



# Robert Penn Warren and the American Imagination

*Hugh Ruppersburg*

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The myth of America--the gap between American ideals and the actualities of American life--is a central and controlling metaphor in the works of Robert Penn Warren. Ranging across Warren's distinguished sixty-five year career, *Robert Penn Warren and the American Imagination* identifies the concerns that stem from Warren's vision of American history as a struggle to restore the lost ideals of the founding fathers and shows how they resonate through his writings.

From his 1928 biography of the abolitionist John Brown to the late poems of *Altitudes and Extensions*, Warren returned again and again to themes related to democracy, regionalism, personal liberties, individual responsibilities, minority relations, and above all the loss of ideals. Ruppersburg initially focuses on Warren's expression of these themes in three major narrative poems: *Brother to the Dragons* portrays slavery in all its horror and its consequences for Jeffersonian idealism; *Audubon: A Vision* extols the power of imagination in one man's quest to assert an American identity in the wilderness; and *Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce* regards the victimization of Native Americans and their exclusion from traditional versions of American history as evidence of flaws in the founding vision.

In his nonfiction works *Segregation* and *Who Speaks for the Negro?* Warren depicted the civil rights movement as a struggle for identity and individualism.

Ruppersburg traces the development of Warren's attitudes, arguing that his support of the civil rights movement paradoxically stemmed from agrarianism, which by the 1950s meant something very different to him from the agrarianism of *I'll Take My Stand*. In addition, Warren hoped that the civil rights movement would restore some of the nation's original revolutionary ardor and idealism.

The book closes with an examination of Warren's views on the future of democracy and the individual in a world dominated--and threatened--by science and technology. Looking particularly at *The Legacy of the Civil War*, *Democracy and Poetry*, and the poem "New Dawn," Ruppersburg concludes that Warren was skeptical about our prospects for survival. Still, through his advocacy of the arts and the primacy of the individual, Warren affirmed the values that he believed would help Western culture to endure.

Robert Penn Warren sought to explore the meaning of the American experience, to validate the promise and the dangers of American ideals, and to urge the nation to take stock of itself and struggle for control of its fate in history. Through this obsessive search for America's identity, Ruppersburg demonstrates, Warren affirmed his own position as one of the most accomplished and significant of modern American writers.

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