English

Chapter 4

Comprehension Analysis Guide

**All the King's Men Summary and Analysis of Chapter Four**

Chapter Four briefly picks up after the end of Chapter One, where Willie has asked Jack to dig up dirt on Judge Irwin. Jack goes into a long flashback of his days as an American history graduate student at the state university. Here, Jack lived as a slob with two others, and the three often went on drinking binges whenever they came into money. His two housemates were graduate students who dreaded the future when they would have to leave the university, spending their time reading, drinking and playing cards together. Jack more often spent his time alone studying the writings of [Cass Mastern](https://www.gradesaver.com/all-the-kings-men/study-guide/character-list#cass-mastern).

Jack tells the reader the story of Cass Mastern, his great-uncle on whom he tried to write his graduate thesis, having obtained the man's collected writings. This frame story encompasses nearly all of the chapter.

Cass Mastern was born into poverty, yet he was saved by his brother [Gilbert Mastern](https://www.gradesaver.com/all-the-kings-men/study-guide/character-list#gilbert-mastern), who had somehow gone west and become a wealthy cotton planter. Gilbert supported Cass financially, sending him to Transylvania College in Lexington in the 1850s on the suggestion of [Jefferson Davis](https://www.gradesaver.com/all-the-kings-men/study-guide/character-list#jefferson-davis), where he studied theology. At college, Cass fell into vice--including one significant sexual impropriety. Through Davis, he became friends with [Duncan Trice](https://www.gradesaver.com/all-the-kings-men/study-guide/character-list#duncan-trice) and his wife [Annabelle Trice](https://www.gradesaver.com/all-the-kings-men/study-guide/character-list#annabelle-trice). Immediately, Cass was stricken by Annabelle, and the two eventually began an affair.

On March 19, 1854, Duncan Trice committed suicide. After the funeral, [Phebe](https://www.gradesaver.com/all-the-kings-men/study-guide/character-list#phebe), a waiting maid in the house, found Duncan's wedding ring, left on his pillow shortly before his suicide, as a sign that he knew about his wife's affair. Because she could not deal with the fact that Phebe knew about the affair, Annabelle sold her to a merchant who would transport her far away, possibly into prostitution. After being informed, Cass became outraged that their illicit affair had wreaked such awful consequences, including the resulting forced separation of Phebe and a plantation slave to whom she was married.

As Cass wrote in his journal, this event marked a significant turning point in his life and in the way he perceived the world. Leaving Annabelle forever, he went in search of the trader to whom she sold Phebe in the hopes of buying her and setting her free. He ended up at a barracoon where female slaves were being sold into prostitution. When one of the vulgar men there said Cass wanted to buy a yellowish woman, Cass violently struck him--and ended up stabbed with a bowie knife.

Giving up on his quest, Cass returned to manage the plantation his brother Gilbert had paid for. Cass repaid the debt and then, to his brother's dismay, set the slaves free and continued operations on a wage basis for a year until his project's failure.

After considering the sorry future misery of the slaves he had set free, Cass briefly ruminated about the story of Caroline Turner, a wealthy abolitionist from Boston who had never seen blacks before coming to Lexington. She gained notoriety for being abominably cruel to her slaves until a coachman, "mild of manner," killed her during a flogging. Cass wrote that he did not understand why Caroline did this at first, yet he eventually came to realize that it was for the same reason Annabelle Trice sold Phebe:

she could not bear their eyes upon her. I understand, for I can no longer bear their eyes upon me. (253)

Just prior to the outbreak of the Civil War, Cass and Gilbert found themselves on the same ship as Jefferson Davis, now president of the Confederacy. Cass reflected later that Mr. Davis was "a good man," yet despite the world being full of good men, "the world drives hard into darkness and the blindness of blood" (253).

During the Civil War, Cass, despite being a stalwart abolitionist, enlisted in the Mississippi Rifles for the South, while his brother received a commission as an officer. Although he carried a gun, Cass refused to use it, believing that after the death of his friend Duncan Trice, he had no right to take another man's life. Marching to war, he wore Duncan Trice's wedding ring on a string around his neck. In the first few battles, Duncan went unscathed and was somewhat sorrowfully surprised at his own invulnerability. Eventually, though, he was shot, and he ended up in a hospital in the besieged city of Atlanta, where he wrote his final words and then died. A person at the hospital kept Cass's papers and ring and sent them all to Gilbert. Eventually, the material fell into Jack's possession, and Jack, as narrator, reflects on his consideration of Cass while a graduate student, bringing the story back to the present.

At the end of the chapter, Jack, writing in a later time, explains that his past self could not understand Cass Mastern's motivations. He eventually gave up on the thesis altogether, entering his first period of the Great Sleep, until he left the apartment altogether. The papers of Cass Mastern were collected by the landlady and sent to Jack, and he has had them ever since.

Analysis

Chapter Four marks the pivot point of the novel: everything before it sets the necessary background for the dramatic series of events that unfold in the following five chapters. The tale of Cass Mastern is a frame story within [All the King's Men](https://www.gradesaver.com/all-the-kings-men), one that mirrors [Jack Burden](https://www.gradesaver.com/all-the-kings-men/study-guide/character-list#jack-burden)'s own life. It need not be read meticulously, since the particulars of Cass Mastern's life do not have a commanding effect on the novel's main plot. Still, Cass Mastern's tale serves two key purposes in All the King's Men. First, it is a lengthy parallel to the story of Jack and Willie, one that foreshadows the later events of the novel. Second, this story reveals more about Jack's past and mindset and defines the transformation he undergoes in the subsequent chapters.

Cass was horrified when he realized that the affair he conducted with Duncan's wife Annabelle made him personally culpable for his friend's suicide. Motivated by guilt, he devotes himself to righting a secondary consequence of the affair, the destruction of Phebe's marriage. With his powerful, newfound morality, Cass sets off to find Phebe and, essentially, repair the terrible destruction he caused. He renounces slavery and ultimately loses his life. As a young graduate student, Jack Burden is incapable of comprehending this selflessness, just as he is mentally unable to recognize Cass's culpability in the death of Duncan and the sale of Phebe. At this period of his life (which is described in every chapter of the novel but the last), Jack refuses to believe that the events of one's past have any bearing on the events of the present, or that his personal actions have serious consequences for those around him. Cass Mastern's transformation thus foreshadows the transformation Jack undergoes later in the novel when he realizes that his personal actions indirectly brought about Willie's death.

In Chapter Four, Jack narrates the events of his earlier life from the perspective of 1939. He refers to his past self as "Jack Burden," implying a strong difference in his attitudes then and now. He explains that his past self was incapable of completing his thesis on Cass because he was singularly incapable of comprehending Cass's motivations and was emotionally afraid of coming to realize the consequences of actions.

Jack introduces at the end of the chapter the "spider web" theory to define what he eventually realized was Cass's understanding: that "the world is like an enormous spider web and if you touch it, however lightly, at any point, the vibration ripples to the remotest perimeter and the drowsy spider feels the tingle" (260). Jack Burden's slow and deadly course of realization the veracity of this concept is the primary plot of All the King's Men. It is noted at the beginning of the chapter that the graduate student Jack Burden, a slob who actively irritated his mother and avoided her Southern aristocratic designs on his life, was invulnerable, unlike his two housemates. The present-day Jack calls this invincibility the "curse" of his past self, one that causes a great deal of destruction and which delays his understanding of the spider web for several years (220).

In addition to foreshadowing Jack's eventual redemption, the story of Cass serves to help the reader gauge Jack's progress towards change. Only when Jack realizes the inextricability of his actions from the wellbeing of those around him and begins to conduct himself in an honorable manner does he begin to comprehend Cass's story. Before this realization, Jack simply avoids Cass and falls into another escapist Great Sleep.

Jack notes at the end of the chapter that all his life he has traveled around with the "big squarish parcel with the brown paper turning yellow and the cords sagging, and the name *Mr. Jack Burden* fading slowly"--the parcel that contained Cass's papers (261). This fading package symbolizes Jack's fading worldview as he sinks deeper into passive denial and nihilism. (It also represents the common malaise of the graduate student with an unfinished project.) It is one of Jack's many burdens, a parallel to the wedding ring Cass wore around his neck, itself a potent symbol of the destruction his indiscretion once wrought. It is not until the end of the novel, when Jack realizes the consequences of his actions and the motivations of Cass Mastern, that he is able to open his package and resume his thesis.

A few other elements of this chapter are worth noting. Gilbert Mastern, Cass's financially successful brother who attempts to do good by lifting his brother's boat--yet supports slavery--is somewhat representative of [Willie Stark](https://www.gradesaver.com/all-the-kings-men/study-guide/character-list#willie-stark), who attempts to do good while using corrupt methods. Additionally, the Cass-Annabelle-Duncan love triangle is a prefiguration of various triangular relationships that twist the plot dramatically later in the novel. The triangle between Willie, [Anne Stanton](https://www.gradesaver.com/all-the-kings-men/study-guide/character-list#anne-stanton), and [Adam Stanton](https://www.gradesaver.com/all-the-kings-men/study-guide/character-list#adam-stanton) results in destruction on the scale of Gilbert's suicide, as does the adulterous triangle that is revealed to have existed among Juge Irwin, [Jack's mother](https://www.gradesaver.com/all-the-kings-men/study-guide/character-list#jacks-mother), and Jack's father [Ellis Burden](https://www.gradesaver.com/all-the-kings-men/study-guide/character-list#ellis-burden).

Additionally, Cass's major interactions with Jefferson Davis, a historical person who seems particularly out of place in an invented allegory within a fictional novel (but whose existence as part of the environment lifts him up in historical memory), hint at the significance of the Mastern story in relation to the tale of Jack and Willie Stark--a representation of the historical Huey P. Long. The story is fictional in many ways, but it is grounded in a recognizable time and place. Much as Jack's fate is strongly linked to Willie's fate, Cass Mastern's life is radically altered by Jefferson Davis's influence. Davis is materially responsible for Cass attending Transylvania, for his meeting the Trices, and for conducting the Civil War, which ultimately takes Cass's life.