

Final Written Report

Professional Development Grant

“Willie and the Poor Boys: History and the Hicks

in Robert Penn Warren’s *All the King’s Men*”

September 2011

Deborah Wilson, Ph.D.

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

A. Title Page (see above)

B. Restatement of Professional Enhancement Opportunity

Abstract of conference paper presented:

One of the issues I have been analyzing since I first began studying *All the King's Men* has been the status of women in the novel. One particular minor passage describing a nameless woman (whom I read as representative of her sex) initiated that focus. Early in the novel, Jack Burden, riding with Willie Stark and his entourage to visit Stark's rural homestead, thinks of riding by farmhouses in the afternoon when "you know the only person in the house is the woman": "[She] has finished washing up the dishes and has swept the kitchen and has gone upstairs to lie down for half an hour and has pulled off her dress and kicked off her shoes and is lying there on her back on the bed in the shadowy room with her eyes closed and a strand of her hair still matted down on her forehead with the perspiration. She listens to the flies cruising around the room, then she listens to your motor getting big out on the road, then it shrinks off into the distance and she listens to the flies" (22). In this scene, the man is in motion and the woman is fixed; she is outside motion and thus outside history. According to Jack's definition of life "Motion toward Knowledge" she is "NonMotion, which is NonLife, which is Death"

(150). To me, this unknown woman and her fixed, uninvestigated life on the side of the road represents the status of all the women in *All the King's Men*.

This past semester, in a graduate course I taught on southern history in southern fiction, one of my students drew my attention to an issue I had not considered particularly connected to my focus on the women in the novel: the representation of the group Stark calls “hicks.” What I then realized, or at least saw as significant, is the fact that the woman in the passage I’d analyzed so closely in terms of sex, was also significant because of her class. She is specifically situated in a farmhouse where she washes dishes and sweeps the floors. She is not comparable to Judge Irwin, Adam and Anne Stanton and Jack Burden: the educated, urbane, cultured class from Burden’s Landing. And she is excluded from history perhaps as much by her class as by her sex. What happens if we expand our attention to the male “hicks” as well? How are they positioned in relation to the history that is so clearly the central issue of the novel? Are they not equally fixed, outside motion and thus outside the history theorized within this novel?

We might see Willie Stark as a member of the same “hicks” that could include this woman. After all, he spends his early life in a similar farmhouse, and, beginning with his speech at the Upton barbecue, he calls himself a hick who’s just like the hicks in his audience. But, as my student insisted, “By the novel’s end, the Washington-aspiring Willie is far more champagne than moonshine, more caviar than grits.” What becomes clear in my rereading of this novel, with class as a primary focus, is that the very hicks Stark overtly aligns himself with are just as marginalized from history as the women are. They, too, are motionless in scene after scene, and their voicelessness becomes particularly evident when placed alongside Stark’s polished rhetoric supposedly on their

behalf. Ultimately, Burden's narrative of Southern liberal solidarity with those hicks is as elitist as it is sexist.

C. Brief Review of Professional Enhancement Opportunity

I attended the American Literature Association conference in Boston, MA, and presented my paper there. I flew out of Memphis on May 25, 2011, and returned on May 30, 2011.

D. Summary of Experiences

My primary teaching area within literature is modern and southern American. I am the primary teacher of Modern American Literature, a required course for all our majors, and the only teacher of our course on southern literature. Not only did I manage to get positive feedback on my paper, I was also able to attend numerous other panels relevant to my teaching and scholarship.

E. Conclusions and Recommendations

I am working on a publishable-length essay of which this paper is a part. I have published on Warren before, but this approach is significantly different from my previous work on this text. I am in the process of writing another section of the essay that I hope to present next spring. Without the funds I received from the ATU Professional Grant, I would not have been able to attend the conference.