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The Puppeteer: An Analysis of the Implications of Gendered Spheres through Sadie Burke in *All the King's Men*

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Robert Penn Warren is a distinguished professor, poet, and author, who is credited for being the founder of New Criticism. He is the only person in history to win a Pulitzer Prize for both fiction and poetry, and his talent for writing has been celebrated as one of the most influential models for contemporary literature. The unique analyses of moral dilemma in the South within his literature have raised the bar for Southern writers, for “he writes about such shortcomings with an eloquence and an elemental rage [that places him] worlds apart from the sordid bitterness of . . . his literary colleagues” (Prescott). The fiercely emotional and mentally stimulating nature of his novel *All the King's Men* ardently supports this assertion. Rumored to be based on the career of Louisiana politician Huey Long, this critically-acclaimed novel chronicles the journey of “The Boss,” or Willie Stark, from hick to hellfire, through the eyes of his faithful muckraker Jack Burden. Warren creates a historically-relevant political narrative that is littered with surprisingly fresh philosophical musings through the use of fiery metaphors and clever punches of sardonic humor. While both the author and various critics admit that “*All the King's Men* is really a double story,” it is clear upon further analysis that the novel is not limited to telling the stories of Willie Stark and Jack Burden alone (Prescott). In fact, Warren’s hyper-attention to the relationship between the past and present weaves the essential tale of a seemingly minor character named Sadie Burke. Often written off as a mere supporting character, her dynamism and gregarious nature mirrors the vivaciousness of Willie Stark himself, thus perpetuating her reckonable force. Sadie Burke is the token woman in a man’s world, and still she is more than that. In a fervent attempt to achieve power for herself, Burke leaves the feminine sphere in order to exercise her political prowess. It is this rejection of traditional femininity that allows Sadie Burke to transcend to the status of creator God in Warren’s narrative and her ultimate attempt to return to the feminine sphere that leads to Willie Stark’s destruction.

The relationship between male and female is colored with a tradition of separatism. Throughout the history of America, it has been agreed that “men and women’s functions [are] to be equal and complementary, not identical” (Norton 297). In other words, humanity is expected to operate with equal respects, but in separate divisions according to gender. The separatism between genders is a result of a domestic ideology that suggests the necessity for a separate male and female sphere. Although it originated much earlier, this division between male and female spheres was

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strongly reinforced during the industrial boom of the nineteenth century. During this time of economic growth, “true men,” characterized by competitiveness, intelligence, and logic, went to work in public sectors such as business and politics, while “true women,” deemed submissive, chaste, and domestic, were limited to the private sphere of organizing the household and providing maternal care to the family (Freedman 24). Historians make it clear that the division between men and women was created to shield the supposed delicacy of women from “all those stern and contaminating and demoralizing duties that devolves [sic] upon the hardier sex—man” (Elshtain 230). Indeed, it can be assumed that this gendered division suggests that the softness of the female sphere is required to make up for the hardness of the male.

Throughout history, both men and women have challenged the expectations of their respective genders through subversion and rejection. In her 1990 book titled *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler develops her theory of performative gender by deconstructing the gendered spheres. The self-proclaimed purpose of Butler’s text is to “think through the possibility of subverting and displacing ... notions of gender ... through the mobilization, subversive confusion, and proliferation of precisely those constitutive categories that seek to keep gender in its place by posturing as the foundational illusions of identity” (44). Surprisingly, Sadie Burke does not subvert the gendered spheres like the feminist heroes of Judith Butler, but instead rejects traditional femininity by becoming defiantly masculine, and assimilates to the public sphere that is conventionally restricted to men. Although she is described as being “built very satisfactorily” with “wonderful eyes,” her “awful clothes,” “violent, snatching gestures,” and “wild, electric” black hair that is “cut off at a crazy length” and flies “in all directions in a wild, electric way” creates a character of lackluster femininity. However, the most detracting attribute is her pock-marked face, which Jack Burden describes as “a plaster-of-Paris mask of Medusa” that has “been [used] as a target for a BB gun” (Warren 170). In chapter two, readers learn that Burke’s loss and ultimate rejection of femininity began with

a childhood case of smallpox. She reveals this childhood pain to Jack Burden while pulling viciously at her scarred skin. She agonizes that her “brother died—and he ought to have lived,” and simultaneously confesses that “it wouldn’t have mattered to him—not to a man—but me, I didn’t die” it is clear that she fully understands the significance of her disfigured appearance (Warren 173). It is easy to assume that this survival of sister over brother represents a subversion of “gender within its binary frame,” by challenging the inherent weakness of women (Butler 526). However, Burke’s survival is not intended to be a social commentary on the foolishness of gendered expectations, but rather Warren’s reiteration of the importance of beauty for women, and the ultimate reason behind Burke’s choice to assume her place in the political world that is so commonly guarded by masculinity. Undoubtedly, the unflattering haircut and exaggerated lack of style Burden mocks throughout the narrative are Burke’s personal form of rejection to the femininity that was stolen from her at such a young age. Therefore, this passage enables readers to realize the significance of her loss of beauty in the creation of Sadie Burke who resides in the public sphere of politics, rather than the role of Sadie Burke in the private sphere of household civility that she could have assumed.

This passage also introduces readers to the basis of Sadie Burke’s character, which is found in Warren’s frequent allusion to the legend of Medusa. Sadie Burke is equated to the mythical Medusa in more ways than their shared tragic beauty. To begin, various ancient legends place considerable importance on Medusa’s eyes. Some legends claim that a single look from her cold eyes turned men irrevocably into stone, while others refer to her blue-green gaze as hypnotizing. She is also said to express “her wrath by making flames shoot forth from her eyes” in Virgil’s *Aeneid* (“Medusa”). Likewise, Sadie Burke’s eyes are described as a “conflagration,” which burns into the hearts and backs of anyone between herself and her goals (Warren 170). Later in the narrative, Burden even remarks that the eyes he meets in the sanatorium “did not belong to Sadie Burke,” because “There wasn’t anything

burning” (Warren 493). This observation reinforces Burke’s likeness to Medusa, for both their eyes claim great significance. Furthermore, Sadie Burke is often depicted as metaphorically guarding the door to the world of politics. In many passages, Burke is found lingering outside the doors of political negotiations and acting as the middleman who relays messages or appointments between Stark and government officials, various businesspeople, and the public. She even acts as a barrier between The Boss and the political bigwigs mulling around his house, by clearing “‘em all out ... and fast” (Warren 40). In the same way, Medusa serves as a guardian in numerous ancient legends. From Hesiod’s *Theogony* and Homer’s *Odyssey* to Dante’s *Divine Comedy* and Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, she is “the guardian of terrifying places,” including “the nocturnal borders of the world” and “the world of the dead” (“Medusa”). Surprisingly, throughout her dedication to Stark’s politics, Burke manages to maintain her own identity through her rejection of traditional femininity. Similar to Medusa’s assertion of “her ‘own’ identity,” she maintains this identity even while engaging in sexual intimacy with Willie Stark (“Medusa”). While Lucy Stark is rarely labeled anything but Mrs. Stark, and Anne Stanton is habitually referred to as Stark’s mistress, it is never explicitly stated that Sadie Burke is sleeping with The Boss. Moreover, in contrast to Sadie Burke, Lucy Stark and Anne Stanton exist solely through their male counterparts. Lucy Stark does not show up in the narrative unless context or clarification is required to paint a better picture of her husband. Similarly, Anne Stanton is only described through the terms previously assigned to her brother Adam. According to Burden’s description, her skin-tone is “brown-toned” and “golden-lighted,” but not as dark as Adam’s, her facial structure paralleled “the tension which was in Adam’s face,” her “blue eyes looked at you like Adam’s eyes,” and “They even had the same smile” (Warren 125). Undoubtedly, while Anne Stanton exists through Adam, and Lucy Stark through Willie, “Sadie Burke was just Sadie Burke” (Warren 117). Additionally, the legend of Medusa claims that her decapitated head acts as “both a mirror and a mask” (Medusa). Just

like Medusa’s double role, Sadie serves as a mask to the brutal truth behind the closed doors of Governor Stark’s political games, as well as a mirror to the pain of his careless actions. She is the perfect mask, for she is dependable, untrusting, and quiet (Warren 397). This is proven when she admits that Stark’s actions stay “in the family” when faced with yet another affair (Warren 397). Her role as a mirror intensifies when she checks into the sanatorium, in which she decides to leave the world of politics altogether. Once a burning light of political prowess and passion, the consequences of Stark’s corrupt practices leave her with “unburning eyes” (Warren 493). Clearly, Burke’s withdrawal from the masculine world of politics she had fought for so long to conquer serves as a mirror to the carelessness of Stark’s personal and political life.

Echoing Medusa’s protective powers, Sadie Burke protects Willie Stark from playing fool to Joe Harrison by exposing Harrison’s ruse. Willie Stark launched his run for Governor honestly. He began as a humble man eager to provide candid politics and create a trustworthy government. Harrison’s henchmen convinced him that he could “change things,” while actually using him to “split the MacMurfee vote,” and he “swallowed it” without complaint (Warren 110). When Burke interrupts a conversation between Burden and Stark on “how he’s not going to be Governor,” she mistakenly assumes someone has divulged Harrison’s plot (Warren 95). Caught in her blunder, she plays it off with calm flippancy and concedes, “you’ve been framed!” (Warren 97). Confessing Stark’s role as monkey-in-the-middle of Harrison and his opponent Sam MacMurfee was certainly not her intention. However, “Somewhere way back inside of Sadie Burke there had been the idea that ... somebody was going to tell Willie,” and she took this role in stride (Warren 98). Burke’s confession is marked as the pivotal moment in her transcendence to the role of creator God. It is Sadie Burke that admits Stark is framed and thus Sadie Burke who assumes responsibility for the muckraking monster present within Warren’s final chapters. Even Stark himself accredits Burke for his enlightenment in an unexpectedly fiery speech of resignation. His declaration that he would still

be a fool if it weren't for "that fine woman right there ... honest enough and decent enough to tell the foul truth" is the first step in his transformation from farmer to fascist (Warren 111). This archetype of creator God is furthered with the Judeo-Christian tradition that claims creation is made in the image of God and thus is a reflection of His Godly desires. Similarly, Stark's emboldened journey from rags to riches directly mirrors Burke's own. They have both "come a long way from the shanty in the mud flats" and are equally hungry for more (Warren 101). The difference, however, is that Burke wanted power from the beginning. Unlike the happy hillbilly version of Stark readers find at the beginning of the narrative, Burke is static in her desires. Under the guise of a powerless woman secretary, Sadie Burke is often the puppeteer guiding Stark's political puppet strings. Her innate desire for power and willingness to use men to achieve this power is made clear through her previous relationships. "Sadie was a very smart cooky," Burden surmises, confessing that she had also put her previous beau Sen-Sen Puckett "into political pay dirt," which refers to extensive profit (Warren 88). With both Puckett and Stark in mind, it is clear that Burke doesn't want to simply support the man in her life, but in fact she uses these men to achieve some semblance of power. Trapped by the limits of her gender in the society of the mid 1930s, she is willing to wait for a man with potential, through whom she can exercise her political savvy and gain power. Thankfully, "Sadie knew how to wait ... She had to wait for everything she had ever got out of the world" (Warren 398). Thus, by pulling the puppet strings of political men, Sadie achieves her own form of power.

According to *Archetypes and Motifs in Folklore and Literature*, the archetype of the creator God "combines the attributes of visibility and invisibility simultaneously" although usually "his invisibility is more significant than his visibility" (7). Burke clearly establishes her visibility both by being the only woman in the world of men, as well as through the flawless management of Stark's political affairs and constant presence at his side. However, the majority of her work and influence is behind the scenes. In fact, she is often

described as being surrounded by "a coronal of smoke" that revolves "slowly about her head" (Warren 157). She is undeniably present yet still hidden by the smolder of her cigarette. This cloud of smoke imagery that often accompanies Burke is the greatest reflection of her simultaneous visibility and invisibility. The sexual relationship between Burke and Stark is also representative of Stark's invisibility. While critics argue that the assimilation of women into male spaces causes women to give up their feminine charms, Sadie Burke does not. Although she talks like a man and looks "them straight in the eye like a man," she balances public masculinity with private femininity, a perfect equilibrium that manifests within her sexual relationship with Stark (Warren 101). Often referred to as the "only one who knew the trick" to rattle Stark's proverbial cage, and the only one who "had the nerve" to do so, it is clear that Burke exerts sexual power over her male counterpart (Warren 39). Additionally, in light of his extra-curricular escapades with "sluts on skates," Sadie Burke confidently affirms that "He'll always come back" (Warren 174). This detached proclamation is clearly influenced by her participation in the masculine sphere, and readers come to find time and time again that she is truthful in her assertion. While every business trip has its fair share of sluts on skates, Willie Stark always comes crawling back. Unfortunately, these reunions are not limited to kissing and making up, and it is in one of these vitriolic fits of rage that Burke herself proclaims her role in Stark's creation. Following an eventful business trip, she is found screeching furiously at Burden, "Who made that son-of-a-bitch what he is today? Who made him Governor?" (Warren 171). These mock-inquisitions establish a level of comfort with her role as creator God and instill her significance within the minds of readers.

Sadie Burke's attempt to fully return to the sphere of traditional femininity leads to the ultimate exercise of her role as God the destroyer, namely Stark's murder. Many creation myths depict God "as both the creator and destroyer without any sense of contradiction," and it is clear through Willie Stark's assassination that Burke's role as creator God is no

different (Archetypes 6-7). Throughout her relationship with Stark, Burke walks on a tightrope between her masculine, public persona and the privately feminine creature she assumes in sexuality. However, once she discovers Stark plans to resume faithfulness to his wife, “just then like a flash [she] knew [she’d] kill him” (Warren 497). This revelation causes her to break from the masculine mold in which she dwelt and attempt to do anything she can to preserve the relationship, an attempt that possesses inherently feminine implications. Burke’s desperation to “attract and keep a man” is a “commonly accepted practice of femininity,” and serves as Burke’s attempt to cross over the return threshold into the fully feminine sphere (Discourse 274). This desperation is demonstrated when she directs Tiny Duffy to reveal Stark’s affair with Anne to Adam Stanton, which results in a bullet in the bodies of both Stark and Adam Stanton. Although she does not literally murder The Boss, her actions figuratively “put the weapon into [the killer’s] hand and had aimed it for him” (Warren 497). Furthermore, Burke threatens to kill Stark for his unfaithfulness multiple times throughout the narrative. When faced with the proposition of leaving him, she proclaims, “I’ll kill him first, I swear it” (Warren 174). Warren’s heavy use of foreshadowing perpetuates the characterization of Sadie Burke as the all-knowing Judeo-Christian God. Even when Burden suggests getting back at Duffy for his assumption of Stark’s government position, she hesitates, declaring that “the world is full of Duffy’s [sic],” and immediately admitting that she’s “been knowing them all [her] life” (Warren 499). This is a reference to her previous sexual relationship with the political bigwig Sen-Sen Puckett, and is a moment of clarity regarding her latest creation. Interestingly enough, at the beginning of the novel Puckett is credited for tricking Stark in the Harrison scheme (Warren 88). It is clear from her experience with Puckett that Burke knew from the beginning that her transformation of Stark would result in another Duffy. Warren’s final pages reiterate Burke’s omniscience, when Jack Burden’s stepfather hauntingly dictates, “The creation of man whom God in His foreknowledge knew doomed to sin

was the awful index of God’s omnipotence” (529). With the foreknowledge that creation is bound to morally fail, resulting in inevitable death, the Judeo-Christian God unmistakably acts as both a creator and destroyer. For “the wages of sin is death,” and Burke knew her creation was doomed to sin. This idea is reinforced by revisiting Burke’s aforementioned possession of a distinct identity. Warren writes that “Separateness is identity and the only way for God to create, truly create, man was to make him separate from God Himself, and to be separate from God is to be sinful” (529). By clinging to her own identity, it is clear that this separation was the only way for Burke to create, which demands the sin and ultimate destruction of her creation.

Arguably, Burke is responsible for the deaths of two Starks, both Willie and his son Tom. Tom is described as “merely an extension of the father ... a trained-down, slick-faced, confident, barbered version” of The Boss (Warren 442). Her conversion of the father into a bloodthirsty Governor led to an outrageously lavish upbringing for the son, which in turn created an overindulged, lazy young man. If Burke had never revealed the truth of Harrison’s scheme to Willie Stark, Tom’s childhood would have replicated the youth of his father’s, spending his days cultivating the land, wearing unkempt suits, and remaining faithful to his schoolteacher-wife. However, it is clear through his insolent attitude in the midst of lavish gifts and vigorous praise that Tom Stark is a product of his father’s corruption. While Stark once “blunder[ed] and grop[ed] his unwitting way toward the discovery of himself,” it is clear that Tom didn’t share this journey of self-discovery, “For he knew that he was the damndest, hottest thing there was” (Warren 442). Rather than working to achieve his aspirations, Tom Stark was spoiled with a childhood filled with luxury and ease, a life that adolescent-Willie had only dreamt of. In fact, Stark’s own wife accuses him of ruining their son, crying that she “would rather see him dead at [her] feet than what [Stark’s] vanity will make him” (Warren 277). This harrowing admittance foreshadows their son’s early death, which can be interpreted as the outcome of Tom’s idle

selfishness. During the final game before the championship, Tom puts “on a little show for the stands,” rather than taking it seriously, which results in the careless football accident that ultimately claims his life (Warren 445). If Burke hadn't created The Boss, presumably Tom's childhood would have echoed the childhood of his humble father and perhaps saved him from a premature death.

In its final pages, Warren's narrator pronounces, “This has been the story of Willie Stark, but it is my story, too” (527). However, Jack Burden fails to recognize the principal role Sadie Burke plays within their narratives, for clearly it is her story as well. Without Willie Stark's rise to the brutal and politicized version who readers find at the novel's closing, the story of Jack Burden would be meaningless, and this conversion did not happen with Stark alone. As demonstrated by his violent protest that “they made me!” the responsibility for Stark's transformation lay in Sadie Burke's hands (Warren 440). In a subconscious struggle for power, she takes advantage of Stark's gender and uses it as a vessel to achieve the potential that is otherwise limited to her. Furthermore, Burke wholly rejects the feminine sphere and transcends to the archetype of the creator through the reinvention of Willie Stark as personified in The Boss. It is only through her return to traditional femininity that she ultimately destroys The Boss, thus fulfilling the role of destroyer in her claim to godliness.

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