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I seek to show how Binx's "search" serves as an example of intersubjectivity by challenging the scientific humanism prevalent in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Succinctly put, Binx challenges both the general and the localized versions of scientific humanism. Percy presents scientific humanism as a characteristic of general society, one co-opted by intellectuals, scientists, and Southern stoics to affirm their beliefs. I use a new methodology that analyzes the search as an educational experience. Binx sharpens and develops the tools necessary in challenging stoicism and scientific humanism. This paper builds on Percy criticism to show *doubt* and *belief* as the novel's driving forces. Belief serves as a landing pad for the searcher who inevitably comes to doubt; the interplay between the two defines Percy's new "thinking" individual. For Percy, doubt begets a matrix through which an individual tunes into the ideas of others by questioning their beliefs. Through this sharing of ideas –intersubjectivity- individuals form a community of "namers," people who arrive at "truths" through a testing of ideas. In its presentation of belief and "doubt, the open plot of the novel becomes a metaphor for the way all humans come to "know." Localizing the searcher's struggles within scientific humanism and its apostles in Binx, the book demonstrates the constant shifting between doubt and belief. The "education" provided by the "the search," however, leads to Binx's ability to form "community" by engaging with them in semiotic community; a system built off the meaning of symbols as they pertain to others. Unlike scientific humanism's tendency to isolate individuals as organisms separate from a community, Percy's semiotics seek to base community off an intercommunication that affirms the individual's ability to affect meaning.

PRAGMATISM AS A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR BINX'S "SEARCH" IN *THE MOVIEGOER*

By

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Approved By

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Committee Chair

To the best parents in the world, Denny and Sue Jolliff. To my grandparents, Doug and Elouise Myers. Also, to my Aunt Lynn Dee, Aunt Linda, and Uncle Bob. A special recognition goes to my brother Kinsey, and my new sister-in-law Meleka Jolliff; I look forward to being a part of your family for years to come.

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of the Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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Date of Acceptance by Committee

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## PRAGMATISM AS A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FORS BINX'S "SEARCH" IN *THE MOVIEGOER*

*Commonweal* magazine's 1959 issue included "The Culture Critics," an essay written by a "physician living in Louisiana" named Walker Percy calling for a novel about "a particular fellow living in a particular house and finding himself in a particular concrete predicament." Two years later, Percy publishes *The Moviegoer*, a story of a young stock broker stricken with alienation in post-war New Orleans. His Korean War experience leads him to the search, "what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life" (12). On this search, Binx contemplates the two seemingly disparate modes of thinking that converge in his family's history, stoicism and scientific humanism. The loose plot of the novel follows Binx on his "search" to the Gulf Coast, Chicago and New Orleans during which he tries to escape the "everydayness" he sees around him. Binx's "search" culminates in a faith that leaves questions unanswered and an affirmation of intercommunication in human relations. Percy's novel meditates on how an individual takes stock of his "particular concrete predicament" and finds the means to overcome it. As Jay Tolson writes in his Percy biography, *Pilgrim in the Ruins*, "Percy saw his work as a form of knowledge, an essay toward understanding what would help him live his life. Artist though he was, Percy became and remained a moralist who saw the end of art not in the formal perfection but in the adequacy of its gesturing toward the truth that would make him free" (11). Percy's *The Moviegoer* meditates on what counts as "knowledge," challenging the reigning philosophies of the day that make human life a science rather than a community of individuals communicating

through an open system of symbols. Percy leaves Binx's search open ended. Thus, he suggests that an individual cannot conquer his/her concrete predicament once and for all, but can use the tools developed during the search – belief and doubt – to continue challenging the particular conditions of his/her life.

I seek to show how Binx's "search" serves as an example of intersubjectivity by challenging the scientific humanism prevalent in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Succinctly put, Binx challenges both the general and the localized versions of scientific humanism. Percy presents scientific humanism as a characteristic of general society, one co-opted by intellectuals, scientists, and Southern stoics to affirm their beliefs. I use a new methodology that analyzes the search as an educational experience. Binx sharpens and develops the tools necessary in challenging stoicism and scientific humanism. This paper builds on Percy criticism to show *doubt* and *belief* as the novel's driving forces. Belief serves as a landing pad for the searcher who inevitably comes to doubt; the interplay between the two defines Percy's new "thinking" individual. For Percy, doubt begets a matrix through which an individual tunes into the ideas of others by questioning their beliefs. Through this sharing of ideas –intersubjectivity- individuals form a community of "namers," people who arrive at "truths" through a testing of ideas. In its presentation of belief and "doubt, the open plot of the novel becomes a metaphor for the way all humans come to "know." Localizing the searcher's struggles within scientific humanism and its apostles in Binx, the book demonstrates the constant shifting between doubt and belief. The "education" provided by the "the search," however, leads to Binx's ability to form "community" by engaging with them in semiotic community; a system built off the meaning of symbols as they pertain to others. Unlike scientific humanism's tendency to isolate individuals as organisms separate from

a community, Percy's semiotics seek to base community off an intercommunication that affirms the individual's ability to affect meaning.

In *The Moviegoer*, Binx reflects both on what keeps him mired in scientific humanism, and what tools will allow him to continue the search. Percy divides the novel into five chapters and an epilogue. A chapter by chapter plot analysis would prove frustrating because the plot itself is rather pedestrian; the book moves jarringly from scene to scene with a majority of the content being Binx's contemplation of his past and present. Thus, schematizing the plot as anything other than a "search" in its true sense negates the novel as a heuristic exercise. Taking the time to contemplate the novel's "denouement" early in the project underscores the main conflict that drive Binx's "search" – scientific humanism vs. semiotic community. Binx's "search" serves as the nexus for the discussions. The majority of Percy critics, including but not limited to John F. Desmond, Gary Ciuba, John Edward Hardy, Lewis Lawson, and Martin Luschei, offer productive critiques of the novel by framing the "search" within specific methodologies , playing out the concepts of scientific humanism and stoicism that complicate Binx's search. The conflation of the two concepts –stoicism and scientific humanism—in the Bolling family serves as an important touchstone for Binx's search, and Percy's vision for the novel.

The jarring nature of the narrative serves as the cornerstone of the learning experience, for without the jarring experience of doubt and belief, no potential exists for a semiotic community. *The Moviegoer*'s broad educational influences on Binx require a fluid and forgiving reading of Binx's characterization. Luschei tries to fit *The Moviegoer* into a dialectical framework, sacrificing the uniqueness of the plot as a learning experience leading directly to the final outcome of the novel. The dialectical framework shows the work involved in unpacking the plot. Luschei

faithfully executes a reading of the novel that shows the significance of the search, concluding that “Binx has found his vocation...Percy suggests this without moralizing and without grandiose claims, by his elliptical approach and the language of understatement” (110). Unpacking *The Moviegoer* takes a considerable amount of time. Luschei’s methodology, however, takes a more clinical and scientific approach to the “search,” missing Percy’s intent to remove himself from the clinical prescriptions he practiced in his previous career as a physician.<sup>1</sup> Rather, I argue that Percy wants to view his characters as unique individuals and less as predictable organisms.

This paper looks to focus on the mental exercises Binx engages with in finding semiotic communities. Several critics look at these mental attitudes. Desmond’s *Walker Percy’s Search for Community* looks at *The Moviegoer* in light of Percy’s interests in C.S. Peirce, ultimately outlining how Binx’s search leads him to semiotic community. Gary Ciuba analyzes *The Moviegoer* as an eschatology, writing that “Percy’s fiction continually discovers revelations through juxtaposing the diurnal round and the penultimate hour in which Binx searches” (66). The “search,” according to Ciuba, is a mental exercise in discovering the “knowledge” that arises from the decay of society. Lawson’s book article “English Romanticism and 1930 science in *The Moviegoer*” addresses Binx’s educational inheritance of scientific humanism from his father. Lawson’s claim that Binx carries on the traditions of scientific humanism through movie going limits “search” the search to an aesthetic value, a value only found in imitations rather than real life. However, suggesting that “education” bears on the “search” is a completely new claim that

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<sup>1</sup> Walker Percy was a medical doctor himself. He acquired tuberculosis as a young doctor, and came to reading philosophy and literature while convalescing (he began his writing career in philosophy, then moved to fiction). Though he had literary interests before his illness, his love for it grew substantially as a convalescent. Thus, later in life, rather than assessing the health of individuals in a clinic, he chose to do so through novels. For a brilliant compilation of essays that attest to Dr. Percy’s unique perspective as a medical doctor turned writer, see *The Last Physician: Walker Percy and the Moral Life of Medicine*, edited by Carl Elliott and John Lantos.

I plan to build from by looking at how the education offered to Binx by the Bolling family informs his search. Each critic offers well argued ideas on the mental attitudes of Binx and the Bolling family from which I plan to build by looking at how these mental attitudes inform Binx's "search" for semiotic community.

The interplay of belief and doubt leaves no room for definitiveness (a concept that will be addressed more fully throughout this paper). Thus, looking at the inconsistencies in the narrative pays in the potential of semiotic community. Hardy points out some of the inconsistencies of the narrative. Binx's "search" fails to provide any real spiritual progress; still a "snob" and a "moral imposter," and at the end of the book Binx "remains...much the same old egotist, the same old sly condescender he always was" (55). Hardy's focus on the inconsistencies between the promise of the "search" and the resulting heteronormative romance between Binx and Kate throws into doubt any educational value of the book. This particular paper uses the inconsistencies to underscore the function of belief and doubt, two different modes of consciousness crucial in analyzing the way individuals come to "know." Belief serves merely as a landing pad for the searcher, who ultimately experiences the irritation of "doubt" and the reformulation of belief it requires. My interpretation of the novel seeks to show how the interplay of belief and doubt creates a momentum that will allow the search to continue into the future.

Percy intentionally left the novel open ended, demonstrating that belief and doubt run in cycles. Binx begins and ends the main narrative at his Aunt's house, the actual physical convergence of stoicism and scientific humanism. One of his first descriptions includes a school building that he describes with a detached and materialistic eye, "It gives me a pleasant sense of

the goodness of creation to think of the brick and the glass and the aluminum being extracted from common dirt – though no doubt it is less a religious sentiment than a financial one, since I own a few shares of Alcoa” (10). Ignominiously retreating to the same spot after his Aunt excoriates him for what she perceives as his immorality, “the playground looks as if it alone had survived the end of the world” (231). Binx first sees the school as a financial boon, then when his search becomes frustrated by his Aunt’s pessimism, he sees it as indicative of the end of the world – a place where his search for semiotic community ends bitterly, or so it seems. Not only is Binx’s ignominy a circular theme, but throughout the book Percy alludes to the importance of Binx’s fellow searcher, Kate Cutrer. Binx’s search began in war, and Kate’s search began after her first fiancé was killed in a car accident. Kate stares down onto the abyss which she describes as “walking the tightrope,” and Binx feels the malaise. Towards the beginning of the book, Kate tells Binx, “You’re like me, but worse. Much worse,” and by the epilogue their kindred spirits are united in marriage. What is the plot doing to advance the philosophical nature of Percy’s writing? The novel challenges any framework such as Luschei’s dialectic that sacrifices the ongoing mental exercise of an individual on the search for a more systematized approach. The novel also challenges Hardy’s insistence that the novel offer a cure all for heteronormative snobbery. Through Binx’s search, Percy offers the reader more developmental answers. By suggesting that the “search” carries implications for the future rather than offering “answers,” I plan to add complexities to the “search” as a heuristic exercise for Binx, Percy, and the reader.

Binx discovers a vocation amidst the ruins by navigating through the abyss of malaise, and of everydayness. Accomplished by experiencing intercommunication and semiotic community, Binx’s new “education” antagonizes the scientific humanists that ruled philosophy for the early

part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. A successful “methodology” for reading *The Moviegoer* must take into account the significance of the education theme – the idea that Binx’s search sharpens the tools for overcoming concrete predicaments, which in Binx’s case is the use of doubt and belief to challenge scientific humanism and stoicism. Percy’s *The Moviegoer* questions the dominant ideologies associated with scientific humanism and stoicism, which offer prefabricated notions of “truth,” in favor of intersubjectivity. Excoriating Binx for his behavior late in the novel, Aunt Emily uses terms like “old time values”, or as Binx’s Aunt Emily says it “honor and truth and beauty.” Aunt Emily refers to the stoic traditions of stoicism and scientific humanism that she pushes Binx to engage with. Though we cover the examples of her scientific humanism and stoicism in more precise ways later on, one of the first parlor conversation between Emily and Binx nicely foregrounds this confluence. Speaking to Binx, Aunt Emily implores Binx to take on the scientific humanist and stoic mantle: “You’re scientific calling, your love of books and music. Don’t you remember how we used to talk – on the long winter evenings when Jules would go to bed and Kate would go dancing, how we used to talk! We tired the sun with talking and sent him down the sky. Don’t you remember studying Euripides and Jean-Christophe?” (55). Though Aunt Emily raised him to understand the standard texts of a scientific humanist and stoic in the hopes that Binx would carry on the Bolling traditions and honors, they mean nothing to Binx. He remembers, “You discovered them for me. It was always through you that’—All at once I am sleepy” Challenging these falsehoods, Binx disentangle “truth” from artificiality - “everydayness”(13-14, 145-146), “the malaise”(120), the “great shithouse of scientific humanism”(228). The novel critiques available notions of education and the concomitant ideas about proper life trajectories they inculcate, like Aunt Emily’s desire for Binx to become a research scientist and fulfill the stoic traditions of the Bolling family. In explicating Binx’s

"search," this paper intends to show how he seeks to challenge the everyday use of terms and concepts that support scientific humanism and stoicism, fostering an ethos of "doubt" that encourages the pursuit of a more flexible notion of "truth." The resulting community refers to intersubjectivity, a process of interaction in which individuals apprehend each other's dispositions and emotional states. Through this intersubjectivity individuals can form a community that engages in common frames of "naming." By no means does this result in finite answers for the "searcher." Rather, the fruits of the "search" pay off in a continuous honing of semiotic community through belief and doubt.

The following road map outlines specifically how belief and doubt serve as the philosophical girding of Percy's *The Moviegoer*. The first subsection, "**Intellectual History**," examines the historical factors that contribute to Percy's *The Moviegoer*, specifically examining the ways Percy conceptualizes scientific humanism and southern stoicism, and pragmatism's role in shaping Percy's opinions. "**A Thief of Peirce: Doubt and the 'Search' Amidst the Modern Malaise**," outlines the more specific ways in which "doubt" and the "search" put Binx at odds with those mired in the modern malaise. The basic framework of doubt and belief having been laid out, the paper frames the "search" within the context of specific Bolling family traditions. The subsection "**English Romanticism and 1930 Science**" looks at the Bolling's father-son relationship as an important touchstone for Binx's "search." Romanticism – an attitude that Mr. Bolling takes on as an alternative to stoicism – and scientific humanism – the desire for resolute and reproducible answers – create a void for Mr. Bolling and Binx. The hopeless romantic, prone to the fall out of discouragement, quickly finds solace in science, and vice - versa. Before resolving the issues of scientific humanism and stoicism, Binx must face the living confluence of the two

issues, his Aunt Emily. “**The Black Knight of the Old South: Aunt Emily’s Pagan Stoicism and Scientific Humanism**” examines Binx’s relationship with his Aunt as a living reminder of his need to escape from the clutches of scientific humanism. Binx’s Aunt, a latter day pagan Southern Stoic, acts as a specter of the Old World in the new by investing her faith in a scientific humanism that loves community but despises the individual.

Percy leaves Binx’s “search” as a continuing project, for Binx’s relationship with others must continue to develop or run the risk of atrophying. “**Finding Community in the Ruins**” takes into consideration the final outcomes of Binx’s “search”: experiencing what it means to plant oneself in a position to be open to symbols. In *Walker Percy’s Search for Community*, Desmond roots the “search” in the triad in terms of a Judeo Christian Heritage, that of God, Christ, and man. Desmond contextualizes the “search” as an individual’s quest to find meaning in the “after - Word” (67), a time when scientism squelches the language that defines the Judeo Christian heritage. Desmond demonstrates how Binx’s repetitions and rotations reveal the hot and cold dynamics between Binx and others-- his aunt, father, and dying brother Lonnie-- that lead him to a relationship with Kate that reflects a “genuine communion between individuals”(75). Searching for the relation between himself and others offers to Binx the gift of vocation, the role which an individual finds in a semiotic community. Binx, who at the end aspires to heal others as a physician, metaphorically enacts healing by bringing to Kate and his brothers and sisters the news of the “search” and its ultimate pay off in community. Though open ended, Desmond provides a solid contextualization of what Binx, and the reader, take away from the “search.” The “**Conclusion**” takes a look at the open

ended nature of the search, and what it means in terms of Binx's progress from alienation to semiotic community.

### **Intellectual History**

Visiting his mother's vacation home in the swamps of Louisiana, Binx wakes up with a start: "Three o'clock and suddenly awake amid the smell of dreams and of the years come back and peopled and blown away again by the smoke. A young man am I, twenty nine, but I am as full of dreams as an ancient. At night the years come back and perch around my bed like ghosts" (144). Binx feels the convergence of his family's histories in his dreams. His sudden awakening in this scene reveals the pressure he feels from them. Percy presents these "ghosts" as not just hailing from the Bolling family history, but as indicative of U.S. culture. The following section seeks to identify these ghosts that Percy sees as endemic to American culture, and how Binx's "search" seeks to overcome their hold upon his psyche.

Since *The Moviegoer* weaves together seemingly diffuse resources -- e.g. Pragmatism, Southern Stoicism, and scientific humanism -- I take a holistic approach in my historical contextualization that brings the elements to bear on Binx's search. I mention most of the terms (or more descriptively the -isms) in the introduction, but I would like to take this time to give more concrete definitions. As Percy uses the foundations of Pragmatism to challenge the terms, it is essential that we understand their definitions. The first term in need of defining, Pragmatism, looks at how humans derive knowledge by engaging with each other. This section looks at two Pragmatists, Charles Sander Peirce and John Dewey, to show the Pragmatist discussion into which Percy enters with *The Moviegoer*. Though Pragmatists credit Charles

Peirce as their founder, William James first used the term “Pragmatism” in “Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results.” James defined pragmatism as follows:

To attain perfect clearness in our thoughts of an object....we need only consider what effects of a conceivably practical kind the object may involve—what sensations we are to expect from it, and what reactions we must prepare. Our conception of these effects, then, is for us the whole conception of the object, so far as that conception has positive significance at all. (259)

Individuals gain knowledge by seeing themselves in other people. Thus, a community comes to being through interaction amongst individuals. Deceptively simplistic, this field of thought created a number of high profile scholars whose ideas differ radically. For the sake of time, I will say that Peirce looks at knowledge as deriving from a constant interplay of “belief” and “doubt.” Triadicity, an “I, you, it” relationship drives the interplay of belief and doubt. Through intercommunication, triadicity challenges and/or affirms the significance of the meanings individuals place on objects. For Dewey, meaning was derived strictly from the scientific process.

Percy uses Pragmatism, particularly the ideas of Peirce, to challenge what he saw as the reigning philosophy of American, Cartesian dualism. In Percy's opinion, American individualism stems from Cartesian dualism. Thus, the term serves as an umbrella for Southern stoicism – Southern paternalism – and scientific humanism – the idea that all human problems can be solved by science and compassion. The importance of this term – Cartesian dualism-- for Percy cannot be understated, for he saw it truly as endemic to American culture as a whole. Cartesian dualism means the insistence that everything operates in a cause and effect relationship. This Cartesian individualism sees humans as organisms ruled by dyadicism – the idea that all living

things can be reduced to interaction between twos, thus reducing human organisms to cause and effect relationships. Descartes' "Cogita ergo sum" forgets that man assigns meaning through the use of language rather than through the interaction of neurons. As Percy states in a 1989 interview with Scott Walter on the subject of Tocqueville labeling Americans as Cartesians:

All the Americans I know are Cartesians without having read a word of Descartes. He meant that an educated American believes that everything can be explained scientifically, can be reduced to the cause and effect of electrons, neurons, and so forth. But at the same time, each person exempts his mind from this, as do scientists. I see this endemic Cartesianism, and my criticism is that it leaves us without a coherent theory of man. Consequently, modern man is deranged. (More Conversations with Walker Percy, 232-233)

As John Desmond notes, Percy echoed Tocqueville in saying that Cartesian dualism was a characteristic of all Americans, "was the source of that radical individualism so embedded as an idol in the American psyche – at once self assertive, given to role playing and sociopathic impersonation, and yet haunted by a ghostly sense of solitariness" (Desmond 14). The Southern Stoics picked up on the Cartesian dualism in their historical will to conquer the land, and their enduring desire to impose a social order upon society.

This explication shows how Percy saw Cartesian dualism as a common source of stoicism as well as scientific humanism. The world of *The Moviegoer* ultimately arrives at truth through the secular, rational thought often described as "scientific humanism." What Corliss Lamont calls a "naturalistic philosophy that rejects all supernaturalism and relies primarily upon reason and science, democracy and human compassion" (3). Thus, it is essential to keep in mind the relation between the two concepts when looking at the Bolling family traditions. Though scientism permeates America -at- large, the Bolling family's stoicism serves as the most important touchstone in Binx's "search." Indeed, the stoics see the world as cause and effect –the rise of (a

very general) profanity will bring all virtue to ruin. The stoics cast themselves as virtuous; they live to tend to their virtue, paternalistically see to it that their inferiors are taken care of. When their romanticism seems fleeting, they sink their souls into scientism to substantiate their values. A “noble stock,” the Bollings hail from a long tradition of Southern stoicism that imposes a significant effect on Binx’s “search.” Due to this dyadic perspective, Percy casts 20<sup>th</sup> century America as a rigid system of social relationships owed to the traditions of Descartes and the Enlightenment, thus coloring his character’s reflections ideas on “meaning.” As John F. Desmond points out in *Walker Percy’s Search for Community*, Binx Bolling possesses a prominent awareness of Cartesian dualism’s presence in society:

The culture that dominates Binx’s society is a deformed semiosis; that is, it is a community governed largely by a scientific perspective. Hence it looks on the world and human interactions as causal and dyadic rather than as relational and triadic. Its citizens suffer a displacement from being. Binx senses this fundamental displacement in himself and in those around him. (Desmond 42)

Desmond makes clear that Percy saw the dominant scientific perspective as a “terror” intrinsic to American individualism and to Binx Bolling, “the stepchild of Cartesian dualism” (42). The Bolling family’s history reveals the extent to which American individualism, Cartesian dualism, and stoicism permeated Binx’s mindscape. Seeing the world as “causal and dyadic rather than as relational and triadic,” stoicism separates the mind from the body. Scientific humanism serves as stoicism’s “new arm,” offering a superficial view of human relations as cause and effect.

Percy applies these diffuse resources to the idea of change in *The Moviegoer*, specifically using pragmatism to complicate the notions of scientific humanism and stoicism. The aforementioned concepts orbit around the idea of “change” in *The Moviegoer*: pragmatists embraced change as a method for making meaning, scientific humanists saw change necessarily

possessing a scientific outcome, and Southern Stoics saw change as symbolizing the end of their virtuous era and the beginning of societal decline. The millenarian Southern stoics viewed change as promising a “second coming” of sorts which foretold the rightful ascendency of their virtue. Percy discusses “change” in *The Moviegoer* using the three themes of stoicism, scientific humanism, and Pragmatism, constructing a meditation on the ways “change” and its inverse, “habit,” informs the debate on what constitutes “knowledge.” This “Intellectual History” begins by explaining the connection Percy’s novel shares with southern stoicism and scientific humanism, then moves to its engagement with pragmatism, specifically looking at Percy’s muse Charles Sanders Peirce and Percy’s nemesis John Dewey.

While lying wounded in Korea, Binx questions everyday objects, foreshadowing his struggles with stoicism and scientific humanism – his search. Percy draws the doubt that instigates Binx’s search from American Pragmatism’s founder Charles Sanders Peirce. Focusing his thought on American Pragmatism, Percy’s *The Moviegoer* interrogates the stoicism and scientism of the Percy/Bollings. The “original” Pragmatists did not identify as such, but as members of a philosophical club called “The Metaphysical Club” in 1879. Started by Charles Sanders Peirce, the group included philosophers and intellectuals like William James, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Joseph Warner, Nicholas St. John Green, Chauncey Wright, John Fiske, and Francis Ellingwood Abbot (Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce ala Menand vol 5 paragraph 12). John Dewey, though much younger than others in the group, also attended meetings. Change served as the philosophical backdrop of their discussions; how do philosophers account for change in a world supposed by science to operate according to laws? How does one arrive at certain theories and ideas to which they will adhere strictly? Is there a law to laws? How does what we call

“knowledge” straddle the evolution and chance of Charles Darwin and John Venn with “habit” as described by Emile Boutroux? “The Metaphysical Club” saw Darwin, Venn, and Boutroux as contemporaneous philosophers, whose concern with change and habit paralleled “belief” and the “irritation of doubt” that served as the cornerstone of American Pragmatism.<sup>2</sup>

Pragmatism developed along with one of the biggest changes in 19<sup>th</sup> Century American history. Darwin’s publication of *The Origin of Species* in 1859 underscored the change, volatility, and unpredictability of human life that fed the thoughts of the first American pragmatists. Darwin coined the term “natural selection” to describe nature’s preference for the most biologically adept organisms, and tied human survival to constantly changing natural systems. Other writers of the time picked up on the same ideas. John Venn’s *The Logic of Chance* argues that organisms constantly evolved, and that this “evolving” status was a natural law itself: “It is as if the point on the target at which we aim, instead of being fixed, were slowly changing its position as we continue to fire at it; changing almost certainly to some extent, and temporarily, and not improbably to a considerable extent and permanently” (37, 48). Emile Boutroux’s 1874 piece titled “De la contingence des lois de la nature” (“The Contingency of the Laws of Nature”) posits that natural laws constantly evolve. This popular French philosopher argues strongly and eloquently that “Scientific laws are the bed over which passes the torrent of facts...they shape it even as they follow it....They do not precede things, they derive from them, and they can vary, if the things themselves happen to vary” (39). People conflate the predictability of nature with laws, but laws exist only according to habits; in other words, people create laws according to the way they see the world working. Emile Boutroux continues to argue that without change,

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<sup>2</sup> Peirce had in fact written a review of Venn (*Writings of CSP*, vol. 2 98).

everything dies (167). Darwin, Venn, and Boutroux saw the survival of nature as contingent upon change and variations, and consistency only a state best described as a habit. Evolution by natural selection, chance, and habit influenced the ideas of the leading American philosophers at the time, developing into a distinctly American school of thought. Darwin et al. wrote of change and habit, and the men of “The Metaphysical Club” began meditating on “change” as a way to describe the way humans acquire knowledge—what Peirce describes as “belief and doubt.” This very brief overview of the intellectual atmosphere from which American Pragmatism grew intends to show the importance of change.

The main focus of the pragmatist thought section of “Intellectual History” rests on Peirce’s “irritation of doubt”—this idea allows Binx to challenge the Cartesian dualism that ensouls the world of *The Moviegoer*. Peirce lays out his theories on systems of knowing in “How to Make Our Ideas Clear.” He writes in this important essay:

The action of thought is excited by the irritation of doubt, and ceases when belief is attained; so that the production of belief is the sole function of thought. All these words, however, are too strong for my purpose. It is as if I had described the phenomena as they appear under a mental microscope. Doubt and Belief, as the words are commonly employed, relate to religious or other grave discussions. But here I use them to designate the starting of any question, no matter how small or how great, and the resolution of it. ('How to Make Our Ideas Clear', CP 5.394, 1878)

The parallels between “habits” and “change,” “belief” and “doubt,” i.e. the idea that both “change” and “doubt” bring about a reconstituting of truth, suggest the importance of looking into systems of knowledge that embrace change. As Louis Menand puts it, “Peirce was a system builder – by virtue of the range of his expertise, possibly the most ambitious (and possibly the most frustrated) system builder of late nineteenth century North Atlantic Culture. And it was a culture that took system building extremely seriously” (276). An essay which Peirce read at one

of the club meetings titled “Design and Chance” intricately works through classic probability theory to say that “chance is the one essential agency upon which the whole process depends...everything that can happen by chance sometime or other will happen by chance. Chance will sometime bring about a change in every condition” (4: 548, 549). This theory of change is closely related to the ideas of Darwin. Peirce states, “my opinion is only Darwinism analyzed, generalized, and brought into the terms of Ontology”(552). Habits are an evolutionary function. Just as natural selection works to eliminate the bad traits in favor of the good, bad habits in “law” are weeded out for the good “habits”: “Systems or compounds which have bad habits are quickly destroyed, those which have no habits follow the same course; only those which have good habits tend to survive” (553). Peirce formulates a theory of systems by which we can understand how the natural world deals with “change.” For Peirce, there are no exact origins to laws, but there are ways which laws develop as the world changes. These laws are always contingent upon their success, but chance is a law itself: “Chance is indeterminacy, is freedom. But the action of freedom issues in the strictest law” (552). James claimed Peirce invented pragmatism, and “Design and Chance” demonstrate the questioning of “laws” and “stability” in favor of “change” – descriptors of a system of meaning making that parallel “doubt” and “belief.” Peirce’s system uses belief and doubt to form a semiotic community – a triadic relationship between symbol, interpreter, and interpretant that develops laws of meaning through sharing “belief” and “doubt.” Percy writes *The Moviegoer* with this system in mind.

In other sections of the paper, we will look at specific instances in which Binx interrogates scientific humanism and stoicism. Here, I address the connections between stoicism and

scientific humanism, showing the extent to which Percy saw the two as specific threats to Binx's progress. The root of the novel's scientific humanism begins with the stoicism of the Percy family, whose early colonization of the South asserted a physical and mental hegemony. The two concepts, scientific humanism and stoicism, seem disparate, but they ultimately come together in the Bolling family's reaction to change. The early Percy's "conquering" of the wild land paralleled the "civilizing" effects their presence created. The first North American Percy, Charles, colonized the 600 acres of land in British West Florida in 1777 (Mississippi Delta) and began a storied family history that includes Civil War heroes, Senators, patriarchs, and cultural luminaries (Brown 28). Percy dedicates *The Moviegoer* to one of these famous members of his family, William Alexander Percy, whose book *Lanterns on the Levy* chronicled their family's life as eminent Southern planters. William Alexander Percy, referred to as Uncle Will by his nephew and adopted son Walker, expresses the ethos of his Southern upbringing. He laments the loss of the stronghold their virtue once exerted on the beloved Southland in his part autobiographical novel, *Lanterns on the Levy – Recollections of a Planter's Son*. Note how the stoic's "Jesus – Buddha – and Socrates" loses to an insipid yet undefined obscenity, but that Percy foretells of a "second coming" for the loyal stoics:

Should I teach deceit, dishonor, ruthlessness, bestial force to the children in order that they survive? Better that they perish. It is sophistry to think of two sets of virtues, there is but one; virtue is an end in itself; the survival virtues are means, not ends. Honor and decency, compassion and truth are good even if they kill you, for they alone give life its dignity and worth. Yet probably...all the good and the noble and the true of all the world will die and obscenity will triumph. Probably those that practiced virtue will be destroyed, but it is better for men to die than to call evil good, and virtue itself will never die.

We of my generation have lost one line of fortifications after another, the old South, the old ideals, the old strengths. We are now watching the followers of Jesus and Buddha and Socrates being driven from the face of the earth. But there's time ahead, thousands of years, there is but one good life and men yearn for it and will again practice it, though of my contemporaries only the stars will see. Love and compassion, beauty and innocence will

return. It is better to have breathed them an instant than to have supported iniquity a millennium. Perhaps only flames can rouse man from his apathy to his destiny.

The individual must save himself/herself from moral decrepitude:

There is left to each of us, no matter how far defeat pierces, the unassailable wintry kingdom of Marcus Aurelius, which some more gently call the Kingdom of Heaven. However it be called, it is not outside, but within and when it is all lost, it stands fast. To this remaining fastness I knew I should help the children find their way. (Lanterns 313)

Uncle Will believed that the course of the country was on a downward spiral. Outmoded were the paternal responsibilities to take care of subordinates and subalterns and guarding “virtue” and “sanctity” from corruption. The *noblisse oblige* to which the Percys subscribed for so many years faced extinction. Rearing his adopted son, Uncle Will reasserted these characteristics at any cost. He hoped that the future, however far down the road, would prove their efforts fruitful. William Alexander witnesses the strength of the stoic individual, stating, “it is not outside, but within and when all is lost, it stands fast” (Lanterns 313). In short, he hoped for a renaissance of the individual’s “love and compassion, innocence and beauty” to which his *noblisse oblige* clung.

William Alexander Percy’s stoicism, a battle between good and evil, offered varied readings on the state of society. He hoped for the retainment of stoicism, while also seeing the world as hopeless and determined to fail. Discussing *The Moviegoer* and its indebtedness to William Alexander Percy in “Versions of Percy,” Jim Van Cleave writes,

Between the idealized Will Percy of his friends’ affectionate memoirs and the same man in the view of his nephew, we measure the difference between the Old Deep South and the contemporary South, between a serene and deeply willed idealism and a tortured existential psychological realism. Walker Percy dramatizes this distance in Binx Bolling’s inability to talk the same language as his Aunt Emily. (991)

Binx's Aunt Emily represents the stoicism of Mr. Bolling, the literary likeness of Williams Alexander Percy. However, Van Cleeve's phrases "deeply willed idealism" and "tortured existential psychological realism" hints to more than moodiness in the Percy family dynamics. William Alexander's mood swings from idealism to determinism reflect the Bolling family's desire to switch from romanticism to science, and from science back to romanticism. While their romanticism upholds their desire for stoic righteousness, science upholds their desire to know the facts. Like William Alexander, they are doomed by their expectations – Binx's father dies of romanticism and 1930's science, while Aunt Emily is doomed to see the sun set on her "messianic hopes" of a scientist/stoic Christ figure. The stoic mentality to jump from romanticism into science haunts Binx. He lives in a nightmare of miscommunication brought on by the abyss of the stoic/scientific humanist mindscape.

Percy brings together scientific humanism and stoicism in the effects they impose on society. In the novel, the Bolling family represents the Percy's fixations on noblisse oblige and their fixation on upholding the virtue of the land, both common elements of Southern stoicism. While the Percy's represent a particular Southern version of this stoicism, the novel presents it as only one variation of American individualism. Though certain characteristics of the Cartesian mind/body split remain Southern -- Aunt Emily's insistence upon "goodness, truth, and beauty" and her memory of the Bollings as a "fierce old warrior gens" (26) -- a version of this individuality surfaces throughout America. Following in this tradition, Emily sees how "things should be" with her visions of "goodness, truth, and beauty" and nothing will keep her from trying to assert these absolute truths as the member of a "fierce old warrior gens" (26).

The conflicts Binx faces as the inheritor of this stoic/humanist hybridity concretize in the present through the depiction of the Bollings. Aunt Emily's stoicism and scientific humanist intertwine during the dinner party scene. Referring to his Aunt's interaction with the reporter/author/public intellectual Sam Yerger, Binx narrates:

And you spoke to me for the first time about your messianic hopes? Sam smiles at my aunt. In Feliciana we used to speculate on the new messiah, the scientist - philosopher – mystic who would come striding through the ruins with the *Gita* in one hand and a Geiger counter in the other. (183)

Emily's "messianic hopes" demonstrate the extent to which her stoicism –the following of William Alexander Percy's "Jesus and Buddha and Socrates"— translates into scientific humanism. Finding a new world in the figure of a scientists/intellectual: a "new messiah, the scientist - philosopher – mystic who would come striding through the ruins with the *Gita* in one hand and a Geiger counter in the other" (Lanterns 313, Percy 183). Binx throws off the mantle of the Bolling family's scientific humanism. Consequently, Aunt Emily pegs Binx as "an ingrate, a limb of Satan, and the last and sorriest scion of a noble stock" (26). Binx, the last generation, uses his disconnect from the life trajectories offered by his family's scientific humanism and stoicism as a subject of his "doubt."

The stoics turned scientific humanists staked their only hope or the kind of "jeremiad" Uncle Will voices: the country is in moral decrepitude, but if we keep the flame of honor and beauty alive, we might reap the benefits in another world, possibly another life.<sup>3</sup> Once again,

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<sup>3</sup> Berkovitch, Sacvan. *The American Jeremiad*. A particularly American tradition, with roots to sermons in the colonies, that has become an intrinsic part of our sacred and secular rhetoric. Its importance comes from the threat to America's "special missions" and "high errands" by a prevalence of sin, greed, slothfulness, and dishonor. Berkovitch writes that "The revelation of America serves to blight, and ultimately to preclude, the possibility of fundamental social change. To condemn the profane is to

echoing William Alexander Percy, Aunt Emily proselytizes her millenarianism to Binx at the end of the novel:

No, my young friend, I am not ashamed to use the word class. They say out there that we think we're better. You're damn right we're better. And don't think they don't know it--' She raises the sword toward Prytania Street. 'Let me tell you something. If he out yonder is your prize exhibit for the progress of the human race in the past three thousand years, then all I can say is I am content to be fading out of the picture. ..one thing I am sure of: we live by our lights, we die by our lights, and whoever the high gods may be, we'll look them in the eye without apology. (224)

Aunt Emily sees the end coming, and it bodes poorly for the "common man" she points to on Prytania Street. The end means glory for Aunt Emily, however, seeing her refusal to change with the times as honorable. Emily sees change as hearkening an end in which the Stoic honor will be revered. Both William Alexander Percy and Emily predict the end, and each sees the end as victory for stoics and scientific humanists, little differs between the two reactions.

However, the effects of Cartesian dualism are not limited to the South. Percy desires to enter into a larger, nationwide conversation on what it means to be ruled by scientism. Percy passionately communicates the pervasiveness of Cartesian dualism. Leaving New Orleans to attend a business meeting in Chicago, Binx senses the alienation that plagues America, and notes that while there is a particular Southern version of it, it is endemic to American culture. Arriving at Chicago, Binx comments on the "genie soul", stating:

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commit oneself to spiritual ideal. To condemn 'false Americans' as profane is to express one's faith in a national ideology. In effect, it is to transform what might have been a search for moral or social alternatives into a call for cultural revitalization" (179). Binx's 'search' is situated between those who lament change and those who embrace change. The purpose of this Intellectual History section is to frame this search in a far reaching American tradition of habit and change, belief and doubt. The purpose of the paper is to demonstrate the how Percy mitigates this stultifying competition in Binx's search.

Nobody but a Southerner knows the wrenching rinsing sadness of the cities of the North. Knowing all about genie souls and living in haunted places like Shiloh and the Wilderness and Vicksburg and Atlanta where the ghosts of heroes walk abroad by day and are more than real people, he knows a ghost when he sees one, and no sooner does he step off the train in New York, Chicago, or San Francisco than he feels the genie-soul perched on his shoulder. (202-203)

The North and the South possess a history of individualism to which the living can only feel as ghostly, and can only feign to own in the present. Though the two regions manifest individualism differently, they still fall prey to the void left from Cartesian dualism.

In contextualizing the intellectual conversation into which Percy wrote, I intend to contrast Percy's semiotics (borrowed from Peirce's) with the ideas of John Dewey, a pragmatist whose writings very much informed the intellectual atmosphere contemporary to Percy. Percy's main conflict with the mainstream pragmatists of his day (namely John Dewey) was their insistence upon scientific value rather than those derived from intercommunication. In Percy's time, pragmatism moved away from semiotic philosophy at the expense of individuality and intercommunication. In a 1984 essay titled "Diagnosing the Modern Malaise", Percy points to G.H. Meade and Dewey as those to whom the scientific humanism of his day was indebted. Percy uses *The Moviegoer* to reexamine the boundaries of pragmatism; to rethink the way humans make meaning in terms of the "effects" of those objects around him. Anything but mysterious, the fictional and real world mental landscape contemporary to Binx's search belong to the Aunt Emilys, Sam Yergers, and the "humanists and lady psychologists who came to my Aunt's house" (109). In an article predating the "The Culture Critics" (1959) titled "The Coming Crisis in Psychiatry: I" (1957), Percy offers a critique of science that seems to define his position on scientific humanism:

The suspicion is beginning to arise that American psychiatry with its predominantly functional orientation – its roots - concepts of drives and counter-drives, field forces, cultural criteria – is silent (on the great themes raised by existentialist critics like Kierkegaard and Marcel) because, given its basic concepts of man, it is unable to take account of the predicament of modern man. (392)

He makes his point more succinctly, saying that American social scientists “have no criteria for evaluating illness except as a deviation from a biological form” (392). The former physician sees scientific humanism as reducing humans to “drives and counter – drives, field forces, cultural criteria” (392). Alternatively, Percy defines illness as an estrangement from others-- an acute absorption into a material world that precludes the intercommunication that we later see in Binx’s life in Gentilly where he lives by recommendations from *Consumer Reports* and radio advertisements. These maladies closely reflect the economy of American individualism in which the individual derives meaning from acting out certain roles, a cause and effect relationship that reflects the effects of Cartesian Dualism on Binx even while trying to escape his Aunt’s house of stoicism in the suburban Gentilly. An individual is never far from the Cartesian dualism that rules the land, and Percy looks to semiotic community to fill in the gaps the Cartesian dualism leaves in finding out how humans make meaning beyond cause and effect relationships.

In Dewey’s reaction to the upswing of religion amongst American intellectuals, of which Percy’s semiotics was apart, we see Dewey’s direct engagement with the ideas of a mystical community of faith. Dewey’s article “Anti Naturalism in Extremis” (1943) illuminates the debate over “knowledge” that informed Percy’s vision for a novel. “Anti-Naturalism in Extremis” addresses the rift between naturalism and anti - naturalism as one which dates back to the early church and its use of Aristotle to create a mystical way of coming to truth. Dewey then proceeds to attack the philosophers who follow in the early church’s footsteps -- like Kant,

German idealism, Thomists -- as promoting “supernaturalism”: “there are philosophers who claim to rest their extra – if not super naturalism – upon a higher faculty of Reason or Intuition, or whatever, not upon divine revelation” (25). Dewey also claims supernaturalists see naturalists as reductionists: “Both of them identify naturalism with materialism. They then employ the identification to charge naturalists with reduction of all distinctive human values, moral, aesthetic, logical, to blind mechanical conjunctions of material entities- a reduction which is in effect their complete destruction”(25). Dewey attacks this as anti-naturalist presumption, stating that naturalist’s “modern methods of experimentalist observation have wrought a profound transformation in the subject matters of astronomy, physics, chemistry, and biology” and asserts that “the change wrought in them has exercised the deepest influence upon human relations” (26). Naturalists focus on how science – astronomy, physics, and chemistry—develops perceptions on human relationships, and that the supernaturalist rejection of science seeks to overthrow these social developments for its own agenda. Dewey’s ideas are in direct conflict with those of Percy’s, who sees the scientific humanists as the reductionists.<sup>4</sup>

The conflicts between naturalists and anti-naturalists bears on the discussion of scientific humanism throughout *The Moviegoer*; how does an individual deal with facts and standards the he/she feels as dismissive of the individual? Dewey makes mention of semiotic philosophers as

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<sup>4</sup> Percy writes in “The Coming Crisis in Psychiatry” that scientists wrongly feel they can prove health without checking into any other non-tangible factors. Percy wonders about those factors that are unobservable, but still have a strong effect on an individual. What about the malaise? The malaise is unidentifiable through observation. Binx tells us that the malaise has nothing to do with looks or observations, just sensations: “A fine Sunday afternoon, though. A beautiful boulevard ten thousand handsome cars, fifty thousand handsome, well – fed, and kind – hearted people, and the malaise settles on us like fall out” (166). The differing prognoses of Dewey and Percy are as different as their solutions. While Dewey believes the cure for these ailments can be found in a scientific method, Percy believes they can be solved through semiotic community.

buying into supernaturalism in “Anti-Naturalism in Extremis.” Failing to see the adequacy of a theory that takes into account the extra natural meanings people place upon objects, Dewey writes:

The current discussion of language – also a topic of basic importance – affords another example. Students of this subject, from a logical and social point of view, who regard themselves as anti-metaphysical scientific positivists, write as if words consisted of an ‘inner’, private, mentalistic or substance and ‘outer’ physical shell by means of which a subjective intrinsically incommunicable somewhat gets conveyed ‘trans-subjectively’.! And they appear quite unaware of the extra-natural origin and status of their postulate. (28)

Linguists fall into the trap of supernaturalism due to their insistence upon intersubjectivity. For Dewey, naming is a process best done through scientific modes of observation. Semioticians like Percy believe that meaning results from a triadic relationship between the “truth” the observer sees in an object, and how the “other” picks up and modifies the “truth.” Though this intersubjectivity forms community for Percy, it threatens “truth” for Dewey. As Robert Coles points out, however, Percy’s work “straddles delicately the world of faith and the world of precise scientific observation” (70). Though Percy believes in the testing of hypotheses through observation, he also has faith in man’s ability to derive truth from intercommunication. This prerogative puts Percy at odds with the idea of reducing humans to reactive organisms who learn through the scientific process. For secular humanists like Dewey, nothing is unknown and unobservable. Faith in the use of signs and symbols to derive meaning for humans exemplifies supernaturalist folly.

Dewey’s 1943 article, “Anti Naturalism in Extremis,” questions the relationship between what people experience in semiotic communities through triadicity and certifiable “knowledge.” Dewey flags the connection between “knowledge” and semiotic community, suggesting that it

serves only the purposes of moralists seeking to promote their agenda of absolute truths.

Though Dewey and Percy ultimately disagree on what constitutes meaning, the issues with which the two grapple indicate the larger cultural debate over the different ways to make meaning. Thus, it is interesting that in 1950, Dewey wrote a second response to religion and intellectuals –an installment of numerous luminaries of the time in the *Partisan Review* titled “Religion and the Intellectuals” -- in which he revisits the theme of naturalism and supernaturalism, except now employing the terms “religion” and “science”. Indeed, the destruction of the Second World War provides a good backdrop for discussing the wane of “science” in the minds of the public. Wondering whether or not people could return to believing in science after this destruction, Dewey writes that “The fundamental consideration, then, with respect to the forsaking of the ‘scientific attitude of mind’, would seem to be that the great mass of human beings has not deserted it for the simple reason that the mass never shared that attitude” (132). The masses reaped the benefit of science, but never fully shared in the idea that “truth” could be realized apart from supernaturalism using the scientific method. Dewey then goes on to posit that science will receive a new and rejuvenated place amongst the minds of the intellectuals, stating, “The scientific attitude has had little place in the concerns and interests of highest importance to the mass of men. In consequence the attitude is inevitably contained and restrained in the class that is specifically intellectual” (132). Dewey proposes that since supernaturalism has been “the source of violent conflict, and destructive of basic human values; and in view of the fact that even now differences of religion divide people of the earth”, he can deduce that religion will continue without supernaturalism (133). Using the exact theories that he faulted science for believing in earlier, intersubjectivity, Dewey extends an olive branch to religion: “just as mankind may become all the richer when there is an assured ability on the part

of each people to develop its own preferred way, so it is with religious pluralisms among the people of the earth, *provided that there is freedom of intercommunication*" (italics mine, 133). Dewey's support for religion as an effective tool for sponsoring intercommunication shows significant development in the intellectual perception of his secular rationalism.

By developing semiotic theory within his literature, the physician novelist Walker Percy gives a prognosis to the reader-patient as well as the possibility of recovering from the malaise. Instead of using the language of scientific humanism which Percy saw as cancelling out individuality, his fiction and philosophy sought to hone current ideas on how individuals make meaning. Percy outlines the three points of triadicity that make up the semiotic community: the sign, the referent, and the meaning that comes forth from naming. Unlike the system of "symbols" that form a semiotic community, Percy sees this system of "signs" as contributing to alienation. We do not learn from the dyadicism in which cause and effect is the paradigm for meaning, but by assigning meaning to symbols and sharing this meaning through intercommunication. Percy states, "An index sign is a part of a dyadic relation. An index refers to the object it denotes by virtue of really being affected by that object. A symbol, however, refers to something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. 'The index is physically connected with its object...but the symbol is connected with its object by virtue of...the symbol using mind'" (MB 162). Percy best states the relation between meaning, symbol and interpretant: "The speaker intends the thing and thus comes to know it and to validate it, by lying alongside it the word-symbol through which we know it" (178). "Knowledge" derives from the sharing of meaning through symbols rather than the reflection or mirroring of ideas from one person to another -- dyadicism. Percy wanted to reframe what James called the "effects of

a conceivably practical kind the object may involve – what sensations we are to expect from it, and what reactions we must prepare" (James and Burkhardt 259). Percy saw intercommunication as another part of the experiences to which people must develop responses, come to know its effects both in others and in themselves.

#### **A Thief of Peirce: Doubt and the “Search” Amidst the Modern Malaise**

To repeat the aforementioned definition of Binx's search, "The search is what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life"; despair leads to stagnation, the search leads to movement (13). In other sections of the novel, Binx uses the term "malaise" to describe a feeling of despair. He states, "The malaise is the pain of loss. The world is lost to you, the world and the people in it, and there remains only you and the world and you no more able to be in the world than Banquo's ghost" (120). Binx contextualizes the beginning of the "search" as something he came to while wounded in Korea: "My shoulder didn't hurt but it was pressed hard against the ground as if somebody sat on me. Six inches from my nose a dung beetle was scratching around under the leaves. As I watched, there awoke in me an immense curiosity. I was onto something. I vowed that if I ever got out of this fix, I would pursue the search" (11). Binx experiences the "irritation of doubt" when he realizes that his intimacy with the "shit" and "dung beetle" represents the status quo that the majority of people find themselves living. Binx starts the search with a question about what life among the dung beetles means, and begins a journey that carries large stakes. After all, one can either be onto the "search", or in despair and feeling the malaise.

Because the methodology which Binx uses in the search is frustratingly understated, the reader receives few tools to explain Binx's progress other than the rather general definitions of

"search," "despair," and "malaise." Fluctuating in the meniscus of modern day scientific humanism, Binx finds the pitfalls to be as gaping and wide as his definitions. I specifically discuss how Peirce's ideas on doubt fit into *The Moviegoer* in order to frame Binx's progression through the meniscus, ultimately arriving at a successful methodology for remaining on the "search". The "search" begins with Binx's doubting of God's existence and works through a number of scenarios in which Binx succumbs to a life similar to that of the dung beetle he observed in Korea. Binx ultimately prevails by following his most pressing doubt, the "invincible apathy" towards God, a term Percy crafts to refer to the way in which an individual may doubt the existence of God, but still find truth in the mystery of faith. Binx's questioning of the "everyday" objects he sees around him acts as a catalyst for defining his relationship with others, ultimately resulting in triadicity and semiotic community.

Binx's "search" connects Binx, his fellow characters, and the reader into a semiotic community built from doubt and belief. Charles Sanders Peirce's discussion of the interplay between belief and doubt closely reflects the progression of Binx's search. Doubt, no matter how small or how large, changes the way people come to know. For Peirce and for Percy ala Binx, the treasure of doubt lies in its ability to open up a whole new world to the doubter/searcher. Peirce's description of belief and doubt closely reflect Binx's ideas in *The Moviegoer*; not necessarily religious, but not excluding of religion, and based on the presence of a "search" rather than its grandeur. The "search" that Binx describes makes meaning from the world of signs through which every human communicates. This world of signs, and the drive to interpret them, creates the common meanings that create community.

The disjointed structure of *The Moviegoer*, itself a methodology, brings Binx and the reader closer to semiotic community through the common experience of doubt. Speaking of the similarities between *The Moviegoer* and Peirce's theories, John F. Desmond writes, "the novel's loose form re-creates the real semiotic community that Peirce described in his concept of triadicity, with asynchronic overlapping of signs from past, present, and anticipated future, and a flow of triadic interaction between these signs" (43). The "search" and the doubt that accompanies it forms a community built off a system of signs, or beliefs, that are constantly in flux, including the many factors which control our understanding of "who we are," like religion, race, and love. These sign relations form a community within the novel between Binx and his fellow characters, and between reader and novel: "Through this underlying web of sign relations Percy constructs the novel's inner meaning. Its disjunctive surface engages the reader in an interpretive search to understand the novel's signs, just as Binx searches to understand his world. This process, as Percy claimed, creates a community of meaning between reader and author" (Desmond 43). Looking at doubt and belief in terms of the interpreter and interpreted -- the reader and the character of Binx-- fosters a more inclusive "search." The reader shares in the irritation of doubt that Binx feels. Percy layers the novel so as to make it intellectually challenging work for both Binx and the reader, a significant part of Percy's methodological critique and development. Working against the arbitrary predetermined positions assigned by society, "sign relations" focus on how people relate to each other through the dynamics of doubt and belief.

Binx embraces his complicated position within community as a "doubter" amongst "knowers." The doubt that presages Binx's searches suggests the novel's debt to Peirce, who

writes in “How to Make Our Ideas Clear” that “doubt” –no matter how small- carries tremendous potential for humans. Seeing everyday objects “as if for the first time,” Binx begins the questioning that instigates the “search.” While lying wounded in a ditch, Binx questions the nature of existence. The “immense curiosity” that awoke in him signified the disassociation with the meaning of the things that surrounded him. Were people like these dung beetles crawling around in front of him, or did a chance for meaningful relations with others exist? The same question occurs to him on the day he begins the search anew, the day the narrative begins:

But this morning when I got up, I dressed as usual and began as usual to put my belongings into my pockets: wallet, notebook (for writing down occasional thoughts), pencil, keys, handkerchief, pocket slide rule (for calculating percentage returns on principal). They looked both unfamiliar and at the same time full of clues. (11)

Seeing these everyday contents of his pockets as “unfamiliar” and “full of clues,” Binx recommences the act of redefining what he sees around him. No longer mere “things,” these objects serve as clues to a deeper sort of meaning; triadicity. Percy grounds the “search” and the irritation of doubt in the need to become more familiar with the objects that surround a person. The more Binx feels separated from the meaning of the objects he uses, the more secluded he feels; whereas the more he understands just what these objects mean, the more he can relate to others.<sup>5</sup> Binx underscores the importance of re-examining these everyday objects to finding his place in a semiotic community:

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<sup>5</sup> For the more skeptical minded Percy readers, I wish to cover the significance of these seemingly insignificant objects. Peirce writes in “How to Make Our Ideas Clear,” that doubt, no matter how small, leads to a change in belief. Percy shows Binx coming to question just what these objects on his dresser mean to him, analyzing the everyday objects through the “mental microscope”(Peirce 394) made by his “thumb and forefinger” (Percy 11), scrutinizing them like a detective -- on a ‘search’. In this scene, we see that the items on the dresser are for Percy a useful metaphor for the irritation of doubt that drives the search.

I stood in the center of the room and gazed at the little pile, sighting through a hole made by thumb and forefinger. What was unfamiliar about them was that I could see them. They might have belonged to someone else. A man can look at this little pile on his bureau for thirty years and never once see it. It is as invisible as his own hand. Once I saw it, however, the search became possible. I bathed, shaved, dressed carefully and sat at my desk and poked through the little pile in search of a clue just as the detective on television poke through the dead man's possessions, using his pencil as a poker . (11)

This unordinary morning reawakens the search in Binx. He must begin to ask questions and examine objects as if they reveal some clue about the relationship between himself and others.

Binx places more importance on the questions his search raises. He first engages the audience in his revelries with a twist of meta-narrative: "What do you seek-God? you ask with a smile." Binx follows only with more open ended questions:

Truthfully, it is the fear of exposing my own ignorance which constrains me from mentioning the object of my search. For to begin with, I cannot even answer this, the simplest and most basic of all questions: Am I, in my search, a hundred miles ahead of my fellow Americans or a hundred miles behind them? That is to say: Have 98% of Americans already found what I seek or are they so sunk in everydayness that not even the possibility of a search has occurred to them? (14)

Percy formulates Binx's search as a meditation on how doubt of the everydayness –dung beetles, contents of pockets, religious certainty- leads to a belief in semiotic community. Thus, Binx begins his search towards a triadicity in which people can come to understand each other by the different and similar definitions they have for an object. The resulting semiotic community allows individuals to come to "know" not through an understanding of facts, but through a system of shared meanings in which the identity of each individual is respected. Binx's "search" serves as praxis for overcoming present alienation and forging community. The faith in establishing an open community based off the potential of its individuals to realize new belief drives Binx's "search" from alienation to community.

Before the revelation of community, Binx must sift through the “merde”—the meaningless language that alienates man. When Binx meets his cousin Nell Lovell outside the library in the middle of the novel he is disgusted by her certainty in life (101). Speaking of her and her husband’s values in life as “pretty darn enduring”, she proclaims that her only goal in life now is “to make a contribution, however small, and leave the world just a little better off” (101). To consecrate this commitment to the world, the couple “gave the television to the kids and ...sat by the fire and read *The Prophet* aloud” (101). Binx sees their values as fake, as only fake beliefs endure without the presence of doubt, and considers their values more in the realm of the monetary: “The two of them are forever buying shotgun cottages in rundown neighborhoods and fixing them up with shutter blinds in the bathroom, saloon doors for the kitchen, old bricks and a sugar kettle for the backyard, and selling in a few months for a big profit” (21). The prospect of their enduring values makes Binx smell “merde,” for he comically narrates that “A rumble has commenced in my descending bowel, heralding a tremendous defecation” (101). As the Percy scholar William Dowie notes, “Only by avoiding such comfortable fogs and by confronting the reality of objects can the lost hero find his way” (Dowie 54). Binx must shift through what he calls the “merde,” the manure of words and falsities that alienate man, to find his place as a part of a community.

Self definitions created by those in “This I Believe,” a radio show in which national figures write in to share their ideas, and by the Lovells, collapse individuality into meaninglessness. One listener, “a playwright who transmits this very quality of niceness in his plays” writes, “I believe in people. I believe in tolerance and understanding between people. I believe in the uniqueness and dignity of the individual” (109). Listening to “This I Believe,” Binx feels something similar to

the “heralding of a tremendous defecation” that suggests Binx’s disdain for Nell Lovell: “Everyone on ‘This I Believe’ believes in the uniqueness and the dignity of the individual. I have noticed, however, that the believers are far from unique themselves, are in fact alike as peas in a pod” (109). No community of individuals exists by which to base meaning. As Percy writes in “Symbol, Consciousness, and Intersubjectivity,” “Every symbolic formulation...requires a real or posited someone else for whom the symbol is intended as meaningful” (*Message in the Bottle* 271).<sup>6</sup> Neither “This I Believe” participants nor the Lovells have any intention of using language as a way to establish meaning with someone else. Percy intends the “search” to allow Binx to communicate in ways meaningful to another person.

Binx’s alienation informs his search for meaningful communication. Two large differences between his current life and the life his family expects him to lead make Binx’s sense of alienation evident. The first sense of this comes from his Aunt’s disapproval of his profession. Binx went off to college in the hopes of becoming a research scientist but ended up a stock broker in Gentilly. Binx leaves no question as to his family’s disapproval of this life choice, stating, “I am a stock and bond broker. It is true that my family was somewhat disappointed in my choice of a profession” (9). The second comes from his mother’s concern over his agnosticism. They find it a cause for concern: “My mother’s families think I have lost my faith and they pray for me to recover it. I don’t know what they’re talking about” (59). His career unsatisfactory to the benefactress of his education, and his choice to abstain from religion a source of contention with his mother’s family, Binx feels alienation compounded in his current living conditions in Gentilly. The narrative describes him as living with Mrs. Schnexnaydre,

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<sup>6</sup> From here I will refer to *Message in the Bottle* as MB.

whose own name very well may mean “nothing,”<sup>7</sup> in the basement of a house in Gentilly situated amongst “...shopping centers and blocks of duplexes and bungalows and raised cottages”(9). Here he watches television, reads cheesy magazine articles, and wanders through the suburbs “solitary and in wonder.” Though Binx’s life choices prevent him from commitment to a set of beliefs or a vocation, his state of “wonder” suggests a developing awareness of himself as a human capable of doubt, and thus capable of the meaning that comes from it.

Binx finds few alternatives to deductive reasoning – the idea that all human experience can be explained by the scientific method. John Desmond gives a solid account of how this prevailing scientism leaves Binx with few options, stating, “Two possibilities seem to be offered by the prevailing culture of scientism – that of consumer immersed in the material world and that of ‘objective’ theorist, seduced by abstraction” (44). Binx lives a life seduced by the abstraction found in the “This I Believe” segments and in his Aunt’s parlor where in theory they love people, but eliminate the individual from the cultural equation. We learn that he found it difficult living at his Aunt’s house because “whenever I try to live there, I find myself first in a rage during which I develop strong opinions on a Variety of subjects and write letters to editors, then in a depression during which I lie rigid as a stick or hours” (6). We find out later in the novel that these letters to the editors are in response to “This I Believe” segments with which he often finds fault. Binx states, “Everyone on ‘This I Believe’ believes in the uniqueness and the dignity of the individual. I have noticed, however, that the believers are far from unique themselves, are

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<sup>7</sup> Chaney, Brainard. “To Restore a Fragmented Image,” *Sewanee Review* LXVIX (1961), 693. “Obviously, his landlady’s name is manufactured through ends of symbolism.” Fake, comodified Gentilly, surrounds Binx in nothingness, “Except for the banana plants in the patios and the curlicues of iron on the Walgreen drugstore one would never guess it was a part of New Orleans” (6). Concerning the street on which he lives, Elysian Fields, he states, “Though it was planned to be, like its namesake, the grandest boulevard of the city, something went amiss, and now it runs an undistinguished course from river to lake through shopping centers and blocks of duplexes and bungalows and raised cottages” (9).

in fact alike as peas in a pod" (109). He relates these people to the house guests of his Aunt, "humanists and lady psychologists who come to my aunt's house. On "This I Believe" they like everyone. But when it comes down to this or that particular person, I have noticed they usually hate his guts" (109). Following in the fits of anger he put on at his Aunt's house, Binx decides to make his own "This I Believe" segment: "But instead of writing a letter to an editor, as was my custom, I recorded a tape which I submitted to Edward R Murrow. 'Here are the beliefs of John Bickerson Bolling, a moviegoer living in New Orleans,' it began, and ended, 'I believe in a good kick in the ass. This –I Believe" (109). I want to refer the reader back to the way Desmond describes Cartesian dualism performativity: "at once self assertive, given to role playing and sociopathic impersonation, and yet haunted by a ghostly sense of solitariness" (Desmond 14). Binx role plays throughout the novel, but in this instance he is casting himself as another one of his Aunt's parlor guests, "lady humanists and psychologists." Binx antagonizes in the present, but remembers his own complicity in the scientific humanism he hears on the radio and sees in his Aunt's parlor. Although his doubt here leads him to properly accuse the scientific humanists of hypocrisy, his reaction to them puts him in danger of losing himself to a different monster: materialism in Gentilly.

Binx flees to Gentilly to get away from the scientific humanists. However, Binx's life in suburbia epitomizes of the everydayness from which he wishes to escape—in a sense he has left the stoicism/scientific humanism to impersonate a yuppie suburbanite. As a young stock broker, Binx spends his time and money developing the most mundane sort of life. Binx carries out the duties of a citizen with great pleasure, stating, "What a satisfaction I take in appearing the first day to get my auto tag and brake sticker" (7). Furthermore, Binx subscribes to *Consumer Reports*

which guides his every purchase; as a consequence, "I own a first class television set, and all but silent air conditioner and a very long lasting deodorant. My armpits never stink" (7). Binx's buying habits translate into living as a good citizen, taking care of his mind and body, seeing to it that he stays informed on current events:

I pay attention to all spot announcements on the radio about mental health, the seven signs of cancer, and safe driving – though, as I say, I usually prefer to ride the bus. Yesterday a favorite of mine, William Holden, delivered a radio announcement on litter bugs. 'Let's face it,' said Holden. 'Nobody can do anything about it – but you and me.' This is true, I have been careful ever since. (7)

Binx keeps up on current events, jumps into the public crusades sponsored by celebrities like William Holden, and keeps up on personal hygiene. His citizenship and the duties that come along with it create the illusion of enlightenment. The Gentilly life certifies Binx as a living, breathing human being. The *Consumer Reports* subscription, the car maintenance, and the litter awareness serves as the public counterpart of what he keeps locked up in his strong box:

Last year I purchased a flat olive-drab strong box, very smooth and heavily built with double walls for fire protection, in which I placed my birth certificate, college diploma, honorable discharge, G.I. insurance, a few stock certificates, and my inheritance; a deed to ten acres of a defunct health club down in St. Bernard Parish, the only relic out of my father's enthusiasms. (6-7)

Binx keeps the essence of his life –his proof of birth, his education, his property, his genealogy-preserved in his box, his civic involvement and responsible consumer practices a public extension of these certificates. Though meant to lead him away from the meniscus of scientific humanism and stoicism, his life in Gentilly -- steeped in civic duty and materialism -- epitomizes everydayness.

Binx takes note of the differences between his previously clean, tidy, Gentilly life with the gaping and unfocused definition of his current search. Again, Binx doubts the usefulness of scientific humanism only to find himself empty and in despair. Reading a newspaper over another man's shoulder, Binx notices that they both read the same types of articles -- the man reads a "counseling column which I too read faithfully" (189). The man reads another article titled "Scientist Predicts Future if Nuclear Energy is not Misused" and Binx sees underlined the phrase, "the gradual convergence of physical science and social science" (191). However, the doubt prompted by the search informs the way he views the man's article. No longer steeped in everydayness, Binx develops repulsion towards the scientific humanism those steeped in the "everyday" buy into. Comparing his life to that of the man on the train, he states, "I have to admire the St Louisan for his neat and well ordered life, his gold pencil and his scissors knife and his way of clipping articles on the convergence of the physical sciences and the social sciences; it comes over me that in the past few days my own life has gone to seed" (191). Binx no longer invests in the scientific humanism of the day by clipping articles from enlightening newspapers. Binx no longer derives pleasure from living according to the maxims of relationship columnists, scientists, or other scientific humanists, nor can he find identity in the documents he keeps in his lockbox:

The search has spoiled the pleasure of my tidy and ingenious life in Gentilly. As late as a week ago, such a phrase as 'hopefully awaiting the gradual convergence of the physical sciences and the social sciences' would have provoked no more than an ironic tingle or two in the back of my neck. Now it howls through the Ponchatoula Swamp, the very sound and soul of despair. (191)

Binx's search leads him from the prickling sensation he often feels at the back of his neck when he comes across something ironic to a real sense of doubt. Certainly, the articles the man on the

train reads would have once intrigued Binx, even made him feel civically minded, but now they represent his doubt.

Binx's desire to start the search in his own community, like a castaway on an island and not "miss a trick," serves Percy's desire to develop an individual's relationship to the community at large within the text. This community consists of people who are also alienated, but unlike their fellow "men", recognize and accept their status. For Percy, Jews serve as the first clue to semiotic community built off this common understanding. The particular use of the Jews in this scene reflects Percy's religious philosophies. The Jews represent the Divine word on earth, creating a triadicity between God's word, the Jews, and Christians. Desmond explains it thoroughly: "By the Jews...Percy means the whole Jewish-Christian tradition, with the Incarnation as its axis point. The Jews are the semiotic link between God and humankind, the sign of covenant and mystical community in history" (53). The Jews, then, serve as a major clue towards realizing a semiotic community.

Binx states that since the first day of his most recent "search," "I have become acutely conscious of Jews. There is a clue here, but of what I cannot say" (88). Binx's ties to the Jews he passes on the street remark on his developing sense of being open to a semiotic community. He compares the "searchers" to those who are still in "despair," stating, "When a man becomes a scientist or an artist, he is open to a different kind of despair. When such a man passes a Jew in the street, he may notice something but it is not a remarkable encounter. To him the Jew can only appear as a scientist or artist like himself or as a specimen to be studied" (89). Furthermore, Binx explains that he is "Jewish by instinct. We share the same exile. The fact is, however, I am more Jewish than the Jews I know. They are more at home than I am. I accept my

exile" (89). He concludes saying, 'Jews are my first real clue" (89), and this clue leads him closer to a semiotic community.

Those in despair remain unaware of their isolation. Their "careers" as scientists or artists allow them to view themselves and other people in "I-You" format; a sign of a dyadic relationship in which individuals determine their identity by the reactions they get from other people. However, Binx intuits a deeper meaning that exists between people, what Percy calls the "I, the object, you" system. Binx claims to not just see the Jews as people who can be put into categories of scientist or artist, but as people who understand human relationships as one built off shared meanings. Binx opens up this community of "searchers" to other alienated people not rooted in historical connotations like his comparison to the Jews. He states, "when a man awakes to the possibility of a search and when such a man passes a Jew in the street for the first time, he is like Robinson Crusoe seeing the footprint on the beach" (89). Percy sees Binx's realization of fellow searchers as akin to Robinson Crusoe seeing the footprints in the sand; they both provide the hope for fellow searchers. Binx seeing a Jew on the street as a fellow "searcher" means that while both live like castaways on a strange island, each remains aware of their alienation, and can establish meaning. A 'searcher' looks to develop a system of meaning that transcends the cause and effect relationships between two people. Different from a cause and effect relationship in which one merely observes the other, the two individuals find common meaning in their sense of alienation. No matter how different people's definitions of alienation, they find common meaning in the sharing of their definitions, thus forming a semiotic community.

One of the most important examples of community in *The Moviegoer* involves Binx's relationship with his dying half brother Lonnie. The two find common ground through their sense of alienation. While Lonnie feels alienated because of his physical paralysis, quickly deteriorating health, and an overwhelming desire to know God, Binx feels alienated because of the invincible apathy towards God. Lonnie, an unquestioning and steadfast believer, and Binx, a believer in the impossibility of proving God's undoubtable existence (invincible apathy), establish semiotic community by sharing their faiths. Note how this does not believe they believe the same thing, but that through sharing their ideas on God they establish a semiotic community. The direct relationship between Lonnie and Binx plays out in what Binx refers to as a positive "repetition and rotation," synonymous in *The Moviegoer* lingo with Peirce's belief on doubt; a change, no matter how small, that leads to something new. The particular scene depicts Binx's ordinary trips to the coast with one of the secretaries he tries to bed; hence, a repetition. The rotation comes into play when Binx unexpectedly finds his family vacationing at the secluded family cabin where Binx conducts "business" with his secretaries. This particular repetition and rotation leads to the first experience of semiotic community. Binx explains the two terms while narrating his trip to the movies with Sharon and his brother Lonnie:

A good rotation. A rotation I define as the experience of the new beyond the expectation of the experiencing of the new. For example, taking one's first trip to Taxco would not be a rotation, or no more than a very ordinary rotation; but getting lost on the way and discovering a hidden valley would be. (144)

Binx terms his trip to the movies as a "repetition and rotation," in which one discovers something new in "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 without the usual adulteration of events that clog time like peanuts in brittle" (80). The repetition of taking

in a movie leads to a rotation between Binx and Lonnie, making the experience unique in its escape of events “that clog time like peanuts in brittle.”

The particular “repetition and rotation” leads to the intercommunication that Binx searched for with his secretaries: with women it is a communion of flesh, but with Lonnie it is a communion through shared feelings. The experience with Lonnie suggests an evolution into more meaningful communication with others. Binx’s fixation on Sharon’s “golden thighs” -- “such a fine strapping armful” (132) -- describes the latest shallow relationship with one of his secretaries:

Naturally I would like to say that I had made conquests of these splendid girls, my secretaries, casting them off one after the other like old gloves, but it would not be strictly true. They could be called love affairs, I suppose. They started off as love affairs anyway, fine careless raptures in which Marcia or Linda (but not yet Sharon) and I would go spinning along the Gulf Coast, lie embracing in a deserted cove of Ship Island, and hardly believe our good fortune, hardly believe that the world could contain such happiness. (8)

Binx’s perception of his relationships is invested in the flesh; he feels happiest when embracing them. The way Binx speaks of Sharon connects his feelings with the pleasures of the flesh. He humorously states, “Her person has acquired a priceless value to me. For the first time I understand the conceits of the old poets: how I envy thee, little kidney shaped cushion. Oh to take thy place and press in thy stead against the sweet hollow of her back” (68). It is no surprise that these relationships end due to a lack of communication:

It would become impossible to exchange a single word or glance that was not freighted with a thousand hidden meanings. Telephone conversations would take place at all hours of the night, conversations made up mostly of long silences during which I would rack my brain for something to say while on the other end you could hear little else but breathing and sighs. (9)

Seeing his family at the cabin Binx realizes that his plans to bed Sharon are sunk, actually describing the house as “ablaze like the Titanic” (136). However, the resulting “repetition and rotation” with Lonnie takes Binx well beyond the artificial forms of communication we see between Binx and his secretaries. Seeing its significance as the first sign of positive communication between Binx and another, Desmond writes, “...in one of the fine communal scenes of love in the novel, Lonnie and Binx intuitively share their secret joy and humor in watching hero Clint Walker triumph. Their unspoken bond of mutual love and joy shines through translucently in this scene” (55). Percy uses the transition from communion of human flesh to intercommunication to underscore the importance of triadicity in forming a semiotic community; an individual cannot truly understand others until they establish commonality through shared “meanings.”

The Binx and Lonnie scene completes the cycle of doubt and belief in creating a semiotic community. Lonnie believes in God, and Binx doubts, but together they achieve a semiotic community through the act of listening to language for its true meanings. Binx pays to Lonnie the respect due to another “searcher” whose words are perhaps more dignified than those around him: “his words are not worn out. It is like a code tapped through the wall. Sometimes he asks me straight out; do you love me? And it is possible to tap back; yes, I love you” (56). Following this statement, the two participate in a particularly poignant conversation that echoes the ideas of “invincible apathy.” Lonnie believes in God, whereas Binx suspends making a decision, but they both find commonality through the communication of faith. The half brothers discuss Lonnie’s dangerous desire to receive extreme unction while suffering from a chronic illness. Lonnie reveals that he fasts to absolve himself of a habitual disposition to envy. Binx

responds to Lonnie's envy, stating "Why shouldn't you be [envious]? He [Duval] sees God face to face and you don't" (163). Lonnie covets the deceased Duval who sees God, knows God in heaven, while Lonnie remains on earth with his "faith". The rhetorically savvy Binx points out that Lonnie only has his faith, while Duval knows (of God or of no God). Lonnie need not be jealous, for he still retains the mystery of faith. This is not just a rhetorical device, but a catalyst to community and deep understanding. Following Binx's assurance, he narrates "Lonnie grins at me with the liveliest sense of our complicity; let them ski all they want to. We have something better. His expression is complex. He knows that I have entered the argument as a game played by his rules and he knows that I know it, but he does not mind" (163). The other members of the family can water ski (as the other members of the family are doing during this scene), but Binx and Lonnie can count on their complicity in understanding the play between belief and doubt. Binx and Lonnie's ideas on God are not in complete agreement, but they have come to a commonality through understanding language; the language of faith and its concomitant "doubts" and "belief." Their camaraderie forms a semiotic community that blocks out the chaos of the world around them.

Binx cannot resolve all the issues of the novel through his beliefs and doubts, by the nature of belief and doubt, the "search" never ends. Answers provide no comfort, because beliefs serve only as temporary place holds. The scene between Binx and Lonnie, however, best represents the enduring nature of the semiotic community in the face of the abyss. The last words they speak before Lonnie's death signify Lonnie's need for his big brother. Lonnie says, "Wait," and Binx turns around asking "What?". Lonnie asks "Do you love me," to which Binx responds "Yes." The last sentence of the exchange reads: "I love you too.' But already he has the transistor in

the crook of his wrist and is working at it furiously" (56). Both Binx and Lonnie leave their relationship for a world separated by material objects like radios, secretaries, and movies. Together, however, they found what Percy terms solitude a deux, "the power of true words to form a community" (55).

Doubt -- the enduring flame which makes Binx's "search"--never ends, for Binx is constantly challenged by the search. A man on the train may inspire him to despair scientific humanism's effects on identity. An exchange with his half brother Lonnie brings Binx to terms with doubt's potential. After meeting with Lonnie and conversing about Lonnie's absolute belief in God, and Binx's doubt, Binx writes in his journal:

#### REMEMBER TOMORROW

Starting point for search:

It no longer avails to start with creatures and prove God

Yet it is impossible to rule God out.

The only possible starting point: the strange fact of one's own invincible apathy – that if the proofs were proved and God presented himself, nothing would be changed. Here is the strongest fact of all.

Abraham saw signs of God's existence and believed. Now the only sign is that all the signs in the world make no difference. Is this God's ironic revenge? But I am onto him. (146)

Binx's doubt pays off in no small change. The invincible apathy which Binx discusses here echoes back to his discussion of God at the beginning of the novel. Is he ahead or behind the 98% who believe in God? Is his doubt a sign of intelligence, or stupidity? As "truth" is shrouded behind the mystery of the world, and the danger is to fall into the abyss of scientific humanism or materialism, God is shrouded in mystery, and the danger of looking for him is finding oneself in the meniscus where the "only sign is that all the signs in the world make no difference" (146).

Doubting leads the individual to an invincible apathy, and the invincible apathy allows for a faith that rests firmly in the inability to prove – beyond – a –doubt God’s existence, a sign that for Binx means that God actually exists.

### **English Romanticism and 1930's Science**

The idea of how one “lives” *in*, but not *of* the world of Cartesian dualism – e.g. scientific humanism, and stoicism -- drives Binx’s “search.” This means that Binx must live in a world defined by Cartesian dualism, but not participate in its dyadicism. Percy extends and sharpens the metaphor of the seemingly ubiquitous pitfalls of scientific humanism by meditating on his Mr. Bollings romanticism and scientific humanism, and how Binx navigates through them in the book. While he experiments with romanticism – long letters during the war, admiring the sun beams on the wall, chasing an elusive love through the French Quarter, role playing from the movies he sees -- and with science – performing research on kidney stones in pigs – Binx also searches for a way out of the Bolling family traditions. Thinking about his father and his death from “English romanticism” and “1930 science,” Binx writes, “Explore connection between romanticism and scientific objectivity. Does a scientifically minded person become a romantic because he is left-over from his own science?”(88). The connection between the two is not obvious for Percy, Binx, or the reader. However, in seeing the Bolling family tradition of succumbing to one or the other, it becomes clear that scientific humanism and romanticism become the default answers for life’s ennui and disappointment; when one fails, they move to the other.

As noted in the “**Intellectual History**” section, this paper deals with a lot of –isms, and here we add romanticism. Romanticism serves as Mr. Bolling’s attempts to escape the traditions of

stoicism and scientific humanism. We learn that, for Binx, romanticism makes Mr. Bolling at once a part of and not a part of the Bolling family. "But my father was not one of them," Binx states upon looking at a picture of the Bolling men. Remembering his father's deterministic heroism, however, he states, "Yet he is by every right one of them" (25). Mr. Bolling's romanticism leads to his heroic death, one fit for a stoic Bolling. Thus, it is important to note that while Mr. Bolling saw romanticism as an alternative to stoicism, it did not get him very far. Binx wrestles with the idea of what it means to be the last Bolling engaged in a struggle with a scientific humanism and romanticism that seem so polarizing, but yet so easy to fall into. Writing down his question about what happens to the mind when it is cleared of scientific objectivism demonstrates the confluence of the past examples of how to live in the world with the present "search."

A reader's critique of the search, then, is necessary to see Binx's shortcomings in the present, and just how mired his world is in scientific humanism. The aforementioned question Binx poses concerning what a scientifically minded person becomes when he turns away from being a scientist only gets Binx back to romanticism. Knowing that this led to his father's demise, Binx wants to avoid this default position. Taking stock in what Lawson writes about Binx's alternative to romanticism and science raises more questions as to how Binx's search works to take him away from these perils :

At first glance, the two concepts seem to be unconnected, but Binx senses, once he spontaneously links them, that the concepts behind the labels must have a relationship, and he vows to discover it. The nature of the relationship, it becomes clear, is that 'English Romanticism', as Binx uses the term, inspired '1930 science.' Moreover, it becomes evident, the process of education, of forming a worldview, implied by 'English Romanticism' ...and '1930 science' is illustrated by moviegoing, the principal image –pattern of the novel (123).

It seems that Binx's "moviegoing" is replacing science and romanticism, while offering few solutions. By "moviegoing", Binx still finds himself living a life ruled by the role playing that Demond says is characteristic of Cartesian dualism. Like his father thought romanticism provided the alternative to stoicism and scientific humanism, Binx sees his outlet as movies.

Binx and his father's shared conflicts with Cartesian dualism –scientific humanism and stoicism, romanticism and science – underscore the father and son theme prevalent throughout Percy literature. As *The Last Gentleman's* Will Barrett must escape the desperate romanticism and code of chivalry that instigated his father's suicide or suffer the same fate, and as *The Second Coming's* Will Barrett escapes from a murder-suicide pact made by his father, so must Binx Bolling escape the "English Romanticism...and 1930 Science" that killed his father. Mr. Bolling offers his son a relationship on a trip to the Field Museum in Chicago:

he staking his everything this time on a perfect comradeship – and I, seeing in his eyes the terrible request, requiring from me his very life; I, through a child's cool perversity or some atavistic recoil from an intimacy too intimate, turned him down, turned away, refused him what I knew I could not give. (204)

Mr. Bolling offers Binx a comradeship ruled by romanticism and science. Lewis Lawson writes in "English Romanticism and 1930 Science in *The Moviegoer*," "That obligatory reverential moment before the 'tableau' brilliantly conveys the quaint, tragic optimism of the scientific humanism of the 1930's. In those prewar days it was still possible to believe that mankind was engaged in an orderly progression from the Cave Man to the Century of Progress" (125). As romanticism killed his father, and the scientific humanism of the day leads to a type of spiritual death, the comradeship of his father means that Binx shares this same fate (12). His refusal marks the beginning of a long struggle to fully question the intellectual legacy his family offers.

Binx undergoes a number of stages during which he picks up the romanticism and science of his father. Binx grew up on the old Bolling plantation in Feliciana Parish, exposed to the scientific rationale of his grandfather, Dr. Wills Bolling and his father, Dr. Bolling. Binx remembers his grandfather and his grandfather's brothers as strong willed types, perhaps the last bastions of Southern manhood's strong intellects. Looking at a family picture in his Aunt's living room, Binx observes:

The elder Bollings – and Alex – are serene in their identities. Each one coincides with himself, just as the larch trees in the photograph coincide with themselves: Judge Anse with his drooping mustache and thin cold cheeks, the hard eyed one who is still remembered for having publicly described a Louisiana governor as a peckerwood son of a bitch; Dr. Wills, the lion head one, the rumpled country genius who developed a gut anastomosis still in use; and Alex, serene in his dream of youth and of his hero's death to come. (25)

The elder Bollings live by a code of honor, forthrightness, romantic heroism, and science. Together in the picture, they mark the cultural inheritance that Binx receives. Living amidst this tradition at the Bolling plantation, Binx remembers hearing talk of “psychological make ups and the effects of glands on our dismal, dark behavior” (154), and in turn began reading Freud in his early youth (138). Binx picks up on the Bolling curriculum. As Mr. Bolling fell into the trap of reading the canonical texts of 1930’s science, Binx falls into the habit of reading the more updated versions of the list. The young Binx reads all the “fundamental books,” “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; Schrödinger’s *What is Life?*, Einstein’s *The Universe as I See It*, and such” (69). After completing the last of these books, *The Chemistry of Life*, Binx realizes that “though the universe had been disposed of I myself was left over. There I lay in my hotel room with my search over yet still obliged to draw one breath and then the next” (70). Raised in a world of certainty and science, Binx thought he learned what is objectively considered knowledge from

these fundamental books. Learning differently after reading *The Chemistry of Life*, Binx realizes that something more existed than science texts.

Binx must learn to live apart from the romantic heroism of the Bolling family. Introducing his father into the narrative through the same picture in which he introduces Judge Anse, Dr. Wills and Alex, Binx observes that his father was different than his family, but also “one of them,” for “He was commissioned in the RCAF in 1940 and got himself killed before his country entered the war” (25). Describing the martial way his father died, Binx states, “And in Crete and in the wine dark sea. And by the same Boche. And with a copy of *The Shropshire Lad* in his pocket” (25). This important line uses imagery of the “wine dark sea” from Homer to convey the attempts of the Bolling family to keep their particular, ancient version of honor alive. Nary has a wartime Bolling survived. Speaking of Alex Bolling, Binx states, “His death in the Argonne (five years before) was held to be fitting since the original Alex Bolling was killed with Roberdaux Wheat in the Hood breakthrough at Gaines Mill in 1862” (25). Mr. Bolling’s death in the Mediterranean while serving in the Royal Canadian Airforce follows in this moribund tradition. His staged (and ludicrous) heroism was meant as an escape from alienated. The observations of Mr. Bolling as being “ironical” and strange in a picture with his father, uncle, and brother (24), and having a nervous “psychological makeup” like that of a “high powered radio” (154), demonstrate how he was not like his family – “not one of them” (25)—and not of the “world”. Prone to engaging in activities like the “Wanderjahr”, “a fine year’s ramble up the Rhine and down the Loire, with a pretty girl on one arm and a comrade on the other” (55), and dreaming “of a place of quiet breathing and a deep sleep under the stars and next to the sweet earth,” Mr. Bolling felt at

odds with the reality the world offered him. Binx learns neither to accept his father's heroism, nor to accept society's position for him as an individual mired in romanticism.

Binx finds himself shifting between romanticism and science throughout his own life. Binx decides to become a medical researcher during college, but becomes "extraordinarily affected by the summer afternoons in the library" (51) and moves to the French Quarter where he spends "the rest of his vacation in quest of the spirit of summer and in the company of attractive and confused girl from Bennington who fancied herself a poet" (52). Once Binx makes a revelation against objectivism while working in a lab researching kidney stones in swine, he switches into a romantic spirit in which he pursues young, attractive poetesses in the French Quarter. Furthermore, the narrative slyly clues the reader into the fact that Binx also was a romantic during the war, writing "long, sensitive, and articulate letters" to his Aunt:

Japan is lovely this time of year. How strange to think of going into combat! Not so much fear – since my chances are very good – as wonder, wonder that everything should be so full of expectancy, every tick of the watch, every rhododendron blossom. Tolstoy and St. Exupery were right about war, etc. (87)

If Binx believes that he will live, why the heroism, why the expectancy? Binx sees himself as a hero going to war, translating everything he sees into the last images before he is inducted into the annals of Bolling war heroes. However, Binx lives through this, and the question about how one who does not succumb to romanticism lives is in the front of his mind. Discovering the joys of science seems the only option for Binx, but Binx experiences its effects by the time the narrative begins. To repeat the aforementioned scene of Binx's despair after reading Schroedinger's life: "though the universe had been disposed of I myself was left over. There I lay in my hotel room with my search over yet still obliged to draw one breath and then the next"

(70). After avoiding his rendez-vous with death, Binx is left to figure out how to live apart from the dyadicism of romanticism and science.

Binx succumbs to the “role playing and sociopathic interpretation” that Desmond claims as characteristic of Cartesian dualism. As romanticism had little effect on Mr. Bolling’s escape from stoicism, moviegoing exerts little effect on Binx’s escape. Moviegoing gets Binx to the same place he would be if he followed his father’s 1930 science and English romanticism. Though the titles have changed from Schroedinger’s “What is Life” to any number of movie titles starring John Wayne, William Holden, or Rory Calhoun, the results remain the same. Binx realizes he is still left in the world. Mr. Bolling’s mind was influenced by the “romantic idealism so pervasive in English higher education in the latter half of the nineteenth century” (124), and Binx’s was affected by the movies. As Binx explains:

The movies are onto the search, but they screw it up. The search always ends in despair. They like to show a fellow coming to himself in a strange place – but what does he do? He takes 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 so sunk in everydayness that he might just as well be dead. (13)

Movies are onto the search in that they put a character into a new place, but they fail to carry out the search. The protagonist falls in love, resumes life, and sinks into the everyday. Not only is this a romantic element to the movies, but a scientific and dyadic one as well. Man is an organism that can be observed in its common, everyday, and predictable behavior. The camera lenses, reels, and projectors mean nothing in the end; they cannot capture the semiotic community for which Binx’s search is looking.<sup>8</sup> Lawson aptly observes that Binx’s trips to the

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<sup>8</sup> Lawon, Lewis. “English Romanticism and 1930 Science in *The Moviegoer*.” “When Binx goes to the movies, in other words, he is betraying a strong tendency to follow his father and his aunt, to see the

movies reflect his tendency to fall into “romanticism” or “1930’s science,” but unlike his father and his Aunt, Binx pierces through the lens of the camera: “Binx the moviegoer is aware that moviegoing is his greatest deception...He has, though no belief that will get him out of the cave. The changes in his life will not occur because of some physical act by which he makes some radical achievement in the social world” (133). Though Binx defaults to moviegoing as a way out of romanticism and science, he remains on the “search” to find his way out of the mimicry and everydayness of the camera.

For Binx, moviegoing is both a romantic activity as well as a scientific one. He not only uses his experiences in the movie theatre to romanticize his life, such as when he “confirms” the existence of a neighborhood after he sees it in the theatre, but he mimics the behavior of Rory Calhoun while having sex with Kate on the train. The two of them have entered into a parody of the Tillie the Toiler and Whipple comic strip that Kate reads as pornography. Kate tries to set up their union in ways similar to the comic strip: “—like a comic book one of your aunt’s maids showed me last week in which Tillie the Toiler and Mac – not the real Tillie, you understand, but a Frenchy version of Tillie – go to an office party and Tillie has a little set-to with Mac in the stockroom and gets caught by Whipple” (199). Kate reads the comic book into her relationship with Binx, and propositions him accordingly: “Now I’ll tell you what you can do, Whipple. You get out of here and come back in exactly five minutes. Oh you’re a big nasty Whipple and you’re only fit for one thing” (199). Similar to Kate reading their sexual relationship like a comic strip,

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world as interpreted by ‘English romanticism...and 1930 science.’ The temptation to see larger than life actions on the screen is a metaphor for his father’s devaluation of ordinary life (becoming) in favor of the Perfect Gesture (being). The temptation to see the unrolling of the films as a metaphor for the deterioration of the universe is an attitude that Binx was taught by his aunt. Both father and aunt are therefore moviegoers....Yet Binx the moviegoer is aware that moviegoing is his greatest deception....He has, though, no belief that will get him out of the cave. The changes in his life will not occur because of some physical act by which he makes some radical achievement in the social world” (133).

Binx interprets it as a movie. Speaking to Rory Calhoun, Binx states, “We did very badly and almost did not do at all. Flesh poor flesh failed us” (200).<sup>9</sup> Binx cannot mimic the chaste morality of the movie actors, whose roles are to bring the story closer to the fulfillment of virtue that the writer intends at the end. This avid moviegoer learns on his romp with Kate that this aestheticism exists not in real life, but only in movies. Moviegoing is a method of empty romanticism as well as a scientific type of observation which can be mimicked, but it does not take the place of semiotic community. Binx gains perspective on this “role playing and sociopathic impersonation” when his sexual relationship with Kate falls flat. The emphasis here is not that Binx feels dissatisfied with the sex, but that he realizes he needs the common meaning he had with Lonnie to carry on a true relationship with others. In other words, through this failed impersonation during the sexual act, Binx learns that he must take a more active and consistent role in forming semiotic community.

The curriculum of 1930 science and English romanticism works its way through a number of Bolling generations. Binx, being the last of them, is cited by his Aunt as the worst of them. He is literally the beginning of the end. To reiterate, she calls him “an ingrate, a limb of Satan, the last

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<sup>9</sup> Ciuba, Gary M. *Walker Percy Book of Revelations*. “The debacle causes a moviegoer’s apocalypse. On screen, failure does not exist, for every action is efficacious. In exchange for abandoning sovereignty to the script and the production crew, stars live in a riskless world where what should happen does not. Binx wishes that he could have been so successful by imitating Rory Calhoun, who would have simply tucked his beloved under the covers and slept with magnificent chastity in an adjoining room, or by copying some hero from a novel who could turn from his contemplation, merrily bed a beautiful maiden, and then return to his quest for wisdom. But on the train Percy’s apocalyptic moviegoer inevitably fails to act like either of these paragons. He makes the same mistake as do the moviegoers and readers of apocalypse tales described by Percy in ‘The Main on the Train’: trying to live by their supernal fictions rather than within the mundane constraints of their lives. Although the tense stranger in the Western wipes his brow with a stylized gesture, Percy speculates that if the anxious film buff tries the same movement, he will find that his forehead is dry and he will only bump his nose. Percy writes against a tradition of eschatological romance that relies on the self – defeating idealism as do the movies” (84). Unlike Lawson, who does not provide an alternative to scientism and romanticism for Binx, Ciuba writes further down on the page, “Without the communion revealed by the dying Lonnie, Binx and Kate’s attempted union in the flesh can only be one more symptom of the malaise” (84).

and sorriest scion of a noble stock" (26). Binx agrees: "What makes it funny is that this is true" (26). Binx admits to being the last Bolling, and the worst one, for though he is trying to escape the world of romanticism and science, he is still very much in it. To do it right, he would have died, or have demonstrated a fateful hard headedness. Instead, he goes to movies where he observes, romanticizes, and emulates. He is even a failure in his emulations. However, Binx is onto the "search," and is learning through observation the third element that throws off the dyadicism of his forefathers. Amidst the ruins of romanticism and science, Binx will find salvation in "some dim, dazzling trick of grace" (235).

### **The Black Knight of the Old South: Aunt Emily's Pagan Stoicism and Scientific Humanism**

In *Sign Posts in a Strange Land*, Percy describes Aunt Emily's stoicism as the "wintery kingdom of the self" (83-89), a phrase harkening back to William Alexander Percy's "unassailable wintry kingdom of Marcus Aurelius" (Lanterns 313). William Alexander Percy sees his stoicism reflected in the writings of Marcus Aurelius, whose irreproachable meditations defines role of the individual in fulfilling his version of "virtue" no matter the consequences. To recap, the "wintery kingdom of the self" is "a logical derivative of the Cartesian spirit that Percy...saw as endemic in American culture" (Desmond 46). Aunt Emily stepped in as the mother figure in order to "teach" Binx to live like a proper Bolling. The arithmetic, reading and writing taught at prep schools and in college, Binx's religious and social education derived from Emily. She sends Binx a verse from Marcus Aurelius: "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" (78). Emily urges Binx to follow this creed, stating, "These words of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius

Antoninus strike me as pretty good advice, for even the orneriest young scamp" (78). Through the meditations of Marcus Aurelius, Emily offers Binx her pagan and stoic worldview -- paradigm for making meaning. Thus, Binx spent his life in the "House of Cutrer," a literal and figurative metaphor for living amidst the expectations of honor.

True to form for the Bolling family, however, this "logical derivative of the Cartesian split" finds its way into Emily's doctrine of scientific humanism – reducing human interactions to a formula. Like with stoicism and honor, the potential exists for Binx to be caught in Emily's vortex:

All the stray bits and pieces of the past, all that is feckless and gray about people, she pulls together into an unmistakable visage of the heroic or the craven, the noble or ignoble. So strong is she that sometimes the person and the past are in fact transfigured by her. (49)

Not just an element of stoicism, "the wintery kingdom of the self" separates the self from "others." Turning people's "feckless and gray" characteristics into discernable fact, Emily takes advantage of messy identities. The conclusions that she reaches from these observation put people in a kind of limbo that obfuscates a semiotic community.

Emily's religious beliefs bring together her stoicism and scientific humanism. Emily is "an Episcopalian by emotion, a Greek by nature and a Buddhist by choice", and her greatest messianic hope rests in the "scientist – philosopher – mystic who would come striding through the ruins with the Gita in one hand and a Geiger counter in another" (181). Emily's religion closely resembles that espoused by William Alexander Percy in the selection from *Lanterns on the Levee* discussed earlier. This quintessential Southern stoic writes, "We of my generation have lost one line of fortifications after another, the old South, the old ideals, the old strengths.

We are now watching the followers of Jesus and Buddha and Socrates being driven from the face of the earth" (Lanterns 313). Emily's image of the "scientist – philosopher – mystic" adds the element of science to William Alexander's lamentations. To this Emily only adds her hope for scientism in the image of the "scientists – philosopher – mystic." This messianic hope reflects Emily's mixture of Greek rationality, Buddhist mysticism, and science that informs her idea on what the second coming might look like.<sup>10</sup> Her idea of a post-apocalypse would be the rejuvenation of love, kindness and charity under the guise of scientism.

Summing everyone up into neat identities she herself manufactures, she insists that Binx either be a gentleman or a fornicator. Her insistence upon acting out these roles (once again alluding back to Desmond's Cartesian dualism) poses a significant threat to Binx's search. True to form for someone who sums up all the stray bits and pieces of the past and all that is feckless and grey, Emily cannot see Binx as anything but a prefabricated Bolling, or a heathenish stranger. Desmond frames it in terms of a conflict between the Cartesian dualism, "abstraction and theorizing on one hand, and entrapment in desacralized flesh on the other" (43). According to Emily, Binx can either live as a gentleman ascribing to the code of the Bolling family, or take the low road as a fornicator. Indeed, we see Binx literally trying on each of these options in the text. Binx tries the life of a war hero, but accidentally survives, and he tries relationships of the flesh with his secretaries and Kate, finding them short and unsatisfactory. Binx's third option, one not presented to him as either gentleman or fornicator, the semiotic community, promises Binx a place in a community built off common understanding rather than Emily's "objective" dies for others.

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<sup>10</sup> Percy, Walker. *The Moviegoer*. Binx reveals that "Of my six living aunts, five are women of the loftiest theosophical pan Brahman sentiments" (108).

As a foregrounding to Binx and Emily's complete breakdown in communication, Emily uses words throughout the novel that mean nothing to Binx. The first sign arises when Binx leaves lunch to find Kate, noticing, "She opens her eyes and seeing me, forms a soundless word with her lips" (42). Binx expresses his desensitization to his Aunt's meaningless speculations and contrivances. The novel begins with Binx going complacently to his Aunt's to chat about the same things they always talk about, his cousin Kate or his future:

This morning I got a note from my aunt asking me to come for lunch. I know what this means. Since I go there every Sunday for dinner and today is Wednesday, it can only mean one thing: she wants to have one of her serious talks. It will be extremely grave, either a piece of bad news about her stepdaughter Kate or else a serious talk about me, about the future and what I ought to do. It is enough to scare the wits out of anyone, yet I confess I do not find the prospect altogether unpleasant. (3)

Binx resigns himself to Aunt Emily's lectures, which always lead to the expectations of the Bolling family upon Binx. When Binx's older brother Scott dies of pneumonia, Aunt Emily bequeaths the honors of inheriting the Bolling stoicism to Binx: 'Scotty is dead. Now it's all up to you. It's going to be difficult for you but I know you're going to act like a soldier" (4). Upon reflection, Binx responds to his Aunt's peculiar request to "Act like a soldier" with, "Was that all I had to do?" (4). Slightly aware of his Aunt's shallowness as a child, Binx now knows it as an inadequate methodology for making meaning in the world – the now more mature Binx is onto his Aunt's need to cast individuals in roles, and the dangers it presents to him. Weldon Thornton notes that in many of Percy's essays he "begins by asserting the inadequacies of current methodologies to deal with the question of meaning" (172). When false answers pass for truth, people fail to reach a common understanding. No one learns to accept the mystery of other human beings.

Percy makes it clear that Binx and Emily face the same questions: What does a Bolling do when he survives a war? How does a Bolling survive in the world? While Binx searches for a way to live in, but not of the world, Emily urges him to follow the romanticism (stoicism), and 1930's science (scientific research). Now that Binx has not died in war, he must fulfill his duty to uphold the Bolling family name. While Emily tries to talk Binx into going to medical school, Binx describes their shuffling around as pistol fire: "Our footsteps echo like pistol shots in the basement below" (53). Binx duels with Emily, not to avenge the death of the Old Guard South, but to keep his dignity in the face of Emily's ideas on his future. Belittling Binx's "search", she calls his life in Gentilly now a "Wanderjahr", a trip that every man must take after college. She says understandingly, "What happened to you when you finished college? War. And I'm so proud of you for that. But that's enough to take it out of any man" (55). She exhibits no understanding of the "irritation of doubt" that Binx experienced in his trauma. Emily wants Binx to go to medical school now that he finished his college life, his duty to the Army, and "Wanderjahr". Disinterested in her teachings on the Plato and the classic stoics, he says, "You discovered them for me. It was always through you that..." (55). Trailing off into thought, the shock of his alienation from the Bolling family stoicism and romanticism silences Binx. Furthermore, Binx resists succumbing to his Aunt's request for him to study scientific research. A conversation between herself and Binx's old chemistry professor convinced her of Binx's need to go back into scientific research. Emily pushes Binx to revert to the romanticism of the Bolling family's stoic values, and the scientism of his father. Though Binx promises to come back and live with Emily, he also sees the need to connect what he learned through the irritation of doubt with his actions, the first step to coming into a semiotic community. Binx, "prone to taking a detached observer's stance toward the world, to formulating experience reductively, and to

abstracting and categorizing others,” looks for a different way of interpreting the world (Desmond 42). Since he wants not the Bolling version of an individual’s predetermined place in society, Binx must learn to connect his actions with a system of meaning created by his doubts. The process of arriving at a semiotic community, synonymous with Binx’s “search,” serves Binx with the tools necessary to overcome the confluence of family pressures: scientific humanism, stoicism, romanticism. The process, the “search,” takes us to Peirce’s “semiotic community”, a world “not structured according to the simple laws of causality affirmed by scientism and behaviorism” but representing “the real, dynamic community of sign relations by which we mysteriously participate in being” (43). These family pressures are essential to the book, for the “asynchronic overlapping of signs from past, present, and anticipated future, and a flow of triadic interactions between these signs” makes the narrative only a series of scenes at best when the novel is viewed as a purely aesthetic creation (Desmond 43). However, if one looks at the novel as a meditation on how a particular fellow living in a particular time reacts to this confluence of family philosophies, the critical stakes of the novel increase. Taking the latter route, the question to follow would be: What statement is Percy trying to make by staking Binx’s future as a “searcher”, an individual with a vocation and the means for overcoming the malaise, on the semiotic community? How is this at all a constructive commentary on how one comes to know? What does this have to do with challenging scientific humanism and stoicism?

### Finding Vocation in the Ruins

In *The Moviegoer*, the existence of doubt can be traced to the intersubjectivity between Binx and his fellow searcher, Kate Cutrer. As John Van Cleave writes, “For Walker Percy, authentic being is co – knowing, shared consciousness – his term is intersubjectivity” (996), meaning that

Percy's main goal is to foster this shared consciousness between Binx and Kate. The significance of Binx and Kate's couple hood is not in the details of their sexual relationship, as their failed sexual encounter on the train makes clear, but the "shared" consciousness they develop through signs and symbols. Furthermore, as Binx and Lonnie also share this consciousness, "semiotic community" is not limited to heterosexual, romantic couples. Percy follows the thread of the story by uniting Kate and Binx, whose similarly dubious positions in the "material" world make them a fated pair. In the act of "naming" things together, they begin to finally sift through the "merde" of the world in the only way that will actually mean something--as two people who come to a share a common meaning establish triadicity. Their couple hood has more to do with the meaning they share by the end of the novel than heterosexual coupling. Sifting through the "dead" language, the secular rationalism, the pseudo communities of fraternities and Mardi Gras Krewes, ties the two together in a search that started with the irritation of doubt, an event that awakens them to the possibility of a search. As Desmond writes, "What binds Kate and Binx deeply is their mutual awareness of the 'abyss' of inauthenticity that surrounds them. They share this 'secret' because both have experienced the disasters that paradoxically give them back their lives" (60). The shared experiences of falling prey to the abyss, and helping each other climb out of it, will allow Binx and Kate to grow in their vocations within the larger community.

The first paragraph of the novel mentions Binx and Kate's problems in the same sentence, suggesting their fate of a "shared consciousness." Furthermore, we see where Aunt Emily may have the union of Kate and Binx in mind from the beginning. The scene most telling of Binx and Kate's developing relationship arises when Aunt Emily urges Binx to move back to the house, because "Kate is going through something I don't understand. Jules, my dear Jules won't even

admit anything is wrong. You and Sam are the only ones she'd ever listen to" (53). Binx must speak to Kate, for she only listens to him (aside from Sam, ultimately a minor character in the novel). This becomes significant when Kate tells Binx later that "What I want is to believe in someone completely, and then do what he wants me to do...I am a religious person (180)". Kate will listen to Binx because she wants to believe in him; she trusts that his words will provide a belief in another person for which she longs. Ultimately, this belief in the other, and the capacity for Kate to "listen to" and for Binx to "speak accurately," will overcome alienation, allowing for Binx to realize a vocation that contributes to a community of shared meaning with others.

Binx's fellow "searcher" Kate, the step daughter of his Aunt Emily and his future wife, falls to the deformed semiosis of the reigning Cartesian dualism. Prone to dialectics between her father Jules and her step mother, Kate swings away from her Aunt by practicing what Binx calls "the girlish socialism of Sarah Lawrence":

And if later her stepmother was to take alarm at Kate's political activities – a spiritual rebellion was one thing, the soaring of the spirit beyond the narrow horizons of the parochial and into the lofty regions of Literature and Life; nor was there anything wrong with the girlish socialism of Sarah Lawrence; but political conspiracy here and now in New Orleans with the local dirt necks of the book shops and a certain oracular type of social worker my aunt only knew too well – that was something else. (46)

Here Binx distances Kate's socialist, Sarah Lawrence education from her rebellion. After all, her mother also rebelled as a college graduate working in Chicago settlement houses (26). But Kate's rebellion takes on a different tone than Emily's rebellion as "the female sport of a fierce old warrior gens"(26), for Kate's "Sarah Lawrence solemnity" leads her to the practice of an objective social work, which Binx describes as a trait of dubious quality: "Since she started her social work, Kate has spells of talking frankly in which she cites case histories in a kind of droning

scientific voice: ‘and all the while it was perfectly obvious the poor woman had never experienced an orgasm’” (45). Together, Binx and Kate would revel in this objectivism, for he would respond “Is such a thing possible?”, laughing, shaking their heads, and reveling in “the camaraderie of a science which is not too objective to pity the follies and ignorance of the world” (45). Binx and Kate find themselves comrades in the scientific parlance of social work, “not too objective to pity the follies and ignorance of the world,” but objective enough to reduce one person’s problem to not having had an orgasm.

The path to realizing a vocation through a semiotic community requires the conscious decision to follow certain modes of understanding over others, and Binx and Kate struggle with this as their relationship develops. Though similar in their objectivity, Binx must trust Kate as a fellow searcher before he trusts her with the knowledge of their search. One scene between Kate and Binx recalls Binx’s failed vertical search while in college. Rambling through the old campus they stumble upon the building where Binx worked in the lab. Upon being asked by Kate, “What is this place?” Binx responds, “I spent every afternoon for four years in one of those laboratories up there” (81). Kate shows her knowledge of the “search” by asking, “Is this the search?”, and continues to attempt to define Binx’s vertical search. A call and response ensues that explains their mutual recognition of a problem with objectivism, however vexed by Kate’s recognized instability with drug addictions and manic spells. Kate calls, saying “If you walk in the front door of the laboratory, you undertake the vertical search. You have a specimen, a cubic centimeter of water or a frog or a pinch of salt or start” (82). She asks, “One learns general things?”, he responds “And there is an excitement to the search”, and she asks, “Why?”. Binx states, “Because as you get deeper into the search, you unify. You understand more and more

specimens by 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). Kate responds, "And it doesn't matter where you are or who you are...And the danger is of becoming no one nowhere" (83). Surprised by her understanding of this, Binx says, "Kate parses it out with the keen male bent of her mind and yet with her woman's despair. Therefore I take care to be no more serious than she" (83). However, she continues with an explanation of the "search" key to understanding "meaning" in *The Moviegoer*'s terms. Having heard this before, Kate responds like a parishioner responding to the minister's litany, "And it doesn't matter where you are or who you are", and the danger is becoming no one nowhere" (83). Binx refuses to take the bait and explain further.

Kate's response here mimics Binx's own voice, tenor, and message. By this point in the novel, the reader feels familiarized with Binx's famous sardonicism, and should recognize Binx's voice in Kate's explanation. To recap, however, Binx calls the search "what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life" (13). As an example of being sunk in everydayness, Binx refers disparagingly to his lab partner: "His abode was anywhere. It was the same whether he catheterized a pig at four o'clock in the afternoon in New Orleans or at midnight in Transylvania" (52). Kate merely repeats what Binx certainly has told her of his life, and his "search." Though their conversations on the search take place outside the narrative, the fact that these conversations have taken place is evident. After seeing a movie that uses their neighborhood as a scene, Kate says, "Yes, now it is certified." Binx explains to the audience what Kate knows but we do not:

She refers to the phenomenon of moviegoing which I call 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 is 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. (63)

As Binx explains these concepts to us, the concepts of “certification” and being a “person who is Somewhere and not Anywhere,” he has also told them to Kate, who then mimics them back to Binx. Binx wants to steer Kate away from this mimicry if she is not coming to terms with her own problems.

Kate’s emotional instability manifests itself in depressive fits that lead to an overdose and attempted suicide. Binx’s reticence to allow Kate into his “search” reflects his concern for her health rather than paternalism. He knows her as a fellow sufferer of Cartesian dualism but not yet someone mentally stable enough to take on the “search.” Knowing this, Binx feels that her only interest in the “search” would result in another one of her ridiculous declarations, like when Kate arrives at Binx’s house at three in the morning, declaring: “Yes, I stood up. I had discovered that a person does not have to be this or be that, or be anything, not even oneself. One is free” —a strange and jumbled riff on ‘and it doesn’t matter where you are or who you are” (114, 83). Knowing she runs the risk of becoming mired, once again, in the “abyss,” Binx shies away from offering her the prospect of yet another objectified truth. Binx brings to light the sensitive nature of their relationship into the late after they watch a movie together:

She sounds better but she is not. She is trapping herself, this time by being my buddy, best of all buddies and most privy to my researches. In spite of everything she finds herself, even now, playing out the role. In her long nightmare, this our old friendship now itself falls victim to the grisly transmogrification by which she unfailingly turns everything she touches into horror. (61)

As Kate says in an earlier scene, “‘Binx Binx. You’re to tell me all sorts of things...It will end with me telling you’” (43). Kate waits on him until he figures things out, but he must be sure they are ready to establish the bond. She angrily lets him know that he remains aloof to their destined fates, “‘It is possible, you know, that you are overlooking something, the most obvious thing of all. And you would not know it if you fell over it’” (83). Percy builds on this complicated relationship between Binx and Kate throughout the novel by underscoring semiotic community as the catalyst to overcoming their immersion in Cartesian dualism. Not simply offering Binx her affection, Kate also fights her demons, and learns how to establish a deep connection with someone without objectivity. In the same vein, Binx’s “search” leads him away from this objectifying, and towards an intercommunication epitomized by Kate and Binx’s mutual understanding of signs and symbols that create a semiotic community.

Both “onto” the idea of the search, and both suffering under the constrictions of a material world (Binx through materialism and the flesh, and Kate through objectivity and drugs), each character develops in concomitance with the relationship. Percy bases Binx and Kate’s spiritual success off an ability to arrive at common notions of the search – a necessity for semiotic community that challenges the objectivity of stoicism and scientific humanism. They must fight the demons of objectivity together, pulling each other along to realize the true meaning of a semiotic community. On their trip to Chicago, Binx finds that Kate’s presence helps him work through the material world which he often finds hard to escape. Their “union,” then, becomes more spiritual than physical. Surrounded by a room of salesman, Binx starts feeling comfortable, stating, “‘What good people they are. It is not at all bad being a businessman. There is a spirit of trust and cooperation here’” (205). Just as influenced by a fake camaraderie as when he joined

the college fraternity, the "Delts", Binx verges on the precipice of closing off all possibilities of discovering a real community, and contributing to it by answering a true, spiritual calling. Coaxed into the fraternity by Walter Wade's who asks, " 'Did you or did you not feel a unique something when you walked into this house? I won't attempt to describe it. If you felt it, you already know exactly what to do" (37), he also finds himself coaxed by the 'spirit of trust and cooperation" he feels amongst his colleagues. Binx feels the need to leave, though, stating, "But I have to get out of here, good fellows or no good fellows. Too much fellow feeling makes me nervous, to tell the truth. Another minute and the ball room will itself grow uneasy" (206). Binx feels the need to retreat from this abyss of simulated "fellowship", much like he felt the need to retreat from telling Kate about the search. Letting his guard down puts him at risk of falling into the "malaise." However, Kate comes along and saves him. No longer an emblem of emotional baggage and "search" baiting, Binx sees Kate as his companion in the search rather than his foe: "There I see her plain, see plain for the first time since I lay wounded in a ditch and watched an Oriental finch scratching around in the leaves – a quiet little body she is, a tough little city Celt; no, more of a Rachel really, a dark little Rachel bound home to Brooklyn on the IRT" (206). In this scene, Percy intrinsically ties Kate and Binx together in the search. Kate's understanding of Binx's predicament forges a common understanding essential to the realization of community – they work towards Binx's vocation by naming together.

Desmond connects Kate's presence in the novel with Binx's discovery of a community of searchers. Described as Rachel, the mother of the Jews, Kate appears a kindred "searcher." As Binx feels alienated in this search, Kate's presence gives him the drive to continue: "Through these linked signs, Percy suggests that Binx's future openness to the search is linked to his loving

yet difficult relationship to Kate in the here-and-now present.” The signs being Binx’s linking Kate to Rachel, and the city Celt, we see where Binx opens up to a system of signs as described by Peirce. Kate’s signs create for Binx a vision of just how he can contribute to making a community of “searchers.” As Desmond states, “Not for him the romantic wanderlust of his father or the life of contented bond salesman, the archetypal consumer profiteer” (73). Binx’s relationship with Kate brings him to a realization that he can in fact succeed in forsaking the materialist world of his father and of salesman. No longer will he cast himself into the materialism, heroism, stoicism, and scientific humanism of the world. His relationships with others will from this point on be truly a part of a system of sings relating to the alienation of the “search.”

Escaping Chicago, the “great beast’ of anonymity,” Kate and Binx participate in one of the most democratic experiences of the book-riding a bus from Chicago to New Orleans by way of Indiana, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Mississippi. On this ride, Binx experiences an ability to truly separate himself from the abyss. Though these examples reflect neither scientific humanism nor Southern stoicism, Percy means for them to represent the general malaise of materialism and romanticism into which Binx could fall—what he would see as Binx’s life in Gentilly, or the following of romanticism or stoicism. Binx meets two men who represent the lifestyle choices from which Binx flees: “...the first, a Romantic from Wisconsin, the second, a salesman from a small manufacturing firm in Murfreesboro, Tennessee who wrecked his car in Gary” (214). One a young idealist reading *The Charterhouse of Parma* and expecting to make it in New Orleans, and the other a salesman, a metaphysic who brags about his salesmanship. Binx observes how each man’s life mires him in everydayness. The romantic sets his sights on impossible goals. Speaking

of the young idealist's desire to meet girls and live like Rudolpho, Binx surmises that "I have my doubts. In the first place, he will defeat himself, jump ten miles ahead of himself, scare the wits out of some girl with his great choking silences, want her so desperately that by his own peculiar logic he can't have her"(216). On the other hand, he might run away from all of it, and "ponder his own loneliness". Binx, himself a romantic in college, can relate to this young man. Furthermore, a salesman of sorts (a stockbroker), he can relate to the metaphysic. Seeing his trade as being dangerous to the soul, Binx described the salesman's aplomb with his product in deathly ways, stating, "...he gives me a sample of his product , a simple ell of tempered and blued steel honed to a two edged blade. Balancing it in his hand, he tests its heft and temper. The hand knows the blade, practices its own metaphysics of the goodness of steel" (216). The salesman will live and die by the trade, thus being able to deftly handle the two edged sword in terms of "metaphysics", i.e. the handling of his life. Binx's understanding of these two gentleman come from his own participation in romanticism and sales, but his position as a man acutely aware of the systems of signs allows him to so adeptly describe their relation to the world. Binx develops empathy through his observations, along with an ability to separate his own identity from romanticism and materialism.

Binx's development in sizing up a character with empathy still not so far removed from Binx's distant, scientific observations, one should not consider his pilgrimage to semiotic community complete. Percy's version of a knower, someone who is on the path to discovery, comes into focus when Binx realizes his kinship with Kate as a fellow "searcher" that we see resolution. Binx's relationship with Kate (their mutual understanding of the search), enables them to engage in interpersonal communication with others using symbols, thus reconceptualizing

community as a process of interaction in which individuals are able to apprehend each other's dispositions and emotional states and through that engagement construct common frames of naming. Though the nature of the search leaves more for development, Binx and Kate's mutual understanding of the search makes them knowers in Percy's sense of the word, always working towards community.

Binx's enduring relationship with Kate signifies not an end to the "search," but only the beginning. As we will see presently, Binx faces a number of challenges; one can safely assume the challenges he meets after he arrives home from Chicago follow him through life, beyond the narrative. Thus we see the brilliance of Percy's semiotic narrative; through Desmond's "overlapping of signs" the reader becomes invested in the continuance of doubt and belief – the search – beyond the commodified novel form. As Peter J. Lawler states in his essay "Percy and Tocqueville", we can know Percy's protagonists by their seemingly striated movements from one point to the next: "The knower is, necessarily, a wanderer, an alien, a pilgrim on the way to nowhere" (103). This is showcased throughout *The Moviegoer*, the narration of which moves between direct observations of culture, memories of the past, and pauses to explain Binx's latest philosophical terms like "search", "malaise", and "rotation". Returning to New Orleans, Binx visits his Aunt, who expresses her distaste for her nephew:

I did my best for you, son. I gave you all I had. More than anything I wanted to pass onto you the one heritage of the men of our family, a certain quality of spirit, a gaiety, a sense of duty, a nobility worn lightly, a sweetness, a gentleness with women – the only good things the South ever had and the only things that really matter in this life. Ah well. Still you can tell me one thing. I know you're not a bad boy – I wish you were. But how did it happen that none of this ever meant anything to you? Clearly it did not. (224)

Not resenting his Aunt for her admonishment, nor supplicating to her stoicism, he tells her:

You say that none of what you said ever meant anything to me. That is not true. On the contrary. I have never forgotten anything you ever said. In fact I have pondered over it all my life. My objections, though they are not exactly objections, cannot be expressed in the usual way. To tell the truth, I can't express them at all. (224-225)

Binx finally admits to what Aunt Emily stated earlier, that their words share no common meaning:

All these years I have been assuming that between us words mean roughly the same thing, that among certain people, gentlefolk I don't mind calling them, there exist a set of meanings held in common, that a certain manner and a certain grace come as naturally as breathing. At the great moments of life – success, failure, marriage, death – our kinds of folk have always possessed a native instinct for behavior, a natural piety or grace, I don't mind calling it. (222)

Binx and Aunt Emily experience a communication breakdown. Rather than supplicating or rebelling, Binx confesses only to doubt. The fruits of his search mean nothing to Emily, for her world view clings to the concepts of stoicism; she sees human interaction as cause and effect, dyadic, and vests her hope in "the new messiah, the scientist philosopher – mystic who would come striding through the ruins with the Gita in one hand and a Geiger counter in the other" (181). Seeing the Bolling family traditions dying out in Binx, not even to be reclaimed by a career in medical research, denotes the end of humanity as Emily knows it. She states, "If he out yonder [pointing to a common man] is your prize exhibit for the progress of the human race in the past three thousand years, then all I can say is that I am content to be fading out" (224). Looking at her nephew -- the "last and sorriest scion of a noble stock" (26) -- in his postlapsarian state, Emily sees the end coming. But Aunt Emily's end makes for Binx's beginning. For Binx, actions and reactions pale in significance to symbols and the meanings behind them; semiotic community. Binx and his Aunt at odds, Binx refuses to return her jousts – Aunt Emily waves a sword around as she lecture Binx – because he no longer lives by the same codes.

Dismissed from Aunt Emily's house with a goodbye "that she might have spoken to any number of remotely connected persons" (227), Binx finds himself adrift and still vulnerable to relapse. At his home in Gentilly, where he planned to meet Kate, Binx finds himself frustrated and wandering around the adjacent schoolyard. Binx waxes on about his hopeless position after listening to his Aunt admonish him for his fling with Kate. The reader feels like Percy changed out the first sardonic, yet charming, protagonist with another more nefarious one. Succinctly put, things don't bode well for Binx's search:

Now in the thirty first year of my dark pilgrimage on this earth and knowing less than I ever knew before, having learned only to recognize merde when I see it, having inherited no more from my father than a good nose for merde, for every species of shit that flies-my own talent-smelling merde from every quarter, living in fact in the very center of merde, the great shithouse of scientific humanism where needs are satisfied, everyone becomes an anyone, a warm and creative person, and prospers like a dung beetle, and one hundred percent of people are humanists and ninety-eight percent believe in God, and men are dead, dead, dead. (228).

Though this lamentation lays on the doubt, Binx's ensuing hopelessness is not encouraging belief. Note the contrast between Binx's "invincible apathy" and this recent frustration. Both demonstrate doubt, but the invincible apathy leads the doubter to a constructive formulation of belief, whereas this current episode leads only to despair. Finding no value in his "search" for community, this is Binx at his most misanthropic moment in the narrative. He finds a phone to call Sharon, and ends up inviting himself to come out with her, her roommate, and her friends on Saturday night for what is sure to be another ploy to "embrace her golden thighs" (132). Binx is once again seeking solace in role playing, hoping to bed another secretary, or at least her roommate, with his Rory Calhounish, Gregory Peckish Charm: "Toward her I keep a Gregory Peckish distance. I am tall, black – headed fellow and I know as well as he how to keep myself, make my eyes fine and my cheeks spare, tuck my lips and say a word or two with a nod or two"

(68). Binx's desire to role play once again with Sharon harkens back to his status as a victim of Cartesian dualism; his conversation with his Aunt sends him back to his everyday life in Gentilly, physically and mentally.

However, as with other instances of hopelessness in the narrative, there is another side to Binx's despair. Binx has finally verbalized his distaste for the causes of alienation that his "search" feels substantiated for both himself and the reader. The stakes for Binx at the end of the book seem rather large. Will he, as he often does, try to find solace in the fleshy thigh of his Secretary? Will he stay in Gentilly, trade stocks, and chase after women for the rest of his life? Or will he continue on the search, for after all, "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)? Moreover, will Binx's life play out like a movie that shows "a fellow coming to himself in a strange place" but lamentably two weeks later "he is so sunk in everydayness that he might just as well be dead(13)"? The end scene where Binx is in limbo between falling back into the "everydayness" of his secretaries' thighs, or a relationship based off semiotic community with Kate, reveals the type of hopelessness to it that reflects upon Binx's cultural inheritance of the scientific humanism and stoicism. Referring to the particular "truth" Binx's "search" arrives, Martin Luschei writes:

Swamped in inauthenticity and the abstraction of behaviorism that reduces love to mechanical ritual, he feels the loss of self at the heart of the approved 'warm and creative person'. The dung beetle which had witnessed the beginning of his search in 1951 returns as the anyone prospering on the excrement of contemporary despair. Everyone is a humanist, none a seeker, and all have become the anonymous dead under the fallout of the malaise, where the unspoken fear is that the bomb will not fall. (104)

Angered about the conflicts between scientism, humanism, and the seeming meaninglessness of words like “religion”, Binx is at a turning point in his “search.” He sees the possibility for a truth lying beyond the “nose for merde” given to him by his father, and the pagan stoicism of his Aunt (228). This “truth” is exactly what he wanted to protect through his reticence about describing the search to Kate. Binx’s “nose for merde” gets him nowhere without thinking about his place within community, and he needs Kate to help him realize this. Each victims of a despair caused by ‘the great shithouse of scientific humanism,’ the two are in fact fellow “searchers” (228). Their position as fellow “searchers,” and not their sexuality, unite them in semiotic community.

When Kate comes in to save Binx from despair in Gentilly, the scene seems much like the beginning. Binx has just left the Cutrer home after one of the serious talks with Emily when she asserts her status as the purveyor of a system of relationships from the past, a martial woman who expects Binx to fight “like a soldier”. Binx flees from this house, a literal convergence of all the –isms he finds it imperative to flee, only to end up alienated in Gentilly. One of the more poignant changes between the beginning and the end arrives with Binx’s observation of the same school he notices so ironically early on: “The playground is deserted. I notice that the school is empty and locked up” (231). Indeed, for Binx, the “school” is done, but not because he is no longer learning. Quite to the contrary, for Binx demonstrates a considerable amount of development in the way he perceives his fellow man. Kate, now his hero, literally comes flying in at the right moment to save him from the malaise of “golden thighs” and complete despair: “At last I spy Kate; her stiff little Plymouth comes nosing into my bus stop. There she sits like a bomber pilot, resting on her wheel and looking sideways at the children, and not seeing, and she could be I myself, sooty eyed and not seeing” (231). As victims of the “malaise” - an actual

physical symptom described in this scene as “the smoke of the Chef[Mentuer]” and smog that make “Elysian Fields glitter like a vat of sulfur”-Binx and Kate are kindred spirits. Kate loyally swoops in amongst the physical and psychological malaise to save her love, Binx.

In addition to living in a community of intersubjectivity through language and symbols, by the end of the book Binx is forming a community through his intended vocation as a physician. Binx sees the importance of uniting a scientific profession with spirituality:

There is only one thing I can do: listen to people see how they stick themselves into the world, hand them along a ways in their dark journey and be handed along, and for good and selfish reasons. It only remains to decide whether this vocation is best pursued in a service station or –. (233)

Binx trails off, and Kate asks in her usual accidentally oracular way, “Are you going to medical school?” (233). A curious situation, for Binx is doing what his Aunt wants him to do when she implores him to fulfill “your scientific calling” (55) and by doing so redeem himself from being “...an ingrate, a limb of Satan, the last and sorriest scion of a noble stock” (26). Binx also follows in the role of his doctor Father whose life, conflicted by scientism and romanticism, Binx could not substantiate: “I, seeing in his eyes the terrible request, requiring from his very life; I, through a child’s atavistic recoil from an intimacy too intimate, turned him down, turned away, refused him what I know I could not give” (204). Percy, aware that beliefs serve as landing pads for the wonderer Binx, leaves the novel’s outcome open ended for Binx. The story of Binx Bolling and the “search for community” has just begun.

Binx’s “search” discovers a way of fitting into the world by utilizing the gifts that make create mutual understandings. For Binx, this means being a “doctor,” both literally and metaphorically.

He will practice healing by listening to others, deriving meaning from their expressions and feelings; the practical and spiritual extension of his new creed to “listen to people see how they stick themselves into the world, hand them along a ways in their dark journey and be handed along, and for good and selfish reasons” (233). Indeed, his doctoring does not imply his escape from the material world. After all, a doctor goes to school, thinks critically and objectively, and makes a decent sum in doing so. But, despite the potential for pitfalls, Binx demonstrates a large amount of openness concerning the “search”, stating in the Epilogue, “After 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 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” (237). Though Binx seems ready to be more of a concrete character, living in concrete times, he still seems open to the possibility that a “search” continues, even in the Epilogue.

Binx “doctors” his half brothers and sisters, as well as his new wife Kate with the knowledge of shared signs and symbols. Answering “Yes” to his brothers and sisters questions about their recently deceased brother, like ‘Was he anointed?’, and “When our Lord raises us up on the last day, will Lonnie still be in a wheelchair or will he be like us?”, shows his desire to find community with them (240). By this point in the narrative, Binx has named his love for Kate not only by marrying her and vowing to take care of her, and by naming the Cape jasmine as a symbol of his thoughts of her. Kate, still unstable and needing direction – “I will be under treatment a long time... And I’m not sure I’ll ever change. Really change” (234) – is reticent to

leave Binx's side. On the matter of running the errand alone, she states, "Here's the only thing. It's not that I am afraid" (241). Binx's use of the cape jasmine to ask Kate to leave him and do a potentially uncomfortable errand signifies his understanding of a community through signs. Their concluding conversation reveals the strength of their bond over the Cape jasmine as a symbol of his love. Still reticent, Kate asks, "'I've got to be sure about one thing...I'm going to sit next to the window on the lake side and put the cape jasmine in my lap...And you'll be thinking of me just that way'" (242). Binx answers with a "That's right" (242). The cape jasmine is a symbol of Binx's love and protection towards the vulnerable Kate. This is not a patronizing, aloof love like the scene where they discuss the "search", but a scene where Binx and Kate, together, become a part of a semiotic community. While Kate is on the errand, Binx will not only be engaging in a community with Kate, but with his half - brothers and half - sisters who are grieving the loss of their brother Lonnie, and ostensibly his figurative brothers and sisters: "I watch her walk toward St. Charles, cape jasmine held against her cheek, until my brothers and sisters call out behind me" (242). Binx and his loved ones will communicate from now on using these signs, never taking someone else's presence for granted, and forging a community through common respect.

### **Conclusion**

In the essay "Diagnosing the Modern Malaise," Percy locates a source of conflict in working out the differences between "meaning" and matters of deep personal concern. Percy states that exploring language, meaning, and community through novels "may be the only instrument we have for exploring the great gap in our knowing, knowing ourselves and how it stands between ourselves and others" (216). Novels like *The Moviegoer* provide the groundwork for semiotic

theory, helping individuals bridge the gap between their personal meaning, and the meanings that others espouse. Semiotic community fits nicely into *The Moviegoer*'s resolution, the unity of Binx and Kate. However, this unity, when put into the context of semiotic theory, serves as one small step in Binx's development; one small step in "explaining the great gap in our knowing ourselves and how it stands between ourselves and others" (216). Percy's semiotics opens the individual to a world of common meaning with others. Man's antidote to alienation could be found in using words that made meaning for both the individual and his fellow men. Percy provides a fairly detailed description of Binx's progress in bridging the gap between himself and others. Percy's semiotic community does not just result in a coupling between Binx and Kate that excludes racial others. Thus, I wish to close on the progress Binx makes in how he perceives the others by contrasting Binx's reception of Mercer the butler early on in the book, and the black man who leaves the church at the very end of it. Like Binx and Kate signify their love with the cape jasmine, a small yet incredibly important symbol denoting their semiotic community, Binx signifies his openness to others through one small sign at the end of the novel.

Mercer, the only African American character in *The Moviegoer*, represents another victim of the role playing Desmond claims as characteristic of Cartesian dualism. A subaltern whose speeches and action are rarely taken seriously, Mercer is merely a victim. The tension between wanting to pigeonhole the other into roles, and the need to participate in an open community of signs and symbols comes out in Binx's observations on Mercer, who "My Aunt... sees...as a faithful retainer, a living connection with a bygone age" (23). Emily's butler Mercer is a transplant from Feliciana to New Orleans. This move, according to Binx, is a step up for him: "Not only is he a city man now, he is also Mrs. Cutrer's butler and as such presides over a

shifting ménage on New Orleans Negresses, Jamaicans, and lately Hondurians. He is conscious of his position and affects a clipped speech" (22).<sup>11</sup> Mercer even wants to talk to Binx about third world development, “-but they still hasn’t the factories and the –ah-producing set-up we has’” (23) - but Binx puts aside this emulation of the standard, educated American jingoism. Even Mercer’s reading seems tainted by the idea of learning by looking over someone’s shoulder – merely playing the role someone else expects him to play. Binx, looking over Mercer’s shoulder by searching his rooms, finds Mercer’s copy of the Rosicrucian’s tract “How to Harness Your Secret Powers”. Binx looks over Mercer’s shoulder so as to appease the zealot’s desire to please, and Mercer looks over everybody’s shoulder to learn just how to act next. Binx closes that scene with a feeling of sorrow, stating, “The poor bastard”. Both Binx and Mercer are caught up in the futility of learning from others for the sake of moving up in the world.

Neither of them put aside differences and stop casting themselves as the other’s opposite, thus the biracial relationship collapses into the binary role of master/servant. They come to know through rigid expectations of the “other.” Truth as defined by the theory of triadicity runs counter to their ad hoc assessments of how they should act, “asynchronous overlapping of signs from past, present, and anticipated future, and a flow of triadic interaction between these signs” (Desmond 43). Binx can’t quite put his head around Mercer’s assortment of accents and job duties because he only wants to see him in one, set way. However, he cannot: “Mercer has dissolved somewhat in recent years. It is not so easy to say who he is anymore” (23). Though Aunt Emily sees him as a faithful servant, a “living connection with a bygone era”, Binx knows for a “fact that Mercer steals regularly from her by getting kickbacks from servants and trades

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<sup>11</sup> Incidentally, this speech has changed from a Southern, black accent to a Harlem, black accent

people." Tellingly, though, Binx can't quite call him a thief, or trust him, because no one knows anything about Mercer. Binx's concern for Mercer's change of habit becomes clear, saying he hates it when Mercer's "vision of himself dissolves and he sees himself as neither, neither old retainer nor expert in current events" (24). Without Mercer's sense of self, Binx cannot peer over his shoulder to understand the black servant. The tension over this identity crisis becomes clear when Mercer serves the table: "Mercer passes the corn sticks, holding his breath at each place and letting it out with a strangled sound" (32). Though ill at ease with Mercer, Binx also notices the servant's own discomfort with his social position by using the term "strangled" to describe his actions.

Percy carefully constructs Binx's relationship with Mercy to underscore the need for semiotic community. By not escaping the "ghosts" of his family past (Cartesian dualisms and the isms described thereunto), Binx and Mercer both become method actors. Not only does this bode ill for Binx, but it bodes ill for any social movement that seeks to deconstruct the standard, normative social categories. However, the last paragraph in the story proper paints another picture for the skeptic. Note how Binx refuses to come to conclusions about the black man he sees leaving the church:

The Negro has already come outside. His forehead is an ambiguous sienna color and pied: it is impossible to be sure he received ashes. When he gets in his Mercury, he does not leave immediately but sits looking down at something on the seat beside him. A sample case? An insurance manual? I watch him closely in the rear - view mirror. 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)

Binx recognizes the black man as another individual; someone whom he can wonder about, someone who might be on his own search, but not someone whom he can type cast. The last sentence, coming immediately after the aforementioned paragraph, reads “It is impossible to say” (235). Binx is open to the possibility of others as engaging in a search themselves in which, like Binx, coming to semiotic community “through some dim dazzling trick of grace, coming for the one and receiving the other as God’s own importunate bonus” (235).

Ultimately, the search pays off for Binx in the same “dim dazzling trick of grace” that he suspects the other man to have found. We see him in the end married to Kate, living in one of the shot gun cottages his sickeningly generic cousin Nell Lovell fixes up; one might even say Binx and Kate live the kind of life their Aunt wanted for them, and that Binx just landed back in the world of Cartesian dualism, living both *in* it and *of* it. But, let me impart the words of our protagonist Binx Bolling here, “It is impossible to say” (235). The point of the search is that it only matters if you are on it, for, “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). Percy resolves the plot of the novel through Binx’s marriage to Kate, an important example of two individuals realizing a semiotic community, while remaining true to the open ended nature of the search. As Peirce says, doubt and belief lead not to grand events, but to small changes and developments: “Doubt and Belief, as the words are commonly employed, relate to religious or other grave discussions. But here I use them to designate the starting of any question, no matter how small or how great, and the resolution of it” (Peirce 394). Thus, Percy leaves Binx to his search, and hopes to inspire the same “irritation of doubt” Binx felt at the beginning of the search in the reader.

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