

Walker Percy's Vision of Human Life Paving the Way for Redemption in his Fictional World: A Brief Note

Dr. S. Chelliah

Professor & Head

Department of English & Comparative Literature
Madurai Kamaraj University,
Madurai – 625021. (T. N). India.

Received June 25, 2016

Accepted July 16, 2016

ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to project Walker Percy as a reputed physician-turned novelist pondering over the plight of the contemporary American society and his novels as nothing but a withering critique of what is spiritually insane in the contemporary American society and in the world at large pointing to a way out of this spiritual muddle, almost as "gospels of redemption" and also reveals that Percy's novels offer a ray of hope to the modern man who is too much involved in the ways of the world, portraying heroes as dammed men regenerating into salvation and seeking redemption through a new understanding of their life and their roles in the society.

Key words: Sin, salvation and redemption.

It is universally acknowledged that Walker Percy is a physician-turned novelist pondering over the plight of the contemporary American society and his novels are nothing but a withering critique of what is spiritually insane in the contemporary American society and in the world at large pointing to a way out of this spiritual muddle, almost as "gospels of redemption". According to one modern critic, Percy's novels are 'important social documents which highlight the predicament of the contemporary Americans living in a materialistic society with total disregard for religious and ethical values.

Born on May 28th 1916 in a family liable to suicide mania, at the age of just 12, Percy had the traumatic experience of witnessing his father, Le Roy committing suicide and lost his mother also three years after the death of his father. After schooling, he had developed special flair for science which led him to join University of North Carolina. Being fascinated greatly by the elegance, the order and beauty of science, he did continue his scientific studies at Columbia University's College of Physicians and took his M.D.degree at the age of twenty five. The fascination of science for Percy gradually gave way to more fundamental questions about life and his mind was more and more perplexed by "the nature and destiny of man; especially and more immediately the predicament of man in a modern technological

society" (Percy, 28). Eventually Percy realized that scientific and technological development and material concern of science have deprived man of the essential flavor of life. His readings of S.

Kierkegaard, Gabriel Marcel and Martin Hediegger eventually led him to take shelter in Catholicism where he found the answer to the Malaise affecting the contemporary American society. In 1947, Percy, along with his wife Mary Bernice, embraced the Catholic Faith". If I had to single at one piece of writing which was more responsible than anything else for my becoming a Catholic", declares Percy, "It would be that essay of Kierkegaard" (Dewey, 82)

Being so much obsessed by the role of an apostle who is capable of bringing redemption to mankind, Percy wanted to assume the role of an apostle himself. Though Percy had no credentials to be an apostle, he believed that he could effectively play the role of the apostle through his writings. In becoming a writer, as in his profession Catholicism, he believed himself to be born again, born to a new understanding" (Kazin, 85) Gradually he became fully conscious of his entangled in the modern vice of materialism. As a writer, he has to his credit publication of such novels as 1. **The Movie Goer** (1962), 2. **The Last Gentleman** (1966) 3. **Love in the Ruins** (1971) 4) **Lancelot** (1977) 5) **The Second Coming**

(1981) 6) **The Thenatos Syndrome** (1987) and non-fictional works like **The Message in the Bottle** (1975), **Lost in the Cosmos** (1983).

Generally speaking, Percy's novels explore the existential angst and despair of modern man. In a sense, his novels are the physician turned novelist's diagnosis of the malady afflicting the post-modern world. He is out and out a Christian novelist. Percy defines the Christian novelist as "a writer who has an explicit concern with nature of man and the nature of reality where man finds himself" (P.102) He is of the view that the task of the present day novelist is to portray how the alienated man comes to himself and how his relationship with his family, his business and his Church is affected by the change in him. Percy insists that a modern writer should be "a passionate propagandist" (Zeguner, 21) showing men the way to redemption. The fictional heroes of Percy achieve redemption through self-exploration of the existential angst and despair experienced by them. According to him, scientific and technological advancements have given only material benefits to man. Financial security and social power and resulting self-actulaization do not give man the much needed place of mind. In one of his talks with John Carr, Percy notes:

"... man is neither an organism controlled by his environment, nor a creature controlled by the forces of history... nor is he a detached wholly objective, angelic being who views the world in God - like way and makes pronouncements only to himself or to an elite group of people. No, he is somewhere between the angles and the beasts" (P.46)

Catholicism enabled Percy, not only to form a view of man's fate, i.e., man as a way farer, but it also provided him with a system of morality to believe in. The modern man is caught up in 'everydayness', so much involved in the process of everyday life that he has become an "incommunicado, being able neither to speak for himself nor to be spoken to, he is both in the world he is travelling through and not in it" (P.87). Man is a castaway, an exile marooned on an island where he has lived all his life and yet is not at home. He knows that life on the island is "something of a charade" (P143). According to

Percy, in order to attain redemption, man to transcend his everydayness, a term used by him for the malaise besetting post second world war man. Everydayness causes a "generalized loss of awareness that walls a person off from his surroundings and diminishes his vitality" (Luschei, 21). A specific character of everydayness is the loss of visibility where everyone tends to live a life in secrecy, and protect his life with a mask. Under this protective covering life goes on uninterrupted and another cause of the modern malaise is in authenticity, the antithesis of a meaningful life involving a surrender of personal sovereignty where the individual plays roles alien to himself. He flees for refuse into a crowd and thus escapes from his individual self. He accepts the norms, standards and myths of the crowd, without even observing his personality. The reference to the couple riding in the "Dadge Sedan" in **The Movie Goer** is an example of inauthentic experience. Bink, the protagonist of the novel, finds himself playing a role alien to him. He is comfortable and smiling, all his papers are in order and he sits next to beautiful girl. It is recipe for happiness measured by the standards of the society. But the two of them have fallen into in authenticity. Bink discovers that his new Dodge Sedan is a "regular incubator of malaise" (MG, 121).

Another cause of the malaise is 'abstraction'. It is prominently treated in all of Percy's novels. A victim of abstraction takes a purely functional view of himself, seeing his own life not as his personal opportunity to experience life but as an activity that yields a certain return on the world's investment. When one falls into abstraction, one objectifies either one's self so that one's person becomes irrelevant to oneself or to others and thus human beings are reduced into mere symbols or masses. Modern technical society does exactly the same. It threatens the individual self-objectification by valuing his importance to efficiency rather than individuality. Abstraction thus eradicates personality. Percy believes that the only way out of this malaise is the religious way. But everydayness has crept into the religious way. Btu everydayness has crept into the religious character of man throwing him to the vortex of despair. The most despairing character of the

despair experienced by modern man is that he is not aware of it. On becoming aware of the despair that afflicts him, man undertakes a search. As Percy says, “to be a castaway is to search for news from across the seas” (MB, 144)

In the scheme of Walker Percy, man the wayfarer, can recover himself from the hazards of everydayness, in authenticity and abstraction by a recognition of his exile. That is, when man recollects himself, he can rediscover “things a new and afresh” (Carr, 43). Once he recognises his own predicament and identifies the causes of the malaise that encircles him, he begins his search for an egress. One familiar way of escape from his aesthetic sphere of existence is ordeal. Sometimes death offers such an ordeal as in the case of Lonnie in **The Movie Goer** and Jamie Vaught in **The Last Gentleman**. The reality of death and the possibility of life after death offers a means to awaken him out of the torpor of everyday life into some kind of an active search for what life itself is really about. It means, a person like Binx Bolling or Will Barret, who is already dissatisfied with all the good things the aesthetic sphere of existence offers, finds that such a way of life no longer brings him any pleasure and undertakes a quest for an anchorage which gives meaning to his otherwise meaningless life.

Percy as a Southern writer reflects the day-to-day happenings in the South. His novels are a virtual update on what is happening in the new south, “on the prevailing custom of liberated blacks, Pentacostal Christians, secular liberals and knothed conservatives” (Cowley, 70). Percy’s place in American Literature as Hobson observes is

“as individual as the man himself; satirist, humorist, poet, philosopher, linguist and man of faith... not a serious write like nuclear physicist, Freeman, Dyson or C.P. Snow”. (p. 170)

Percy seems to share Arnold’s ‘Dover Beach’-vision of human life, according to which the world is a darkling plain where ignorant armies clash by night. Most of his characters are victims of the existential anguish, which is the common predicament of those who live in a technologically

and scientifically advanced society. However, Percy seems a way of this darkling plain. Thus, the theme of redemption gets extensive treatment in his novel **The Movie Goer** which makes a philosophically sophisticated exploration of the existential anguish experienced by a man totally lost in the process of living. It is Percy’s quintessential work, in which the protagonist, Binx Bolling returns to a meaningful way of life through the process of self-awakening. Walker Percy, in **The Movie Goer** shows how its protagonist, John Bickerson Bolling, comes to selfhood from an inauthentic life and thus attains his redemption. In the process of redemption, the hero passes through such phases as ‘alienation’, ‘everydayness’ and ‘inauthentic existence’ that have been pressing him down. The novel focuses on concrete life situations rather than on abstractions. Percy says, “It (The Movie Goer) is mainly interested in the predicament of modern man afflicted as he is with feelings of uprootedness, estrangement and anxiety” (Lawson 3). John Bickerson Bolling or Binx, the narrator protagonist of **The Movie Goer** lives in spiritual solitude. His disease arises from his inability to fit into a fast deteriorating tradition and culture in which he lived and which he supported.

Like every sophisticated American, Binx spends his evenings in movie houses or watching television and spends his weekends in the company of women in the gulf coasts. He takes great pains to convince himself and others that he is a very happy man, taking delight in his life. Yet he is actually living a life of despair, only that his despair is hidden under the daily routine of life. His only difficulty, in fact, is that for him, “the fabric of reality has dissolved” (P 12). Thought he appears outwardly happy, life has no meaning for him and as a result nothing is significant to him. Percy says, Binx “... Simply lived ... a rather cool detached exercise in cultivating different sensations. And his girl friends, his readings were all a kind of play acting” (P.89) Binx leads an inauthentic life, alienated from God, himself, others and everything around him. Yet he tries to make others believe that it is the happiest mode of existence.

Binx, realizing that the pleasantries of life are not all well, is sickened by the Cartesian world he supported. A nagging sense of weariness afflicts him, which Binx terms as the “malaise of the pain of loss” (MG, 120). Binx’s malaise emanates from his unconscious despair. He defines the malaise as: “the malaise is the pain of loss. The world is lost to you, the world and the people in it and there remain only you and the world and you no more able to be in the world than Benquo’s ghost” (MG 120). He realises himself to be “a blank, a no one living nowhere at no particular time” (Ciuba, 58). Binx thinks that movies can alleviate his everydayness and provide him with a pattern for his search. The passion for movies is an indication of Percy’s indictment upon contemporary American society, devoid of spiritual values. Percy wishes to emphasize through Binx that modern science and technology are no substitutes for God and spiritual values which alone can make people communicate with each other effectively and make them attain perfect happiness and serenity of mind. As Lewis A Lawson puts in, “movie going characterizes the alienated man’s fascinated gaze at a distant reality, stresses the sense of apartness he feels” (P 31). On the surface level, modern man, like Binx, appears to be happy because of the sense of freedom he enjoys on account of his successful position in society. But on a deeper level, he is restless and is constantly in search of something that can give him happiness.

Binx’s marriage with Kate is significant for now he is a redeemed man who has escaped from despair and the desire for death. He gives up sex for love or at least engages in marriage and accepts that institution’s responsibilities. Binx is hopeful of the future, leaps to faith and accepts shared consciousness. “Binx who exists in the aesthetic mode of damnation in the end and becomes a believer in his own rather laconic style” (Carr 51). The redeemed Binx is no longer attracted towards his ‘little way’. He regains his mother’s religion, Catholicism, as part and parcel of the complex business of coming up in the end. He chooses not the casual religion of his mother, but a tough little faith, gained after many ordeals and escapes from the Hound of Heaven. He gives up his life of evasiveness and begins the only genuine pursuit, the search for God through giving on self to

others. He becomes a knight of faith rejoicing in the beauty of his island. He is no more any man living anywhere, but one who finds at home with Kate and people around. He wishes to be honourable as well as a Christian. Binx steps into the Catholic Church rejecting his aunt’s southern stoicism. He proudly announces that he is a member of his mother’s family (Rowan Catholicism) and not his father’s stoicism. He is no more a watcher but an active member of the Church and the world. From being a passive reader of signs, a movie goer at the start of the novel, Binx now becomes more involved to create the meaning of life by his own actions. Becoming Catholic, gives Binx direction and meaning. The enlightenment he gained through the Catholic Church enables Binx to solve his dilemma of being torn by various traditions. Acknowledging himself as a wayfarer, a pilgrim in search of God, Binx becomes a caring husband, a loving brother, a dutiful doctor and a good man.

Binx gains the assurance of a man at home with the world and with himself through his redemption. All that was restless and at times a little maniac in Binx disappears in front of his newly found faith. This quiet is not one of dumb passivity but it is that of a man who is ready to hear the news bearer whenever and wherever he appears of one who waits and watches patiently for the news from across the seas. Binx, thus is an Abraham freed from his malaise and he becomes an imitator of God by redeeming himself from his alienation through the recognition that the ultimate cure of the malady is to undertake a journey and search the good-God. Binx realizes that God is the only answer and the self; the only certifier and the certified. Binx is, therefore, blessed by God as he blessed Abraham long ago,

“because you have done this, because you have not refused me your son, your only son I will shower blessings on you” (Genesis, 22:16-17)

To conclude, it may be stated that Percy’s novels offer a ray of hope to the modern man who is too much involved in the ways of the world. Almost all his novels like **The Movie Goer** portray men who regenerate into salvation and redemption through a new understanding of their life and their roles in the society. Too much of faith in

science and technology contaminates man's daily existence making him fall a prey to restlessness and despair. In a state of utter restlessness of things falling apart, Percy's heroes are projected as damned men seeking redemption. Even when man flees from God, seeking the pleasures of the world, he has unquenchable thirst for God. The journey's undertaken by Binx in **The Movie Goer** and Will Barret in **The Last Gentleman** are symbolic of man's quest for a spiritual anchor – God- that can secure him against his sense of alienation and everydayness. Percy conceives human existence in the temporal world only as a sojourn which prepares them for eternity. In a nutshell, it may be said that the protagonists of Percy, only through inter-subjectivity, authenticity and love, are redeemed from their malaise. The redeemed Binx and Will Barret do breathe pure and uncontaminated air and see the world a new and afresh.

References

1. Carr, John., **Kite Flying and other Irrational Acts: Conversations with Twelve Southern Writers**, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1972. Print.
2. Coles, Robert, **Walker Percy: An American Search**, Boston: Little Brown, 1978. Print.
3. Dewey, Bradely, R. "Walker Percy Talks about Kierkegaard: An Annotated Interview" **Journal of Religion**, No.54, 1974. Print.
4. Kazin, Alfred, "The Pilgrimage of Walker Percy", **Harper's Magazine**, 242, June, 1971. Print.
5. Lawson, Lewis, A., **Conversation with Walker Percy**, Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1985. Print.
6. Luschei, Martin, **The Sovereign ways Farer: Walker Percy's Diagnosis of the Malaise**, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1972. Print.
7. Percy, Walker, "From Facts to Fiction", **Writer**, 80, October, 1967. Print.
8. Walker Percy, **The Message in the Bottle: How queer Man is, How Queer Language is and What one has to do with others**, New York, Farrar, 1975. Print.

All our dreams can come true – if we have the courage to pursue them.

~ Walt Disney