

Robert Penn Warren

Robert Penn Warren, born in Guthrie, Kentucky in 1905, was one of the twentieth century's most eminent American writers. He was a distinguished novelist and poet, literary critic, essayist, short story writer, and coeditor of numerous textbooks. He also a founding editor of *The Southern Review*, a journal of literary criticism and political thought.

The primary influences on Robert Warren's career as a poet were probably his Kentucky boyhood, and his relationships with his father and his maternal grandfather. As a boy, Warren spent many hours on his grandfather's farm, absorbing stories of the Civil War and the local tobacco wars between growers and wholesalers, the subject of his first novel, *Night Riders*. His grandfather, Thomas Gabriel Penn, had been a cavalry officer in the Civil War and was well-read in both military history and poetry, which he sometimes recited for Robert.

Robert's father was a banker who had once had aspirations to become a lawyer and a poet. Because of economic troubles, and his responsibility for a family of half-brothers and sisters when his father died, Robert Franklin Warren forsook his literary ambitions and devoted himself to more lucrative businesses. Robert Warren did not always have ambitions to become a writer, in fact, one of his earlier dreams was to become an adventurer on the high seas. This fantasy might have indeed come about, for his father intended to get him an appointment to Annapolis, had it not been for a childhood accident in which he lost sight in one of his eyes.

Warren was an outstanding student but there were also many books at home, and he savored reading. His father at one time aspired to be a poet. His grandfather Penn, with whom he spent much time when he was young, was an exceptional storyteller and greatly influenced young Red. But both of these men whom he loved had in some sense failed to achieve. By contrast, Warren was determined to achieve, to be successful.

During his college years at Vanderbilt, the sense of being physically maimed, as well as the fear sympathetic blindness in his remaining good eye became almost unbearable.

At Vanderbilt University he met Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, Donald Davidson, and others interested in poetry. As part of *The Fugitives*, a private group that met off campus, he delved deeply into poetry, and his first poems were published in their short-lived quarterly. Warren had a remarkable capacity for friendship, and he was in touch with these men all of their lives. For years Tate was "first critic" of his poetry.

After graduating from Vanderbilt in 1925, he took a Master's Degree from the University of California at Berkley. After visiting Yale University, he moved to Oxford as a Rhodes scholar, where he wrote his first book: *John Brown: The Making of a Martyr* in 1929.

"Red" Warren, as he was known to his friends, married Emma

Brescia in 1930, a marriage which ended in divorce 20 years later. In the last several years of that period, Warren was panned with depression and a lack of new material. His period of dissolution did not end until his second marriage to Eleanor Clark in 1952.

Warren received many honors including a Pulitzer Prize for the fiction *All the King's Men*, 1946: This novel illustrating a powerful Southern governor resembling the Louisiana politician Huey P. Long. .

He also produced his complex *World Enough and Time*, based on the Kentucky hanging of Jeremiah Beauchamp for murder in 1826. The research he done for this book was done at the Library of Congress during the time he was Poetry Consultant there. In this research, he uncovered the sordid tale of Lilburne Lewis, Thomas Jefferson's nephew, who chopped a young slave girl to pieces with a meat ax. Robert struggled to convert the account of the murder into a long dramatic poem, which was to emerge at last in 1953 as *Brother to Dragons: A Tale in verse and Voices*, one of the most distinctive long poems in American literature.

Warren's marriage to Eleanor and the births of their two children, Rosanna and Gabriel, brought new life into his writing. After the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Promises: Poems* 1954-1956, dedicated to his children, Warren produced several more novels and a steady stream of poetry. He also wrote his other Pulitzer Prize-winning collection of poems, *Now and Then: Poems*, in 1978. He is still known to be the only writer to win a Pulitzer in both categories. He also received the prestigious National Medal Now and Then and the Bollingen Prize for Poetry, a MacArthur Prize "genius" grant, and was named the country's first Poet Laureate in 1986.

Warren's long record of achievement in American poetry can hardly be equaled in either quantity or quality. In his earlier years, during which, he was an admirer of innovators such as T.S. Elliot and by the revival of interest in seventeenth century poetry. In these years, he produced the best adaptations of the Metaphysical style of any of his contemporaries.

One perceptive critic said that, "Warren's own life, his own story, would become partly at least that of an exile telling stories about his homeland." In talking about his work Warren noted: "I am a creature of this world but I am also a yearner. I would call this temperament rather than theology_I haven't got any gospel. That is, I feel an immanence of meaning in things, but I have no meaning to put there that is interesting or beautiful." He continued to deal with timeless themes, and his late poetry is considered among his best.

Late in life Warren said: "I'm a naturalist. I don't believe in God. But I want to find meaning in life. I refuse to believe it's merely a dreary sequence of events. So I write stories and poetry. My work is my testimony . . . I want to give myself in sacrifice of some sort. To participate in the common body of human life . . . my poetry lets me do that, but that sounds so trite to say."