

A Primer for Prose: A Selection from Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*

The first prose passage featured in this edition is from Robert Penn Warren's 1946 novel *All the King's Men* whose main character, Willie Stark, is thought to have been modeled upon Louisiana's real-life populist demagogue, Huey Long. The charismatic Long served as governor of Louisiana from 1928-1932 and as a United States Senator from 1932-1935. As governor, Long sponsored an ambitious public works' project that was responsible for the construction of badly needed infrastructure such as schools, roads and hospitals and garnered the support of the rural poor via the fervent and romantic slogan "Every man a king, but no one wears a crown." Though he was responsible for much civic improvement in the state of Louisiana, the passage of legislation supporting these incentives was many times allegedly achieved through patronage and graft. As Senator, Long advocated, through his "Share the Wealth" platform, a radical distribution of the country's wealth, necessary, he felt, to lift the country out of the economic death throes of the Great Depression. Thus, Long achieved a somewhat antithetical status as both an advocate of (and hero to) the poor and a powerful autocrat who frequently used actions and rhetoric to strong-arm legislation that he favored. However, the student who is unfamiliar with this supposed historical model for Willie Stark comes to the passage without this 'biography' and must take the character and the passage on its own merits.

- (5) ...He was a lawyer now. He could hang the overalls on a nail and let them stiffen with the last sweat he had put into them. He could rent himself a room over the dry-goods store in Mason City and call it his office, and wait for somebody to come up the stairs where it was so dark you had to feel your way and where it smelled like the inside of an old trunk that's been in the attic twenty years. He was a lawyer now and it had taken him a long time. It had taken him a long time because he had had to be a lawyer on his own terms and in his own way. But that was over. But maybe it had taken him too long. If something takes too long,
- (10) something happens to you. You become all and only the thing you want and nothing else, for you have paid too much for it, too much in wanting and too much in waiting and too much in getting. In the end they just ask you those
- (15) crappy little questions.
- (20) But the wanting and the waiting were over now, and Willie had a haircut and a new hat and a new brief case with the copy of his speech in it (which he had written out in longhand and had said to Lucy with gestures, as though he were getting ready for the high school oratorical contest), and a lot of new friends with drooping jowls and sharp pale noses, who slapped him on the back, and a campaign manager, Tiny Duffy, who would introduce him to you and say with a tingly-glittering hardness, "Meet Willie Stark, the next governor of this state!" And Willie would
- (25) put out his hand to you with the gravity of a bishop. For he never tumbled to a thing.
- (30) I used to wonder how he got that way. If he had been running for something back in Mason County he never in God's world would have been that way. He would have taken a perfectly realistic view of things and counted up his chances. Or if he had got into the gubernatorial primary on his own hook, he would have taken a realistic view. But this was different. He had been called. He had been touched. He had been summoned. And he was a little bit awestruck by the fact. It seems incredible that he hadn't taken one look at Tiny Duffy and his friends and realized that things might not be absolutely on the level. But
- (35) actually, as I figured it, it wasn't incredible. For the voice of Tiny Duffy summoning him was nothing but the echo of a certainty and a blind compulsion within him, the thing that had made him sit up in his room, night after night, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes, to write the fine phrases and the fine ideas in the big ledger or to bend with a violent, almost physical intensity over the yellow page of an old law book. For him to deny the voice of
- (40) Tiny Duffy would have been as difficult as for a saint to deny the voice that calls in the night.
- (45) 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. The blaze of light hitting him in the eyes blinded him. After all, he had just come out of the dark...
- (50)
- (55)
- (60)
- (65)

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Now read the first paragraph, even the first sentence, “. . .He was a lawyer now” (line 1). What does this statement connote? Look closely at the sentences that follow it. Note details such as the nature of Willie’s overalls and the quality of his room. What do they reveal about Willie’s character? See if you can determine why achieving the bar took Willy so long.

The subsequent paragraphs provide a brief insight into the changes that Willie experiences after becoming a lawyer. How are these changes manifested? How would you characterize Tiny Duffy and his friends? What effect do they have upon Willie and how does the language of the passage—lines such as “He had been called. He had been touched. He had been summoned” (lines 44-45)—reveal both the nature of that effect and Willie’s response to it? How does the image of Willie studying long into the night coalesce with the innuendo that surrounds Tiny Duffy? What does the concluding image/symbol/allusion reveal about Willie’s character? His aspirations? What do you believe the author is trying to say/show about Willie Stark?

As you might have already guessed, good readers actively ask questions, underline or mark important points or interesting language, and annotate the passage as they read it. In so doing, they often anticipate the types of questions an examination may pose. This helps in several ways—by reassuring the reader that he/she has read the passage well; by making it easier to locate the lines that reveal the most profound thought or the most interesting diction, syntax and/or figurative language; and by helping to crystallize for the reader an overall impression of what the author is trying to convey. Remember: most of these selections are excerpts from longer works and function more as vignettes than as bearers of the entire work’s message.

Now it’s time to revisit this passage. Let’s see how well you have anticipated the questions that follow it.

Questions 1-9. Refer to the following passage.

...He was a lawyer now. He could hang the overalls on a nail and let them stiffen with the last sweat he had put into them. He could rent himself a room over the dry-goods store in Mason City and call it his office, and wait for somebody to come up the stairs where it was so dark you had to feel your way and where it smelled like the inside of an old trunk that's been in the attic twenty years. He was a lawyer now and it had taken him a long time. It had taken him a long time because he had had to be a lawyer on his own terms and in his own way. But that was over. But maybe it had taken him too long. If something takes too long, something happens to you. You become all and only the thing you want and nothing else, for you have paid too much for it, too much in wanting and too much in waiting and too much in getting. In the end they just ask you those crappy little questions.

But the wanting and the waiting were over now, and Willie had a haircut and a new hat and a new brief case with the copy of his speech in it (which he had written out in longhand and had said to Lucy with gestures, as though he were getting ready for the high school oratorical contest), and a lot of new friends with drooping jowls and sharp pale noses, who slapped him on the back, and a campaign manager, Tiny Duffy, who would introduce him to you and say with a tingly-glittering hardness, "Meet Willie Stark, the next governor of this state!" And Willie would put out his hand to you with the gravity of a bishop. For he never tumbled to a thing.

I used to wonder how he got that way. If he had been running for something back in Mason County he never in God's world would have been that way. He would have taken a perfectly realistic view of things and counted up his chances. Or if he had got into the gubernatorial primary on his own hook, he would have taken a realistic view. But this was different. He had been called. He had been touched. He had been summoned. And he was a little bit awestruck by the fact. It seems incredible that he hadn't taken one look at Tiny Duffy and his friends and realized that things might not be absolutely on the level. But actually, as I figured it, it wasn't incredible. For the voice of Tiny Duffy summoning him was nothing but the echo of a certainty and a blind compulsion within him, the thing that had made him sit up in his room, night after

night, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes, to write the fine phrases and the fine ideas in the big ledger or to bend with a violent, almost physical intensity over the yellow page of an old law book. For him to deny the voice of Tiny Duffy would have been as difficult as for a saint to deny the voice that calls in the night. 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. The blaze of light hitting him in the eyes blinded him. After all, he had just come out of the dark...

- In the passage the speaker seems MOST interested in exploring the
 - arduous road Willie took from obscurity to prominence
 - uncharacteristic materialism that Willie experiences upon becoming a lawyer
 - negative effect Willie's new political acquaintances might have upon him
 - hidden aspirations that fueled Willie's pursuit of power
 - sweeping changes Willie might effect if he became governor
- In documenting Willie's rise to prominence, the speaker uses contrasting images of
 - innocence and sin
 - darkness and illumination
 - youth and age
 - sleep and awakening
 - silence and sound
- All of the following are used to show that Willie has moved on to a new aspect of his existence EXCEPT
 - his overalls
 - his office over the dry-goods store
 - his haircut
 - his hat and briefcase
 - his penmanship

4. The speaker repeats the phrase “He was a lawyer now” (line 1, lines 9-10) to convey Willie’s sense of
- (A) relief
 - (B) accomplishment
 - (C) superiority
 - (D) dejection
 - (E) responsibility
5. Ultimately, the speaker’s implication that Willy “paid too much for” his success—“too much in wanting and too much in waiting and too much in getting...” (lines 17-19)—likely alludes to
- (A) physical stress
 - (B) marital woes
 - (C) moral compromises
 - (D) financial expenses
 - (E) dilapidated accommodations
6. In the phrase “on his own hook” (line 42), the “hook” represents Willy’s
- (A) initiative
 - (B) money
 - (C) merits
 - (D) words
 - (E) personality
7. The three declarative sentences in lines 44-45—“He had been called. He had been touched. He had been summoned”—describe Willie in terms usually associated with a(n)
- (A) seer
 - (B) underling
 - (C) sycophant
 - (D) meddler
 - (E) messiah
8. The details and diction of lines 51-59, “For the voice...of an old law book,” depict Willie as
- (A) troubled and insomniac
 - (B) determined and driven
 - (C) scholarly and reclusive
 - (D) dutiful and obedient
 - (E) anti-social and ascetic
9. Lines 65-67, “The blaze of light hitting him in the eyes blinded him. After all, he had just come out of the dark....,” are BEST seen as a(n)
- (A) visual image of brainstorming
 - (B) personification of light
 - (C) metonymy for celebrity
 - (D) implied metaphor of childbirth
 - (E) hyperbolizing of his new-found grandeur

Précis and Explication of the Passage from Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*

The passage from Robert Penn Warren's thinly disguised fictional account of the rise and fall of Huey Long and political corruption in Louisiana marks a pivotal moment in the career of the Long-like figure, Willie Stark, who takes the first formal step in his ascension by becoming a lawyer. Though limited to the narrator's reflections on the importance of this achievement in Stark's life, the passage provides a brief but insightful glimpse into the character traits that drove him to it, as well as a figurative description of the possibilities that his becoming a lawyer portend, painting Willie as a messianic figure who has responded to both an external and an internal call.

The declarative statement, "He was a lawyer now" (line 1), that opens the passage is delivered in a tone of accomplishment, and the speaker's subsequent claim that Willie "could hang the overalls on a nail and let them stiffen with the last sweat he had put into them" (lines 1-3) suggests a trading of attire and places, the overalls representing the blue-collar, lower-class, agrarian roots from which he sprang through hard work and a compelling ambition. Now having achieved a professional degree (and the status that goes with one), he could open a practice even if for the moment it was in a ramshackle, Stygian, malodorous locale "where it was so dark you had to feel your way and where it smelled like the inside of an old trunk that's been in the attic twenty years" (lines 6-9). The speaker's observation that "It had taken him a long time because he had had to be a lawyer on his own terms and in his own way" (lines 10-12) conveys a sense of the stubbornness and self-reliance that emerge as important factors in Willie's rise to prominence. Nevertheless, the speaker also sounds an admonitory note, saying "If something takes too long, something happens to you. You become all and only the thing you want and nothing else, for you have paid too much for it, too much in wanting and too much in waiting and too much in getting" (lines 14-19). This implies that success for Willie had become almost an obsession, a compulsion so strong that he would sacrifice almost anything to secure it.

Still, the Willie depicted in the second paragraph seems a man poised on the edge of new and exciting opportunities. With his new hat, new briefcase, and handwritten speech which he had prepared "as though he were getting ready for the high school oratorical contest" (lines 26-27), he seems an innocent, youthful figure, one blissfully unaware of the cadre of suspect-looking political supporters, the "lot of new friends with drooping jowls and sharp pale noses, who slapped him on the back, and a campaign manager, Tiny Duffy, who would introduce him to you and say with a tin-glittering hardiness, 'Meet Willie Stark, the next governor of this state!'" (lines 27-33). In contrast, his seriousness is compared to that of a bishop (lines 34-35), implying a mien and morality that is in sharp opposition to the cronyism with which Tiny Duffy and these others resonate.

In the third and fourth paragraphs the speaker returns once more to commentary on Willie and "how he got that way" (line 36), a line that suggests a change in manner, belief, or both. Referencing Mason County, which seems to be the environment from whence Willie came, the speaker observes that Willie "never in God's world would have been that way" (lines 38-39), once again alluding to the elliptical and undefined "that way" and reinforcing Willie's transformation. In four simple declarative sentences—"But this was different. He had been called. He had been touched. He had been summoned" (lines 43-45)—the narrator paints Willie's ascendance in almost messianic terms, as if Willie had been chosen to do something extraordinary in an equally extraordinary moment. And yet at the same time he suggests that "the voice of Tiny Duffy summoning him was nothing but the echo of a certainty and a blind compulsion within him, the thing that had made him sit up in his room, night after night, rubbing the sleep out of his

eyes, to write the fine phrases and the fine ideas in the big ledger or to bend with a violent, almost physical intensity over the yellow page of an old law book” (lines 51-59).

Comprising the longest sentence in the passage, these words imply that the external political machinations (symbolized by the voice of Tiny Duffy) were matched by an equally persuasive internal Siren, whose seductive call drove Willie to labor long into the night with a passion that was almost physically visible. Lines 59-61, “For him to deny the voice of Tiny Duffy would have been as difficult as for a saint to deny the voice that calls in the night,” suggest that the fervency of Willie’s vision and desire was tantamount to any external stimulus, and his summons to public service an almost spiritual one. Indeed, the final eight lines of the passage almost paint Willie as a mystic or a seer, someone not “really in touch with the world” (line 62). The concluding image of the passage—a comparison to a child’s emergence from the darkness of the womb into the brilliance of human existence—provides an appropriate climactic metaphor that figuratively depicts the movement from ignorance to knowledge, from innocence to experience, and from rural obscurity to political prominence that characterized the career of Willie Stark.

1. In the passage the speaker seems MOST interested in exploring the **(D) hidden aspirations that fueled Willie’s pursuit of power.**

Though the first two paragraphs focus foremost upon Willie’s achievement of becoming a lawyer and the way it affects his attire, his appearance and his status, the speaker does begin to explore Willie’s motivations when he talks about how long it took him to achieve this and how he “had to be a lawyer on his own terms and in his own way” (lines 11-12). While this initially seems to be a compliment of his perseverance and his self-reliance, later comments seem to suggest more suspect motives. For example, the speaker observes “It seems incredible that he hadn’t taken one look at Tiny Duffy and his friends and realized that things might not be absolutely on the level” (lines 46-49), implying that Willie either had to be totally naïve or conscious of the corrupt political arena he was entering. He adds later that “the voice of Tiny Duffy summoning him was nothing but the echo of a certainty and a blind compulsion within him, the thing that had made him sit up in his room, night after night, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes, to write the fine phrases and the fine ideas in the big ledger or to bend with a violent, almost physical intensity over the yellow page of an old law book” (lines 51-59). The choice of the word “echo” suggests that Tiny’s “summons” was a mere reflection of Willie’s own secret thought and desire. Moreover, the image of Willie poring over the yellowed pages of a law book deep into the night testifies to his determination to succeed regardless of the sacrifice that he must make to do so. Choice D captures this best.

2. In documenting Willie’s rise to prominence, the speaker uses contrasting images of **(B) darkness and illumination.**

This is evidenced by both the image of Willy laboring night after night over the yellow pages of an old law book and the implied metaphor of childbirth in the final paragraph: “The blaze of light hitting him in the eyes blinded him. After all, he had just come out of the dark...” (lines 65-67). As was indicated in the overall explication of the passage, this image of entering the world of light from the world of darkness symbolizes Willie’s movement from ignorance to knowledge, innocence to experience, and obscurity to prominence.

3. All of the following are used to show that Willie has moved on to a new aspect of his existence EXCEPT **(E) his penmanship.**

That Willy is able to dispense with his overalls, attire more appropriate for a farmer than a lawyer; that he is able to get his hair cut and purchase a new briefcase; that he is able to rent a space over the dry-goods store and open a law office—all suggest a shift in his status. However, Willy writes out his speech in longhand in the exact same manner as he took notes while studying the law at night. This is the reasoning behind the selection of choice E as the answer.

4. The speaker repeats the phrase “He was a lawyer now” (line 1, lines 9-10) to convey Willie’s sense of **(B) accomplishment**.

This is largely determined by tone. The word “now” suggests that Willie has reached a goal, the culmination of all those long nights of study. The fact that he can swap his sweaty overalls for nicer attire, rent a space and open a legal practice, afford a haircut and a new briefcase, and appeal enough to the local political bigwigs to have Tiny Duffy start introducing him as the state’s next governor suggests that he has achieved a position of stature, of accomplishment; hence, the selection of B as the best answer.

5. Ultimately, the speaker’s implication that Willy “paid too much for” his success—“too much in wanting and too much in waiting and too much in getting...” (lines 17-19)—likely alludes to **(C) moral compromises**.

Though this could possibly refer to the amount of work he put into his studies, these lines have an almost Faustian feel to them, as if Willie has struck some sort of dark bargain. The gerunds “wanting,” “waiting,” and “getting” are in turn suggestive of strong desire, long patience, and triumphant acquisition, and the speaker later refers to “a certainty and a blind compulsion” (lines 52-53) within Willie that confirm these characteristics. Moreover, the speaker’s remark that “It seems incredible that he hadn’t taken one look at Tiny Duffy and his friends and realized that things might not be absolutely on the level” (lines 46-49) seems to cast doubts upon Willy’s naïveté and to suggest that in climbing this ladder he knew all along where he was headed and what he had to do to get there. Choice C suggests this best.

6. In the phrase “on his own hook” (line 42), the “hook” represents Willy’s **(A) initiative**.

The “hook,” it may be presumed, is what pulled him into the political arena, which would be his campaign manager, Tiny Jones, who is already introducing him as the “next governor of this state” (line 33). If it were to have been his own hook, that would logically mean his desire or initiative (A).

7. The three declarative sentences in lines 44-45— “He had been called. He had been touched. He had been summoned”—describe Willie in terms usually associated with a(n) **(E) messiah**.

These three lines suggest that Willie is the “anointed one,” someone who has been elected to serve the people. The verbs in these sentences make Willie seem singular and special, and they are the type of words one traditionally sees applied to messianic figures. This is further supported by references to Tiny Duffy’s “summoning” him and the comparison of Willie to a saint (“For him to deny the voice of Tiny Duffy would have been as difficult as for a saint to deny the voice that calls in the night,” lines 59-61). The fact that Tiny sees him as the next governor is also compelling.

8. The details and diction of lines 51-59, “For the voice...of an old law book,” depict Willie as **(B) determined and driven**.

The details in these lines show Willie laboring deep into the night, “rubbing the sleep out of his eyes” in order to stay awake and pursue his studies. A phrase such as “violent, almost physical intensity” captures the intensity with which he works. Choice B best reflects this.

9. Lines 65-67, “The blaze of light hitting him in the eyes blinded him. After all, he had just come out of the dark....,” are BEST seen as a(n) **(D) implied metaphor of childbirth**.

The emergence from a dark world into a world of blinding light mirrors the movement from the womb into the world and metaphorically parallels Willie’s emergence from humble agrarian roots into the world of power and politics. This is expressed by choice D.