I. Walker Percy as an Existential Writer

This research is a study of Walker Percy first and best novel *The Moviegoer* which won him the National Book Award for fiction in 1961. The study focuses on modern man's alienation in America. In the novel, Binx Bolling's self-alienation from society and finding harmony in fictitious world of movies is central to the novel. Those impersonal images on the screen seem to offer him vision into the purpose and meaning of his own life. For him, watching movies becomes watching real life, which becomes living life for him. Thus, Percy shows Bolling alienated from society and lost in fictitious world of movies to expose haunting sense of present decadent capitalistic values and the fragmented self of modern American man.

In five subsequent novels and numerous essays, Percy explored his chosen theme of "the dislocation of man in the modern age" (qtd in Simpson 180). His work combined a distinctly southern sensibility with existential philosophy and a deeply-felt Catholicism. He was a descendant of a distinguished Mississippi Protestant family that counted congressmen and Civil War heroes among its members. Before he was born, Percy's grandfather killed himself with a shotgun, setting a pattern of tragic death that would haunt the boy throughout his life.

In 1929, Percy's father committed suicide with a shotgun. Percy, his mother, and his two brothers, Phin and Roy, then moved to Athens, Georgia. Two years later, Percy's mother was killed when she drove her car off a country bridge and into a bayou-an accident that Percy later came to consider a suicide. At the invitation of his bachelor uncle, Percy and his orphaned brothers moved to

Greenville, Mississippi. There he finished his last three years of high school. His tragic past made his life miserable, throwing him into existential crisis.

After graduating from college, Percy decided to embark on a medical career. He enrolled at Columbia University's medical school. Upon completing his education, he accepted an internship at New York's Bellevue Hospital. There Percy contracted tuberculosis. He spent most of the next four years recuperating at the Trudeau Sanitorium on Saranac Lake in the Adirondack Mountains of New York and in Wallingford, Connecticut. During this period of reflection, Percy began to question the ability of science to explain the basic mysteries of human existence. He read the works of Danish existentialist writer, Soren Kierkegaard, and the Russian novelist, Fyodor Dostoevsky. These works proved revelatory and inspired Percy to become a writer rather than a physician-a pathologist of the soul rather than the body.

Percy returned to his native South and lived, for a time, in Sewanee, Tennessee. In 1946, he married Mary Bernice ("Bunt") Townsend, a medical technician, and moved to New Orleans. Supported by a family trust fund, Percy spent the next seven years writing two novels that were never published. He studied semantics under the influence of Susanne Langer's Philosophy in a New Key. Percy converted to Catholicism, partly, he acknowledged, because of reading St. Augustine. He wrote scholarly articles for learned journals about existentialism and the philosophy of language, earning some notoriety in these fields. However, he realized that he could reach a wider audience and make more money by writing fiction.

In 1961, Percy's first successful novel, *The Moviegoer*, was published by Knopf after long and creative editing and much rewriting in collaboration with

editor, Stanley Kauffman. Percy later described the novel as the story of a young man who had all the advantages of a cultivated old-line southern family: a feel for science and art, a liking for girls, sports cars, and the ordinary things of the culture, but who nevertheless feels himself quite “alienated from both worlds, the old South and the new America” (Samway 23). The book’s protagonist, Binx Bolling, attempts to numb himself from this creeping alienation by attending movies and enjoying casual sex with his secretary, but he suffers an existential breakdown while attending the annual Mardi Gras celebration with his neurotic cousin, Kate.

Percy's second novel, *The Last Gentleman*, explored similar philosophical terrain. It told the story of Williston "Bibb" Barrett, an old-fashioned southern gentleman living in New York. Barrett suffers from a recurring sense of *deja vu* and seems lost in the ultra-modern secular North. He returns to the South and takes a position as tutor to a terminally ill boy. Barrett's return to his roots is meant as an allegory of man's search for identity in an increasingly complicated world, stripped of the traditions and rituals that once gave life meaning. The book won high praise in literary circles and is generally considered Percy's most mature exploration of his core themes.

In 1971, Percy's work moved toward the surreal with the publication of *Love in the Ruins*. This was a satire about the descendant of a 16th century English saint living in the hyper-developed consumer society of the South in the near future. Inspired in equal parts by Aldous Huxley, George Orwell, and Kurt Vonnegut, the novel signaled a shift away from semi-autobiography toward a more socially critical fiction. The broad comic strokes of *Love in the Ruins* pleased some critics, but left others scratching their heads.

Percy continued on in this vein with his next novel, *Lancelot*, published in 1977. The story of a man fascinated by the courtly traditions of Arthurian romance and obsessed with discovering his wife's infidelity, it was Percy's darkest and most disturbing vision to date. The violent novel ended with a fire that destroyed the murderous narrator's gothic southern plantation house-a symbol, perhaps, of the consumption of the old value system of honor, chivalry, and social convention by the modern world. While this searing tale impressed many critics, it also left some wondering at the state of Percy's mental health.

Percy took five years off before producing his next novel, *The Second Coming*, in 1982. It saw the return of Will Barrett, the protagonist of *The Last Gentleman*. Now a retired widower, Barret lived in an exclusive North Carolina suburb where he had become "the world's most accomplished golf amateur." When his golf game turned sour, however, "hidden memories" popped up, including the truth about his father's suicide, previously thought to be a hunting accident (Tolson 27). While Will is struggling with these revelations he meets Allison, a neurotic young woman who has escaped from a mental hospital and is living in an abandoned greenhouse. This semi-autobiographical novel returned Percy to the style of his earlier works. Its exploration of a father's suicide was perhaps the novelist's most direct attempt to confront his own tragic family history.

Percy's last novel, *The Thanataos Syndrome*, was published in 1987. It was a follow-up to *Love in the Ruins* that saw that book's hero, Dr. Tom More, investigating some mysterious personality changes in his wife and children. With the help of his scientist cousin, More discovers that a group of industrialists are releasing heavy sodium into the water supply to "improve" the social welfare.

Perhaps Percy's most ambitious novel, *The Thanataos Syndrome* revisits old themes found in his previous works, while providing a forum for his biting commentary upon the post-modern predicament. The novel moves from existential themes found in his earlier novels to those subjects that most concerned him as a Catholic near the end of his life.

Over the course of 26 years, Percy published six novels and two collections of nonfiction. He enjoyed both critical and financial success and established himself as America's leading novelist. Percy's consistent themes were the decline of the old Southern order-with its paternalism, code of honor, and sentimentality-and its succession by the New South: a sterile Hollywood-like pursuit of the American Dream. His work influenced the efforts of novelists as diverse as John Hawkes and Richard Ford, and kept alive the rich tradition of southern fiction dating back through Welty, O'Connor, and Faulkner.

Literature Review

Walker Percy has become am important writer in the last twelve years on the basis of three major award-winning novels, and he is beginning to attract a fair amount of critical attention. His remarkable first novel, *The Moviegoer* (1961) has drawn the attention of numerous critics, which was largely ignored at first by reviewers until it won the National Book Award for fiction in 1962. Approximately a dozen long articles on his works have appeared in critical and scholarly journals. Taking the novel, *The Moviegoer* as one of the most profound novels ever written, Stephen Amid on says, "Percy traces with unforgettable precision an individual soul's passage through the world. His Binx is on a search that proves every bit as urgent as that of Bunyan's pilgrim, Christian, as he looks for a way of living that helps him avoid being 'sunk in everydayness'" (5).

Percy's The Moviegoer deals with the emptiness of human life in the modern times. Despite his affluent lifestyle and gook position in society, Binx Bolling feels the lack of substance in his life. So, he embarks on a search for something meaningful. In this regard, Roger Kimball writes, "The novel's protagonist is a bemused person, engaged in 'the search': an amorphous, yet desperate, struggle to escape from the emptiness that suffuses his quiet, everyday life in a New Orleans suburb" (3).

Commenting on the major characters in the novel, Lewis p.Simpson says that his "protagonists are intellectually aware of their grotesqueness and agonizingly self-conscious- run the risk of being emblems of Kierkegaard Ian philosophy" (181). Similarly, describing the protagonist. Binx Bolling as a disillusioned person, John Wakeman remarks:

> Binx Bolling suffers chronically and sometimes acutely from a sense that he lacks identity or even reality, and who is finally preoccupied with death. The activities that alleviate his 'invincible apathy' are 'working, making money, going to movies and seeking the company of women.' Bolling is in despair and ignorant of his condition only because in the words of the book's epigraph, 'the specific character of despair is precisely this, it is unaware of being in despair.' (661)

Similarly, Ted Howell explores this despair which he describes as a malaise. Percy describes the predicament of contemporary people, who are trying to live in a new post-modern age, experience and every day de-evaluation of life and its marvels. Howell writes:

> This malaise as Percy and Binx Bolling call it is reversible through portrayal in literature, opening the possibility of reevaluation. In the text Percy exposes three particular 'coping mechanism' Bolling uses to avoid his malaise: abstraction and detachment through philosophy and science, 'the rotation method,' and the performance of redemption. All of these prove inadequate, and Binx's search intensifies, leading into a love affair and a deeper consciousness of despair, which Binx finds to be the true source of his malaise. (170)

The text explores the modrtm disease cjaeactrozed by estramge,emt and boredom. Binx Bolling immerses himself in the movies on an attempt to seek meaning in his life. In this connection, James D.Hart in *The Oxford Companion to America Literature* writes, "The moviegoer deals with an alienated young stock broker of new Orleans, addicted to the movies who during Mardi Gras finally finds his own involvement in life through compassionate relationship with a woman who has suffered a personal tragedy" (581).

Lois Parkinson Zamora,in *The American Journals of Semiotics* finds the similarity between Binx in *The Moviegoer* and Toto *in La traicion de Rita Hayworth.* He remarks, "Both Binx and Toto are romantics, alienated from their societies and longing for an unattainable realm which life cannot provide but which the movies can, and both are described in these terms" (par.11). He further comments on the protagonist of *The Moviegoer* like this:

> He is a moviegoer though of course he does not go to the movies. The moviegoer then is one who uses art to mediate between desire and reality, one for whom life should imitate the ideal realm of art.

> The 'moviegoer' must inevitability feel the loss of a world that might be but that never will be, a world realized only in art which is distanced from reality, conventional and stylized rather than faithfully mimetic. (11)

The major concern of the Southern writers – Walker Percy, Flannery O'Connor, John Updike and the likes has always been a search for salvation of the individual in religion. In this connection, while comparing the novel *The Moviegoer* with Camus' *The Fall* and Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* Brainard, Cheney finds striking similarities among these novels as he says, "Each of the works presents a narrator-hero who reveals himself to be a villain – or, more exactly, a dammed man seeking salvation.

As the novel emerged after the World War II, it bears the postmodern pangs. There is nothingness, meaninglessness and despair in this period, however, the post-modern man accepts these things as inevitable phenomenon. He struggles hard to establish himself in the displaced world. Richard Pindell views the novel's hero, Binx Bolling's struggle as existential and he writes:

> In the course of *The Moviegoer* he awakens to the possibility of a search for how he can best place himself in the world. "To become aware of the possibility of the search", he notes, formulating the burden of O'Connor's statement in other terms, "is to be 'unto something '. Not to be into something is to be in despair." Brought alive by his research, learning along the way in trust and patience to patience the arts of openness and to promote kindness. (219)

Carl, E. Olson, one of Percy's good friends read a lot about his writing and preferred him to call a 'diagnostician of the modern malaise.' He accepts that

Percy was truly a Southern and Catholic. As he read *The Moviegoer* he was greatly impressed and writes that "as I read the book two things impressed me: the beauty of his writing and the spiritual longing which permeates the book" (2).

Although these critics have hinted at the theistic analysis of *The Moviegoer*, this researcher attempts to analyze the novel from atheistic perspective. The study has been divided into four chapters. The first chapter presents an introductory outline of the research work, a short introduction to Walker Percy and a short critical response.

The second chapter tries to briefly explain the theoretical modality that is applied in this research work. It discusses existentialism with reference to atheism. On the basis of the theoretical framework established in the second chapter, the third chapter analyzes the text at a considerable length. It analyzes how modern man has become alienated. It sorts out some extracts from the text as evidence to prove the hypothesis of the study ─ Percy shows Bolling alienated from society and lost in fictitious world of movies to expose haunting sense of present decadent capitalistic values and the fragmented self of modern American man. And, the fourth chapter is the conclusion of this research work.

II. A Study of Atheistic Existentialism

In the broader sense, existentialism is a twentieth century philosophy that is centered upon the analysis of existence and of the way humans find themselves existing in the world. The notion is that humans exist first and then each individual spends a lifetime changing their essence or nature. In other words, existentialism is a philosophy concerned with finding self and the meaning of life through free will, choice, and personal responsibility. The belief is that people are searching to find out who and what they are throughout life as they make choices based on their experiences, beliefs, and outlook. And personal choices become unique without the necessity of an objective form of truth. An existentialist believes that a person should be forced to choose and be responsible without the help of laws, ethnic rules, or traditions.

Existentialistic ideas came out of a time in society when there was a deep sense of despair following the Great Depression and World War II. There was a spirit of optimism in society that was destroyed by World War I and its mid-century calamities. This despair has been articulated by existentialist philosophers well into the 1970s and continues on to this day as a popular way of thinking and reasoning – with the freedom to choose one's preferred moral belief system and lifestyle. An existentialist could either be a religious moralist, agnostic relativist, or an amoral atheist. Kierkegaard, a religious philosopher, Nietzsche, an anti-Christian, Sartre, an atheist, and Camus an atheist, are credited for their works and writings about existentialism. Sartre is noted for binging international attention to existentialism in the 20th century. Each basically agrees that human life is in no way complete and fully satisfying because of suffering and losses that occur when considering the lack of

perfection, power, and control one has over their life. Even though they do agree that life is not optimally satisfying, it nonetheless has meaning. Existentialism is the search and journey for true self and true personal meaning in life.

Most importantly, it is the arbitrary act that existentialism finds most objectionable – that is, when someone or society tries to impose or demand that their beliefs, values, or rules be faithfully accepted and obeyed. Existentialists believe this destroys individualism and makes a person become whatever the people in power desire thus they are dehumanized and reduced to being an object. Existentialism then stresses that a person's judgment is the determining factor for what is to be believed rather than by arbitrary religious or secular world values.

Existentialism as a philosophical concept has been in vogue in recent years especially after the postwar periods. So, the theory of existentialism found a particular relevance during and after the Second World War when Europe found itself threatened by “incoherence, emptiness and lack of durability of Western civilization” (Abrams 167). The negative aspects of human existence such as pain, frustration, sickness and death became for existentialist the essential features of human realities. As the doctrine emerged worldwide, the existentialist thinkers also differed greatly in various ways. However, it may be said that with existentialists the problem of individual is central and that they stress on man's real existence, his uncertain nature, his personal freedom and his responsibilities for what he does and make him to be.

In fact, man is free of routines and conventions; he has no fixed preset destiny and any kind of unseen power. Existentialism speaks of a kind of personal freedom that is “inviolable regardless of circumstances and that can

exist . . . anywhere in the world" (Killiger 303). Sartre further says that the freedom of man depends not on situation but on attitude. Sartre says that "man is freedom" (304). Sartre and the existentialists are vitally interested in the whole problem of what it means to be free. Existentialism, according to them, constitutes an effort to rehabilitate man in his own eyes, to restore him to himself. In this sense, we can say that existentialism tries to return man to himself as freedom, as possibly and openness to the future, as indeterminate potentiality. Man's nature is not "fixed" as a stone's or tree's is; he is a creature with the ability to choose, and decides what he shall become.

When man is born, he brings with him nothing but his mere physical body. In this sense, he is an alienated being. This feeling of utter alienation was the product of the recognition of Nietzsche's proclamation "Death of God" on the one hand and the cabalism of the World War I and II on the other. Not only "God *is* dead" as Nietzsche proclaimed, but also all the intermediary values connecting God and man declined. Man has lost even the certainties and values of his own existence, which he had originally supposed to receive from his belief in God. He is thus a castrated and deserted animal in the overwhelming and the absurd universe. He is thrown into this world which possesses no meaning.

On the background of such fragmented and disillusioned situation, many writers and philosophers sought at least to reduce if not to alleviate the present condition of modern man. They had nostalgic feelings and expressed contempt for those rulers who had waged wars frequently for the fulfillment of their trivial individual selfishness. The writers easily realized that life has become alarmingly insecure. Moreover, the industrial revolution, the race for ornaments, large-scale manufacture and the great political tycoons and straps has shaken the

very foundation of human existence. As it is, today existential philosophy is probably the most dynamic of appropriate philosophical movement to define and interpret the anxiety, absurdity and the uncertainties of the human existence at the modern time.

The centrality of individual passion in contrast to the passion of the mass as Kierkegaard called “crowd,” or Dostoevsky’s “an ant in an ant heap” is one of the basic concepts of existential philosophers. (qtd. in *The Encyclopedia Britannica* 620). For Kierkegaard, ‘crowd’ and cowardliness are the one and same thing. He believes in the view that “truth lies only with the individual being” (809). So, for him ‘crowd’ is untruth. He emphasizes the distinction between "subjective truth (what a person is) and objective truth (what the person knows), and says that we encounter "the true self not in the detachment of thought but in the involvement and agony of choice and in the pathos of commitment to our choice" (qtd. in Bigelow 171). The individual is the combination of temporal (in the process of becoming) and eternal (for from) existence) and, finite and infinite. The individual is a paradox within himself. Kierkegaard holds the view that the belief in a crowd and gathering is the belief in abstract system, which is the only possibility and never occurs, but belief in the individual is the belief in concrete existence that constitutes reality.

Nietzsche also rejects the concern for the welfare of ‘crowd’ and the establishment of “common good” or “herd-desires” (804). He advocates for the “unconditional mental and physical state of the free and independent thinker rather than the consensus of the herd” (814). He considers that the free and independent thinker does not care about good and evil while exercising his “life will “to possess an unbounded “power – will” subjective will and instincts,”

according to Nietzsche, play a major role in shaping the ideas of an individual (817). Thus, Nietzsche advocates the welfare of an individual. He values an individual's subjective way of looking at things in this meaningless world.

Although there is no denying the fact that many Christians and even some Jewish theologians have made use of existentialist themes in their writings, it remains a fact that existentialism is much more readily and commonly associated with atheism than with any sort of theism, Christian or otherwise because of its strong emphasis on the first premises that existence of man is the most important thing. So, the concept of existentialism is that man is the center of all things.

Historically, existentialism began with Kierkegaard's protest against Hegel, and it would appear that a philosophy that refuses to dissolve the individual in any larger medium can never accommodate itself to a historicism in the same fashion of Hegel which always knows what the individual is doing better than he does himself and absorbs every revolt and conflict and assertion of individual freedom into an over-all, logical, and necessary development.

Sartre is aware of these difficulties. His strategy in dealing with them has been to play down the "deterministic and materialistic aspects Marx's teaching and to emphasize its humanistic origin, Marx's sense of the human predicament under capitalism and his affirmation of freedom through the activity of the awakened proletariat in liberating humanity" (qtd. in Olafson 127). He appears to believe that this corrected existentialist version of Marxism offers a more adequate philosophy of the revolution.

In this way, Sartre's embrace of Marxism is a function of his sense of history as the factic situation in which the project of self-making takes place. Because existing is self-making action, philosophy – including existential

philosophy – cannot be understood as a disinterested theorizing about timeless essences but is always already a form of engagement with the past and a projection of norms appropriate to a different future in light of which the present takes on significance. It therefore always arises from the historical-political situation and is a way of intervening in it. Marxism, like existentialism, makes this necessarily practical orientation of philosophy explicit.

Existential philosophy views that man is free to choose his destiny. The belief not to believe in faith comes under atheistic existentialism as opposed to theistic existentialism which emphasizes on the man's relationship with God. As existentialism emphasizes on the freedom of choice of an individual to set a course of his destiny, not to believe in God is a personal choice made on the basis of a passion, experience, and observation. So, atheistic existentialists can freely choose not to believe in God. So, Sartre divides the existentialist thinkers into two groups. The theistic or Christian group includes Martin Bubber, Kierkegaard, Gabriel and Karl Jaspers. In the atheistic group, Sartre ranks as a leader after Martin Heidegger and other French existentialists.

Atheistic existentialism begins by agreeing with nihilism. Nihilism is the belief that all values are baseless and that nothing can be known or communicated. It is often associated with extreme pessimism and a radical skepticism that condemns existence. A true nihilist would believe in nothing, have no loyalties, and no purpose other than, perhaps, an impulse to destroy. While few philosophers would claim to be nihilists, nihilism is most often associated with Friedrich Nietzsche who argued that its corrosive effects would eventually destroy all moral, religious, and metaphysical convictions and precipitate the greatest crisis in human history.

Among philosophers, Friedrich Nietzsche is most often associated with nihilism. For Nietzsche, there is no objective order or structure in the world except what we give it. Penetrating the façades buttressing convictions, the nihilist discovers that all values are baseless and that reason is impotent. "Every belief, considering something true," Nietzsche writes in his “Will to Power,” "is necessarily false because there is simply no true world" (12). For him, nihilism requires a radical repudiation of all imposed values and meaning: "Nihilism is . . . not only the belief that everything deserves to perish; but one actually puts one's shoulder to the plough; one destroys” (13).

Obviously, Fredrick Nietzsche is the forerunner and chief source of inspiration for the atheistic existentialists as his declaration “God is dead” influenced many thinkers. These thinkers repudiated the concept of God as an authentic shelter. They began to regard human beings as optimistically forlorn, free and spotless and a helpless creature. In this helpless universe, the atheistic existentialists undertake to create a system in which an individual is paradoxically free and condemned to choose his own destiny, whereas, the theistic existentialists hold that the anxiety of modern man can be eradicated when one submits himself to the will of God.

In the nineteenth century, Nietzsche called Christianity a “slave morality” and held that religion provides no truth because ‘God is dead’ and Christianity has become a shelter of weak and displaced people that he hated" (Russell 732). Nietzsche expresses his view on religion and God as “the Christian conception of God – God as sick, God as a spider, God as spirit – is one of the most corrupt conceptions of the divine order ever-attained on earth. God has declared war

against life, against nature, against the will to live” as the Christianity itself has defined God through such symbols and metaphors (912).

In the twentieth century, existential nihilism began with the notion that the world is without meaning or purpose. Given this circumstance, existence itself – all action, suffering, and feeling – is ultimately senseless and empty. At that time, it's the atheistic existentialist movement, popularized in France in the 1940s and 50s, that is responsible for the currency of existential nihilism in the popular consciousness.

Sartre, who ranks himself in a group of atheistic existentialists along with others, insists that “existence precedes essence” (304). Because man can choose, within the limits of his finitude, how he shall live, his existence occurs before his essence is determined. Sartre's straightforward vision of existentialism lays emphasis upon the existence of individual –"first of all man exists, turns up, appears on the scene, and only after wards defines himself" (13). For existentialists, man himself is responsible for his action and effect. Sartre says that it is the feelings of freedom and responsibility that is the source of man's anguish (15). Anguish is an emotion to all man's problems. For Heidegger, man's existence in the world is fund mentally different from the being of others only because man exists, while other does not. Heidegger says, "the being whose manner of being is existence is man: man alone exists. A rock is, but does not exist. A tree is, but it does not exist . . . God is but does not exist" (65).

Hence, Sartre, one of the eminent French existentialists, contributed to the meaning of atheistic existentialism. Along with Albert Camus and Samuel Beckett, he developed the existential philosophy to its farthest point. The earlier thinkers such as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Heidegger are the chief influences

upon these three great philosophers and writers. Sartre put himself in the group of anti-religious existentialists and described existentialism as a "means of facing the consequences of the modern world that is devoid of any absolute power like God" (13-15). Elaborating on atheistic existentialism, Sartre writes:

> It states that if god does not exist, there is at least one being in whom existence precedes essence, a being that exists before he can be defined by any concept, and that this being is man, or, as Heidegger says human reality. What is meant here by saying that existence precedes essence? It means that, first of all, man exists, turns up, appears on the scene and, only afterwards, defines himself. (15)

Even to think of God is to go against life, against the will to power. As there is no God in the world, the supermen are the gods. The supermen are higher men, who declare war over the masses of inferior men, and are free from any restrictions imposed by the society.

Thus, the term "existentialism" covers diverse areas both geographically and theoretically contrasting directions. In terms of its function and nature, the *Encyclopedia Britannica* describes existentialism in line with atheism:

> Existentialism can insist on the transcendence of being with respect to existence, and by holding this transcendence to be the origin of foundation existence, it can thus be assumed a theistic term. On the other hand, it can hold that human existence, posing itself as a problem projects itself with freedom creating itself by itself, this assuming to itself the function of god. As such existentialism presents itself as a radical atheism. (621)

As most of the existentialists claim, Sartre also stresses upon the subjectivity of the individual. But the individual is not free from other beings. When he becomes conscious of Rene Descartes' "*Cogito ergo sum*, i.e. I think, therefore I am," he also becomes aware of the other that constitutes his whole beings. (qtd. in Gaarder 238). The central tenet of Sartre's existentialism, says Robert C. Solomon, "is the freedom of human consciousness, freedom to act, freedom to value, and freedom to make itself" (89). Sartre, as Heidegger says, holds that only human beings exist. He argues that emotions can be understood only if it is said in the context of this total "human reality" (289)

Another German thinker, Heidegger, who publicity praised Hitler and Nazism, is another leading figure of atheistic existentialism. He made a distinction between beings and "being"; the oblivion of "being" (individual) into the beings (group) has made us last in unreal existence (879). To get back the last being, Heidegger suggests us to "return in the ground of metaphysics, and find the rots of our existence" (qtd. in Ellmann and Feidelson 808). He held the belief that man should face explicitly the problem of "being": he has to determine his own existence create his own possibilities and make choices and commitment. The feeling of dread due to the awareness of death, may incite us to flee away from the problems of being, accepting a way of life set by others instead of coming face to face with it. But if we take the dread of death as an opportunity, we may construct our life unique, and our own.

Emphasizing on action, freedom, and decision as fundamental, existentialist thinkers oppose then selves to rationalism and positivism. That is, they argue against definitions of human beings as primarily rational rather, existentialists look at where people find meaning. So, existentialism asserts that

people actually make decisions based on what holds meaning to them rather than what is rational.

Jean-Paul Sartre saw rationality as a form of "bad faith," an attempt by the self to impose structure on a world of phenomena – "the other" – that is fundamentally irrational and random. According to him, rationality and other forms of "bad faith" hinder us from finding meaning and freedom. So, Sartre defines existentialism as an "attempt to make life persistent by creating a system in which one realizes "human loneliness and human subjectivity" (10). So, the focus of existentialism is on "being" and subjectivity as opposed to the logical reasoning or "objectivity" individual experience rather than abstract thought and philosophy is given importance in existentialism.

The rejection of reason as the source of meaning is a common theme of the existentialist thought as it focuses on the feelings of anxiety as dread that we feel in the face of our radical freedom and our awareness of death. Kierkegaard saw rationality as a mechanism humans use to counter their existential anxiety, their fear of being in the world. He says, "If I can believe that I am rational and everyone else is rational then I have nothing to fear and no reason to feel anxious about being free" (135).

At the present time marked by chaos and insecurity, where human have failed to have a meaningful existence, existentialism is the most appropriate philosophical theory to define and interpret the human predicament –anxiety, absurdity and the uncertainty. For existentialism, the most important thing is the knowledge of the absurd existence, which awakens the human beings to freedom and choice, and therefore, presents us from being simply things. In this regard, Abrams says:

> Existential philosophy views a human being as an isolated existent who is cast into an alien universe, as possessing no inherent truth, value, or meaning and to represent human life – in its fruitless search for purpose and meaning, as it moves from the nothingness where it came toward the nothingness where it must and as an existence which is both anguished and absurd. (1)

In this regard, M.H. Abram's explanation of the term "absurd" would be insightful: "The term is applied to a number of works . . . , which have in common the sense that the human condition is essentially and ineradicably absurd and that this condition can be adequately represented in works of literature that are themselves absurd" (1). This implies that human condition at the modern time is completely ridiculous and nonsensical which can be shown through literary forms which look nonsensical and illogical. Instead of concerning on logic or rationality, Sartre says, "existentialities is primarily concerned with human existence, especially with man most extreme experience: the confrontation with death, anguish and anxiety, despair and guilt" (589).

Similarly, Camus said, "In a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile. . . . This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting truly constitutes the feeling of Absurdity" (qtd. in Abrams 1). Rene Wedlock writes that existentialism is a last and vital trend in this centre. It dominated French and German intellectual scene after World War II. He further classified that "if we interpret existentialism as a philosophy of despair, of fear and trembling, of man's exposition to a hostile universe the reason for it s spread are not far to

seek” (82). Thus he says the world is void, meaningless, irrational and absurd further.

In this sense, Albert camas is a strong follower of all atheistic philosophy. As Frederick Olafson genuinely remarks, Camus believes in fraternity and humanism rather than 'nihilism'. He states that "this universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor fertile" (132). Camus reached the conclusion to declare the condition of man to be absurd when he realized that the speculative system of past provided no reliable guidance for life or guaranteed any foundation of human values. According to Camus, when the absurd man becomes aware of his futile living, he is naturally filled with anxiety and hopelessness but he does not surrender himself to the mouth of death.

One of the hallmarks of existentialism is its strict contemporaneity. Its view of life grows out of, reflects, and accuses the mood of the times. It is this inevitable contemporaneity that makes the message of existentialism so urgent. It is of our times and it is to our times, and it is set so thoroughly within the context of where we live that we cannot fail to be impressed by its passionate relevance. And there is a remarkable rightness, or givenness, about most of its observations.

In the strict sense, or in the academic sense, existentialism is more a corrective than a philosophy because as a corrective, it speaks to all philosophies. Its major objective in our century has been to make man aware of himself and his freedom by setting him in boundary situations where, faced with his finitude and his own non-existence, he must choose his self or his annihilation. So, to exist authentically in the highest degree is the aim that existentialism sets before every man. This is tantamount to real human freedom.

Thus existentialism frequently reminds us that there is a kind of freedom, though it is not free from dread.

This dissertation seeks to show that in *The Moviegoer*, we find the major character in total existential crisis because of his inability to reconcile with the material and technological development. As a result, the protagonist Binx Bolling fails to satisfy himself, so out of disappointment he excessively indulges himself in worldly activities before he settles down for life. The following chapter analyzes this in a greater detail.

III. Alienation and Escapism: An Existential Study of *The Moviegoer*

Walker Percy's chief concern as a novelist is with 'the dislocation of man in the modern age,' with the sense of ennui and meaninglessness that has shadowed so many lives, even - or perhaps especially - in the midst of affluence. The thing that fascinates him he once told one interviewer is the fact that men can be well-off, judging by their own criteria, with all their needs satisfied, goals achieved, yet as time goes on, life is almost unbearable and amazing. Thus in his first and most celebrated work, *The Moviegoer* we find the bemused protagonist, Binx Bolling, engaged in 'the search': an amorphous, yet desperate, struggle to escape from the emptiness that suffuses his quiet, everyday life in a New Orleans suburb.

Percy's *The Moviegoer* deals with the modern man's alienation which forces him to escape into the fictitious world. In the novel the protagonist, Binx Bolling has become an alienated and fragmented being as he indulges himself in the fictitious world of movies. He frequents the movie theatres almost as an addict. The impersonal images that he sees on the screen seem to offer him vision into the purpose and meaning of his own life. For him, watching movies becomes living real life. Thus, Percy shows Bolling alienated from society and lost in fictitious world of movies to expose haunting sense of present decadent capitalistic values and the fragmented self of modern American man. So, in an attempt to seek meaningful existence Bolling wanders around indulging himself in movie watching, money-making, and seeking the company of women.

Binx Bolling is a thirty- year-old young Korean War survivor. He comes from an 'old money,' rather eccentric New Orleans family. He is something of a 'black sheep' and seemingly rather directionless. He passed up on a family

approved career in medical research – a field in which he showed talent – but now works as a stock broker in the family brokerage. He has abandoned New Orleans proper of the suburbs, spends his time making money for his clients and himself, "bedding his secretaries, and going to the movies. He lives a prototypical lost bachelor life; superficially comfortable and satisfying to the point where a man must wander. "Is that all there is?" Binx does not delude himself with conventional wisdom. He doesn't believe the answer is love or adventure in the traditional sense. He engages himself in something which he refers to as "The search" (5), a Zen-like process in which he is not so much attempting to find answers as to see the world as it truly is and to appreciate what is before his eyes. Much of this stems from his experience of being wounded during the war and while lying in great pain from his wounds, uncertain of whether he would live or die, he observes a beetle scratching around under the leaves and sees it with an existential clarity. As he watches it, he feels inspired to struggle in his life. "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" (11). His mission is to view the world as such to not give in to the despair of the mundane, but to struggle for existence.

Binx Bolling is a successful Louisiana stockbroker from a good family. Initially, he wants to find his meaningful existence through material prosperity. Though his parents are not happy with his decision to start a bond business, he takes up the bond business against the will of his parents. So, his first choice to live a materially prosperous life can be taken as an existential choice. This becomes his first step towards his search for meaningful existence. He says:

> I am a stock and bond broker. It is true that my family was somewhat disappointed in my choice of a profession. Once I thought of going into law or medicine or even pure science. I even dreamed of doing something great. But there is much to be said for giving up such grand ambitions and living the most ordinary life imaginable a life without the old longings; selling stocks and bonds and mutual funds. (9)

As a businessman, he has to deal with his staff and different people, but it is the female secretaries who must draw his attention most. He pursues them with apparent motive of sexual pleasure. This shows his hedonistic attitude towards life. Thus, this attitude of Binx comes as a result of present decadent capitalistic values which are a pleasure-seeking existence. He spends most of his time with these splendid girls, his secretaries. Binx himself says,". . . 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. Nor is the brokerage business as uninteresting as you might think. It is not a bad life at all" (9). Marcia, Sandra and Linda are his secretaries with whom Binx goes to different places by turns. But he does not stick to any of these secretaries. He keeps changing them one after another. As Percy writes," . . . casting them off one after the other like old gloves" (8). Binx Bolling's not sticking to one activity or person is the example fragmented personality in the capitalistic and materialistic world. Binx's purpose in doing this is to have new experience, by implication, new meaning. So, he moves from one superficial secular liaison devoid of substantive meaning. This is his escapement from humdrum life.

The fundamental action of the novel centers on the escalation of Binx's search over the course of several days, leading up to his thirtieth birthday. Binx knows he is sunk in "malaise", the "pain of loss" (120) and his search concentrates on the hope of a break. After a few opening remarks, Binx writes of his current state: "This morning, for the first time in years, there occurred to me the possibility of a search" (10). Binx clarifies his conception:

> What is the nature of search? You ask.
>
> Really it is very simple, at least for a fellow like me;
>
> so simple that it is easily overlooked.
>
> The search is what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life. This morning, for example, I felt as if I had come to myself on a strange island. And what does such a castaway do? Why, he poses around the neighborhood and he does not miss a trick.
>
> To become aware of the possibility of the search is to be onto something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair. (13)

Binx is careful not to specifically state the object of his search, for he has no such goal insight – he just feels that he is onto something and keeps his eyes peeled for prospects. Binx does not seem certain of what he is going to search. He is in conflict with himself. He just wants to escape from meaningless world. He makes it clear that he does not seek God, since "as everyone knows, the polls report that 98% of American believe in God and the remaining 2% are atheists and agnostics – which leaves not a single percentage point for a seeker" (14).

Thus he places himself under atheistic category. This is his stand on atheistic existentialism.

Binx Bolling sneaks into the world of fictional world of movies. He develops a fetish for the movies and thinks movie stars are surrounded by reality more than the ordinary people who he comes across. He has only resorted to it as the people and world he associates himself around lead him to existential crisis. This also reflects his escapement from the oppressive capitalistic world. He likes going to the theaters in different neighborhoods and always has to anchor himself in a specific place by getting to know the theater owner or the ticket lady. One of his great fears is becoming an ‘Anyone,’ and living in ‘Anywhere.’ He does not go to these movies but for him being a 'moviegoer' is more of an attitude, because when he meets a romantic young man on a bus, he thinks of him: "He is a 'moviegoer' though of course he does not go to movies" (216). He takes movie-going as his 'search' though he does not get what he searches. Percy says:

> The movies are onto the search, but they screw it up. The search always ends in despair. They lie to show a fellow coming to him in a strange place – but what does he do? He talks up with the local librarian, sets about proving to the local children what a nice fellow he is, and settles down with a vengeance. In two weeks time he is sunk in everydayness that he might just as well be dead. (13)

And for Binx, the unreality of his modern life is only amplified by the movie screen. At one point during a movie, he realizes that the movie was shot locally and describes a phenomenon called certification. 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. But if he sees a movie which shows his very neighborhood, it becomes possible for him to live, for a time at least, as a person who is somewhere and not anywhere

Binx's search for something unspecified leads to further existential crises. He further says that the places where he used to visit for new experience are used up now. When he wakes up, he feels as if he is in the grip of everydayness, which is trivial worldliness. He thinks, "Everydayness is the enemy" (145). No search is possible unless one makes himself free from its grip. Binx, in course of searching meaningful existence, indulges in movie-watching. He does not go to the movie-theaters as other common people who go for entertainment or to get the autographs of the stars. He finds illusion in the reality, so he turns to the movies to compare the so-called reality with the movie so as to find out which one is more real. He says:

> I am attached to movie stars but not for the usual reasons. I have no desire to speak to Holden or get his autograph. It is their peculiar reality which astounds me. The Yankee boy is well aware of it even though he pretends to ignore Holden. Clearly he would like nothing better than to take Holden over to his fraternity house in the most casual way. "Bill, I want you to meet Phil. Phil, Bill Holden," he would say and go sauntering off in the best seafaring style. (17)

Just like Binx moves from one relationship to another with his different secretaries and he watches movies quite frequently. So, movie-going activity can be taken as a means of living his life. He finds the impersonal images of the movie stars more satisfying than his bond business that fetches him good fortune.

In his struggle to search for meaning in his monotonous life, he makes friends, develops liaisons with his secretaries. But what he feels that he has had no warm and close friendship with anyone. He says:

> To tell the absolute truth, I've always been slightly embarrassed in Walter's company. Whenever I'm with him, I feel the stretch of the old tightrope, the necessity of living up to each other. There is only this thick sympathetic silence between us. We are comrades, true, but somewhat embarrassed comrades. It is probably my fault. For years now I have had no friends. (40-41)

What Binx seeks, more or less, although he himself does not put it this way, is a way to exist – an existential truth that will bring significance to his daily life and eliminate the alienation and despair that he calls ‘malaise’ in which he is currently steeped. He is a wayfarer looking for a sign. Binx phrases this by saying he is "in wonder, wondering day and night, never a moment without wonder" (42). So, he always seems to be lost in deep thought and wonder. But Binx’s family members including his mother and aunt take him as smart and genius and therefore capable for doing research. But they consider him as smart because he is quiet and absent-minded. In reality, Binx finds it very difficult to locate himself in society. He has not been able to figure out what life actually is. He is suffering from the existential crisis. In this regard he says:

> My aunt is convinced I have a "flair for research". This is not true. If I had a flair for research, I would be doing research. Actually I am not very smart. My grades were average. My mother and my aunt think I am smart because I am quiet and absent-minded – and because my father and grandfather were smart. They think I was meant to do research I am not fit to do anything else – I am a genius whom ordinary profession can't satisfy. (51)

As Binx searches for alleviation from the alienation, his yearnings generate several 'coping mechanism.' He thinks of new ways of coping with his problems. As he narrates, Binx catalogs these efforts, and comes to new consciousness regarding his attempts to muddle through his predicament. Binx's patterns parallel those of countless modern souls who suffer from the same malaise. While naming his patterns, Binx discovers that none of them are satisfactory, and moves into a new understanding of his search. The three primary 'coping mechanisms' Binx uses to defend against his alienation are abstraction and detachment through philosophy and science, the rotation method and the performance of repetitions. He tries to alleviate his malaise through scientific truth but he finds that it does not offer much to cope with the dullness of his daily life. Then he pursues unity in the past through his reading. Sitting in his office on a particularly dull afternoon, Binx reflects on the transformation of his reading habits:

> Until recent years, I read only "fundamental" books that is, key books on key subjects, such as *War and Peace*, the novel of novels; *A Study of History*, the solution of the problem of time;

> Schroedinge's *What is Life*?, Einstein's' *The Universe as I See It*, and such. 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. (69)

Binx has distracted, trying his best to understand his world by distancing himself from it. But in doing so he has lost sight of himself as an individual and the particulars of his life. Binx calls this quest for idealistic understanding his "vertical search" (70). Describing his vertical search, Binx describes a particular night when, reading *The Chemistry of Life*, he made a breakthrough:

> When I finished it, it seemed to me that the main goals of my search were reached or were in principle reachable, whereupon I went out and saw a movie called *It Happened One Night* which was itself very good. A memorable night. 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. But now I have undertaken a different kind of search. (70)

Percy's battle with scientism seems in Binx's dissatisfaction. Binx directly associates science with the vertical search, remembering an instance from his past when he was doing laboratory research:

> If you walk in the front door of a laboratory, you undertake the vertical search . . . as you get deeper into the search, you unify. You understand more and more specimens by fewer and fewer formulae. There is the excitement. Of course you are always after

> the big one, the new key, the secret leverage point, and that is the best of it. (82)

The methods Binx uses in his vertical search demonstrate a process of creating a pyramid composed of layers of generalization. From its process he has discovered that it tells him nothing about how to live and has annihilated his selfhood in the process. Binx's analysis is dynamite: "The danger is of becoming no one nowhere" (83). The vertical search, which stands for a major tradition of philosophy, and the endeavors of modern science, has been dismissed by Binx. He now wanders, continuing his search on a different plane, ever wondering.

Another method Binx makes use of in his search is what Percy calls "rotation", as a counter-action to deep, pervasive boredom on the other hand; rotation can be called as the quest for the new beyond the experience of the new. It also brings with it an element of calculated surprise, searching for freshness in each new experience. Rotation is a tolerably good diversion from everydayness and the malaise, for it brings excitement and newness for an instant. In the course of searching meaningful existence, Binx visits several places which do not make any difference in his life. In connection with Binx's visit to different places, Percy writes:

> Chicago. Misery, misery son of a bitch of all malaise. Not in a thousand years could I explain it to Uncle Jules, but it is no small thing for me to make a trip, travel hundreds of miles across the country by night to a strange place and come out where there is a different smell in the air and people have a different way of sticking themselves into the world. It is a small thing to him but

> not to me. It is nothing to him to close his eyes in New Orleans and wake up in San Francisco and think the same thoughts on Telegraph hill that he thought on Carondelet Street. (98-99)

Several times a week, Binx rides the bus to remote theaters in remote suburbs, ever seeking a new experience of movie-going. These wanderings are a significant part of Binx's search, and give him great pleasure, but do not alleviate the malaise for any amount of time. Binx's habit of dating his secretaries is notorious; he mentions two of his previous secretaries in the first few pages, and a good deal of the novel's action centers around his pursuit of his new secretary, Sharon Kincaid. On a nice day in April, Binx and Sharon take a trip to the coast, which Binx hopes for a supreme rotation. But, as Binx explains, the hope of rotation brings danger as well. "Where there is a chance of gain, there is a chance of loss. Whenever one courts great happiness, one also risks malaise" (121). Binx is pointing here to the fundamental connection rotation shares with time – rotation places the hope of alleviation in the future. The practice of rotation is the pursuit of perfect moments, and is ultimately the wrong remedy for malaise, not only because it passes quickly when it is achieved, but also because it draws attention away from individual life and into another abstraction, time. Rotation identifies possibility but fails to heal the despair of 'everydayness.' Binx rifles through a range of repetitions in *The Moviegoer*, mostly of the aesthetic kind, but his search for repetition becomes increasingly existential as the novel progresses. One of his movie-going rotations becomes an aesthetic repetition when he visits a movie theater he frequented as a teenager, where he had a memorable

experience watching a film, *The Oxbow Incident*. Binx calls this night "a successful repetition" (79) and describes what he means:

> What is repetition? 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. (79-80)

The description of repetition falls in line with Percy's conception of aesthetic repetitions: Binx is returning to past experience because it was pleasurable, and he wants to repeat it – this is no better than rotation. Even though his repetition is enjoyable, Binx gains little from it:

> How tasted my own fourteen years since *The Oxbow Incident*? As usual it eluded me. There was this: a mockery about the old seats, their plywood split, their bottoms slashed, but enduring nonetheless as if they had waited to see what I had done with my fourteen years. There was this also: a secret sense of wonder about the enduring, about all the nights, the rainy summer nights at twelve and one and two o'clock when the seats endured alone the empty theater. The enduring is simply something that must be accounted for. One cannot simply shrug it off. (80)

As the novel progresses, Binx's search develops, as he becomes more aware of his "coping mechanisms" and their failure to diminish his malaise. Binx's search intensifies, in both activity and consciousness, leading to the novel's thematic climax. A critical turning point for Binx centers on his trip to

the coast with his secretary, Sharon. Binx has intended this trip as an instance of rotation, hoping to take his love-interest in Sharon to a new level. Binx succeeds in his pursuit of Sharon, and they successfully defeat the malaise with a lovely day on the beach, kissing and rolling around in the sand. Binx feels love for Sharon, and enjoys himself immensely, but his search has intensified to the point that he cannot avoid it, even when enraptured. Driving home, Binx pulls to a bay with Sharon, and reflects on the source of his happiness, and the absence of malaise. "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 little car and a warm deep thigh" (135-136). This reveals Binx's horizontal search and his performance for it over the vertical search that has failed him. Binx's search has moved out of generalization into the existential, and he begins to pay more attention to his surroundings, achieving a small degree of success by overthrowing the malaise in this manner.

However, this aesthetic sphere of existence proves insufficient and sick with anxiety or despair. This hedonistic attitude totally fails to satisfy Binx Bolling's desire, and he is driven to discover another alternative for meaningful existence. He thus turns to the ethical and moral values of society.

When Binx Bolling's esthetic pursuit proves futile to alleviate his "malaise," he falls into despair that leads him to turn to the ethical values of society. He has been following his own roadmap up to this point. But what he feels is that he has been sunk in mundane life by avoiding social life. Later on Binx Bolling goes to Chicago on business and starts seeking his social relationship. While in Chicago, he tries to reach out to someone, despite his

earlier repeated comments about wanting to be left alone. Even though he is in town purely on business Binx skips out on the convention he is supposed to be attending and goes to visit an old army buddy, Harold, who saved his life during the war. As he says before, "Harold loves me because he saved my life. I love him because he is a hero. I have a boundless admiration for heroes and Harold is the real thing" (208).

It is clear here that Binx yearns for a type of connection with other people in visiting his old friend. Their relationship is flimsy at best, based loosely in these events that occurred over ten years ago. Binx glamorizes Harold's life in his own mind, even though Binx himself is engaged in the same occupation and just as affluent not more so.

The one thing Binx is missing, that his friend Harold has, is a sense of family. Harold is married and has a newborn son, for whom Binx is asked to be godfather. Binx is urged by this scene of what he imagines to be pure bliss to reach out to form a family of his own in essence merely imitating his friend in an attempt at happiness and not searching out what would be best for him. Binx replies to Harold: "Dear Harold. Thank you for asking me to be godfather to your baby. Since, however, I am not a practical Catholic, I doubt if I could. But I certainly appreciate – Certainly appreciate" (88).

This search that Binx is on, in fact, does have its origin in Binx's own dissolved family. The novel begins with a description of the death of Binx's older brother Scott when Binx was a very young man. Scott is in essence a non-entity in the novel, never himself having a presence except in death. And upon his death, Binx Bolling and Aunt Emily Cutrer go for a walk in which she tries her

best to explain to him what has happened and urges him to follow her advice and ideas.

When his father died, Binx's mother left him with his Aunt Emily to be raised. His aunt sent him off to prep school; during his years in college he lived in her house. Aunt Emily is a conscious keeper of the Southern culture of memory. She is actually unselfish who constantly thinks of other people. Binx likes to recall her advice:

> Every moment think steadily as a Roman and a man, to do what thou hast in hand with perfect and simple dignity, and a feeling of affection and freedom and justice. These words of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus strike me as pretty good advice, for even the young scamp. (78)

His relationship with his Aunt Emily Cutrer is the most powerful example of his struggle with socially enforced objective values. Emily Cutrer's life can be understood as a form of intellectually elitism, a belief in the "world of books and music and art and ideas" (45). Her emphasis is upon the lofty regions that they can come to control those around her. She calls Uncle Jules a "Cato" and a Cato he becomes, "So strong is she that sometimes the person and the past are transfigured by her. They become what she sees them to be" (49). The role of Emily Cutrer and her effects upon Binx's consciousness have been noted by a number of critics. Michael Kobre considers Emily "the most dominant influence in Binx's life" and that she is the embodiment of "the expectations of a traditional community" (26-27). He goes on to correctly outline that community as the upper class Stoicism of the Old South. In addition, he recognizes that the

community Emily represents holds a great power over Binx. Kobre even comes close to outline Binx's struggle against his aunt's values in the correct light. He claims that Binx's resistance to Emily's "sentimental . . . pessimism" derives from his aunt's character and the values she received from earlier generations of the Bolling family" (30-31). What needs to be added to this reading is a definition of Aunt Emily as the pure example of a misrealtion of the self. Emily seems to have absorbed all the ideas of her society and to use them as if they were her own. Binx has participated in this society and used its norms for almost all of his life. Emily has had "charge" of him since his early youth (3) and even at that age she was instructing him the correct manner of living. "Scotty is dead. Now it's all up to you. It's going to be difficult for you but I know you are going to act like a soldier. This was true. I could easily act like a soldier. Was that all I had to do?" (4). Even at this early age, her expectations for Binx provide a path upon which his individuality is unimportant. The only necessity is to walk the path. This path corresponds to the one that Binx's social group would have him walk. It is a conglomerate of objective cultural symbols: "It seems so plain when I see it through her eyes. My duty in life is simple. I got to a medical school I live a long useful life serving any fellowman" (54). By referring to Binx as "an ingrate, a limb of Satan, the last and sorriest scion of noble stock, Emily casts Binx's personality in terms of her society and "in a split second he has forgotten everything, the years in Gentilly, even his search" (26).

Thus, one can see Emily almost as a true personification of the 'everydayness.' She invokes the idea of the soldier, the doctor, the everyman rather than addressing Binx as a unique entity. Emily stands upon one side and

Binx's search upon the other. The pull of the everydayness is strong. So strong in fact it actually has the power to transfigure sight. When Emily shows Binx the bottles found on Kate's armoire, even a disruption of Binx's physical ability to examine is impeded: "But instead she shows me something and searches my face for what I see. With her watching me, it is difficult to see anything. There is a haze. Between us there is surely a carton of dusty bottles- bottle? – yes, surely bottles, yet blink as I will I can't be sure" (27). Under the pressure of the 'everydayness,' objects lose their undefined nature and take on meaning. This meaning is controlled by the society and in this example Binx is not free to make his own associations to the bottles. There is an expectation upon the part of the community that he "see" these bottles for what they really are. Virtually every object one can see is clouded with a similar application of cultural symbols. It was only through Binx's experience in Korea that he manages to break free from this objective 'haze' and begins to see himself not as an Everyman but as Binx.

Another incident that swells Binx's search is his love affair with his cousin, Kate Cutrer. Kate too is onto the possibility of the search, although she and Binx search quite differently. Binx and Kate have always been great friends, but recently. Kate has fallen into deep despair, and Binx's Aunt Emily calls Binx in to help. Binx and Kate discuss their respective searches, balancing each other nicely. Binx perspectives Kate's coping mechanisms and Kate puts up with none of Binx's. When Binx is assigned to a Chicago business trip, Kate decides at the last minute to come along. Their love affair begins on the train. Kate, talking dismissively of her friends and relatives, speaks of her appreciation for Binx, and half- seriously proposes that they get married. Binx earnestly agrees, but Kate

quickly sees that such a marriage will simply turn into another coping mechanism, that Binx "could only carry it off as one of his 'ingenious little researches'" (193). After further discussing their desolation, Kate falls into a fit of depression, and when Binx goes to comfort her, they sleep together, and afterwards fall into deeper despair.

Now Binx and Kate have married, but their relationship is anything but a solution to their problem. It is clearly a passionless marriage, and Binx's conversations with Kate are as devoid of meaning. Percy mentions the conversation between Binx and Kate:

> "Don't you love these things? Don't you live by them?"
>
> "No."
>
> "What do you love? What do you live by?"
>
> I am silent.
>
> "Tell me where I have failed you."
>
> "You haven't."
>
> "What do you think is the purpose of life – to go to the movies and dally with every girl that comes along?"
>
> "No." (226)

Kate is dependent upon Binx for her survival. She needs him to be thinking of her at all times. But Binx takes this marriage just as a means to have meaningful existence. So, he tries his best to fulfill this social obligation. He constantly has to reassure Kate that he will be thinking into her the entire times has gone, non-stop.

Binx has left his profession as stockbroker and decided to become a doctor. He has left behind the empty pursuit of money, and is now in medical school, trying to help people. But while this is admittedly a noble pursuit, is not a choice he made on his own. His Aunt Emily has always wanted him to become a doctor and while his interest in helping people is genuine, his outlet for this goal has been chosen for him. Much like his emulation of Harold's life, this choice of profession was not one that he came to himself.

When Binx returns form Chicago with Kate, he finds Aunt Emily waiting, furious with Binx for not telling anyone that Kate was going with him to Chicago. Binx attempts to explain that he did not know Kate had hid her departure from everyone, but to no avail. Aunt Emily derides Binx, not just for his behavior with Kate, but also for his search. Aunt Emily, representing the ethical sphere, does not understand Binx's search, and believes he is simply rejecting his obligation to her, his family, and society. After a long of lecture, Binx feels defeated, and, in a passage that acts as the emotional and psychological climax of the novel, reflects on his life, his despair, and his search:

> . . . and one hundred percent of people are humanists and ninety-eight percent believe in God and men are dead, dead, dead; and the malaise has settled like a fall-out and what people really fear is not that the bomb will fall but that the bomb will not fall – on this my thirteen birthday, I know nothing and there is nothing to do but fall prey to desire. Nothing remains but desire, and desire comes howling down Elysian Fields like a mistral. My search has been

> abandoned; it is no match for my aunt, her rightness and her despair, her despairing of me and her despairing of herself. (228)

Binx is now completely at a loss, truly in despair and conscious of it. He has run out of 'coping mechanisms,' has sniffed out all the shit in his life, and is forced to stare into his own emptiness. Binx has recognized that his self is totally lost, and his search for a way to live has run into the ground.

What makes the moment so captivating for Binx is its profound immediacy. Binx notes the immediate gain when he talks with his cousin Kate about a traumatic accident in which she was involved:

> 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. Everyone pretended that our lives until that moment had been every bit as real as the moment itself and that the future must be real too, when the truth was that our reality had been purchased only by Lyell's death. In another hour or so we had all faded out again and gone our dim ways. (120)

Kate, who is suicidal and unstable, seems to share Binx's fear of the ordinary. But unlike Binx, Kate can only deal with these moments of alienation with destruction and the manufacture of drama. Binx is more reserved, but is perhaps more afflicted; nevertheless he is capable of enduring everything that is unpleasant and unbearable.

Ultimately, in the epilogue, Binx reflects on his search and his present state. Several months have passed for Binx and Kate are now married, and Binx's half-brother Lonnie is near death. Binx has found companion for his search in

Kate, and seems to have achieved a degree of domestic happiness in married life. There is no evidence that Binx turns to God for meaningful existence as some critics have hinted. This researcher firmly believes that Binx is an ateistic existentialist. He finally makes his choice to settle down with Kate and lead a moral and ethical life, which is also the rejection of the material life that he before used to pursue. Binx speaks of his conclusions:

> As for my search I have not the inclination to say much on the subject, for one thing to speak of such maters in any way other than the edifying. For another thing, it is not open to me even to be edifying, since the time is later than his, much too late to edify or do much of anything except plant a foot in the right place as the opportunity presents itself – if indeed ass-kicking is properly distinguished from edification. Further: I am a member of my mother's family after all and so naturally shy away form the subject of religion. (237)

This passage explains that Binx now wants to lead a good moral life which he has decided against the material life. This is his existential choice though he tried to escape from the social life before.

Except Binx doesn't delude himself with conventional wisdom, he doesn't believe the answer is love or adventure in the traditional sense. He engages in something he refers to as The Search, a Zen like process in which he is not so much attempting to find answers as to see the world as it truly is and appreciate what is before his eyes. Much of this stems from his experience of being wounded during the war and, while lying in great pain from his wounds,

uncertain of whether he would live or die, he observed a beetle moving about and saw it with an existential clarity. His mission is to view the world as such and make his existential choice; to not give in to the despair of the mundane.

It sounds horribly pretentious, but Percy doesn't play it that way. As we follow Binx's activities, we are not exposed to any extended treatises on the deep spiritual nature of things from a monk-like point of view. Binx is a bit of an eccentric, from an eccentric family. He likes making money for his clients and himself. He visits with two disparate sects of his family and keeps up close ties with both. He chases after his secretaries and has a healthy, and rather ribald, appreciation of the female backside.

But Binx maintains a certain detachment. He is a moviegoer. He observes, he perceives, he reacts, but he does not wholeheartedly participate. He feels, somewhat arrogantly, that the people of the world live lives of a passionless despair whereas he yearns to find a zeal for the world around him.

Over the course of the book, primarily through interactions with troubled family members for whom he has a special fondness, Binx discovers that he can't draw the line between himself and the world that cleanly; that the zeal he seeks can only come through embracing what he perceives as the mundane and that emotional richness and fervent ardor are not one in the same. So, although many readers of *The Moviegoer* have interpreted this as a spiritual awakening to a faith in God, if not specifically Christianity. But it does not strike me as such.
Binx is a fine character. Certainly an excellent portrayal of the combination of thoughtfulness and fecklessness that is common in unattached, mildly cynical, 30-year-old males.

IV. Conclusion

The protagonist, Binx Bolling is a representative of modern man who falls into a deeper sense of alienation and despair because of the present decadent capitalistic American values. He finds himself trapped into mundane things in the capitalistic and materialistic world. Thus, the novel *The Moviegoer* becomes a novel of alienation, despair, and escapism especially as these states appear in the occurrence of 'everydayness' and the 'malaise,' the pain of loss.

As an experienced Korean War Veteran, Binx Bolling starts his life in New Orleans where he finds himself lost in material things. Although he is a successful bond businessman he feels lack of something in his life and embarks on a ‘search’ for meaningful existence. In his attempt to search meaning in life, he indulges himself in these pleasure-seeking activities, as an aesthetic mode of experience. However, Binx finds these activities inadequate as they cannot gratify him. So he shows a tendency to escape from these activities. He moves from one activity to another, in an attempt to lead a harmonious life. He involves himself in random sexual activities. Moreover, he frequently changes one secretary for another.

While inside the movie-theater, Binx tries to compare the real people around where he lives with those of the movie-characters. The purpose of making this comparison is to find what is real. He finds more authenticity in the movie characters. Even when he is not going to the movie he prefers to call himself the moviegoer. He himself declares towards the beginning that he has embarked on the "search".

When Binx's aesthetic pursuit proves futile to alleviate his malaise, he turns to the ethical values of society. This is what Binx turns to when he finds himself in despair and conflict with the aesthetic mode of life.

Binx then starts the social relationship which he has been avoiding so far. While in Chicago he tries to meet his old friend Harold, who saved his life during the War period. As Harold is leading a successful, happy married life, Binx is reminded of his social responsibility too. Therefore, Binx becomes ready to be the godfather to Harold's son. Next time when Binx goes to Chicago with his cousin Kate Cutrer, he marries her there. Although Aunt Emily wants him to marry Kate, she does not like the way in which they secretly got married in Chicago. As an embodiment of social values, she expected him to take her permission. Now, Binx has accepted the social life by getting married. This cannot prove to be a solution to their problems. This is not something that helps him to alleviate his "malaise."

Binx then leaves his profession as a stockbroker and decides to become a doctor, which his Aunt Emily has always wanted him to become. He now completely leaves behind the empty pursuit of money and pleasure, and tries to help people. He now becomes settled with his wife Kate. This is his ultimate existential choice that he makes.

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