HEARING VOICES:
Characterization, Temporal Perspective, and Poetry
Through Four Narrative Voices in
*All the King’s Men* by Robert Penn Warren

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“No, no. It's not schizophrenia. It's just a voice in my head. I mean, the voice isn't telling me to do anything. It's telling me what I've already done, accurately, and with a better vocabulary.”

-- *Stranger Than Fiction*

“We can keep the past only by having the future.”

-- Robert Penn Warren, *All the King’s Men*

The use of first-person narration in fiction presents certain opportunities, but also entails particular challenges and limitations. As Wayne C. Booth explains in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, “It is true that choice of the first person is sometimes unduly limiting: if the ‘I’ has inadequate access to necessary information, the author may be led into improbabilities” (150). One limitation of first person is giving the reader access to secondary characters’ thoughts and motivations (secondary character development); another is relating events that the narrator does not experience directly; and, because most novels utilize dynamic characterization, it can be challenging to show clear primary character development and a self-aware perspective (over time) without utilizing more distant narration such as second-person, third-person limited, or third-person omniscient point of view.
Jack Burden is Robert Penn Warren’s memorable historian/political operative, protagonist, and narrator of *All the King’s Men*. Jack is what Booth would describe as a “narrator-agent” (he produces some measurable effect on the course of events) (154) and he’s a “self-conscious narrator” (aware as himself as a writer) (155). Warren adapted his novel *All the King’s Men* from his play *Proud Flesh*, and in the play Jack Burden is a minor character who appears “only in the last act to evoke the last backward glance of the dedicated assassin” (Warren, *A Robert Penn* 227). And therefore Jack Burden was not Warren’s first, obvious choice for the narrator, but due to aesthetic and technical issues, Warren said that there was “[…] the necessity for a character of a higher degree of self-consciousness than my politician, a character to serve as a kind of commentator and raisonner and chorus” (Warren, *A Robert Penn* 226).

In *All the King’s Men*, Jack is telling both his and Willie Stark’s story, one that begins almost seventeen years earlier, as well as relating events that he understands changed him fundamentally, and consequently Jack experiences self-aware, dynamic character development. Warren accomplishes this narrative sleight-of-hand by writing four distinct narrative “voices” for Jack. The definition of narrative voice is as varied as there are approaches to writing, but for this paper I would define it as the story-telling persona created by point of view, diction, “sound” (rhythm: punctuation, sentence structure, repetition, alliteration, etc.) and various stylistic elements (figurative language, imagery, etc.).

Jack’s “voices” vary in terms of point of view, denotation, and temporal perspective; and yet, each voice is imbued with Jack’s personality. The voices Warren employs for Jack as narrator are second-person, third-person, and two different first-
person narrative voices. Of the first-person narrative voices, one is cynical, smart-aleck, young, and sometimes matter-of-fact, and the other is wiser, philosophical, older, and poetic/lyrical. The narrative voices are sometimes separate and sometimes layered, but each time Warren uses them he does so with a specific intent. Warren employs the voices to establish the passage of time and the distinct change of Jack’s character, but they also showcase his talent for vivid, lively narration and descriptive prose poetry and lyric poetry.

While the novel is told retrospectively, with all events having transpired and all connections and consequences known, it “begins” for the reader in 1936, *in medias res*, as Jack and his boss (the Boss) Governor Willie Stark, are traveling to visit Willie’s father on the family farm. That night they take another trip, a political shakedown of Judge Irwin, who lives in Jack’s hometown (Burden’s Landing), because the judge is going to support Stark’s opponent for Senate. However, there are complications (external and internal conflicts) because, although Jack has known Judge Irwin since he was a child when he was a father figure and friend of his mother’s, Willie Stark orders Jack to find “dirt” on Irwin in order to destroy the judge politically and personally. Jack’s mission helps propel and complicate the storyline for the remainder of the novel. What he finds, and his actions in helping the Boss retain his power, result in tragedy for all involved.

The first three pages of the novel are distinctly original. Warren employs long sentences full of descriptive second-person narration (in Jack’s “voice”) that portray driving a new highway north to fictional Mason City:
You look up the highway and it is straight for miles, coming at you, with the black line down the center coming at you, with the black and slick and tarry-shining against the white of the slab, and the heat dazzles up from the white slab so that the black line is clear, coming at you with the whine of the tires, and if you don’t quit staring at that line and don’t take a few deep breaths and slap yourself hard on the back of the neck you’ll hypnotize yourself and you’ll come to just at the moment when the right front wheel hooks over into the black dirt shoulder off the slab, and you’ll try to jerk her back on but you can’t because the slab is high like a curb, and maybe you’ll try to reach to turn off the ignition just as she starts the dive. But you won’t make it of course. (1)

He also describes the surrounding countryside and the history of the people who settled and changed it:

There were pine forests here a long time ago but they are gone. The bastards got in here and set up the mills and laid the narrow-gauge tracks and knocked together the company commissaries and paid a dollar a day and folks swarmed out of the brush for the dollar and folks came from God knows where, riding in wagons with a chest of drawers and a bedstead canted together in the wagon bed, and five kids huddled down together and the old woman hunched on the wagon seat with a poke bonnet on her head and snuff in her gums and a young one hanging on her tit. (2)

The narrative voice, from the start, is infused with Jack’s cynical commentary. While some of Jack’s observations contain truths, are intended to show changes (a new highway that Willie had built), the greed of the mill owners, or the poverty of the original
settlers, they are clearly filtered through Jack’s background: wealthy, white, and educated. Jack is often “cheeky” (just short of rude) as he narrates in rushing (few commas), looping, repetitive phrases and images, and then adds snide remarks—“but you won’t make it of course”; “the bastards”; “God knows where”—and classist generalizations about those who came to labor on the narrow-gauge railroads and then became the first settlers of Mason City—“five kids”; “old woman […] snuff on her gums […] young one hanging on her tit” (Warren 2).

It could be argued that the built-in “prologue” is unnecessary; that the novel could begin on page three with “I was in the first car, the Cadillac, with the Boss and Mr. Duffy and the Boss’s wife and son and Sugar-Boy.” But the effect of the first two-plus pages establishes Jack’s distinct and compelling voice: sometimes dark, cynical, showy, combined with rich visual description, tangential observation beyond the scope of the plot, and interesting elements of the setting. It makes one want to read because Jack, within the first three pages, already feels so very real—all too human (flawed but intelligent)—and, despite his cynicism, he is an observant and entertaining storyteller whom has taken you under his wing for the remainder of the novel. By using second person, Warren is able to embed the reader within the story as an active observer in an always current (present tense—“you look”; “coming at you”) and perennial tale of political and moral corruption.

After dinner at the Stark place, but before the fateful trip to Burden’s Landing, Jack is leaning on a fence rail by the pastures and taking “pulls” from his hip flask while the sun sets. As Warren does elsewhere in the novel, Jack doesn’t just observe but comments on his past self. It is as though the Jack of the past is in fact a different person,
and the present Jack (the older, wiser Jack who is looking back and narrating) is able to step outside himself and judge the naïve notions he once held as absolutes:

> I leaned back and waited for the sunset colorations to explode in my stomach, which they did. I heard somebody open and shut the gate to the barn lot, but I didn’t look around. If I didn’t look around it would not be true that somebody had opened the gate with the creaky hinges, and that is a wonderful principle for a man to get a hold of. I had got that principle out of a book when I was in college, and I hung on to it for grim death. I owed my success in life to that principle. It put me where I was. What you don’t know don’t hurt you, for it ain’t real. They called that Idealism in my book I had when I was in college, and after I got hold of that principle I became an Idealist. I was a brassbound Idealist in those days. If you are an Idealist it does not matter what goes on around you because it isn’t real anyway. (32)

The passage above drips with Jack’s cheeky sarcasm: “a wonderful principle”; “I owed my success in life to that principle”; “what you don’t know can’t hurt you”; “brassbound Idealist”; etc. There are also two out-of-place dialectical slang phrases (“what you don’t know don’t hurt you” and “it ain’t real”) which seem to be a verbal play on the ironic nature of what he learned (a deliberate ignorance) and where he leaned it (from a college textbook). The voice here almost sounds like the young Jack (using his vocabulary), but it is actually the older Jack, looking back, and poking fun at his younger self for what he used to believe. By practicing the “principle of Idealism,” almost ignorant nihilism, Jack keeps himself emotionally detached, and ensures inaction, in relationships and life, because nothing, and thus no one, is real. The addition of this character flaw, and Jack’s
later self-awareness, causes Jack to seem more real and rounded. This flaw, as in real life, adds to Jack’s inability to be content and find happiness until he lets go of Idealism and his old self.

Initially, the reader might believe that the division of Jack’s past and present selves is merely temporal, and reflective of gained wisdom, but later the division is explained as finite, and marked by death. In chapter 4, the “Cass Mastern chapter,” Warren shifts Jack’s narration to the youngest of the “voices”—a third-person limited point of view that portrays Jack’s Ph.D. days. Looking back, older Jack considers his past self as distinctly different from his current self, because his former self no longer exists. The young Jack is dead, just as Willie Stark is dead, because “the story of Willie Stark and the story of Jack Burden are, in one sense, one story” (170):

Long ago Jack Burden was a graduate student, working for his Ph.D. in American History, in the State University of his native state. This Jack Burden (of whom the present Jack Burden, Me, is a legal, biological, and perhaps even metaphysical continuator) lived in a slatternly apartment with two other graduate students… (170)

The “story” of Cass Mastern comes to Jack via a packet of letters, eight tattered account books, and an old photograph sent by his father’s uncle, Gilbert Mastern. The story of Cass Mastern begins with a description of Cass Mastern, filtered through Jack’s perspective, combined with Jack’s vivid imaginings upon seeing the photograph:

So Jack Burden made the acquaintance of Cass Mastern, who died in 1864 in a military hospital in Atlanta, who had been only a heard but forgotten name to him, and who was the pair of dark, wide-set, deep eyes which burned out of the
photograph, through the dinginess and dust and across more than fifty years.

(Warren 173)

Jack is both the historian and the medium through which we delve into the past and into the troubled and tortured life of Cass Mastern. Warren, still using third-person, establishes the progression of Jack’s approach to Cass’ writings and the historical context of the pre-Civil War South, in a semi-journalistic, nonfiction style, with references to Jack and the journal. The third-person narrative summary, the intrusion of phrases, such as “according to the journal,” “Cass wrote,” and double quotations around dialogue (Cass’s exact words), and the frequent appearance of Jack’s name and actions reminds us that Jack is still the central narrative persona and the impetus of the novel’s overall arc. But by using third person, Warren can still relate events Jack doesn’t experience directly: “Scarce a corner, cranny, or protected nook or angle of my friend’s trusting house did we not at one time or another defile, and even in the shameless light of day,” Cass wrote in the journal, and when Jack Burden, the student of history, went to Lexington and went to see the old Trice house he remembered the sentence […] Jack Burden stood in the main hall, which was cool and dim, with dull glittering floors, and, in the silence of the house, recalled that period, some seventy years before, of the covert glances, the guarded whispers, the abrupt rustling of silk in the silence (the costume of the period certainly had not been designed to encourage casual vice), the sharp breath, the reckless sighs. (184)

The passage above, weaving Jack’s imagination and Cass’s story, is important to establish Jack’s emotional connection to the subject (familial and regional history), the depth of his research, and the likelihood that he will be successful in capturing the
emotional truth when writing the book about Cass that he embarks upon at the end of *All the King’s Men*. By using Cass’s exact words filtered through Jack’s narrative third-person voice, the reader is able envision Jack as a writer of depth and poignant observation (without the boasting of first-person) and not merely a drifting political “bloodhound” (digging up things buried) for the Boss.

The changes in Jack’s narrative voice are influenced by the Warren’s need to establish Jack within a specific time and place, and to illustrate emotional and/or psychological changes. Just as with real people, what a first-person narrator chooses to relate and describe and how he or she relates and describes events, people, and places are often indications of his or her character at a particular point in time and place (characterization). For instance, when Jack is out of work, he visits his long-time friend Adam Stanton, now a talented surgeon, and he relates the scene with the self-inflated bravado and hard-boiled voice of the young Jack:

> He was a hot-shot surgeon now, with more folks screaming for him to cut on them that he had time to cut on, and a professor at the University Medical School, and busy grinding out the papers he published in scientific journals or took off to read at meetings in New York and Baltimore and London. He wasn’t married. He didn’t have time, he said. He didn’t have time for anything. But he’d take a little time to let me sit in a shabby overstuffed chair in his shabby apartment, where papers were stacked around and the colored girl had streaked dust on the furniture. I used to wonder why he lived the way he did when he must have been having quite a handsome take, but I finally got it through my head that he didn’t ask anything from a lot of the folks he cut on. He had the name of a softy in the
trade. And after he got money, people took him for it if they had a story that would halfway wash. The only thing in his apartment that was worth a plugged nickel was the piano, and it was the best money could buy. (Warren 109)

In the passage, young Jack (the “brassbound Idealist”) details Adam’s talents (surgeon, teacher, writer, lecturer, and musician), work ethic, compassion, and general disregard for money, but he does so in a way that attempts to mock and diminish Adam. Warren, via Jack, uses words and phrases that are specific to Jack (pat words or phrases he would commonly use) and familiar for the time period (slang or euphemisms) such “hot-shot surgeon,” “cut on,” “grinding out papers,” “shabby,” and “softy” (109). The indication is that young Jack is jealous, but he wants to appear to the reader as more exciting than his childhood friend Adam. Jack seems to want the reader to believe that Adam’s life, in contrast to his own, is boring and burdensome, and that Adam is a “sucker,” and thus lacks Jack’s savvy in understanding human nature. Also, the sentences are fairly simple, unoriginal, and un-poetic in their construction (many are subject, verb, object), and they employ repetitive words and phrases like “he,” “didn’t have time,” and “money.” This lack of variety shows an over-simplification by Jack and/or a lack of sophistication in terms of thought and description. Also, “colloquial diction and relatively short sentences […] have the instant effect of humanizing once elevated characters and events” (Gardner 76). It is clear from the context and his retelling that Jack knows that Adam is following “his calling” as Jack drifts around unhappy and out of work. Young Jack is shown, through voice, to be insecure, inexperienced, and almost defensive (jealous) by acting self-important, arrogant, and petty. Adam’s tragic fall and death is partly Jack’s fault, which Jack later admits, and here Jack seems to be distancing himself emotionally from
his “childhood friend.” Warren’s use of the young Jack’s narrative voice is important in establishing the base-line for Jack and clarifying its difference from the older and more sophisticated Jack’s voice; in this way, Warren can show clear, dynamic character development over time.

Warren, who won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry twice (1957 and 1978), the National Book Award for poetry once (1957), and numerous other awards, did not write poetry for ten years beginning in 1943 as he devoted much of his time to writing his most famous novels: *At Heaven’s Gate, All the King’s Men*, and *World Enough and Time* (Burt xxiv). But that his thorough grounding in poetry and its power for illuminating emotional truth through image, sound, and unusual/creative language informed his prose is evident in many passages and scenes in *All the King’s Men*. Robert Gorham Davis remarked in a *New York Times Book Review* in 1946:

"All the King's Men" is brilliantly done, with magnificent brief set-pieces in which Robert Penn Warren writes prose equivalent to his poems in sound and rhythm and imagery; lyric passages full of wisdom and acute observation […] Warren records almost too sharply, as if with glasses to overcorrect myopia so that we stare from a few inches away at shreds of shuck lying in the pig's trough, or at the creping of a lovely woman's neck, or at japonica petals in a pool after rain, or at a man's cortex laid bare by the surgeon's knife. (nytimes.com/books)

Throughout the first two thirds of the novel, Anne Stanton is the one person who remains un tarnished in Jack’s critical eye. She is faultless, graceful, intelligent, precise, and serious. In Jack’s view, she is the exemplar un-manipulative woman (almost the opposite of his mother), and she is also unattainable. Jack desires and yet respects her
more than any other woman he has ever known, and this desire and admiration leads to love. In order to capture the emotional center of the novel (Jack’s love for Anne) and to distinguish the beauty of Jack’s love from the rest of his morally questionable life, Warren uses his well-recognized poetic talents to create a poetic voice for older Jack.

Poetry “uses concrete words to suggest meaning” and so “relies on implication” (Clark 1-2), and the narrative form of the novel can lend itself to prose and/or lyric poetry. Prose poetry, as defined by Kevin Clark, in The Mind’s Eye: A Guide to Writing Poetry, is “often marked by persuasive rhythm, internal rhyme, repetition, alliteration, narrative, and of course, intense lyric moments” (147). Mr. Clark explains that lyric poetry “renders the interior life by depicting the intense personal emotions of the speaker” and uses “considerable concrete imagery” (43).

In the “Foreword” to The Collected Poems of Robert Penn Warren, the prolific critic Howard Bloom states, “From the start, Warren’s characteristic mode had been the dramatic lyric” (xxiii Burt). So when Warren describes the intense image that was the seed of Jack’s love for Anne, her floating on the water under storm clouds, he does so with prose poetry (through the voice of older Jack)—rhythmic, repetitive, alliterative, narrative, and with intense lyric moments (rich interior life via personal emotion):

The water was very still, and suddenly dark with the darkness of the sky, and away across the bay the line of woods looked black now, not green, above the whiteness of the line which was the beach way over there. A cutboat, a catboat, was becalmed over in that direction, nearly a mile away, and under the sky and over the dark water and against the black line of the woods, you never saw anything so heart-breakingly white as the sharp sail […] The sky was darker now,
with a purplish, greenish cast. The color of a turning grape. But it still looked high, with worlds of air under it. A gull crossed, very high, directly above me. Against the sky it was whiter even than the sail had been. It passed clear across all the sky I could see. I wondered if Anne had seen the gull. When I looked at her, her eyes were closed. Her arms were spread out wide, and her hair wavered out free on the water from around her head. Her head was far back, her chin lifted. Her face looked very smooth, as though she were asleep. As I lay on the water, I could see her profile sharp against the far-off black trees. (126)

The scene has rhythmic qualities created through diction, punctuation (which create distinct pauses and stops), and repeated sounds (particularly “s,” “d,” “b,” and “w”). Alliteration is used in the description—“very still, and suddenly dark with the darkness of the sky”; “sharp sail”; and “her hair wavered out free on the water from around her head” (126). The repetition of certain words establishes the visual setting, heightens the mood of the impending storm and tension, and highlights its contrasting elements: “dark”/“darkness,” “black” and “white”/“whiteness”; “sky,” and “water” (126). Internal rhyme (perfect and imperfect) is also used: “away,” “bay”; “woods,” “looked”; “wavered,” “water” (126). The scene itself is narrative and lyric—depicting an imagistic epiphany that Jack later says was:

[…] an image in my head that never got out […] This is not to say that I fell in love with Anne that day […] But the image was there all the time, growing brighter as the veils were withdrawn and making the promise of greater brightness (Warren 127).
Warren uses voice-rich prose poetry that is full of concrete, descriptive images of Jack’s memories (intense personal experience and transformation) to create implications for meaning—“a good image will render both feeling and idea” (Clark 2).

Later, after Jack and Anne’s first kiss, at her house, Adam walks in on them holding hands. It is an uncomfortable moment and the first outsider’s recognition that they are a couple and not merely sneaking around. Anne excuses herself to go to bed, and Jack and Adam smoke cigarettes and say little. Jack’s personal explanation of Anne’s reasons for leaving at that moment become more complex and less egocentric as Jack becomes older and more contemplative. Initially, Jack, who is young and self-absorbed (read: clueless), doesn’t wonder why Anne goes upstairs. Later, when Jack can better empathize with Anne, he believes that by leaving she had “served noticed to Adam” and wants to leave Adam alone “to let him accustom himself to the new structure of our little crystal, our little world” (Warren 302). But even this reason, revolving around the “couplehood” of Jack and Anne, is too self-centered to be completely real. As in the previous passage of Anne floating on the water, Jack’s aging sharpens his perspective and his “voice” becomes more eloquent and poetic; as a result, many years later, older Jack, looking back, describes with vivid, lyrical prose the real reason he believes she had gone upstairs:

But maybe, I decided later, much later, years later when it didn’t seem it would ever matter again, she had gone up because she had to be alone, to sit by the window in the unlighted room, looking out on the night, or lying on the bed watching the dark ceiling, to accustom herself to her new self, to see if she could breathe the new air, or sustain herself in the new element or dive and lounge in
the new tide of feeling. Maybe she went up there to be alone, absorbed in herself the way a child is absorbed in watching a cocoon gradually part in the dusk to divulge the beautiful moth—the Luna moth again, with its delicate green and silver damp and crumpled but gradually spreading in the dusk, defining itself, slowly fanning the air to make a breeze so light that you would not be able to feel it on your eyeball were you to lean in close to peer. (Warren 302-303)

In the excerpt above, as with prose poetry, Warren repeats specific words (“later,” “alone,” “watching,” and “dusk”) to accentuate their importance. Certain word pairs (adjective and noun) are repeated with changes to the noun (“new self,” “new air,” “new element,” “new tide of feeling”) making it seem that everything is transformed and “new.” The overall effect is that the passage seems initially contained and confined (contemplating within a room; in a specific space), and the repetition gives the scene a certain rhythmic quality of recurring sounds. This feeling of breathless meditation is aided by the two long sentences, broken up primarily by commas that comprise the short scene. However, with the second “Maybe,” and especially after the em dash, the prose seems to gradually open and slow, detailing the beautiful image of the final stage of a Luna moth’s metamorphosis as it emerges from its cocoon. As with lyric poetry, Warren, via older Jack’s voice, uses concrete, descriptive images of the Luna moth—its “delicate green” and yet slightly sexual “silver damp […] gradually spreading in the dusk” as it is “defining itself” and disrupting the air so subtly one couldn’t even feel it “on your eyeball were you to lean in close” (302-303)—to symbolize Anne’s intense personal and emotional transformation (metamorphosis) and emerging womanhood. Thus, by using
Jack’s poetic imaginings, Warren is able to show the thoughts and motivations of secondary characters through first-person narration.

Warren also uses poetic description, built from concrete imagery, in less emotionally significant passages. With his extensive poetic training (writing, reading, and teaching) it seems natural for Warren to use prose or semi-prose poetry or lyric poetry for effect and/or to add interest to the novel. This is an especially successful and oft-used technique when Warren, through Jack, describes what he sees on road trips from the back of the Boss’s Cadillac. After Jack and the Boss leave Burden’s Landing, seemingly unsuccessful in manipulating the Judge, they travel though the quiet dark. The scene is a memory relived, and so begins in a layering of the younger Jack’s voice (memories, sarcasm, and irony) over the older Jack’s ability to describe in remarkable, visceral detail:

We left the bay, and lost the salt, sad, sweet, fishy smell of the tidelands out of our nostrils. We headed north again. It was darker now. The ground mist lay heavier in the fields, and in the dips of the road the mist frayed out over the slab and blunted the headlights. Now and then a pair of eyes would burn at us out of the dark ahead. I knew that they were the eyes of a cow—a poor dear stoic old cow with a cud, standing by the highway shoulder, for there wasn’t any stock law… (Warren 52)

The passage above begins after a scene break and establishes the setting with specific sensory details—a road trip back though the misty, still countryside (“we left the bay,” “headed north,” “darker,” “ground mist lay heavier in the fields”) and the melancholy mood (“lost the salt, sad, sweet, fishy smell”; “a poor dear stoic old cow”)
The image of the highway as a “slab” is a repeated image from the first page of the novel, and its use returns the reader to the initial trip and younger Jack’s voice. Next, the passage becomes increasingly poetic, intense, and rapid, sounding a bit more like older, lyric Jack with alliteration, some repetition, rapid rhythm, and concrete imagery:

[…] —but her eyes burned at us out of the dark as though her skull were full of blazing molten metal like blood and we could see inside the skull into the bloody hot brightness in that moment when the reflection right before we picked up her shape, which is so perfectly formed to be pelted with clods, and knew what she was and knew that inside that unlovely knotty head there wasn’t anything but a handful of coldly coagulated gray mess in which something slow happened as we went by. (Warren 52-53)

The very long sentence above with only two brief pauses (commas) creates the breathless, dream-like quality of barreling down a rural road through a sleepless night. As in prose poetry, the sounds created by the repetition and alliteration of “b” words (“but,” “burned,” “blazing,” “blood,” “bloody,” “brightness,” “before”) and further alliteration (including: “molten metal”; “coldly coagulated”) creates a distinct rhythmic sound. The imagery of the passage is especially intense, yet ironic, as Warren describes the searing image of light reflected from the eyes, head, and brain of cow. The reflection is bright, hot (“burning”), and molten (“like blood”), and yet the cow’s brain, contained in an “unlovely knotted head,” is a “handful of coldly coagulated gray mess” (52-53).

Then the passage shifts to the distinct voice (particularly diction) of younger Jack full of biting sarcasm: “We were something slow happening inside the cold brain of a cow. That’s what the cow would say if she were a brass-bound Idealist like little Jackie
Burden” (53). The last two sentences of the passage uncomfortably tweak the preceding poetic description and ground it in the negative, and slightly bitter, viewpoint of young Jack. The use of the phrase “brass-bound Idealist” once again returns us to the younger Jack (“Jackie”) who inhabits the “present” of much of the novel. The phrase also reminds the reader, coupled with the contrast created by poetic language, of the almost absurd notion (Idealism) that drives younger Jack—that nothing and no one is real—and reminds the reader of how his perception, and voice, as the narrator is skewed as he relates his story.

Warren also uses poetic description to depict seemingly ordinary scenes, where not much occurs plot-wise, and Jack’s observations of the subtle actions and reactions of characters help the reader to better understand Jack’s imagination and poetic sensibilities and the motivations of auxiliary characters. Lucy Stark, who stands by her husband throughout the novel despite her husband’s serious marital transgressions, is another woman (like Jack’s mother and Anne) whom Jack watches but never fully understands. For Jack, as for many men, women remain a mystery, and so, as he does with Anne, Jack invents a projected interior life for Lucy based on his observations. When Jack has dinner at the Boss’s family farm with the Boss, Old Man Stark, Tom Stark (the Boss’s son), and Lucy Stark, Jack describes the “everyday” scene:

The jaws got to work around the table, and she watched them work. She [Lucy] sat there, not eating much and keeping a sharp eye out for a vacant place on any plate and watching the jaws work… (37).

The scene starts simply with everyone at the table eating as one—the family and Jack seen as a single unit (“all jaws got to work”) and Lucy, in a maternal way,
overseeing their progress without actually eating much herself. This place and function, the family table and nourishment, according to Jack’s viewpoint, are clearly Lucy’s domain and concern. Once her “face seems to smooth itself,” Warren, via older Jack’s voice, launches into narrative lyric poetry utilizing concrete imagery and compares her to a chief engineer of a ship in the engine room watching the engine work in an almost divine (Godlike) fashion:

[…] and as she sat there, her face seemed to smooth itself out and relax with an inner faith in happiness the way a chief engineer does when he goes down to the engine room at night and the big wheel is blurred out with its speed and the pistons plunge and return and the big steel throws are leaping in their perfect orbits like a ballet, and the whole place, under the electric glare, hums and glitters and sings like the eternal inside’s of God’s head, and the ship is knocking off twenty-two knots on a glassy, starlit sea. (37)

The passage above uses remarkably inventive and imagistic similes (“her face seemed to smooth itself out and relax with an inner faith in happiness the way a chief engineer does when he goes down to the engine room at night”; “the big steel throws are leaping in their perfect orbits like a ballet”; “hums and glitters and sings like the eternal inside’s of God’s head”) to explain and even elevate Lucy above the everyday responsibilities of a mother during this time period (1930’s) when the perception among many was that woman’s power existed only within the domestic sphere. Of course, Jack knows that popular notions of “a woman’s sphere” aren’t true for all woman because Anne Stanton and Sadie Burke are both influential in worldly ways.
The scene has distinctive rhythm (sound qualities) developed through the use of alliteration (“seemed to smooth,” “big wheel is blurred,” “pistons plunge,” “starlit sea,” etc.), some rhyming (“wheel” and “steel”), and minimal punctuation (commas). The result of the passage, as with many others, is that Warren, via poetic language and Jack’s imaginative perception (older voice), has used the simple scene of a family having a quiet dinner to illustrate what motivates an auxiliary character (Lucy Stark), and why she stays with an egotistical, philandering husband.

Robert Penn Warren, in his novel *All the King’s Men*, has mitigated the most significant limitations of first-person narration: giving the reader access to secondary characters’ thoughts and motivations (such as the metamorphosis of Anne Stanton from girl to woman and the grace and power of Lucy Stark despite her husband); relating events that the protagonist, Jack Burden, does not experience directly (such as the tragic story of Cass Mastern); and dynamic protagonist characterization—clear primary character development and a self-aware perspective over time (from young Jack to older Jack). Warren accomplishes this through four narrative voices built with Jack’s diction, punctuation, sentence structure, repetition, alliteration, rhythm, and various stylistic elements (figurative language, imagery, etc.). The four voices Warren uses for Jack include second-person, third-person limited, and two different first-person narrative voices (young Jack--cynical, smart-aleck, and sometimes matter-of-fact, and older Jack--wiser, philosophical, older, and poetic/lyrical). The narrative voices, and their colloquial or poetic qualities, are sometimes used separately and are sometimes layered, but their use is always purposeful—for a desired effect, such as to capture the emotional center of the novel, the dream-like qualities of a road trip at night, or the interior emotional life of
secondary characters. The voices also help add interest for the reader through beautiful images, figurative language, descriptions, and word usage; and allow Warren to use his extensive talents as a poet to transport readers beyond themselves.


