

# **The Theme of Confrontation in the Novels of Robert Penn Warren**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The present research paper analyses the Theme of Confrontation in the Novels of Robert Penn Warren. Robert Penn Warren is the foremost American novelist of the Twentieth Century. He is a poet, a novelist, and an eminent critic also. He is a true successor to William Faulkner in the great novelistic tradition of the American South. He is the recipient of several awards and prizes including the National Medal for Literature, the highest honour America bestows on a writer. Robert Penn Warren is unique among American writers in winning Pulitzer Prizes for both novels and poetry. The present research paper traces the background of Confrontation in human relationships. The causes of confrontation such as personal obstacles and environmental obstacles are analysed. Lack of contentment, economic depression, and search for self-identity leads to confrontation. This study further hypothesises that self-knowledge is one of Robert Penn Warren's themes. It seems that he is concerned with man's place in the Universe, his guilt, and complicity in the evils that surround him. This study further aims at revealing how Robert Penn Warren makes his protagonist pay the price for his pursuit of identity by losing his innocence to attain self-knowledge. According to Robert Penn Warren, betrayal, corruption, politics, and lust are also important causes of confrontation. Loss of faith in ethical values is the starting point of confrontation. Confrontation results in arson, murder, rape, or separation in the novels of Robert Penn Warren. His novels contain elements of evil and human failure, which are the typical Southern view of life. He uses the language with the southern literary stamp to portray the many faces of his characters in his novels. Robert Penn Warren's first novel *Night Rider* deals with the problems faced by the tobacco farmers of Kentucky. Most of Robert Penn Warren's novels are based on actual events from history. *At Heaven's Gate*, *Flood*, *All the King's Men*, and *Night Rider* contain historical themes. Robert Penn Warren is concerned with man's imperfections and the consequent failure leading to a confrontation.

## **KEYWORDS**

Confrontation; Failure; Human relationship; Self-identity.

Robert Penn Warren is the foremost American novelist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He is a poet and an eminent critic also. He is a true successor to William Faulkner in the great novelistic tradition of the American South. He is the recipient of several awards and prizes including the National Medal for Literature, the highest honour America bestows on a writer. Robert Penn Warren is unique among American writers in winning Pulitzer Prizes for both fiction and poetry. John L. Longley observes: "Robert Penn Warren occupies a position both outstanding and unique. His position is unique in that he is the only living American author who is unquestionable of the first rank in poetry and literary criticism and the novel". Robert Penn Warren died on 15<sup>th</sup> September 1989 at his summer home in Stratton, Vermont.

The novels of Robert Penn Warren are not popular in India. Post-World War II young writers have gained prominence in India. Ralph Ellison, Isaac Singer, Wright Morris, Bernard Malamud, Toni Morrison, and Jack Kerouac are well known. The present study, it is hoped, will stimulate the Indian readers to study Warren's works in depth.

Critics like John Longley, Jr. J. E. Hardy and Leonard Casper consider Warren the most distinguished American writer. However, Alfred Kazin, Roger Sale, and John F. Sullivan charge Robert Penn Warren with serious faults such as lack of thought or moral concerns. But one thing is certain. Robert Penn Warren is the most remarkable writer of this century. He is a consistent thinker. He has portrayed new ideas in new situations in his novels. So, his novels are refreshing and appealing. In India, Warren is not widely known or read. He is caught between the old generation of writers like Hemingway, Faulkner, and Fitzgerald who made their marks in the 1920s and 1930s, and the younger generation of writers after World War II. Warren is a difficult writer to be

understood by the masses due to his philosophical inclinations.

This paper proposes to analyse 'The Theme of Confrontation in the novels of Robert Penn Warren'. A confrontation takes place due to a misunderstanding of values by the characters in the novels. Civil war, politics, agrarian unrest, corruption, and lust are described as causes of confrontation in a human relationship by Warren. He conveys a message that confrontation in human relationships can be controlled for better utilization of human energy. If left uncontrolled, the confrontation leads to violence and ends in tragic events. The paper hopes in its humble way to contribute to a better understanding of Robert Penn Warren's novels such as *Night Rider*, *At Heaven's Gate*, *All the King's Men*, *Band of Angels*, *Brother to Dragons*, *The Cave*, *Wilderness*, *Flood*, *Meet Me in the Green Glen*, *A Place to Come to*.

Confrontation in Human Relationships occurs when there is a clash of opinions, desires, or aims. Personal obstacles and environmental obstacles produce frustrations and conflicts. When the cumulative stress pattern begins to act upon the individual, he is not able to handle the extraordinary situation. Then he begins to behave erratically due to stress. This disorganized behaviour results in confrontation. The resultant confrontation is with the community or with another individual. Maladjusted men and women in the novels of Robert Penn Warren exhibit discordant interpersonal confrontation patterns.

Different types of confrontation in human relationships are described by Robert Penn Warren in his novels. He approaches the victims of confrontation with sympathy. He analyses the cause of confrontation. Lack of contentment, economic depression, and search for self-identity are some of the causes of confrontation. Warren adds that betrayal, corruption politics, and lust are also

important causes of confrontation. He observes that confrontation leads to arson, murder, rape, or separation. Warren feels that loss of faith in ethical values is the starting point of confrontation in interpersonal relationships.

The search for self-identity and the search for God also lead to confrontation in human relationships. The confrontation comes to the surface when the characters interact. Warren's description of confrontation in human relationships can be classified into four different types. The first type of confrontation is between father and son. The number of such father-son confrontations in Warren's novels is surprisingly high.

The second type of confrontation takes place between husband and wife; often this type of confrontation leads to extra-marital relationships and separation. The third type of confrontation takes place when individual characters fight against society. This type of confrontation is the result of the action of the central character. The fourth type occurs when two individuals confront each other. Warren uses the theme of confrontation in human relationships in his novels. The confrontation leads to quarrels, separation, rape, and even death. Sometimes the central character undertakes a journey to escape from confrontations. Warren's use of the theme of confrontation in human relationships in his novels is intentional. He is aware of the presence of the psychoanalytical traits in his novels.

Betrayal is the cornerstone of Warren's novels in which confrontations take place. In *Night Rider*, Perse Munn has joined "Free Farmers Brotherhood Protection and Control" intending to help the poor farmers. To his utter shock, he realizes that Tolliver has betrayed the association; he, in turn, betrays Christian by sleeping with his daughter Lucille. In *World Enough and Time*, Fort confesses to

Rachael in a letter about his betrayal. He has betrayed his friends who have trusted him. In *Meet Me in the Green Glen*, Cassie murders her paralysed husband Sunderland just to implicate her fleeing lover Angelo Passeto. This act of betrayal turns Cassie into a mental wreck at the end of the novel. The characters in his novels indulge in such acts of betrayal as a result of their confrontation with fellow human beings.

The heroes in *Night Rider* and *World Enough and Time* sacrifice their lives for the sake of others. Their confrontation with the people is the real cause of their downfall. It is seen in his novels that the hero who champions a noble cause inadvertently adopts a criminal course of action.

In Warren's novels, the confrontation between father and son is described vividly. He uses a psychological concept in such father-son confrontations. The son usually considers his father an enemy. This behaviour is analysed by Sigmund Freud. He concluded that every individual has a force of aggression leading to destruction and death. The father-son confrontation occurs in *All the King's Men*, *Night Rider*, *World Enough and Time*, *Band of Angels*, *Wilderness*, *A Place to Come to*, and *The Cave*. In *At Heaven's Gate*, Warren introduces the confrontation between father and daughter. This is only an expectation of the general pattern visible in Warren's novels.

In *All the King's Men*, the novelist depicts the confrontation between father and son very lucidly. Willie Stark has spoiled his son Tom Stark, against the advice of his wife Lucy. Tom is a star football player in his high school. He has an affair with Sibyl Frey and as a result, Sibyl becomes pregnant. Meanwhile, his coach suspends Tom. But Willie intervenes and the coach allows Tom to play. During the match, Tom falls and injures his spinal cord. He is paralyzed for life. Tom's affair with Sibyl represents his

moral downfall while his paralysis marks his physical downfall. In a way, Willie is responsible for his son's injury. This is an example of a father causing his son's decline and death. This father-son confrontation is to be contrasted with Jack Burden causing his father Judge Irwin's death.

Warren describes the father-son confrontation in *Night Rider*. The poor tobacco farmers form an association to procure good prices for their tobacco. Perse Munn, the young lawyer joins the association, after being influenced by Christian. He appeals to Munn in the name of social justice. As Munn becomes an active member, he undertakes a series of illegal activities. He becomes a night rider, taking the law into his own hands. The lawyer leads to a lawless band, indulging in arson and murder. As rightly observed by Katherine Snipes, "The rebellion against tyranny becomes, as it so often does in real life, a new form of tyranny" (24).

Munn becoming a night rider is the turning point in his life. Later he becomes a fugitive. His confrontation with Tolliver is the cause of his death. He is hunted down like an animal. This is entirely due to the wrong path shown by his father figures. Instead of guiding the young lawyer correctly, Christian, Ball, and Tolliver have exploited Perse Munn. Carl Gustav Jung observes in 'The undiscovered self':

The evil that comes to light in man and that undoubtedly dwells within him is of gigantic proportions...We are always, thanks to our human nature, potential criminals... (26)

The father-son confrontation surfaces again in the novel, *At Heaven's Gate*. For a change, Warren has also introduced father-daughter confrontation. Jerry Calhoun appears in the novel as a progressive businessman. He suffers the

familiar identity crisis in Warren's novels. Jerry's home reflects his sense of insecurity. His family is not rich. His father performs ordinary jobs clumsily. He cares for the two invalids at home. Jerry is not able to shoulder his responsibility in his family. He begins to hate his father. This leads to the confrontation between father and son. Jerry decides to cut off all his links with his father.

Murdock is keen on building his financial empire. He adopts every method to gain financial control. Due to his avarice, Murdock loses his humane approach. In the end, he brings about the decline and fall of his financial empire. But Murdock is a polite man even while engaged in evil activities.

Sue revolts against her father, unable to withstand his obsession with wealth. She begins to cultivate friends, who are not on equal terms with her status as the daughter of a financial baron. Murdock takes great pride in looking after his horses. It is his hobby. It reflects his overbearing attitude symbolically. But he is not able to control his daughter. The rift between the father and the daughter widens as the novel progresses. Sue behaves in a Bohemian way to spite her father. The confrontation of Sue with her father leads to her murder. Murdock, the embodiment of evil is responsible for Jerry's arrest. Jerry realizes the truth about his surrogate father very lately. Katherine Snipes observes that Jerry "he wished his father dead..." and "he has learned, of course, that Murdock the surrogate father, he has admired and emulated is 'hollow to the core'. Warren has created such father-son relationships in his novels to convey the desire of his characters about their true identities. The characters realise, through humility that death is the end of their search.

Human beings always undertake the quest for intimate relationships. The search usually ends in the form of marriage. Marriage is viewed as a source

of need fulfilment. Traditionally, the husband enjoyed authority in married life, based on duty and economic factors. In contemporary life, the institution of marriage has undergone many changes. Both husband and wife are considered equal partners. Now marriage is regarded as a mutual understanding of intimate relationships. Warren's description of husband-wife confrontations can be analysed as discordant interpersonal patterns. Immature and maladjusted couples find it difficult to safeguard marital relationships.

Warren devotes more attention to the confrontation between husband and wife in his novels. It is interesting to note that many couples in Warren's novels have extra-marital relationships. Some lovers, after their sexual urge, is satisfied, get separated. The confrontation between man and woman results in rape, suicide, murder, or flight from the location.

When the novel *Night Rider* opens, Perse Munn is a happy, married man. His wife May is pleased to know that her husband has become a Director of the Association. Munn relays all the information about his Association to his wife. But the moment he becomes a night rider, he keeps his wife in the dark about his night activities. Every night, Munn indulges in unlawful activities; when he returns tired, after every incident of arson or murder, his wife looks at him enquiringly. She begins to suspect that something is wrong with Munn. This stems from the fact that Munn fails to perform his role as a husband. The first confrontation takes place between them when Senator Tolliver has betrayed the Association. May says that she dislikes the man Tolliver from the beginning. Munn feels insulted at her candid observation. When May reveals her plan to design a garden, Munn indulges in an angry outburst that surprises her. She walks away from him, controlling her tears.

Perse Munn fails to utilise the opportunity to mend his parting ways with his wife. After killing Trevelyan, Munn returns home very late. He is in a state of mental and physical exhaustion. May questions his late coming. Instead of giving a reply, Munn forces his wife down on the sofa and has violent sex with her. She leaves her home in revulsion and stays with her aunt. Thus, the confrontation between Munn and May ends in separation.

Munn's affair with Lucille, the daughter of Bill Christian also ends in separation and suffering. Benton Todd loves Lucille. But bringing nighttime, Lucille goes to Munn's room to have sex with him. Bill Christian discovers the affair; he is shocked to know about the immoral behaviours of his daughter and his friend. His shock results in his paralysis for life. Later Munn wants to divorce his wife and marry Lucille. But Lucille is not prepared for marriage while her father is affected by paralysis. This denial of Lucille is the starting point of the confrontation between Munn and Lucille. After her father's death, Lucille completes the cycle of confrontation. She realizes that neither of them has real love.

The confrontation between Munn and Lucille is in a way responsible for the death of Munn, while the love affair between them is responsible for the death of Bill Christian.

*All the King's Men* contains many episodes of man-woman confrontations. Cass Mastern's affair with his friend's wife Annabelle Trice produces in him a guilty consciousness. His affair has triggered three deaths. Unable to withstand the stress, Cass Mastern joins the Southern Army and dies in the war. The significance of Cass Mastern's martyrdom is understood by the research scholar Jack Burden very late in the novel. Cass Mastern has lost his life because of his extra-marital relationship with Annabelle Trice.

Jack Burden, the narrator of the novel marries Lois, a beautiful lady. Though they begin their married life happily, soon friction and misunderstanding follow. Lois is a talkative person. Jack discovers that Lois discusses with her friends their intimate, sexual behaviour. This behaviour of Lois irritates Jack. Their marriage ends in divorce. Warren describes the affair between Tom Stark and Sibyl Frey. The moral downfall of Tom is followed by his physical fall in a football match, which ends in his paralysis. Warren conveys the message in his novel *All the King's Men* that moral degradation results in death and paralysis as in the cases of Cass Mastern, Judge Irwin, Willie, and Tom Stark. The confrontation in human relationships is the real cause of their degradation, downfall, and death.

In *World Enough and Time*, Col. Fort is responsible for the seduction of Rachael Jordan, the beautiful lady; he deserts her with a stillborn baby. This act of Fort has angered Jeremiah. He decides to wreak vengeance on Fort, forgetting the fact that Fort is his foster father. Jeremiah succeeds in winning the hand of Rachael. He wants to compensate for her loss due to Fort's action. As fate would have it, Jeremiah is induced by Wilkie to contest the election. Rachael is pregnant and she pleads with Jeremiah to drop his idea of contesting the election. But Jeremiah is stubborn. He wants to oppose Fort at any cost. This is the starting point of the confrontation between Jeremiah and Rachael. Jeremiah wants to eliminate Fort for his sin against Rachael. But Rachael does not feel so intensely against Fort. She declares before her death that she is compelled by Jeremiah to hate Fort. This dying declaration of Rachael has induced a wave of shock in Jeremiah. He realizes that he has forced Rachael to hate Fort against her wishes. He understands that he is no better than Fort in violating the will of Rachael. He longs for her forgiveness. But

it is too late. He is murdered for the reward on his head. The needless confrontation between Jeremiah and Rachael is allowed to grow and they meet their ends in the end.

*At Heaven's Gate* discloses the strained relationship of Murdock with his daughter Sue. Murdock is a busy business baron. He is greedy to the core. To him, money matters most. His daughter could not digest his evil ways of accumulating wealth. So, she begins to quarrel openly with her father. It is a pity that Murdock who is an expert in controlling the horses is unable to control his daughter. Sue breaks her engagement with Jerry and becomes a mistress of Slim Sarrett, a seedy intellectual. When she realizes the dark side of Slim's character, Sue deserts him. She becomes a mistress of Sweetwater. Sue's action reflects the agony of her agitating mind. She wants to strike where her father will feel the pain. She selects an easy-going way to spite her father. Her affairs with ordinary fellows and her constant confrontation with her father evoke the reader's sympathy for her. Sue is strangled by Slim Sarrett. *Heaven's Gate* opens the gate of Hell.

In *Band of Angels*, Warren presents Amantha's father breathing his last in the bed of his mistress. Amantha is terribly confused about her identity. She marries Tobias Sears, a federal officer. She is torn by her changing loyalties between whites and Negroes. Her inner confrontation finds an outlet when she has an affair with Rau-Ru, the African slave. Amantha has betrayed her husband in her search for identity.

In the novel *Meet Me in the Green Glen*, Sunderland Spotswood has seduced a Negro woman. His daughter Arleta is born out of wedlock. Afterward, he is struck down by paralysis, and his wife Cassie looks after him. Angelo Passeto, an immigrant from Italy arrives at the farmhouse. Soon Angelo and Cassie become lovers. One day he rapes her to

exhibit his masculine power. Simultaneously Angelo develops a love affair with Arleta. He also rapes Arleta. When Cassie comes to know about this love affair, she becomes jealous. Still, she advises Angelo to elope with Arleta when the lovers have escaped, Cassie kills her husband. She wants Angelo to be arrested. Subsequently, Angelo is executed. Cassie loses her mental balance while Arleta becomes an addict. Murray Guilfort commits suicide. It is seen that the illicit relationship of Cassie with Angelo is the root cause of the death of Sunderland, Angelo, and Murray Guilfort. It is also responsible for Cassie's mental breakdown and Arleta's addiction. The confrontation in human relationships has sparked a chain of events and the principal characters have no control over the course of events. They remain a mute spectator.

Warren's intention of introducing a multiplicity of man-woman confrontations in his novels is not known. But the fact remains that there are many confrontations in his novels involving men and women.

Warren describes the confrontation that takes place between the individual and the community in his novels, *Night Rider*, *World Enough and Time*, and *At Heaven's Gate*. James C. Coleman describes the terms antisocial and psychopathic personality as referring to:

personality characteristics and behaviour patterns that lead to serious difficulties in interpersonal relationships and usually bring the individual into repeated conflict with society.

Antisocial personalities exhibit a lack of ethical values and they are unable to follow approved models of behaviour. Warren uses this pattern in describing the character Murdock in *At Heaven's Gate*. He is charming: he wins people easily. Murdock creates a great deal of

unhappiness for his daughter. The psychopath in him is responsible. Though he promises to change, he never does so. He is a smiling villain in the novel.

Warren describes the confrontation between two individual characters in his novels. This interpersonal confrontation often leads to complications. A confrontation occurs in human relationships when environmental obstacles and personal obstacles interfere. Such obstacles produce stress or adjustive demands on the individual. Psychological studies classify stress as frustrations, conflicts, and pressures. They are closely interrelated. Though particular stress may dominate in a given situation, other types also occur. So, it is called stress patterns, instead of a single stress situation. If a person is not able to handle the stress, it leads to a breakdown of organized behaviour. Warren depicts this psychological concept in his novels. He can portray effectively the sufferings, his characters undergo. John M. Bradbury analyses Warren's ability to probe the inner conflicts in his characters and declares:

...the most valuable faculty he possesses is human insight, a shrewd and at the same time sympathetic ability to penetrate imaginatively into the inner life of his characters. (40)

This paper traces, thus, the theme of confrontation in human relationships present in the novels of Warren. It also leads to a sort of contamination. Robert E. Spiller observes:

Two themes are dominant in Warren's novels: the need for self-fulfillment which can be achieved only through self-recognition, and the inevitability of contamination by the world when one steps out of the prison of self.

Usually, these themes are in conjunction.

These scenes of confrontation lead the reader to believe that Robert Penn

Warren is obsessed with the problems of human existence in the modern world which leads the protagonists to the path of confrontation. As he is concerned with a metaphysical search for man's role in the scheme of existence, the confrontation does not stop with it. It is only leading the protagonist through guilt and complicity in worldly life towards a realization of the values of life on earth.

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