

## ANALYSIS

### *The Moviegoer* (1961)



Walker Percy

(1916-1990)

“In *The Moviegoer*, which also appeared in 1961—and was given the National Book Award over *Catch-22*—there is an equivalent form of strangulation. Walker Percy’s is more undefined, what he calls a malaise. This malaise, which is not only existential angst, but Kierkegaard’s fear and trembling and even his sense of dread, is a peculiarly American ailment; it lies in the character, but also beyond. And it is unconnected to personal success or failure. Binx Bolling suffers from it while he is quite successful as a broker and quite attractive to women.

It is, we may say, the Catch-22 of life itself, and it seems associated with the fifties: *The Moviegoer* takes place in the fifties, Binx has fought and been wounded in the Korean War, and the novel was written and rewritten throughout that decade. The period which more than any other in history allowed American affluence to multiply also produced a sense of doom and disquiet that was a Catch-22 or malaise; and since it did not roar like apocalypse or Armageddon, it was even more prevailing. It is embedded, in the Heller novel, in the ‘city of death,’ Rome, which has at one stage been the city of life—women, booze, freedom from missions. For Percy, it is New Orleans, with its Elysian Fields and lovely-sounding areas. Behind all the loveliness, or the relief, there lies a mechanical principle which is typically American. It is not clearly defined as destiny or fate or even doom; nor is it directly connected to history, the weight of the past, as it is for the European. It is, rather, connected to the very success that American brings, to that destruction which lies so close to success....

Walker Percy is very possibly our most graceful and inventive instructor. His five novels to date demonstrate that he is, foremost, a teacher. However much he entertains—and he is witty and adroit—his primary function is to lead us into a deeper sense of ourselves, to make us perceive the nature of despair. In this respect, he is a litmus of reaction to contemporary American culture, the recorder of events by a man who refuses. We recall Melville’s *Bartleby*. Percy must simultaneously restrain the forces of apocalypse and remain loyal to protagonists who are inert, disaffected, wrong in the head, unable to act or lacking in the will to act. The main character in two of his novels is Will, who lacks what his name suggests. Yet even the man without will owes something to himself and to his society, especially when God is dead and society is secularized. Golf and golf course become for Percy the emblems of such secularity: pastoral spatiality given over to effete shepherds and shepherdesses. Somewhere there lies a balance of inner and outer; to locate it is Percy’s quest.

He makes certain all his protagonists have successful careers, or the potentiality of such success; for he wants them to have infinite choices. Careers, money, status, rich marriages—they have these, and yet they must remove themselves from climbing in order to descend. Binx Bolling in *The Moviegoer* (1961), Will Barrett in *The Last Gentleman* (1966) and again in *The Second Coming* (1980), Thomas More in *Love Among the Ruins* (1971), and Lancelot in *Lancelot* (1977) are men of substance undermined by ruins. They, their personal and emotional lives, are in ruins; Will must be literally hoisted out to be saved. They are, all, more than Southern gentlemen, more than social or psychological misfits; they have been born too late or too soon, and their quest is for some ideological thread that can connect them to a center, however inadequate centers are. Binx depends on film for certification of reality; More must live in the shadow of his illustrious name; Lancelot is supported by modern novelties; and Will Barrett finds peace in a Trav-L-Aire camper, a complete environment which isolates him. When he reappears, fourteen years later, the camper is no longer adequate; only a pastoral greenhouse can help him survive. In common, they share the nausea of Roquentin in the Sartre novel, men out of phase, historically misplaced, emotionally dislocated, culturally discontinuous.

Binx Bolling comes out of the 1950s and with a somewhat different focus could have been a figure of the Beat movement. But he is attached to money, to making it, increasing it, and holding on to it; although his other sensibilities are in ways Beat. A Percy character does not surrender his bourgeois connections easily. He is a mental dropout, a young man (late twenties) who senses the malaise, personal and social, which lies at the heart of an affluent, energetic society.... The malaise he feels, which comes over him like a fog rolling over the countryside, is the adversary side of a rational society, a New Orleans that appears to work. Set into that malaise, as a real inmate of an inner mad world, is Binx's cousin Kate Cutrer. Since her fiancé died in a fiery car crash on the eve of their marriage, this modern-day Miss Havisham has never been right, a young woman who moves from rationality to depression in almost imperceptible swings of mood.

Surrounding Binx is the inauthentic: those of false sensibilities, those who lack perception, or live in the past. But authenticity is difficult to perceive or comprehend. Binx tries to find it in movies, where the search for the authentic is available to the viewer; but the movies made a mess of searches because they must resolve elements. Movies have to end. Nevertheless, they have a reality and an authenticity life lacks. Early in the novel, William Holden strolls down the French Quarter and is spotted. 'An aura of heightened reality moves with him and all who fall within it feel it.' Yet even that 'peculiar reality,' which in itself is astounding, is a cheat; it eases but does not displace the malaise.

Moviegoing fits into the temperament of a romantic: one whose expectations of life are in excess of what it ordinarily supports. Someone may be a moviegoer—as is a fellow Binx meets on the train—without going to the movies. Because he places a value on life it cannot meet, the moviegoer is an appealing person. He may be aware of Kierkegaardian dread, but he has an idealist's demand. Binx's aunt, whose tradition is Southern chivalric, is not a moviegoer, despite certain superficial resemblances. She argues for a conventional view of behavior, something based on the statements of *I'll Take My Stand* [1930]. This is, curiously, a South Percy was himself to hang on to in *Lancelot*, where his protagonist kills to protect it. But such values, based on gentility, chivalry, gaiety, and hatred of outsiders, cannot work for Binx; are, indeed, part of the malaise he suffers from.

The moviegoer cannot be certain of anything. He lives on the edge, a parapet-walker who peers into the abyss. The ordinary becomes, for him, threatening. Movies provide temporary respite; they heighten and lighten, and offer an alternative reality. Binx refers to *Panic in the Streets*, a movie filmed in New Orleans about a cholera threat. Anyone watching it in a New Orleans theater, as Binx and Kate do, can locate the very neighborhoods of the movie. This, Binx feels, 'certifies' the neighborhood, gives it a fixed reality. For that moment, for that glimpse of time and space, there is certainty.

Binx's sole reading is Doughty's *Arabia Deserta*, the only book in his library. That reading is part of his malaise, his own Arabian desert, defined as a sense of loss: 'The world is lost to you, the world and the people in it, and there remains only you and the world and you no more able to be in the world than Banquo's ghost.' The malaise makes one doubt one's existence, since, as in the existentialist's absurdist

universe, the individual has lost all supports. One is like the denizens of Doughty's vast desert, lost amidst swirling sands, caught only by some inner purpose which becomes ever fainter as winds intensify.

The alternative to this, however temporary, is the movies. Percy's sense of the 1950s is quite apparent, in that only the temporary respite of moviegoing can relieve the emptiness of affluence. Binx repeats that his chief forte is making money, and he is good at it. And yet even that activity by contrast makes everything else seem so difficult. The movies are the single contemporary art form that can reach those who have entered the absurdist jungle. The marquees beckon, the movie 'certifies,' the performers pin down reality; all else is floating, evanescent, part of the swamp-like malaise. Movies are part of the American collective unconscious, our primary shared experience.

Centered in that bog is Kate Cutrer. We can understand her appeal to Binx only because of his recoil from scientific humanism. It is the latter that has created 'the great shithouse' where 'needs are satisfied, everyone becomes an anyone, a warm and creative person, and prospers like a dung beetle...and men are dead, dead, dead.' The malaise settles like fallout, 'and what people really fear is not that the bomb will fall but that the bomb will not fall.' Binx perceives that within the world of malaise there is really very little sin, not because of lack of desire for it, but because 'nowadays one is hardly up to it.' The malaise reduces, minimizes. Without it, Binx could not find Kate so attractive; and we, as readers, cannot understand his desire to have her. She drinks, takes heavy doses of pills, cannot cope with even the most ordinary or trivial moments, is always on the edge of collapse, and yet she is precisely, it seems, what Binx wants.

The alternative to Kate is Binx's secretary and assistant, and because she is there, he romances her. Sharon is all live, vitality, responsive to situation and sensation. Percy's presentation of her is the first of several such in his fiction, and they are great triumphs. He catches their confidence in their bodies and health, their awareness of their attractiveness to a certain kind of man, and their ability to handle their own reactions. They are rational, finely toned creatures, not overly intelligent, but bright enough to understand the main chance and to work their way through life. They minimize disaster by foreseeing possibilities. And while they are calculating—Sharon understands Blix's strategies for getting her into bed—they are fun. Whereas Kate represents the darker side of Binx's need, Sharon represents the life side. With her, and her successors, he can fight the malaise; with Kate, indulge it, recognize its proximity. With Sharon, all the feelings he sees as bogus when observed by way of Kate are still real, *there*; but as his mother, the prophetess, perceives, Sharon is not for him.

Kate and Binx come together, as they must, since only they comprehend the malaise. Their marriage will be like their courtship, full of swinging moods. Kate will try to function—the novel ends on that note as she runs a simple errand—and he will enter the malaise full-on under her influence. They will confront it, unlike all those surrounding them who counsel happiness. Binx Bolling's 'search' remains unfocused. All he can do, as he moves across the 1950s, is to 'plant a foot in the right place as the opportunity presents itself—indeed asskicking is properly distinguished from edification'."

Frederick R. Karl  
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