

# QUEST FOR FREEDOM IN WALKER PERCY'S THE MOVIEGOER

*M. Vijayaganth*

*Department of English*

&

*Dr. Sharmila K.N.*

*Asst. Professor of English*

*Annamalai University*

## ABSTRACT

This paper is an exploration of *Quest for Freedom* from the issues of malaise and alienation, through a detailed analysis of the novel *The Moviegoer* by Walker Percy. *The Moviegoer* was the first novel by Walker Percy, one of the few philosophical novelists in America. In this novel, Binx Bolling, the existentialist hero, must decide how to live his life in this world. He does not feel comfortable when Aunt Emily makes family stories to transfigure him and when she preaches stoicism as instruction to make him a man of freedom.

**Key Words:** Existentialist, Stoicism, Reliance, Anguish, Fragile, Alienation, Authentic, Despair, Malaise, Repentance.

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Walker Percy in *The Moviegoer* (1961) examines the issues of malaise and alienation within America's prosperous society. Set in the post-Korean War 1950s, it centers around Binx Bolling, a young war veteran turned stockbroker and his search for authenticity. What Binx terms "every-dayness" is a power that makes everyone sink in routine, mechanical meaningless mode of existence. This struggle causes him to separate himself as much as possible from other people. He visits his family only occasionally; his interactions with

women are purely physical and short-termed. This article scrutinizes how his vision could deal with *Quest for Freedom* from the issues of embarrassment in life.

Binx is a perfect example of what Walker Percy terms the “lost self.” This individual is cut loose from in society by enjoying its own freedom, facilitated by reliance on money rather than property. He is “imprisoned by a curious and paradoxical bondage like a Chinese handcuff, so that the very attempts to free himself, for the pursuit of happiness only tightens the bondage and distances the self farther from the world he wishes to inhabit as his homeland.” The modern man, in his pursuit of freedom, isolates himself from his surroundings and finds imprisoned in his own self.

Binx seeks freedom and authenticity in isolation. His relationships in New Orleans consist of seducing his steady stream of secretaries and listening to his Aunt Emily. She reminds him of his ignored obligations to family and community. Binx is constantly at the movie theater as he wants to escape from his own duty to society.

“In the evening I usually watch television or go to the movies. Week - ends I often spend on the Gulf coast. Our neighborhood theater in Gentilly has permanent lettering on the front of the marquee reading: Where Happiness Costs So Little. The fact is I am quite happy in a movie, even in a bad movie. Other people, so I have read, treasure memorable moments in their lives: the time one climbed the Parthenon at sunrise, the summer night one met a lonely girl in Central Park and achieved with her a sweet and natural relationship, as they say in books. I too once met a girl in Central Park, but it is not much to remember. What I remember is the time John Wayne killed three men with a carbine as he was falling to the dusty streets in Stagecoach, and the time the kitten found Orson Welles in the doorway in *The Third Man*.

In an ironic twist, these film moments have become more authentic to Binx than his own experiences. Binx gains a sharper sense of the world from this meeting of reality and unreality; neighborhoods portrayed in films become more real when encountered again, and movie stars have “a peculiar reality.” The only memorable moment in Binx’s life is the memory of being wounded in Korea. Binx fails to find such reality in the actions and words of normal people and so avoids them. Binx too is pulled out of his self-chosen isolation by the efforts of others. The first person to have such an impact on him is his crippled half-brother Lonnie.

...He is my favorite, to tell the truth. Like me, he is a moviegoer. He will go see anything. But we are good friends because he knows I do not feel sorry for him. For one thing, he has the gift of believing that he can offer his sufferings in reparation for men’s indifference to the pierced heart of Jesus Christ. For another thing, I would not mind so much trading places with him. His life is a serene business....After I kiss him good-by, Lonnie calls me back. But he doesn’t really have anything to say.

“Wait.”

“What?”

He searches the swamp, smiling. “Do you think that Eucharist –”

“Yes?”

He forgets and is obliged to say straight out: “I am still offering my communion for you.”

“I know you are.”

“Wait.”

“What?”

“Do you love me?”

“Yes.”

“How much?”

“Quite a bit.”

“I love you too.”

For Lonnie, everyday is authentic; Binx' interactions with him sow seeds of doubt in Binx' individualistic, isolated approach to the world. His reliance and insistence on love further challenges Binx' attempts to distance himself from those around him. The other person who pulls Binx away from himself is his fragile cousin Kate. Kate is depressed, having lost a fiancé a few years before. She does not love her current fiancé, nor does he provide her the security for which she longs. She turns instead to Binx. After a wild and unwise bus trip to Chicago, Binx sees that she needs him and, after being confronted by his aunt, decides to marry her. Through the satisfaction Lonnie receives in his love and service to others and through Kate's need and reliance on him, Binx begins to realize that freedom and authenticity are not achieved in isolation and individualism. They are found in service to others and in the connection that from service and fellowship with others. Lonnie and Kate's requests for his love make him come outside of his self-enforced isolation and to the authentic world. Binx decides to go to medical school in order to have some impact on the world.

Most importantly, Binx finds the resolution of his searching. This solution is found outside of himself.

... As for my search, I have not the inclination to say much on the subject. For one thing, I have not the authority, as the great Danish philosopher declared, to speak of such matters 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 opportunity presents itself – if indeed asking is properly distinguished from edification. Further: I am a member of my mother's family after all and so

naturally shy away from the subject of religion (a peculiar word this in the first place, religion; it is something to be suspicious of).

This statement, as well as Binx's refocusing his life on Ash Wednesday, a day of repentance, strongly suggest that he has accepted his mother's and Lonnie's Roman Catholicism. Seeing a man step out of a church with ash on his forehead Binx ponders, "It is impossible to say why he is here. Is it part and parcel of the complex business of coming up in the world? Or is it because he believes that God himself is present here at the corner of Elysian Fields and Bons Enfants? Or is he here for both reasons: through some dim dazzling trick of grace, coming for the one and receiving the other as God's own importunate bonus?"(235). This acceptance of faith and God moves Binx beyond the solution of merely human love posited by *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. By grounding his love and service to others in God, Binx is able to find true authenticity. Through rejecting his self-imposed isolation and accepting love and service to others, Binx finds authenticity in the everyday life. Through these relationships he finds himself as a Somebody, Somewhere rather than an Anybody, Anywhere; through relationships his place in time becomes a community. Through these relationships and the love he experiences in them, he comes to a knowledge of and relationship with God and finds his place and meaning in eternity as well. "What is the nature of the 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....To become aware of the possibility of the search is to be in despair. The movies are onto the search, but they screw it up. The search always ends in despair." (13)

To sum up, *The Moviegoer* is a journey of exploration of existential anguish from start to finish and it is essentially Binx Bolling's search is a search for meaning in life. He is struggling each day with the pain of malaise, and the boredom of everydayness that affects people in modern life. He desires to keep a new way of looking at the world around him, for he wishes to become a conscious being with ability to think, and to make his own choice. Aunt Emily doesn't understand what Binx thinks and does, and she never wishes too. He forgets about his malaise out of the comfortable years in Gentilly, and he even forgets about his search. He wakes up a little, sinks back again, and after that wakes back a little more, for his unwilling to give into those false standards, dead values, and empty gestures of the world. He is unwilling to be determined by others evolutions. So man is not determined by God or any other things. And a man is only determined by what he perceives, and what he acts. He will become what he makes of himself. Binx grasps the spirit of freedom and projects himself as a man of freedom. He becomes a searcher who learns to practice the arts of openness and kindness and finds the true relationship with the community by the end of the novel. More over, Binx in both positive and negative ways performs his roles.

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