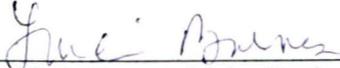


EXISTENTIAL HEROISM IN THE MOVIEGOER:
THE QUEST TO CONFRONT DESPAIR

DANIEL ALEXANDER PLUNKETT

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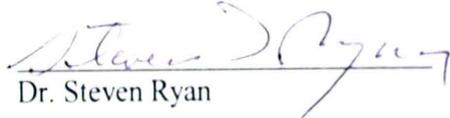


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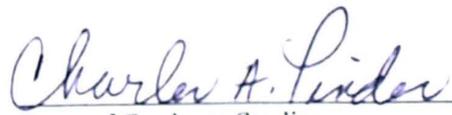


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A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree

Austin Peay State University

Daniel Alexander Plunkett

April 2005

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Lloyd and Betty Plunkett, who have been the most supportive and encouraging parents that I can imagine. They have made my education possible through their financial provision. More importantly, their godly example and spiritual guidance has molded me into the man that I am today.

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this essay is to explain how Binx Bolling, the protagonist of Walker Percy's novel The Moviegoer, is the hero of the novel. The Moviegoer is an existentialist novel, influenced greatly by the great Christian existentialist Søren Kierkegaard, and Binx is thus an existential hero, meaning that he finds a way to achieve selfhood. Everyone, according to Kierkegaard, is immersed in a life of despair, though they may not recognize this fact, and Binx becomes the hero of the novel by not only acknowledging his despair, but also by embarking on a search for a cure. This essay points out the existentialist elements of Binx's search and the spiritual implications thereof. Binx ultimately becomes an authentic self by breaking out of Kierkegaard's aesthetic mode of existence and making a leap of faith into the religious mode.

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And I set my heart to seek and search out
by wisdom concerning all that is done under heaven;
this burdensome task God has given to the sons of man,
by which they may be exercised.

The Preacher,
Ecclesiastes 1:13

CRITICAL PRINCIPLES AND INFLUENCES

The idea for this essay began to germinate when I first read The Moviegoer in the late summer of 2003. I immediately felt empathy towards the character of Binx Bolling, Percy's troubled protagonist. In discussing The Moviegoer, however, I was surprised to learn that most of my peers in the class for which I had read the book did not like Binx at all. Although my arguments on behalf of Binx may not have convinced any of my classmates of his fundamental "goodness," I was at least successful in convincing myself, and I decided to prove that Binx was in fact a hero in my seminar paper for the class.

Binx is not content with the frantic yet empty routine of everydayness which seems to have a stranglehold on the lives around him. Binx truly is "onto something" (Moviegoer 11), and Percy's talent for describing Binx's dissatisfaction with existence as he knows it and his search to rectify the situation is what interested me. Of course, the ideas in The Moviegoer that have captured my interest are not really those of Binx, but of the author, Walker Percy. Percy's art appeals to me not only because I believe he has "hit the nail on the head" in diagnosing and pointing out the problem of modern man (many other contemporary writers have done the same), but also because he believes, as I do, in the possibility of hope. Although his artistic integrity prevents him from being overtly didactic in his presentation of the solution to human despair, Percy does believe that a solution exists, and that it is possible to be healed from Kierkegaard's "sickness unto death."

Percy was a Catholic, while I belong to a Protestant denomination, but despite the differences, I agree with Percy that an answer to the despair lies in Christian faith. Now, Percy did not believe that it was his job to preach in a novel; indeed, if he had, no one

would take what he said seriously. He is far subtler than that. He points out the problem of human existence, that no amount of scientific achievement can explain what it means to be a human. Readers are left pursue the search on their own, if they are sufficiently aroused by Percy's presentation of the problem, but Percy does not end The Moviegoer (or any of his other novels) without holding out the possibility of hope and change and healing, for his protagonists and thus for his readers. Percy's Christian worldview is always present in the background of his novels, and sometimes shines through quite unmistakably. Binx becomes the hero of The Moviegoer in that he does realize the despair of life, and instead of ignoring it or accepting an empty humanistic answer to it, he begins his search, which ultimately reaches a spiritual conclusion in a way reminiscent of Jesus' promise in Matthew 7:7: "seek, and you will find." Binx has realized that he is a castaway and is able to receive the "news from across the seas" that is the message of Christianity (Message 149).

Studying Percy and his diagnosis of despair led me inevitably to Søren Kierkegaard, whose profound influence on Percy may be seen in all of the latter's novels, especially The Moviegoer. Thus, one might say that the following essay is in large part a "Kierkegaardian" reading of The Moviegoer. Christian existentialism, though it is not a conventional theory of literary criticism, is nevertheless the philosophy upon which most of the critical analysis of the essay is based. In addition to two of Kierkegaard's works, I used many of Percy's own non-fiction essays as secondary texts, because the same current of thought that may be seen in Percy's novels (concerning such important matters as selfhood, spirituality, the despair of modern life, etc.) is also found in his non-fiction.

Therefore, I felt that it was necessary to frequently refer to these essays in order to fully appreciate and explicate The Moviegoer.

Although the idea of bringing outside texts into a discussion of a work of literature is against formalist protocol, formalist criticism has had an impact on my writing. New Criticism appeals to me because the formalist ideal of focusing on the text itself is in my opinion the most valid and sensible critical approach (although it is very difficult to strictly follow this ideal, as my own essay shows). The problem with literary studies today, as I see it, is that we no longer study just the literature; we study the study of literature. This is a crisis for literary studies because we have lost focus; it is as if in debating the validity of the different critical theories, we have forgotten what we were arguing about in the first place. The relativity and ultimate meaninglessness of the deconstructive critical approach seems especially unproductive to me. Of course, as I have said, the following essay is by no means strictly formalist. I bring in a great deal of outside material, such as Kierkegaard's philosophy, but I would like to think that I remain true to the basic formalist principle of elucidating the text itself to make my points.

Although this essay is not expressly psychoanalytic, the influence of psychoanalytic theory is worth mentioning here, because many of the ideas in the essay may be explained using psychoanalytic terminology. According to Kierkegaard, there are three modes of existence, which may be called layers of reality, since those who proceed up the ladder of the three phases are being opened to new vistas and possibilities of existence. Binx, by means of his ironic detachment, is already transcendent at the opening of the novel, since, as Percy presents him, he sees things that others do not see. It is as if

he is omniscient and can see reality while everyone else is rendered blind to the reality of despair by the suffocating “everydayness” of their lives.

Binx does not transcend the symbolic order (a feat which is impossible according to psychoanalytic theory), but he does manage to see it for what it is. When he is awakened to his search, he becomes aware of the danger of the symbolic order, in which meanings are lost in symbols. For example, he says himself that “I have only to hear the word God and a curtain comes down in my head” (145). Yet, Binx is able eventually to break free into “the real” of the spiritual mode of existence. Although Binx’s discontent and philosophical meandering may seem like borderline madness to “normal” people, he is actually onto something. In fact, Binx, like many of Percy’s protagonists, seems crazy to everyone around him because he is the only one who is sane; he does not succumb to the madness of pretending that he is not sick when he is; rather, he decides to confront the despair of his life head-on.

My essay differs from today’s Percy criticism primarily in terms of spiritual scope, and by that I simply mean that I attempt to understand and describe what Percy is trying to communicate in The Moviegoer spiritually. Although contemporary critical essays on Percy’s work are a diverse lot, they generally avoid addressing Percy’s spiritual aims. Of course, there is more for Percy’s critics to talk about than his spiritual aims, and many fine essays have nothing to do with anything spiritual. For example, Lewis A. Lawson, a veteran Percy critic, recently wrote “From Tolstoy to Dostoyevsky in The Moviegoer,” which explains the Russian writers’ influence on Percy’s writing. Some essays do touch on spiritual subjects, such as Mary Grabar’s essay “Percy’s Despairing Female in the ‘Unmoved Mover,’” in which Grabar touches briefly on Binx’s spiritual

search as she counters the common feminist criticism that Percy was sexist in his portrayal of women. She argues that Kate may have actually been farther along in her spiritual search than Binx, and at the least the two inform each other's searches. John F. Desmond's essay "Walker Percy's Eucharistic Vision" deals even more closely with Percy's spirituality as Desmond describes the significance of the sacrament of the Eucharist in each of Percy's novels. However, even the contemporary essays that deal specifically with spiritual issues, such as the latter, are not very broad in their scope. When the Christian component of Percy's novels is addressed, it is treated superficially, and only as it relates to larger points being made. The most recent essays do not examine Kierkegaard's influence on Percy and the spiritual power of "the search," probably because modern critics feel that the possibilities of such approaches have been worn out, and perhaps also because most modern critics are embarrassed by anything other than bland religiosity. I feel that there are important points yet to be made regarding Percy's view of a person achieving selfhood through a relationship with God.

For this reason, nearly all of my critical sources are from the 1970's and 80's. Besides the fact that Percy was still writing during this time and critical interpretations of his work were therefore fresh (indeed, many of the works I use were written early enough that the authors only had three or four of Percy's novels available to them), most of my sources are also books, which of course means that there is much more room to deal with Percy's spiritual concerns in depth than there is in an essay. My essay is far more similar to these older works than to any more modern criticism on Percy, so I have used them both to inform my work and also because I believe I have something new to add to their conversation.

I am certainly not the first person to explain the influence of Kierkegaard's existentialism on Percy's novels; what I believe sets my essay apart from the criticism of Jac Tharpe, William Rodney Allen, Jerome Taylor, and others of the 70's and 80's is that I do not just show what Percy does with Kierkegaard, I try to show why. I do not try to show that Percy owes a debt to Kierkegaard, because that is already known. Rather, I try to show what it is Percy actually accomplishes using Kierkegaard's philosophy. What I want to do more specifically is reveal what it is Percy does through the character of Binx Bolling, and this search that I undertake in the essay goes back to my stubborn belief that I had upon first reading the novel that Binx, like him or not, is doing something good, something that everyone ought to take notice of. How is Binx a hero? What does he reveal about despair and the possibility of hope in the midst of despair? I hope that my essay is unique in that it begins to discover answers to these questions.

EXISTENTIAL HEROISM IN THE MOVIEGOER:

THE QUEST TO CONFRONT DESPAIR

In his essay “Diagnosing the Modern Malaise” Walker Percy says, “If I believe anything, it is that the primary business of literature and art is cognitive, a kind of finding out and knowing and telling, both in good times and bad, a celebration of the way things are when they are right, and a diagnostic enterprise when they are wrong” (Signposts 207). Any reader of serious modern literature knows that things have gone terribly wrong in the world, because the symptoms may be seen in modern¹ literature everywhere: absurdity, alienation, the feeling of death-in-life, and all the other descriptions of modern, post-modern, post-post-modern, and otherwise contemporary fiction that every English student is familiar with. So how should a modern human being respond to these terrifying symptoms? Walker Percy agrees with Søren Kierkegaard that despair is the universal human condition and that one can only truly begin to relieve the despair by embracing it. Binx Bolling, the protagonist of Percy’s novel The Moviegoer, becomes the existential hero of the novel by doing just that.

In The Sickness Unto Death Kierkegaard illuminates Percy’s belief in the diagnostic nature of literature:

If it were true that what every man says about the state of his health (as to whether he is sick or well, where he suffers, etc.) were absolutely to be relied upon, it would be an illusion to be a physician. For a physician does not merely have to prescribe medicines, but first and foremost he has to be acquainted with the sickness. (Sickness 156)

¹ “Modern” here is being used in the general sense of literature written since World War I, approximately.

The sickness which Kierkegaard concerns himself with is not, of course, a physical ailment, but a spiritual one, and one of such a nature that most men are unaware of it. The sickness unto death that the title of his book speaks of is despair, and for a man to acknowledge despair is to accept “the highest demand made upon him, that he be spirit” (Sickness 155). Moreover, the despair is virtually universal: “It is not a rare exception that one is in despair; no, the rare, the very rare exception is that one is not in despair” (Sickness 155).

Percy compellingly shows modern man’s collective despair in his non-fiction. He begins his essay “The Delta Factor” with several pages of questions, including these: “Why does man feel so sad in the twentieth century? Why does man feel so bad in the very age when, more than in any other age, he has succeeded in satisfying his needs and making over the world for his own use?” (Message 3). Despite the unprecedented material comforts of the modern age (in the West), human beings remain by and large unsatisfied and suffer from a strange uneasiness. In his first novel, Percy uses a protagonist who has a perfectly normal, perhaps even privileged life, to exemplify this inexplicable despair. No amount of material wealth, knowledge, or social position can satiate the despair. In his National Book Award acceptance speech for The Moviegoer, Percy said that he wrote the novel with “the posture of the pathologist with his suspicion that something is wrong...the pathology in this case has to do with the loss of individuality and the loss of identity” (Signposts 246).

Later in the “The Delta Factor,” Percy attempts to explain the cause of human despair, by first asserting that “A theory of man must account for the alienation of man” (Message 23). He then proposes that a theory that accounts for man’s alienation does

exist: "Judeo-Christianity did of course give an account of alienation, not as a particular evil of the twentieth century, but as the enduring symptom of man's estrangement from God" (Message 23). The Christian belief is that all men are homeless as a result of the Fall. Ever since the sin of Adam and Eve, all men have lived lives of alienation, estranged from God. As Christianity began to be rejected by mainstream society with the coming of modernism, the explanation that Percy suggests (above) it provided for human alienation was lost as well.

The most insidious characteristic of the despair Percy and Kierkegaard speak of is that most people are unaware of it; The Moviegoer begins with an epigraph from The Sickness Unto Death which describes this phenomenon: "...the specific character of despair is precisely this: it is unaware of being despair" (xi). One of the things that makes despair so terrible is that it masks itself, and unfortunately, to be unaware of the despair is not to be blissfully unaware, but to be in the greatest despair of all. The solution to the problem of despair is to accept it; as Kierkegaard explains, the paradox is that "despair...is in fact the sickness of which it holds that it is the greatest misfortune not to have had it." This is so because one must understand that one is sick before healing becomes possible.

Sickness, then, is better than the counterfeit "health" generally accepted by the world at large. Percy's heroes, including Binx, illustrate his point that "a man is better off being half-crazy" (Conversations 111). Of course, one generally thinks of despair as a thing to be avoided, and indeed, most people who have read The Moviegoer would agree that if Binx is an example of someone who has chosen despair, then they would just as soon do without it. Percy, however, makes the audacious suggestion in his first novel that

Binx is sane, and it is everyone else who is crazy. It is Binx, almost alone of the characters of the novel, who truly recognizes despair, and who becomes a heroic archetype by embracing the despair and thus takes the first step from death to life.

Binx's method of choosing or accepting despair is what he calls "the search." Binx explains that "to become aware of the possibility of the search is to be onto something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair" (Moviegoer 13). Binx has identified and accepted despair, and he defines the despair as "malaise": "What is the malaise? you ask. The malaise is the pain of loss. The world is lost to you, the world and the people in it, and there remains only you and the world and you no more able to be in the world than Banquo's ghost" (120). Binx's search, then, is to recover what he has lost. He is reluctant, however, to describe what it is specifically he is searching for. Percy's narrative style is to give Binx a semi-omniscience which allows him to address the reader: "What do you seek—God? you ask with a smile. I hesitate to answer..." (13). His hesitancy has validity. For Binx, words, including (and perhaps especially) religious words, no longer mean what they are supposed to mean. Binx says later in the novel that "I have only to hear the word God and a curtain comes down in my head" (145). The cause of Binx's difficulty in defining his search and speaking of God may be attributed to the loss of symbolic meaning in which words have been deprived of their significance.

The loss of the ability to effectively symbolize and more generally to see reality is one of the primary effects of the universal despair which Binx confronts. A human living in despair without a cure may be seen as a vacuum, a consumer who sucks the meaning out of everyone and everything around him. Binx explains: "Nowadays when a person lives somewhere, in a neighborhood, the place is not certified for him. More than likely

he will live there sadly and the emptiness which is inside him will expand until it evacuates the entire neighborhood” (63). Humans in the state of despair (though they may not know they are in despair) are a hole. As William Rodney Allen explains in his book Walker Percy: A Southern Wayfarer, the resulting anxiety in a man who exists in this state of being, or non-being, “leads him to try to define himself in terms of material objects in the vain effort to fill up the ‘hole’ of self” (Allen 23). The only way to become a true self, as opposed to a nothingness, is to choose despair, for only when the despair has been accepted can a remedy to the vacuity of life be found.

For most of his life, Binx has been the typical passive consumer, who not only is himself a nothingness, but who consumes the meaning of the things he possesses. In his essay “Symbol as Hermeneutic in Existentialism,” Percy further explains consumership: “What paradoxically characterizes the zone of having is the progressive annihilation of forms, an emptying out and a rendering nought by the very act of having” (Message 284). For example, an individual often desires to have a new car, not simply as a means of transportation, but because he believes that his “nothingness will be informed by the having of it. But possession turns out to be a gradual neutralization. Once it enters the zone of my nought, the car...only participates in my nothingness” (Message 284). Binx is constantly “consuming” cars (and secretaries) in the attempt to escape the malaise. He buys an MG because his previous car was “a regular incubator of malaise” (Moviegoer 121), but once the novelty wears off, the MG succumbs to the malaise too. Escape from malaise/despair is simply not possible through material means, because the problem, according to Kierkegaard and Percy, is spiritual.

Thus, because one of the symptoms of malaise is the loss of symbolic meaning (despair cloaking itself), Binx is prevented from pinning down the object of his search, but what is important is that he is on a search. Binx has become unusual in that he has recognized the malaise, and he sets off on his search to fill the void of his self. The first time in his life that the search had ever occurred to Binx was when he was lying on the ground in Korea, having been wounded in the war in 1951. As he lay on the ground, ordinary things, such as the dung beetle near his nose, became extraordinary: "As I watched, there awoke in me an immense curiosity. I was onto something. I vowed that if I ever got out of this fix, I would pursue the search. Naturally, as soon as I recovered and got home, I forgot all about it" (Moviegoer 11). The search was forgotten for a time, but for a brief moment in Korea, the malaise had been lifted and Binx was able to see the world. Maintaining that ability remained a priority in Binx's life after he settled down in Gentilly, a quiet suburb of New Orleans. He spends his time "in wonder, wondering day and night, never a moment without wonder" (42). Binx insists on living in wonder because he wants "to see the world again, to bring the given things of [his] surroundings, extinguished by use, back again in their forgotten strangeness" (Pindell 224). Binx's wonder pays off at last when the search becomes possible again.

At the start of the novel Binx is again awakened to the possibility of the search one morning simply by seeing the usual contents of his pockets in an unfamiliar light: "What was unfamiliar about them was that I could see them...A man can look at this little pile on his bureau for thirty years and never once see it. It is as invisible as his own hand. Once I saw it, however, the search became possible" (Moviegoer 11). These objects, like so much in life, had become so familiar that the malaise had rendered them

invisible. Binx goes on to analyze his revelation: "This morning...I felt as if I had come to myself on a strange island. And what does such a castaway do? Why, he pokes around the neighborhood and doesn't miss a trick" (13). The idea of man as a castaway is common in Walker Percy's thought.

As a Christian existentialist, Percy believes that man is homeless on earth, estranged from God as a result of an original fall, and because of that he is in despair. Man is pictured as a wayfaring pilgrim (a common image in Christian literature), or as a castaway. True despair is to refuse to accept or to try to forget that one is a castaway. The self who becomes a true self by embracing despair is the person who acknowledges that he or she is a castaway. In his essay "The Message in the Bottle," Percy explains the castaway's predicament: "In his heart of hearts there is not a moment of his life when the castaway does not know that life on the island, being 'at home' on the island, is something of a charade...he is aware, however faintly, of his own predicament: that he is a castaway" (Message 143). Recognition of his status as a castaway allows Binx to begin his search in earnest.

The search Binx undertakes at the beginning of the novel is what he calls a "horizontal search," which is existential in nature, as opposed to the "vertical search" in which one tries to find scientific answers to the questions of life. The majority of modern people who live in the scientific age live with the implicit belief that the solutions to all of the difficulties of humanity can be found in the material world. Percy says in his comical yet deadly serious book Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book that "The scientist is the prince and sovereign of the age" (115) and later that "the modern scientific consciousness...has elevated itself from a method of knowing secondary causes to an all-

construing quasi-religious view of the world” (252). The scientific mind has prevailed, and human life has become merely “the transaction of a higher organism satisfying this or that need from the environment” (Message 24). And yet, for all its capacity to understand the world around it, the scientific mind cannot understand itself: “The earth-self seeks to understand the Cosmos overtly according to scientific principles while covertly exempting itself from the same understanding” (Cosmos 254). At the onset of the modern age, it was believed that science could solve any problem, and the world would eventually be turned into a new Eden by the efforts of man alone. The result, according to Percy, was the horror of the twentieth century, because the vertical search fails to take account of the individual self. Kierkegaard explains: “In our age it is believed that knowledge settles everything...but to exist and to know are two very different things” (Concluding 264). Kierkegaard wrote well before the twentieth century, yet his words are still relevant, because secular humanism remains a force in today’s world.

Binx himself undertook the vertical search for a time, and he tells of trying to find a humanistic answer to his despair. Of that time in his life he says, “During those years I stood outside the universe and sought to understand it. I lived in my room as an Anyone living Anywhere and read fundamental books and only for diversion took walks around the neighborhood and saw an occasional movie” (Moviegoer 69). The peak of his vertical search came when he finished a book called The Chemistry of Life, which seemed to explain the whole universe in a scientific way. And yet, he was not satisfied: “The only difficulty was that though the universe had been disposed of, I myself was left over. There I lay in my hotel room with my search over yet still obliged to draw one breath and then the next” (70). Percy uses Binx as his protagonist, a man who on the outside has

every advantage one could ask for, to show that having one's material needs met does not eliminate or even reduce the despair. Modern man has been led to believe that since he "is only an organism in an environment, he should be able to achieve perfect happiness as he adapts his environment to fit his physical needs" (Brinkmeyer 81). Binx, however, has discovered that science is not enough to explain existence.

The attempt to understand the self by scientific means alone is really just one method among many of ignoring despair. Those who live their lives ignoring the despair live in what Kierkegaard called the aesthetic mode of existence. Kierkegaard proposed that there is a hierarchy of three separate modes of existence in which life can be lived, the first of these being the aesthetic stage. He believed that "man is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal" (Sickness 148). Those who live in the aesthetic mode of existence have denied their infinitude and have been "entirely finitized, by having become, instead of a self, a number, just one man more" (Sickness 166). The aesthetic stage is both the most common and the least desirable existential stage.

In his book In Search of Self: Life, Death & Walker Percy, Jerome Taylor describes the aesthetic stage as "being determined by that which is outside ourselves, and therefore not being free" (5). These external distractions render those who live for them selfless because they live for the distractions rather than for themselves. Living life for external distractions is a futile endeavor because "we are not simply animal creatures; we are also composed of an essential part of the infinite. We are not just flesh; we are also spirit" (Taylor 5). People often spend their whole lives in the aesthetic mode, managing to distract themselves from their despair by various means (sex, academics, drugs,

relationships, work, sports, etc.). The self in the aesthetic mode sees itself as merely an organism in an environment (consciously or unconsciously) and therefore lives in what Kierkegaard called “immediacy.”

One type of immediacy is sensual immediacy, which describes those who find distraction from their despair in pleasurable diversions. Taylor gives the example of sex: “Envision a young man consumed with the highly enjoyable passion of pursuing women. Is he in charge of his life or is he not instead being pulled around by the nose?” (Taylor 5). Of course, sex is only one of the more explicit examples of a diversion used by someone in the aesthetic stage. Whatever the diversion may be, it is merely an attempt to find selfhood in the material world.

Another type of immediacy is intellectual immediacy² in which one attempts to transcend despair through the vertical search. Like sensual immediacy, however, the study of science or art is only one of many ways for a person to deny their infinitude and distract from the despair, and the attempt leaves them still in the aesthetic stage. In a satirical jab at intellectual immediacy, Percy has Binx recount a summer of his life in which he and a friend studied kidney stones in pigs. While Binx “became extraordinarily affected by the summer afternoons in the laboratory” (Moviegoer 51) his friend continued his research oblivious of the world (and despair) around him: “He is no more aware of the mystery which surrounds him than a fish is aware of the water it swims in. He could do research for a thousand years and never have an inkling of it” (52).

Binx’s cousin Eddie Lovell and his wife Nell provide a good example of people who are totally normal, even successful, by the world’s standards, and yet they are dead in their despair. In fact, Binx has come to believe that most of his relationships are with

² The two types of immediacy are not mutually exclusive, and the line between them is blurry.

dead people: "For some time now the impression has been growing upon me that everyone is dead. It happens when I speak to people. In the middle of a sentence it will come over me: yes, beyond a doubt this is death" (Moviegoer 99). He has a conversation with Nell Lovell in which she describes her life of redecorating shotgun cottages with her husband, taking philosophy courses, and otherwise working toward her ill-defined life goal, which is "to make a contribution, however small, and leave the world just a little better off" (101). She keeps insisting that she's content with her life: "I don't feel a bit gloomy!" (101). Percy's insinuation, though, is that she probably should, since, to repeat Kierkegaard's phrase, "one form of despair is precisely this of not being in despair, that is, not being aware of it" (Sickness 156). Kierkegaard addresses the façade of immediacy: "All immediacy, in spite of its illusory peace and tranquility, is dread, and hence, quite consistently, it is dread of nothing" (Sickness 158). The Lovells' busy lives are just a frantic attempt to fill the hole that is their self by means of activity. The notion of "making a contribution" is meaningless to Binx: "I get to thinking about her and old Eddie re-examining their values. Yes, true. Values. Very good. And then I can't help wondering to myself: why does she talk as if she were dead? Another forty years to go and dead, dead, dead" (Moviegoer 102). The two part ways "laughing and dead" (102).

As the conversation with Nell shows, Percy has Binx examine the people with whom he comes into contact with an air of ironic attachment that borders on cruelty. If Binx seems to analyze everyone, including his closest acquaintances, as if they are specimens of a disease, it is because that is precisely what he is doing. As Ralph C. Wood says in his book The Comedy of Redemption: Christian Faith and Comic Vision in Four American Novelists, Binx spends his time "acutely dissecting the spiritual corpses around

him" (163). Binx's ironic detachment is important to the novel because it allows Percy to have Binx stand aside, as it were, so that he (Binx) and the reader can together examine examples of Kierkegaard's "sickness unto death."

One of those examples is Binx himself; an understanding of the aesthetic mode of existence is crucial to an understanding of an existential hero because Binx remains in the aesthetic mode for almost the entire novel. His struggle to get out, however, is the basis of his heroism. He has become an authentic self by recognizing despair, though he does not break completely³ free of the aesthetic stage until the end of the novel. Although Binx's ironic detachment allows him to see the despair lurking below the surface of the lives around him, he is not immune to his own cold observations, for he has recognized that he too has the disease that he sees in others. Binx describes his life: "I spend my entire time working, making money, going to movies and seeking the company of women" (Moviegoer 41). This, generally speaking, is an accurate description of the lives of any number of people in America.⁴ Nothing seems to bring true happiness to Binx, which may be frustrating to the reader of The Moviegoer because it seems that he is insisting upon being depressed when he has no reason to be. Binx has realized, however, that there are parts of his being that are not satisfied by women, money, or any other externals. His physical needs are met, but not his spiritual.

³ Kierkegaard explains that irony is the vehicle that makes possible the initial transcendence of the aesthetic mode (Concluding 448). Thus, Binx is in a limbo of sorts, because he remains in the aesthetic mode (though in its outer boundary), but his irony shows that he has recognized his predicament for what it is, setting the stage for his escape.

⁴ Binx enjoys escapes by watching movies, but any form of escapism may be substituted for this. In one episode of the book, Binx meets a young man on the bus that he describes as a "romantic." After the encounter, Binx says, "The best one can do is deflate the pressure a bit, the terrible romantic pressure, and leave him alone. He is a moviegoer, though of course he does not go to movies" (Moviegoer 216). The poor man cannot bear to live with the despair of the real world, so he escapes into romantic notions that ultimately cannot support real selfhood, just as Binx escapes into movies.

Binx says that someone living in the aesthetic mode is immersed in “everydayness.” Everydayness describes the banality of life in the aesthetic mode, and it serves to mask despair through its sheer ordinariness at the same time that it makes the despair more dreadful.⁵ In his essay “Moviegoing in The Moviegoer” Lewis A. Lawson explains that a man caught in everydayness does not have “any reflective conception of himself” (Lawson 29). Apropos of Percy’s view of man-as-castaway, people living in the “everydayness” of the aesthetic stage are like castaways who have made themselves comfortable on the island and are pretending that they are not castaways. According to Percy, the castaway “should be what he is and not pretend to be somebody else...the worst of all despairs is to imagine one is at home when one is really homeless” (Message 144). Binx has recognized this, and claims, “everydayness is the enemy. No search is possible” (Moviegoer 145), and “the search is what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life” (13).

While within the aesthetic mode, Binx uses two strategies (both of which Percy borrows from Kierkegaard) to try to combat the everydayness, or at least to make it bearable. Part of his problem, however, is that Binx is still in the aesthetic mode, and so any relief he finds from malaise and its attendant everydayness is temporary at best. The first of these strategies is the rotation, which Binx defines as “the experiencing of the new beyond the expectation of the experiencing of the new” (Moviegoer 144). The rotation is a future-oriented device; as Percy explains in his essay “The Man on the Train,” it is “the

⁵ Everydayness is not to be confused with malaise; malaise is a synonym of despair, and as such, it is only identifiable to those who have transcended everydayness and become self-reflective (though recognizing despair does not mean that one is cured, it is diagnosing the problem, which is the first step towards being cured). Everydayness is a problematic way of life, it is the rut that people in the aesthetic mode get caught in; one might say that everydayness is the agent of despair, because the despair is virtually impossible to detect as long as one is sunk into everydayness. Everydayness keeps those living in it from seeing their despair and becoming authentic selves, while those who have recognized despair experience a sense of loss.

quest for the new as the new, the reposing of all hope in what may lie around the bend” (Message 86). A prime example of the rotation in literature is Huckleberry Finn drifting down the Mississippi river with Jim, constantly having new and unexpected experiences. Rotations need not be anything extraordinary, however. For example, Binx’s dalliances with his secretaries constitute minor rotations, though the relationships quickly wear out as the malaise takes hold of them and the secretaries must be discarded. Thus, although rotations are a means of avoiding the ennui of everydayness, they leave Binx in a predicament because they are the experiencing of newness but without trying to experience newness—Binx lives in everydayness without them, but forcing a rotation has little or no effect.

The ultimate rotation that may be used to combat everydayness is disaster. Binx explains the power of disaster: “Perhaps there was a time when everydayness was not too strong and one could break its grip by brute strength. Now nothing breaks it—but disaster” (Moviegoer 145). A catastrophe of some sort (the catastrophe may be personal or something communal, like war) has the power to jolt an individual into awareness and out of everydayness. For example, the catalyst that allows Binx to first consider the search was his wound in Korea: “Only once in my life was the grip of everydayness broken: When I lay bleeding in a ditch” (145).

One might say that a disaster wakes a person up from their everydayness, and the world around them, which had previously been evacuated of all reality, has meaning again. Kate Cutrer, Binx’s cousin and eventual wife, has noticed this phenomenon too; she describes the sense of reality she experiences after she was in a car wreck that killed her fiancé: “Have you noticed that only in time of illness or disaster or death are people

real? I remember at the time of the wreck—people were so kind and helpful and solid...our reality had been purchased by Lyell's death" (Moviegoer 81). Because of the sense of reality she experienced, Kate says that this terrible event was the happiest moment of her life (58-60). Indeed, being able to see the world afresh is pleasurable, and that is why Binx says of his experience in Korea, "What are generally considered to be the best times are for me the worst times, and that worst of times was one of the best" (10). However, the relief from malaise that disaster provides is only temporary. Kate says of the people (including herself) who seemed so real after Lyell's death: "In another hour or so we had all faded out again and gone our dim ways" (81). Even the greatest of catastrophes is not enough to assign selfhood and permanently relieve despair.

The second method Binx uses to avoid everydayness is repetition. Binx defines repetition for the reader: "A repetition is the re-enactment of past experience toward the end of isolating the time segment which has lapsed in order that it, the lapsed time, can be savored of itself and without the usual adulteration of events that clog time like peanuts in brittle" (Moviegoer 79-80). The typical repetition in literature consists of a character returning to his roots in search of his past, but most of Binx's repetitions are not so grand. For example, a successful repetition for Binx consists of seeing a western at the same theatre during the same time of year that he had seen a western fourteen years before (79-80). Repetitions are the opposite of rotations in that repetitions are a past-oriented device. One might say that a repetition is a sense of déjà vu that jolts Binx into an awareness of the lapsed time—like a disaster, it works to make one self-aware.

Binx's life in Gentilly seems at odds with his search and his fight against everydayness, since Gentilly and the life he leads there are exceptionally unexceptional.

However, Percy explains in an interview that Binx lives in Gentilly “as a conscious cultivation of a certain kind of experience,” because he does not want to be distracted by the masquerade of life in New Orleans (Conversations 65). In the same interview, Percy says, “There’s also a rather conscious parallel between Binx going to Gentilly and Phillip going to the Gaza desert. A man goes to the desert to seek something. Gentilly is a desert if ever there was one” (Conversations 65). Binx chooses a life and a place to live his life that is totally nondescript so that he can live “in wonder.” As he says himself, “Not for five minutes will I be distracted from the wonder” (Moviegoer 42). By living where he does and by maintaining a simple, routine lifestyle, Binx is able to analyze his despair as well as that of those around him free from interruption. However, the distractions of the immediate life remain a temptation; during a conversation with Eddie Lovell, in which Eddie tells Binx of his busy and varied lifestyle, Binx says, “It comes over me: this is how one lives! my exile in Gentilly has been the worst kind of self-deception” (18). On the outside, Eddie seems to be in control of his life and to be free from despair, and this causes Binx to question the life he has chosen.

Undeniably, Binx tries many times, even in the desert of Gentilly, to find satisfaction in what he calls “the Little Way”: “It is not a bad thing to settle for the Little Way, not the big search for the big happiness but the sad little happiness of drinks and kisses, a good little car and a warm deep thigh” (Moviegoer 135-136). One reason Binx lives as he does is that his life is not without its pleasures. As long as he can manage to ignore his despair, life in the aesthetic mode is not so bad. It is certainly the easiest path of life to take. Binx describes how easy it would be to live his whole life in everydayness:

There is much to be said for giving up...grand ambitions and living the most ordinary life imaginable, a life without the old longings; selling stocks and bonds and mutual funds; quitting work at five o'clock like everyone else; having a girl and perhaps one day settling down and raising a flock of Marcias and Sandras and Lindas of my own...It is not a bad life at all. (9)

Nevertheless, it is impossible to find permanent contentment in a life lived solely for such externals once the despair has been recognized, and Binx knows it: "The search has spoiled the pleasure of my tidy and ingenious life in Gentilly" (191). The fact that Binx does not ultimately settle for the "Little Way" is the distinguishing mark of his existential heroism.

One cannot help but get the impression that Percy uses Binx to mock the aesthetic stage and those trapped in its everydayness. Although Binx has recognized his despair and embarked on the search for clues, the search takes place from within the aesthetic stage, and Percy is able to use Binx to parody the wretchedness of everydayness. Though Binx is merciless in his scrutiny of the spiritual corpses he sees around him, his satirical knife cuts both ways; for example, in one amusing passage he describes his consumerism: "I subscribe to *Consumer Reports* and as a result I own a first-class television set, an all but silent air conditioner and a very long lasting deodorant. My armpits never stink" (Moviegoer 7). As he lives in his own personal desert, Binx finds satisfaction in dutifully cultivating his anonymous aesthetic life.

Binx's careful consumerist lifestyle is exemplary of the problem of impersonation that many characters in the novel struggle with as a result of their despair. A man in

despair does not have an authentic self, and must therefore pretend to be someone he is not. In his essay "Symbol as Hermeneutic in Existentialism," Percy explains the problem: "The motto of the symbolic (and existential) predicament is: This is a chair for you and me, that is a tree, everything is something, you are what you are, but what am I?" (Message 284). Simply put, the task of the self, according to Kierkegaard, "is to become itself," and the result of the self's being unable to accomplish this task alone is despair (Sickness 162). Kierkegaard describes why impersonation is the norm for those in despair: "The immediate man does not recognize his self, he recognizes himself only by his dress...he recognizes that he has a self only by externals" (Sickness 187). Thus, individuals in despair lose their true individuality by attempting to be who they *think* they are supposed to be (by adopting one or more personas). Binx is fascinated with actors (such as William Holden, whom he follows at a distance early in the novel) because they are masters of impersonation. In his book Walker Percy, Jac Tharpe sheds light on the appeal of actors: "Movie stars are one with themselves individually while they perform. If they endure anomie or identity crises, the difficulty is required in the plot" (Tharpe 55). Binx admires actors because they seem to have figured out how to become the self they want to be.

Binx is an actor himself, and though he is very good at it, the charade of his life does not satisfy him. In an oft-quoted passage, Binx describes himself as the perfect (and anonymous) citizen:

I am a model tenant and a model citizen and take pleasure in doing all that is expected of me. My wallet is full of identity cards, library cards, credit cards...It is a pleasure to carry out the duties of a citizen and to receive in

return a receipt or neat styrene card with one's name on it certifying, so to speak, one's right to exist. (Moviegoer 7)

Although Binx has succeeded in impersonating a model consumer and citizen, he has failed in the effort to be an authentic self. Despite his acting abilities, and despite his exercises in rotation and repetition, the malaise remains.

Kate, who is a searcher herself (though she does not have Binx's ironic detachment, and of course, the reader is not privy to her thoughts), realizes at one point that impersonation cannot result in true selfhood:

I was afraid because I felt that I must *be* such and such a person...What a discovery! One minute I am straining every nerve to be the sort of person I was expected to be and shaking in my boots for fear I would fail—and the next minute to know with the calmest certitude that even if I could succeed...that it was not good enough for me and that I had something better. I was free. (Moviegoer 115)

Although Kate's moment of euphoria over this revelation does not last and she sinks back into her depression, she has realized, if only briefly, that impersonation—to pretend that one is a self when one is not—is the worst kind of despair.

Kate has realized that being the best person one can be is simply not sufficient, and in so doing she has rejected Kierkegaard's ethical stage, the second of his three modes of existence. As opposed to those in the aesthetic stage, who live for diversions (which, again, may include anything from science to sex), those who have moved into the ethical stage of life have accepted a sense of responsibility for themselves and for the people around them. Taylor describes this stage: "We begin to act in responsible ways—

caring for others and for our own welfare, doing what needs to be done, getting a job to feed and clothe the baby, etc” (Taylor 6). The ethical existence is superior to the aesthetic because the ethical individual is capable of serious self-reflection; as Kierkegaard says, the ethical individual has “an inwardness that is infinitely interested in existing” (Concluding 289).

Binx’s Aunt Emily is an example of someone in the ethical stage. She has a sense of duty to do her best in life (whatever that may mean), which is characteristic of the ethical stage. She asks Binx, “Don’t you feel obliged to use your brain and make a contribution?” (Moviegoer 53). Aunt Emily believes that she and others of her class are better than other people “because we do not shirk our obligations either to ourselves or to others. We do not whine” (223). She believes that those who stoically do their duty are superior to those of the lower classes because they live their lives responsibly. Indeed, Percy’s presentation of Aunt Emily as a Stoic (she even sends Binx a note with words of advice from Marcus Aurelius) is not accidental; Kierkegaard draws the parallel between the despair of the ethical stage and Stoicism: “If one would have a common name for this despair, one might call it Stoicism—yet without thinking only of this philosophic sect” (Sickness 202). The ethical individual accepts a sense of duty, but the despair remains.

The ethical stage may be superior to the aesthetic in that a certain responsibility for one’s actions in life is accepted rather than just living life for the next distraction from responsibility and serious thought, but it ultimately does not provide answers either. Aunt Emily confides in Binx:

I don’t quite know what we’re doing on this insignificant cinder spinning away in a dark corner of the universe. That is a secret which the high gods

have not confided in me. Yet one thing I believe and I believe it with every fiber of my being. A man must live by his lights and do what little he can and do it as best he can. In this world goodness is destined to be defeated. But a man must go down fighting. That is the victory.

(Moviegoer 54)

Emily has realized that her beliefs do not provide answers. She has even admitted that for a man to simply “do what little he can” is a hopeless (and therefore meaningless, but she refuses to admit this) cause. It is a lost cause, because “human beings are not constituted with adequate power to accomplish the infinite demands of the ethical” (Taylor 6). The ethical individual has realized that he is in need of a self, but the problem is that he tries to create his own self and that is not possible. Kierkegaard explains the ethical individual’s wasted efforts: “Hence the self in its despairing effort to will to be itself labors itself into the direct opposite, it becomes really no self” (Sickness 202). He goes on to illustrate: “The self is its own lord and master...however, by closer inspection one easily ascertains that this ruler is a king without a country, he rules over nothing” (Sickness 203). The hope for the aesthetic individual resides in realizing his own selflessness, and the hope for the ethical individual is in the further realization that he cannot “fix” his problem of selflessness on his own.

Aunt Emily has tried to make sense of the alienation and despair by living as best she knows how, but she is doomed to failure because she would rather stoically “go down fighting” than accept help from any source outside herself (Moviegoer 54). Taylor says of the ethical stage, “When the ethical striving toward victory finally crumbles under foot,

the individual must either fall into oblivion or make another leap; this time, of necessity, into help from the Beyond” (Taylor 6).

It is possible to move from the aesthetic stage to the ethical on one’s own, but despair cannot be transcended without outside help; being good (in the eyes of others) and doing one’s duty is simply not enough. When an individual realizes this and accepts help from a Power higher than himself, he has made Kierkegaard’s “leap of faith” into the religious mode of existence, the third and final existential stage. The individual who reaches the religious stage has at last found the answer, or the cure, so to speak, of the sickness unto death. Kierkegaard explains: “The self is in sound health and free from despair only when, precisely by having been in despair, it is grounded transparently in God” (Sickness 163). The healing of being “grounded transparently in God” can necessarily only come from first “having been in despair” (Sickness 163). Once an individual chooses despair, healing becomes possible, and selfhood may be achieved by means of a relationship with God.

Kierkegaard explains the relationship of the Christian to the sickness of despair: “The possibility of this sickness is man’s advantage over the beast; to be sharply observant of this sickness constitutes the Christian’s advantage over the natural man; to be healed of this sickness is the Christian’s bliss” (Sickness 148). Here Kierkegaard posits that despair is both good and bad: good because it shows that man is a spiritual being and sets him apart from beasts, bad in that this very despair is a sickness, a sickness which may only be healed by a right relationship with God. The individual in the

religious, or more precisely, Christian⁶ stage of existence, by accepting the tenets of the Christian faith, believes that he is a child of God, a pilgrim (or castaway) on earth.

One character in The Moviegoer who lives in the religious phase of existence is Binx's half brother Lonnie. Unlike the other characters in the story, Lonnie, who is handicapped, seems to truly be at peace with his life, even though externally he has the most reason not to be. One might say that Lonnie has lived a life of constant disaster because of his physical ailments, and is therefore unable to avoid the thought of his own mortality and sink into the everydayness of the aesthetic stage like most people. As a paraplegic, Lonnie can do very little for himself physically, and this has caused him realize that he is spiritually helpless as well, and as a result, the malaise has no power over him.

Binx shows more love and tenderness toward Lonnie than any other character in the novel except perhaps Kate. It seems as if the wall of his ironic detachment actually comes down around Lonnie. Between the two of them, words still have meaning, and communication is possible: "[Lonnie's] words are not worn out. It is like a code tapped through a wall. Sometimes he asks me straight out: do you love me? and it is possible to tap back: yes, I love you" (Moviegoer 162). Without a doubt, the two have a special relationship; it is as if Binx admires what he sees in Lonnie. Despite the latter's physical handicaps, Binx says, "I would not mind so much trading places with him" (137). Although Lonnie dies at the end of the novel, his death is not tragic, at least not for Binx

⁶ The word "religious" is rather ambiguous; Kierkegaard used the term to refer specifically to Christianity, but the word has taken on a more general meaning today; after all, there are many different religions. Also, for someone to be "religious" often simply means that they occasionally think about spiritual things, which does not constitute residence in the spiritual stage. As Binx says, "[A] peculiar word this in the first place, *religion*; it is something to be suspicious of" (237).

and not for Lonnie himself. Binx knows that Lonnie's death is not so much the final defeat of Lonnie's body but the final victory of his spirit, which, according to the belief that Binx and Lonnie now hold in common, is destined to live forever in bliss with God. Lonnie's victory is made complete in the fact that Binx, for whom Lonnie has always offered communion (165), has joined him in the religious stage. The example of Lonnie's life and death help make possible Binx's own victory over the death-in-life of despair.

If Lonnie is an example to Binx in his heroic struggle to confront and eventually defeat the despair of his life, Kate is the character who both mirrors and propels his search, and eventually makes possible his leap of faith. Kate mirrors Binx in that she is herself a searcher (though not a self-conscious searcher like Binx). Although Kate has not analyzed and labeled her existential problems like Binx, she does not hide from the despair either. She says, "I feel fine when I'm sick. It is only when I'm well that—" (Moviegoer 80). She does not finish the thought, but the idea is that life is bearable when she knows what is wrong with her; her problem is living when external circumstances are good. Both Binx and Kate struggle with the same problem, that of existing from day to day, but he does so with a cold detachment that prompts her to say, "You're like me, but worse. Much worse" (43).

In a way, Kate does eventually reach the religious stage. She announces, "I am a religious person... What I want is to believe in someone completely and then do what he wants me to do" (Moviegoer 197). It would be more accurate to say that Percy uses her as an illustration of the religious stage. Simply saying that one is religious does not mean that a relationship with God has commenced; also, she decides to "believe completely" in Binx and does what he tells her to do, and Binx is certainly not God. However, this

declaration is emblematic of the decision one makes when entering the religious stage. Realizing that she cannot make sense out of life on her own, Kate has decided to look outside herself for help. Though she is still a troubled person, one gets the impression in the epilogue that she has begun to improve, even physically: "In the past year, she has fattened up; her shoulders are sleek as a leopard" (239). The novel ends with her going on an errand, comfortable only with Binx's assurances that he will be thinking about her the whole time. Kate also makes possible Binx's own leap of faith, because his love for her leads him to give up his futile "Little Way" and accept responsibility for another. At the same time that Binx gives up his cultivated aesthetic life in order to take care of Kate as her husband, he accepts the need to live "grounded transparently in God" (Sickness 163) in order to gain the selfhood that his self-centered aesthetic life could not, paradoxically, provide.

Until the very end of the novel, Binx is helpless despite his ironic understanding of the world, because he understands everything and everyone—except himself. Ultimately, however, Binx hits rock bottom in his aesthetic lifestyle and makes his own leap of faith. The final catalyst that allows Binx to make his leap comes after a miserable trip to Chicago with Kate. They return to New Orleans on Fat Tuesday, the Mardi Gras parades having ended and the cleanup begun in the cold rain. As Allen explains, the dismal scene illustrates Binx's state of mind; the trip to Chicago, culminating in a failed attempt at sexual intimacy with Kate, exhausted the possibilities of the aesthetic realm for Binx (Allen 41). The trip showed Binx with harsh reality that the carnival of his carefully tended aesthetic life could not provide a satisfying conclusion to his search.

Immediately following his return from Chicago, Binx is given an angry lecture by Aunt Emily for failing in his duty to Kate, etc., and afterwards, while waiting for Kate, Binx very nearly falls back into the abyss of the aesthetic realm.⁷ He says that “the malaise has settled like a fall-out,” and “on this my thirtieth birthday, I know nothing and there is nothing to do but fall prey to desire” (Moviegoer 228). This moment constitutes the dramatic conclusion of the book, not dramatic for the external action, but for the internal struggle Binx goes through. He feels as if his search has failed, and in the absence of any remedy for the malaise, the only thing he can do is to “fall prey to desire” in an effort to forget his troubles. To that end he tries to call his secretary, and when he finds that she is gone he begins to flirt with her roommate.

Hope arrives, however, in the form of Kate’s 1951 Plymouth, and in that moment, as nearly as it is possible to discern,⁸ Binx turns his back on the aesthetic and makes his leap of faith. Thus, Binx is finally enabled to transcend the aesthetic stage to the religious. Walker Percy has said in an interview that “Binx jumps from the esthetic [sic] clear across the ethical to the religious. He has no ethical sphere at all. That’s what Aunt Emily can’t understand about him. He just doesn’t believe in being the honorable man, doing the right thing, for its own sake” (Conversations 66). Binx remained in his sometimes-pleasurable “Little Way” until he was able to make his leap of faith because he realized that Aunt Emily’s humanistic values were inadequate to address the despair.

⁷ Kierkegaard does not propose that any of the stages are necessarily permanent; one can slip back into a lower stage.

⁸ Binx’s movement into the religious stage is understated, even ambiguous, partly because Percy wanted to avoid moralizing, as will be discussed later, and partly because, as Robert Coles explains in his book Walker Percy: An American Search, “the shift from one ‘stage’ to another cannot be turned into an occasion for dramatic presentation or wordy explication, because in many respects the person appears the same after he has made such a shift; even ‘the leap of faith’ is something inward and ineffable” (Coles 171).

Although Binx himself remains cagey at the end of the novel, the author provides ample clues to show that he reaches a spiritual resolution. For example, as Kate and Binx sit in her car, Binx sees a black man coming out of a church (the day is Ash Wednesday), and his musings as he watches the man provide a clue to the spiritual nature of his search, and its conclusion:

It is impossible to say why he is here. Is it part and parcel of the complex business of coming up in the world? Or is it because he believes that God himself is present here at the corner of Elysian Fields and Bons Enfants? Or is he here for both reasons: through some dim dazzling trick of grace, coming for the one and receiving the other as God's own importunate bonus? It is impossible to say. (Moviegoer 235)

Like the man coming out of the church, Binx has been doing what he thought he had to do to survive in the world. In the process, by means outside his control, he has come into contact with the grace of God. Kierkegaard explains that a man like Binx can become a man of faith when he realizes "that there is a God, and that he, he himself, his self, exists before this God, which gain of infinity is never attained except through despair"

(Sickness 160). Though Binx's search was fraught with imperfection and uncertainty, it has at last come to fruition as he has at last stumbled into the dazzling light of the grace of God.

The action of the epilogue takes place the day before Lonnie's death, after Binx and Kate have been to visit the dying boy. Binx comforts his half-brothers and sisters as Kate looks on. A seemingly minor part of the conversation between Binx and the children shows that Binx has indeed found hope in a world infested with malaise; one of the

children asks, “When Our Lord raises us up on the last day, will Lonnie still be in a wheelchair or will he be like us?” ‘He’ll be like you.’ ‘You mean he’ll be able to ski?’ The children cock their heads and listen like old men. ‘Yes’” (Moviegoer 240). In reference to this scene Percy has said in an interview that “Binx doesn’t joke...he tells the truth. He wouldn’t have said ‘yeah’ if he didn’t mean it” (Conversations 66). Percy goes on to say that “Kate missed it, missed the whole thing” (Conversations 66). Binx really believes what he tells the kids, but Kate, who thinks that Binx is cold and callous about Lonnie’s sickness, does not understand his new way of looking at things.

Unfortunately, some critics have “missed the whole thing” as well. For example, John Edward Hardy’s attitude towards both Binx and Percy, in his book The Fiction of Walker Percy, is baffling; he complains that Binx’s manner towards Kate is one of authoritarian control rather than patient love, and insists that Percy should have spelled out the details of Binx’s relationships with both God and Kate—he even goes so far as to protest that Percy does not inform the reader as to whether Binx and Kate “have managed any better sexually after marriage than they did on the way to Chicago before” (Hardy 51-53). Such quibbling is irrelevant; Percy’s deftly made point is that Binx has been able to relate to Kate by means of a transcending relationship with God. Binx no longer has the ironic detachment which characterized him while he was in the aesthetic stage—that wall has come down. Binx’s commitment to Kate shows that by living a life that is “grounded transparently in God,” he has been able to put an end to his play acting and become a real self, capable of loving another person.

Of course, Percy does not exactly spell out the transformation that has taken place in Binx’s life, because he wisely realized that overt moralization has no place in a serious

novel. At the same time, however, the fact that many of the readers and critics of The Moviegoer missed the message of hope in the midst of despair that is in the novel was profoundly upsetting to Percy (Tolson 300-302). Percy felt unable to talk of Christian faith more directly in his novels because of what he sees as the staleness of religious language. In her book Understanding Walker Percy, Linda Whitney Hobson explains further: "Walker Percy is a Christian novelist but he also knows that the words of faith are used up, meaningless, and one therefore can't talk of faith in a novel. He can only describe the outward signs of his hero's faith, and let the reader infer the rest" (42). Early in the novel Binx himself says, "I have only to hear the word God and a curtain comes down in my head" (Moviegoer 145).

Like Binx, readers would be immediately disaffected if Percy were to talk directly about man's need for God. Walker Percy says, "Start with God and man's immortal soul and you've lost every reader except those who believe in God and man's immortal soul" (Message 18). Percy illustrates further, "The Christian novelist nowadays is like a man who has found a treasure hidden in the attic of an old house, but he is writing for people who have moved out to the suburbs and who are bloody sick of the old house and everything in it" (Message 116). For this reason, Percy first starts by diagnosing the problem (despair), and if the presentation of the problem is sufficiently disturbing, then the message of Christian faith may have new meaning for the reader.

Aside from the staleness of religious language, Percy does not overtly preach the Christian message in his novel simply because that is not the place of the novelist. In the epilogue Binx's reason for not telling the outcome of his search is this: "I have not the authority, as the great Danish philosopher declared, to speak of such matters in any way

other than the edifying" (Moviegoer 237). The "great Danish philosopher" is of course a reference to Kierkegaard, and since Binx cannot tell what has happened to him without being edifying (the role of an apostle, according to Kierkegaard), he declines to speak of it.

Percy gives Binx the unenviable task of figuring out what is wrong with the world, and Binx realizes that figuring out the world and figuring out himself are one and the same. The problem with the world around him begins with a problem with his self, or more accurately, his lack of a self. Thus, Binx's existential heroism lies in the fact that he saves himself, and possibly helps others in their own diagnoses as well by awakening them to their own despair. By determinedly choosing despair and accepting his status as a castaway, Binx finds himself in a position to come to an understanding of himself, of God, and what one has to do with the other.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Allen, William Rodney. Walker Percy: A Southern Wayfarer. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1986. Allen's prime interest is psychoanalytic in nature; his aim is to discover how Percy's novels were influenced by his struggles with the memory of his father, who committed suicide when Percy was thirteen. Although this psychoanalytic approach may be a bit dated, the importance of the father figure in Percy's novels and the connection with Percy's own experience is certainly there. Over and over again, Percy presents a protagonist whose father failed in life and committed suicide, but the protagonists consistently turn their backs on their father's way out of despair to find meaning in love for a woman and for God.

Brinkmeyer, Robert H., Jr. "Percy's Bludgeon: Message and Narrative Strategy." Walker Percy: Art and Ethics. Ed. Jac Tharpe. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1980. 80-90. In this short essay, Brinkmeyer's interest is in Percy's intention to shock readers out of their complacency and into an awareness of their alienation (despair), pointing the way to a search for God. In so far as it accomplishes this aim, Brinkmeyer believes that Lancelot is Percy's most successful novel.

Coles, Robert. Walker Percy: An American Search. Boston: Little, 1978. Coles' book is divided into three sections. The first deals with Percy's philosophical roots that formed prior to his writing any novels. The second section deals with Percy's nonfiction writing, and the third deals with the novels. Coles makes some good observations, but overall, the book is not a first class work of criticism (especially considering some clumsy mistakes, such as his calling Binx's Aunt Emily "Aunt Kate").

Desmond, John F. "Walker Percy's Eucharistic Vision." Renaissance: Essays on Values in Literature 52 (2000): 219-228. Infotrac. 5 April 2005

<http://infotrac.galegroup.com/search>. Percy believed that a radical break between mind and matter has occurred in modern man, so that many of the problems with language and life in general experienced by humans today come from mankind's inability to reconcile the two. People may live entirely in the mind ("angelism"), or entirely in the body ("bestialism"). After briefly establishing this background, Desmond proposes that the Catholic sacrament of the Eucharist is of vital importance to Percy's novels because Catholics believe in transubstantiation, an act in which the bread and wine literally become the body and blood of Christ. Thus, the spiritual becomes physical, and spiritual life is then imputed to those who receive the physical embodiment of Christ.

Grabar, Mary. "Percy's Despairing Female in the 'Unmoved Mover.'" Renaissance: Essays on Values in Literature 54 (2002): 119-138. Infotrac. 5 April 2005

<http://infotrac.galegroup.com/search>. Mary Grabar begins her essay by cataloguing some of the common feminist complaints leveled against Percy, particularly the complaint that "women in Percy's fiction never participate as fully in the spiritual awakening as do the men, and...are thereby relegated to secondary roles" (119). She then argues against this complaint by asserting that the character of Kate Cutrer is farther along in her spiritual search than Binx. In fact, Kate "acts as a sort of spiritual guide to Binx" (122).

Hardy, John Edward. The Fiction of Walker Percy. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1987. Hardy says in the introduction that his purpose is to "study the art of Walker Percy's

fiction, an art which in many of its affective and formal properties has not been examined at length by other critics" (1). Although this may be true, one wonders why Hardy took the trouble to address the supposed deficiency in Percy criticism when he is quite explicit about his distaste for much of Percy's art, not to mention his aversion to Percy's fundamental values. Hardy's negative opinion of Percy (and Binx Bolling) would seem to be better placed in a book review than a work of criticism.

Hobson, Linda Whitney. Understanding Walker Percy. Columbia: USC Press, 1988.

Hobson's book is a very simple introduction to understanding Percy's novels. Unlike many of the other books on Percy, this one was written late enough to include a chapter on The Thanatos Syndrome, his last novel. Although the chapters on each novel are relatively short, Hobson's analysis is quite useful in its pithiness.

Kierkegaard, Søren. Concluding Unscientific Postscript. Trans. David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1941. One of Kierkegaard's more accessible works, in which he reviews ideas set forth in his previous books. He describes his three existential spheres of existence more explicitly, those spheres, or stages, being the aesthetic, ethical, and religious. Among many other things, he also describes the role of irony in transcending the aesthetic stage and the leap of faith to the religious sphere.

---. The Sickness Unto Death. Trans. Walter Lowrie. Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1941. This book combines two of Kierkegaard's most influential works. For the purposes of this paper, however,

only one was relevant: The Sickness Unto Death. The eponymous sickness is despair, the symptoms and varieties of which Kierkegaard explains throughout the book. Despair is refusal to be oneself, which selfhood may only be achieved by willing to be oneself and becoming "grounded transparently in God" (163).

Lawson, Lewis A. and Victor A. Kramer. Conversations with Walker Percy. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1985. Walker Percy seems to have been quite willing to put up with frequent interviewers at his home in Covington, Louisiana, and this book contains over two dozen of the resulting interviews. Percy is very forthcoming in his discussion of his philosophical beliefs and of his own novels. One interview of special interest is that with Bradley R. Dewey, a Kierkegaard expert. Another very relevant interview is the one with John C. Carr, in which Percy discusses Binx Bolling at length.

Lawson, Lewis A. "From Tolstoy to Dostoyevsky in The Moviegoer." The Mississippi Quarterly 56 (2003): 411-420. Infotrac. 5 April 2005

<http://infotrac.galegroup.com/search>. Walker Percy has said himself that Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky were important influences on his work, and Lawson shows in this essay how the two authors influenced The Moviegoer. Tolstoy (more specifically War and Peace) was always of interest to Percy, but Dostoyevsky was a later and more prominent influence. Lawson says that Percy regarded Dostoyevsky as "the master of the theme of the alienated person searching for God" (411), which is something one might just as well say of Percy.

... "Moviegoing in The Moviegoer." Walker Percy: Art and Ethics. Ed. Jac Tharpe. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1980. 26-42. As the title of the essay suggests,

Lawson examines Binx's moviegoing habits and how they relate to his existentialist problems. Moviegoing in the novel is particularly tied to Binx's twin (yet opposite) aesthetic escape devices, the rotation and the repetition. Also important is Binx's affinity with the actors that he is constantly speaking of (and to), since he is an impersonator himself. The fact that Binx does not mention any movies or actors in the epilogue, Lawson suggests, is evidence of his changed life.

Percy, Walker. Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book. New York: Farrar, 1983. A zany but very accessible work of nonfiction in which Percy once again attempts an understanding of the human predicament, with special emphasis on man's unique ability to use symbols. The book is mostly a series of questions (twenty to be exact) which analyze the human self. Inserted into the center of the book is a section on semiotics, in which Percy summarizes his semiotic theory of the self, which may be found in more detail in his earlier The Message in the Bottle. In the last two sections Percy combines science fiction, semiotics, and wry social commentary into two short stories dealing with space travel.

... The Message in a Bottle: How Queer Man Is, How Queer Language Is, and What One Has to Do with the Other. New York: Farrar, 1975. The subtitle of this book, Percy's first book of nonfiction, very accurately describes the contents. He says in the opening essay ("The Delta Factor"): "This book is about two things, man's strange behavior and man's strange gift of language, and about how understanding the latter might help in understanding the former" (9). Although the biological process that is involved when communication takes place is well understood, behaviorism is not enough to explain the phenomenon of the

symbolic act itself. Percy discusses the nature of the act of symbolization and, eventually, the spiritual implications of the human ability to symbolize.

---. The Moviegoer. 1961. New York: Vintage, 1998. Percy's first novel, for which he received the National Book Award. The main character, Binx Bolling, has a seemingly "normal" life, but embarks on an existential search at the beginning of the novel in an effort to discover what it means to be a human. The main action of the novel takes place in a one week period, with Binx's search coming to a conclusion of sorts on Ash Wednesday. Binx perceives that despair infests everything and everyone around him, and his quest involves finding a way to deal with it.

---. Signposts in a Strange Land. Ed. Patrick Samway. New York: Farrar, 1991. A work of previously unpublished nonfiction compiled after Walker Percy's death. The essays, speeches, letters, and other pieces of the book are divided into three sections: Life in the South; Science, Language, and Literature; and Morality and Religion, respectively. Also included is an interview with Zoltán Abádi-Nagi, and a revealing and humorous self-interview. Of particular interest is the essay "Diagnosing the Modern Malaise," in which Percy outlines the problems he sees with contemporary society, as well as the cognitive and diagnostic capabilities of the novel form.

Pindell, Richard. "Basking in the Eye of the Storm: The Esthetics of Loss in Walker Percy's The Moviegoer." boundary 2 4 (1975): 219-230. JSTOR. 1 March 2005 <<http://www.jstor.org/search>>. In this article Richard Pindell analyzes the sense of loss in The Moviegoer, and the ways in which Binx deals with it. Binx subverts

common assumptions about value by reveling in the commonplace. Pindell is amazed at the way that Binx is able to render his sense of loss poignant, and even beautiful, and explains that Binx is able to maintain his sense of wonder by “a brooding and vigorous involvement with place and space” (226). By rendering loss beautiful in his novel, Percy has kept “green the ground for renewal” (229).

Taylor, Jerome. In Search of Self: Life, Death, and Walker Percy. Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 1986. Jerome Taylor takes a look at both Kierkegaard and Percy and their similar evaluations of the difficulties of existence. Taylor’s success is in rendering some of Kierkegaard’s extremely complex concepts understandable, and therefore paving the way to further existentialist reading. Most of his discussion of Percy’s works, however, focuses on Love in the Ruins and especially on Will Barrett, the protagonist of both The Last Gentleman and The Second Coming.

Tharpe, Jac. Walker Percy. Twayne’s United States Authors Series. Boston, Twayne, 1983. Tharpe’s book is a straightforward critical analysis of the major themes of Percy’s novels. The book has four introductory chapters which deal with Percy’s biography, his views on art and the church, and major themes of his novels. Tharpe then has a chapter on each of Percy’s first five novels, focusing on the themes of sex and religion. Tharpe’s considerable contributions to Percy studies seem at odds with some of his rather harsh critiques, such as his flatly stated assertion that “The Moviegoer does nothing to help with alienation” (63).

Tolson, Jay. Pilgrim in the Ruins: A Life of Walker Percy. New York: Simon, 1992. Tolson’s biography is the definitive work on the life of Walker Percy. All of the

events and influences in Percy's life of importance are discussed. The writing of Percy's novels and nonfiction is obviously of prime importance in the book, and Tolson gives revealing information on Percy's attitude toward his own works, his psychological states before and after their publication, his purposes in writing, and the critical reaction to each of his works. Of particular interest for the purposes of this paper was Tolson's description of the tension Percy felt between expressing his fundamental religious/moral beliefs in a serious novel, while avoiding didacticism.

Wood, Ralph C. The Comedy of Redemption: Christian Faith and Comic Vision in Four American Novelists. Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 1988. Wood says in his introduction that "Jesus' death and resurrection render human existence comic in both its roots and its ramifications," and this thesis constitutes the central argument of his book (1). The Christian faith, Wood asserts, provides victory and hope, and is therefore comic in the deepest sense of the word. Obviously, the book is not just about Percy, but it does contain two chapters on him, one of which focuses on *The Moviegoer*, which Wood calls "a comic novel in the deepest theological sense" (176).

VITA

Daniel Alexander Plunkett was born in Seattle, Washington, on October 23, 1981. He was educated at home through the third grade, and then attended Meridian Elementary School through the sixth grade. In 1993 he moved with his parents to Bôuaké, Ivory Coast, and attended International Christian Academy, where his parents served as short-term missionaries. When his family moved back to the United States in 1996 they settled near Nashville, Tennessee, and Daniel attended Pleasant View Christian School for two years. In 1998 he and his parents moved back to Ivory Coast for one year, and he graduated from International Christian Academy in 1999.

After moving back to Tennessee, Daniel attended Free Will Baptist Bible College in Nashville. In May of 2003 he graduated *cum laude* with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English. Since he did not have any serious familial or financial obligations upon graduation, he decided to live with his parents in Pleasant View, Tennessee, and pursue his education further. Assuming he satisfies all requirements, he will graduate from Austin Peay State University in Clarkesville, Tennessee, with the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

As for future plans, Daniel intends to follow where God leads, and the details of that plan are yet to be discovered.