructure. He thus gains their trust while exploiting their vulnerabilities for his political purposes. By doing so, he positions himself as the champion of the people, even though his solutions consolidate power rather than break down systematic inequality. This shows how economic control reinforces political dominance and is a further exemplification of class exploitation. Marx and Engels' observation in *Communist Manifesto* (1848), "The bourgeoisie keeps more and more doing away with the scattered state of the population, of the means of production, and property. It has agglomerated population, centralized the means of production, and has concentrated property in a few hands. The necessary

consequence of this was political centralization” (p.12) is particularly relevant. The lines from that work explain the interconnection between economic and political power: whoever controls the resources will inevitably control and centralize authority.

Butts (2023) states that, Willie betrays the trust of poor rural farmers in his pursuit of power. As a governor, he gains office through empty promises to end political corruption, but instead embraces corruption and builds monuments to his own power. His contributions to the rural poor are primarily designed to improve his image rather than truly benefit them. Willie shows from his propositions, where his control over economic projects becomes unrestrained political control. The manipulation of economic resources by him best illustrates Marx’s view that beneath political dominance is always an economic power. Promising people to compensate for what they lack, he conceals in that promise how such an offer consolidates control, illustrating Marxist criticism’s justification of the capital state which is a tool that elites use for their ruling. Furthermore, economic obligations validate the mistreatment of others, as his choices have costs that reflect Willie’s manipulation of public projects. This analysis sets the stage for discussing how the capitalist system inherently forces individuals like Willie Stark into moral compromises.

The moral compromise of both characters Willie Stark and Jack Burden in the novel powerfully demonstrates the destructive effects of the capitalist power structure, as explained by Marxist criticism, on individual ethics. At the beginning, an outsider to politics, Willie’s innocence and integrity, are apparent in his initial dismissiveness at the hands of political insiders as mentioned, “Willie was not in politics. Not in Mason City or anywhere else [...] You could look at Willie and see that he never had been and never would be in politics” (Warren, 1946, p. 29). He has slowly stripped away as he is pulled deeper into a system that favors power over morality, the transformation from an honest man to a manipulative politician reflected in Marx’s notion.

Also, Jack’s cynical perspective demonstrates politics as a tool for manipulation, clearly showing that people do not need truth just emotions and motivations. He states to the Boss (Stark), “Hell, make 'em cry, or make 'em laugh, make 'em think you're their weak and erring pal, or make 'em think you're God-a-Mighty. Or make 'em mad. Even mad at you. Just stir 'em up [...] That's what they come for. Tell 'em anything. But for Sweet Jesus' sake don't try to improve their minds” (Warren, 1946, p. 102). The words point to the contingencies that the dynamics of capitalist exploitation and manipulation are prioritized over moral reform in ways that make individuals act against their principles. So, another critical moment in the novel is when Willie persuades Jack to dig into Judge Irwin’s past to find a way to threaten him and blackmail him in one way or another as he is not in his political side. Jack’s discovery of the bribery that Irwin has accepted from the local companies, and the way Willie uses it as a tool to blackmail his opponents underlines the inexorable connection of power, corruption, and domination by the capitalist elites as Jack clarifies this metaphorically:

I discovered that its delicate little root, with many loops and kinks, ran all the way to New York City, where it tapped the lush dung-heap called the Madison Corporation. [It] was the Southern Belle Fuel Company. So I plucked another little flower called the American Electric Power Company and discovered that its delicate little root tapped the same dung heap” (Warren, 1946, pp. 309-310).

Cullick (2018) precisely is relevant here as he puts, politicians weaponized language, not to educate people but to manipulate them, as AKM shows, true power lies in saying the right thing at the right time. The extract shows, how the system operates to maintain exploitation and inequality, and how it forces Willie and Jack to betray their moral commitment to justice and perpetuate the corruption they sought to fight. Marx and Engels write in *The Communist Manifest* (1848, p. 26), “In bourgeois society, living labor is but a means to increase accumulated labor. In Communist society, accumulated labor is but a means to widen, to enrich, to promote the

existence of the laborer". This is the principle that explains how structures of capitalism impel people such as Willie and Jack to forgo ethical values. This fame here has served to show, in the context of the novel, how characters have morally collapsed due to the capitalist society that prioritizes power and money over morality. Besides, this compromise between Willie and Jack in the novel serves to mirror how the structures of capitalism make men work in systems of domination wherein they sacrifice integrity for the sake of survival or promotion.

By contrasting it with the Marxist vision of a communist society, the novel's portrayal of systematic corruption brings about the tension between capitalism's exploitative demand and the moral aspiration of individuals. Both Willie Stark and Jack's compromises exemplify Marxist theory's critiques of capitalism as a system that erodes an individual's ethics, stemming from such a system where power and resources rest in the hands of few, Willie's claims characterize the impossibility of moral compromises. This matches the analysis the Marxist theory had presented about capitalism. Equally representative, in his journey toward disillusionment and complicity, the character of Jack expresses well how systematic power relations take such a toll on personal integrity. The statements go with Marx's notions that people are the products of the ideological and material conditions of their age. Such extractions are integral to analyzing the contradictions within capitalism that perpetuate inequality and collapse.

Willie Stark's political rise was based on the promise to uplift the poor to ridicule fixed systems of inequality in the world of *AKM*. It is through his governance, however, that the contradiction in the capitalist system is expressed, where class inequality and moral compromises embody those very ideals that he purports to challenge. With him as the focus, the novel speaks, of the critique of capitalist structures and corrupt leaders who would seek to reform them, binding them into cycles of exploitation and moral failure. Through systematic flaws in capitalism, the novel discloses how real progress cannot be made, simply furthering the cycle of oppression. The Marxist analysis of capitalism identifies contradictions between the promises of progress and the reality of exploitation, where even reforms often maintain the structures, they claim to dismantle. Through the same character, Willie Stark, who promises reform yet perpetuates class inequality and moral collapse, the novel comments on the inherent contradictions of the capitalist system. It is into this aspect of distribution of wealth that he speaks, "This is a poor State, they always screamed [...] there is a passel of pore folks living in it and no mistake, but the State isn't poor. It is just a question of who has got his front feet in the trough when slopping time comes" (Warren, 1946, p. 547). This reflects how capitalism pays its attention to wealth only among the powerful figures, leaving the masses in a perpetual state of poverty.

The inherent contradictions of the capitalist system are further criticized as the idea of how the systematic corruption gets rationalized through Willie's claim as states, "All change costs something [...] Maybe in our State change could only come in the terms in which it was taking place, and it was surely due for some change. The theory of the moral neutrality of history, you might put it" (Warren, 1946, p. 548). Through this, he outlines the exact nature of his actions, stating in typical capitalist reasoning that any kind of exploitation and moral collapse is acceptable as long as in some forms it is advancing and pushing something forward. However, the narration in the novel criticizes the destructive nature of this system through Willie's reflection on the state of the community, Jack points this out:

All of a sudden, there weren't any more pine trees. They stripped the mills. The narrow-gauge tracks were covered with grass. Folks tore down the commissaries for kindling wood. There wasn't any more dollar a day. The big boys were gone, with diamond rings on their fingers (Warren, 1946, p. 3).

This exactly presents the exploitation of the resources, showing how capitalist projects can leave communities in poverty once their profits have been washed out. Moreover, this helped him for personifying the paradox of the corrupt leader who gave up his moral outlook for power, he

says, “Maybe a man has to sell his soul to get the power to do good” (Warren, 1946, p. 548). This infers moral compromises are part of capitalist leadership, where performing “good” sometimes means the loss of honesty. Together, this makes him feel the sad realization when before his death talked to Jack and points out, “It might have been all different, Jack. You got to believe that” (Warren, 1946, p. 605). This reality underlines the uselessness of the attempts at reform that Willie wanted to make, and how his personal and systematic failures further propagated the very inequalities he tried to destroy.

Both thinkers, Marx and Engels, (1848) referred to this notion of contradictions and theorized them in *The Communist Manifesto*: “The development of Modern Industry [Capitalist], therefore, cuts from under its feet the very foundation on which the bourgeoisie produces and appropriates products. What the bourgeoisie therefore produces, above all, are its own grave-diggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable” (p.22). The statement shows how the capitalist system, despite the claim made to tackle inequality, eventually reproduces it through inherent systematic contradictions. Besides, this goes well with Willie’s actions and leadership which highlights the contradiction with the capitalist system as he uses state power to reinforce his domination instead of addressing inequality. His actions further declared how capitalism often favors power and control, even among leaders who start with reformatory intentions, although he does not have any tangible type of such intentions. Collectively, these aspects review the fundamental limitations of capitalist frameworks in achieving genuine equality or moral advancement, instead of preserving cycles of exploitation and collapse.

For Cullick (2018), “Stark is indeed a demagogue who begins with ideals but ends up with compromising those high values. In the name of getting good things done, he cuts ethical corners” (p.6). While class conflict theory emphasizes a structural and material struggle between classes, Antonio Gramsci’s theory of Hegemony extends the analysis by focusing on how power is maintained through cultural and ideological dominance. In doing so, hegemony complements class conflict by disclosing how the ruling class secures consent rather than relying mainly on pressure to show dominance as natural and acceptable. *AKM* mainly uses Willie and occasionally Jack to show how public opinion is manipulated and ideological discourses are controlled to justify the authority. It is through hegemony that one can see the functions of cultural manipulations and moral compromises as so deep within the structures of Willie’s power. Having explored these points, the discussion now moves to the mechanism of consent and cultural tools through the lens of hegemony theory.

Stark’s rise to power in *AKM* exemplifies Antonio Gramsci’s consensual domination, wherein leaders try to secure their control not merely through pressure but by shaping and manipulating cultural and ideological beliefs. His use of public works, rhetorical charism, and manipulation of public perception enables him to create a hegemonic system in which the people consent to his authority. Gramsci’s theory emphasizes that this kind of dominance is achieved by establishing intellectual and moral leadership within society, which makes power seem legitimate and in tune with the interests of the people. Willie’s strategies reflect this type of hegemony, as he carefully builds support while hiding the moral compromises that lie beneath his actions. His leadership exemplifies a practical approach that originated in Gramsci’s concept of consensual domination, through the use of cultural and ideological means to gain popular consent. For example, he announces his admission of corruption by openly pronouncing:

Sure, there's some graft, but there's just enough to make the wheels turn without squeaking. And remember this. There never was a machine rigged up by man didn't represent some loss of energy [...] And do I deliver the State something. I damned well do” (Warren, 1946, p. 548).

This reflects Willie’s practical view on governance, as he frankly recognizes corruption while presenting it as an unavoidable expense for advancement. By rationalizing graft as an

essential way to move forward, he positions himself as a leader who prioritizes the people's needs, through this he crafts an image of someone who produces real outcomes, even if it requires moral losses for the sake of people. On this basis, he further pushes the limitations of manipulation, that is why he tries to manipulate people's emotions as states, "Willie's speeches weren't any good [...] But they didn't have to be good. People didn't bother to listen to them. They just came to look at Willie and clap and then go vote" (Warren, 1946, p. 93). Through this emotional occupation, which was backed by his charismatic personality, he wanted to create a dominant narrative, where faith in his personality overshadows critical examination.

As well as his ability to adapt to societal changes has further strengthened the emotional bonds, as shown by this quotation: "The world's changing. It's changed so much a fellow can step in and grab the whole State" (Warren, 1946, p. 174). Using the political context and cultural changes to meet his ends, he proclaims himself to be the leader that the people need who profoundly understands people's needs. Furthermore, to show his recognition of ambition and manipulation, it is declared that, "He wasn't really in touch with the world. He was not only bemused by the voice he had heard. He was bemused by the very grandeur of the position to which he aspired" (Warren, 1946, p. 98). This statement demonstrates his awareness of the need for strategic use of ideological norms to gain power. Moreover, his readiness to violate moral standards to achieve results, reinforces the pragmatic image he already projects, Irwin points this out, "You don't make omelets without breaking eggs. And precedents. He's broken plenty of eggs and he may make his omelets" (Warren, 1946, p. 174). To frame this, Gramsci (1971), points out that:

The "spontaneous" consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is "historically" caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production (p.12).

This line from Gramsci's theory highlights how Willie's influence over public belief systems, is achieved through charismatic leadership and strategic public works, and it goes hand in hand with Gramsci's idea of consensual domination. Wainwright (2010) points out that, Gramsci critically shows leadership as a profound intellectual and moral attempt, when radical leaders primarily craft and circulate transformative worldviews, establishing hegemony through the power of conceptual reimagination. Willie's ability to gain the masses' spontaneous consent illustrates how ruling class values and ideologies are internalized as common sense by society, creating an illusion of unity and legitimacy; the lines show his profound understanding of public perception while his acknowledgement of "graft" reveals the moral compromises he considers necessary to maintain the system. He creates a consent-driven dominance that mirrors Gramsci's concept of Hegemony, by shaping public beliefs and aligning his policies with peoples' aspirations. These findings merit further investigation into Jack's role in maintaining and legitimizing Willie's hegemony.

Jack Burden's role in *AKM* shows Antoni Gramsci's idea of ideological submission and complicity. Furthermore, this is where people become unaware players in powerful systems by accepting and supporting the main ideas of those in power. Jack's complicity comes from his silent acceptance of Willie's corrupt actions and his lack of strong morals, even while he sees and criticizes his rise. Gramsci's theory shows how intellectuals like Jack, whether consciously or unconsciously, help support the control of those in power by accepting the values and actions of the ruling class. Jack's way is not paved rather, full of difficult choices and mental obstacles, and it shows how submitting to power affects personal freedom and choice.

To understand this, the consideration concentrates on Jack's mental struggle, as he is unable to understand history; which is symbolized through his work with the Mastern paupers as it is stated, "Jack Burden lived with the Mastern paupers for a year and a half [...] But the day

came when Jack Burden sat down at the pine table and realized that he did not know Cass Mastern" (Warren, 1946, p. 265). That is when it comes out that Jack cannot conceive how personal actions relate to larger issues such as systematic corruption, this reflects his narrow worldview and intellectual paralysis. His failure to comprehend Mastern's struggles reflects his passive complicity in Willie's hegemonic system that unavoidable controlled their perspectives.

Similarly, Jack has hesitated as he became involved in Willie's political vehicle, and this becomes clear when he instructs him to inspect and look into Judge Irwin's past to find a way to blackmail him into withdrawing his support for his political opponent, "You start digging for what the Judge dropped. It will be a long dig. [I]f you don't want to do it you don't have to. I can always pay somebody else" (Warren, 1946, p. 269). Following this Jack declares that it is neither money nor love that makes him work for you, here his hegemonic manipulation is clearly in use, he uses his mind in one way, commanding and forcing his will upon him in the other way. Besides, Jack's eventual agreement discloses how intellectuals can be used as a tool to uphold the dominant power structure, even when they have moral dilemmas.

Furthermore, Jack accepts the moral compromise of his role, he shows this acceptance in his understanding of history's vagueness, "A student of history does not care what he digs out of the ash-pile, the midden, the sublunary dung heap, which is the human past" (Warren, 1946, p. 223). With this statement, Jack is first disengaged; he distils human acts into historical necessities and nothing more and distances him from any responsibility in perpetuating Willie's power. His intellectual stance makes complicity an objective analysis. Likewise, Jack's life in Willie's circle highlights the moral collapse he comes to accept and points out, "Jack Burden lived with them, in the slatternly apartment among the unwashed dishes in the sink and on the table [...] He even took a relish in the squalor" (Warren, 1946, p. 225). This imagery presents Jack's involvement in the corruption he criticized, which further represents his shared liability within the powerful oppressive systems of Willie's ruling agenda. Hoare and Sperber (2016) demonstrate this ideological submission and complicity:

The key to hegemonic reproduction is the educational relationship [...] It exists between intellectual and non-intellectual sections of the population, between the rulers and the ruled, elites and their followers, leaders and led, the vanguard and the body of the army. Every relationship of "hegemony" is necessarily an educational relationship (pp. 127-128).

Jack as an intellectual, who gives up on his studies, plays a main role in having power remain in Willie's hegemonic ruling. Using his cleverness and historical insights justifies his authority. As well as, through adopting his practical ideology, Jack helps maintain his dominance while ignoring his moral flaws. Jack's involvement, matches Gramsci's theory of hegemony, clarifying how intellectuals, even when opposed, maintain ruling class values. How ideologies internalized in Jack's actions are noticed in, his moral detachment, rationalizations, and passive support of his power. Jack to this end operates within Willie's world, he highlights how intellectual submission sustains domination, reflecting the social cost of moral ambiguity and compromise. Thus, the focus shifts to describing how his infrastructure projects function as hegemonic tools of control.

No one better than Willie understands the manipulation of people through winning their consent by forceless tools as hegemonic devices. Therefore, his infrastructure projects are not just public works, rather the projects act as instruments, employed for ideological control and helping him underpin his dominant power. Willie understood this hegemonic tool could help him as he criticized the previous political figures and pinpointed that, "When the first brick school house ever built in his county collapsed because it was built of politics' rotten bricks, and it killed and mangled a dozen poor little scholars" (Warren, 1946, p. 128), where he wants to draw others attention and show previous and politicians as corrupt and indirectly alleging that he is the one

who saves them. This is a way to win people's hearts on one side: by building good public infrastructure he genuinely helps the public, which helps him be viewed as a people's hero who works for the good of everyone. Through this he can create a bond between him and the people, so they see his leadership as something that people choose and support not forced on them.

Gramsci highlights this, in his concept of hegemonic apparatus, in which the ruling class tries to sustain consent and authority by embedding their ideology within cultural and social institutions (Gramsci, 1971). By trying to give or at least say what people seek, he exactly plans for what Gramsci proposes. As he tries to improve people's lives, which makes them trust and admire him, Willie hides his flaws and makes his leadership that is for people not for his benefit. Whereas, behind the scenes, his leadership is tainted by corruption and moral compromises. Through directly talking to the rural people, Willie tries to address their struggles and explains what people lack to address their deficiencies:

Look at your crop. Did it ever rot in the field because the road was so bad you couldn't get it to market? Look at your kids. Are they growing up ignorant as you and dirt because there isn't any school for them? (Warren, 1946, p. 127).

This way of addressing the common problems as bad education and roads, raises and places him as a leader who fights for progress and deals with unfair systems. Gramsci (1971, p.57) states that "the supremacy of a social group manifests itself in two ways, as "domination" and as "intellectual and moral leadership". A social group dominates antagonistic groups, which it tends to "liquidate", or to subjugate perhaps even by armed force; it leads kindred and allied groups. By presenting infrastructure as a solution for them, he positions himself as someone who can be trusted; in doing so, he ties his leadership to their everyday needs, ensuring people see his vision as their own. Expanding on this, Willie tells people, "I am going to build a hospital. The biggest and the finest money can buy [...] To ease the pain. Free. Not as charity. But as a right (Warren, 1946, p. 365)". Uttering these words, while addressing people; and calling it their "right" rather than charity, he emphasized empowering the people rather than making them dependent upon favors. Through this, he secures their loyalty and strengthens his control as he cleverly conceals his political motives, in presenting himself as a leader who cares about justice and fairness to make his leadership inspired by people's sense of dignity and fairness. So, his desire to be best and win people's support is shown as he says, "[D]on't care how fine they are, mine's [hospital] gonna be finer, and I don't care how big they are, mine's gonna be bigger, poor bugger in this State can go there [...] not cost him a dime" (Warren, 1946, p. 323). From his rhetoric, he does not just make himself look generous, he also shoots his rivals, showing he can outshine any other leaders and institutions.

These words help him create an image of a benefactor and powerful figure who can do and compensate for what others do not, to make sure people see him as the only leader capable of meeting their needs, further tightening his grip on power. Put differently, Willie's vision for the hospital is not to help people but he reveals his desire to leave behind a legacy that can carry his name and influence long after he has gone, "I'm building that place, the best in the country, the best in the world [...] and I'm going to call it the Willie Talos Hospital and it will be there a long time after I'm dead and gone" (Warren, 1946, p. 364). He emphasizes this by saying, "I will do those things. So, help me God. I shall live in your will" (Warren, 1946, p. 365). He embeds his name and ideology into symbols of progress, but he presents his actions as fulfilling people's needs.

To ensure his hegemony is deeply rooted he acts selflessly, yet it is a clever way to mask personal ambition as collective empowerment. Jones (2006) points out, "In order to maintain its authority, a ruling power must be sufficiently flexible to respond new circumstances and to the changing wishes of those it rules. It must be able to reach into the minds and lives of its subordinates, exercising its power as what appears to be a free expression of their interests and

desires (pp. 3-4).” This proves that Willie’s infrastructure projects are more than practical solutions for people’s problems; rather, he wants them to be the visible symbol of his leadership and control, as he connects progress and justice directly to him. When Willie embeds his ideas of infrastructure projects into social and cultural fabrics to serve his rule, it is a clear example of Gramsci’s concept of hegemonic apparatus, through this, he wants to make his leadership both legitimate and indispensable. Those actions make people see his power and governing as a necessity, not an option; his projects win loyalty by providing martial benefits, making his leadership essential while hiding moral compromises behind it. As well as that, this strategy strengthens his control, even as it creates moral collapses. In light of this understanding, the coming lines examine the fragility of Willie’s hegemony and its eventual collapse.

The rise and eventual fall of Willie in *AKM* exemplifies the fragile nature of hegemony, especially when people’s consent begins to dissolve among the governed. At first, he wins over the public by presenting himself as someone who understands their needs and calls for change. Thus, he gains their consent and support, however over time his actions become self-serving and corrupt; the popular support he relied on starts to fade away and crumble. Gramsci’s theory of hegemony explains that for domination, gaining ideological and cultural consent is the essence, but this consent is inherently unstable and vulnerable. In Willie’s case, his moral collapse and manipulative method eventually clash with the ideals that originally drew people to him. The novel shows, how cracks in hegemonic control lead to destruction without considering its strong power structure. This indicates how power built on manipulation and consent is not secure. Willie’s frustration with the public becomes clear when he says, “[b]ut they won’t listen to it, God damn those bastards, they come out to hear a speaking and then they won’t listen to you. Not a word. They don’t care” (Warren, 1946, p. 110), this shown that the same crowd that once admired and hung on his every word now seems unconcerned, reflecting a shift in their perception of him.

Furthermore, this is a moment of growing awareness for Willie that he is losing his grip on people’s loyalty. The loss of this connection demonstrates the fragility of ideological control when the people no longer observe their leader as aligned with their interests. Similarly, the novel highlights the consequences of his reliance on manipulation and corruption he states that:

You could look at the crowd out there and hear that undertone in its cry,
hoarse like surf, and think that the crowd there could cause the event.

But no, it could be said, Willie Talos caused the event by corrupting
and blackmailing the Legislature (Warren, 1946, p. 216).

This extract from the novel shows that while the public primarily supported his leadership, his methods of blackmailing, corruption, and pressure began to alienate them. As time passes the energy and trust of the crowd disappear as his moral compromises become impossible to overlook. It is an indication that his control, built on manipulation rather than genuine connection, is unstable. It underscores the idea that power rooted in unethical practices can only last as long as people are willing to ignore the truth behind it. Willie’s once-powerful words no longer stir the same passion in his audience as, “I have seen a sign [...] I have seen blood on the moon. Buckets of blood, and boy! I know whose blood it will be” (Warren, 1946, p. 209). This is an indication that his once powerful, manipulative, and hegemonic words have lost their power and impact, the desperate tone highlights his struggle. Moreover, his public disillusionment reflects his crisis, he says, “I could have made a good Governor” (Warren, 1946, p. 110). This illustrates the gap between the leader he wanted to be and the one he became. Besides, he notices that he begins with genuine ideals, but his dependence on manipulation and pressure overshadows them. But so long as man lives, one must see the outcomes of his deeds Jack shows, “History is blind, but man is not” (Warren, 1946, p. 601). While history unfolds without conscious intention and direction, individuals have the capacity of awareness and moral choices. To support the argument, Gramsci (1971), further elaborates this and states:

If the ruling class has lost its consensus, i.e. is no longer “leading”, but only “dominant”, exercising coercive force alone, this means precisely that the great masses have become detached from their traditional ideologies, and no longer believe what they used to believe previously, The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear” (pp.275-276).

The novel engages our empathy through its examination of political figures who failed to connect with people intellectually and morally but learned to move them through populist words through touching their beliefs, personal values and their prejudices and angers (Cullick, 2018). This manipulation and pressure lead to the collapse of his power and influence, causing the supporters to lose trust and authority. For Gramsci, as reflected in Willie’s journey, this signals a crisis where the old system is collapsing. Still, no new system emerges, leaving the gap with instability and chaos as happens with Willie’s assassination and Tom’s death. Willie’s downfall shows how the loss of people’s trust leads to the collapse of his power; in contrast, for Gramsci, the power built on consent is fragile. When trust fades, the illusion of legitimacy quickly falls apart.

6.CONCLUSION

All the king’s Men demonstrates a highly compelling narrative about politics, power abuse, and moral degradation. This study has closely examined Warren’s text through the complementary frameworks of Marxist criticism and Gramsci’s Theory of Hegemony. Through Willie’s path from idealistic reformer to corrupt politician, the findings show how class conflicts shapes political and moral realities which is the central in Marxist view. Willie’s transformation supports the Marxist assertion that capital systems push politicians to prioritizes survival over moral values, eventually supporting the very class structures they initially opposed. Within Gramsci’s framework, Willie’s rise to power through infrastructure projects, populist appeals, and public opinions manipulation exemplifies Gramsci’s notion of “manufactured consent”. His dominance relies not on force but on embedding his ideology within societal norms. Willie’s assassination at the end reveals the inherent instability of power build on manipulation rather than sincere reform. Meanwhile, Jack Burden’s role as Willie’s right-hand man shows the negative role intellectuals play in legitimizing hegemonic narrative while experiencing personal moral conflict. The novel ultimately discloses that power abuse corrupts both individuals and systems, leading to unavoidable moral collapse when the contradictions within hegemonic power structures become apparent. Warren’s exploration surpasses its historical setting, offering broader visions into the nature of power, corruption and the delicateness of moral frameworks when opposed with political expediency.

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