

WALKER PERCY'S THE MOVIEGOER AS CHRISTIAN APOLOGETIC

By

Jon A. Pirtle IV
A Thesis
Submitted to the
Faculty of the Graduate School
of
Western Carolina University
in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree
of
Master of Arts

Committee:

James E. Byer

Director

Mary Collier

James L. Coddin

James L. Coddin

Dean of the Graduate School

Date: December 20, 2005

Fall 2005
Western Carolina University
Cullowhee, North Carolina

WALKER PERCY'S THE MOVIEGOER AS CHRISTIAN APOLOGETIC

**A thesis presented to the faculty of the Graduate School of Western Carolina University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.**

By

Jon A. Pirtle IV

**Director: James E. Byer, Ph.D.
Professor of English
Department of English**

July 2005

HUNTER LIBRARY
WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

Acknowledgements

Thank you foremost to CJ, for reasons known to her.

Thank you also to Dr. James Byer for your corrections, editing, wisdom,
and patience.

Finally, thank you to members of the English Department at Western
Carolina University who inspired my thinking over the years.

Table of Contents

	Page
Abstract	iv
Introduction: A Background of Atheistic Existentialism	1
Chapter I: Camus' <u>The Stranger</u> and Existentialism Despair	9
Chapter II:: Existential Hell in Sartre's <u>No Exit</u>	29
Chapter III: Percy's <u>The Moviegoer</u> : A Christian Alternative to Existential Despair	38
Chapter IV: The Horizontal Search as Exemplified in <u>The Moviegoer</u>	57
Conclusion	66
Works Cited	69

Abstract

WALKER PERCY'S THE MOVIEGOER AS CHRISTIAN APOLOGETIC

Jon A. Pirtle IV, M.A.

Western Carolina University, December 2005

Director: Dr. James Byer

This thesis examines the existential despair and loss of meaning found in Camus' The Stranger and Sartre's No Exit, and then compares and contrasts those qualities with the Christian worldview and apologetic found in Percy's The Moviegoer.

The first chapter is an exegesis of Camus' The Stranger wherein I relate how the loss of meaning accompanies the denial of a transcendent creator.

The second chapter explains how Sartre's No Exit likewise denies the existence of a transcendent creator and how this denial creates existential hell for the characters.

The third chapter compares and contrasts Percy's The Moviegoer with Camus' novel and Sartre's play. Specifically, I show how Percy's Christian worldview in the novel is an alternative to the atheistic worldview put forth by Camus and Sartre.

The fourth chapter examines the "horizontal search" that manifests itself in the life of Binx Bolling, the protagonist of Percy's The Moviegoer. This horizontal search is predicated on a Christian worldview.

Introduction

A Background of Atheistic Existentialism

The works of Walker Percy (1916-90) have been cited by novelists, biographers, linguists, psychologists, Catholics, Protestants, atheists, semioticists, et al. for his myriad contributions to contemporary thought and literature. Each group has noted some ideas in Percy's thought that merit attention because of their relevance in explaining modern man's alienation and purposelessness. Despite the variety of thinkers that have cited Percy for ideas appropriate for their views, however, Percy belongs firmly in the line of Christian thinkers and writers—including Dostoyevsky and C.S. Lewis. In the following pages I attempt to show how Percy rejects the philosophy of atheistic existentialism found in Albert Camus' novel The Stranger and in Jean Paul Sartre's play No Exit by explicating Percy's novel The Moviegoer as counterpoint. In addition to The Moviegoer, I borrow heavily from other Percy novels as well as from his nonfiction works. I show how Percy's thought parallels that of Dostoyevsky and C.S. Lewis in an effort to show how Percy's ideas starkly contrast with the atheistic existentialism that is presupposed in Camus' novel and Sartre's play.

Much of modern and postmodern fiction has been characterized as literature of despair, angst, malaise, and even silence. The plays and novels of Samuel Beckett, for example, often are set in an "absurd" universe wherein the characters while away their

time until physical death ends their daily metaphysical death experience. Walker Percy wrote in “Diagnosing the Modern Malaise”:

. . . the community of discourse in the current novel might be likened to two prisoners who find themselves in adjoining cells as a consequence of some vague Kafka-like offense. Communication is possible by tapping against the intervening wall. Do they speak the same language? The quasi-conversations or nonconversations might be found in novels and plays from Kafka to Sartre to Beckett to Pinter to Joseph McElroy. (217)

In his diagnosis of the modern malaise, Percy has put his finger on the philosophical nihilism of much modern and postmodern literature. The state of ideas of the modernist and postmodernist is replete with moral relativism. In Jesus Among Other Gods, Ravi Zacharias describes the condition this way:

Philosophically, you can believe anything, so long as you do not claim it to be true. Morally, you can practice anything, so long as you do not claim that it is a “better” way. Religiously, you can hold to anything, so long as you do not bring Jesus Christ into it. If a spiritual idea is eastern, it is granted critical immunity; if western, it is thoroughly criticized. Thus, a journalist can walk into a church and mock its carrying on, but he or she dare not do the same if the ceremony is from the eastern fold. Such is the mood at the end of the twentieth century. (7)

The background of postmodernism from which Percy emerges, and to which Percy objects, is one wherein Truth (with a capital T) has disappeared and people are

reduced to uttering truths without any unifying principle of *objective* Truth. There is your truth and my truth, in other words, but no such thing as *The Truth* exists. In making the statement that there is no objective truth, however, one has posited a statement of truth (an either/or statement). To say that there are no moral absolutes is to make an absolute statement. If it is true that there are no absolutes, for example, then the statement that “there are no absolutes” cannot be true. This is indicative of the circular thinking that pervades postmodernism. Norm Geisler and Frank Turek address this philosophical duplicity found in postmodernism in their book I Don’t Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist:

Relativists usually make two primary truth claims: 1) there is no absolute truth; and 2) there are no absolute moral values . . . if there really is no absolute truth, then their absolute claim that “there is no absolute truth” can’t be true. You can see that the relativist’s statement is irrational because it affirms exactly what he’s trying to deny. (172)

As we will see, this is one of the philosophical difficulties that Percy addresses implicitly in his fiction and explicitly in his nonfiction.

The malaise that pervades Camus’ The Stranger and Sartre’s No Exit is not accidental; rather it follows from the authors’ presuppositions of atheism. The reason that Meursault in The Stranger resembles a pinball in a machine more than a man filled with a sense of purpose is because he is devoid of “calling” or transcendental meaning. Like Beckett’s characters in Waiting for Godot, Meursault whiles away his time and commits “meaningless” acts because there is no transcendent meaning in his life or in anyone

else's beyond that which he ascribes to it. In grappling with this theme of purposelessness in modern and postmodern literature as seen in The Stranger and No Exit, Ravi Zacharias writes the following in the book Can Man Live Without God?:

I hold the view that all philosophizing of life's purpose is ultimately founded upon two fundamental assumptions or conclusions. The first is, Does God exist? And the second, If God exists, what is His character or nature? The questions are impossible to ignore, and even if they are not dealt with formally, their implications filter down in to everyday life. It is out of one's belief or disbelief in God that all other convictions are formed. (8)

At the root of the despair in Camus' The Stranger and Sartre's No Exit is the authors' atheism. The result is meaninglessness and despair in an absurd universe. As Ivan's Grand Inquisitor says in Dostoyevsky's The Brothers Karamazov, "If God doesn't exist, everything is permissible" (243). In The Myth of Sisyphus, Camus argued that if God is dead, then "there is only one truly philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy" (12).

It is a natural extension, then, of Camus' and Sartre's atheism to create characters in their literary works who are in despair and whose actions are performed lethargically. In The Stranger Meursault acts in a defeatist manner throughout the story—almost as if he knows the game is up and he loses. Nothing he does is passionate; rather, he is

dispassionate and enervated in manner and deed. His life is spent in torpor. Like Beckett's characters, he taps out sounds with no hopes of their being answered.

One of the results of postmodernism's atheism and absence of absolutes is a corresponding loss of meaning and value. A contemporary of Camus and Sartre, Francis Schaeffer, takes issue with Sartre and Camus and their philosophical atheism and the effect that it has on modern man's sense of meaninglessness. In his book How Should We Then Live? Schaeffer writes:

What will unify and give meaning to everything there is? Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-80), the French existential philosopher, emphasized this problem in our own generation. His concept was that a finite point is absurd if it has no infinite reference point. This concept is most easily understood in the area of morals. If there is no absolute moral standard, then one cannot say in a final sense that anything is right or wrong. By *absolute* we mean that which always applies, that which provides a final or ultimate standard. There must be an absolute if there are to be *morals*, and there must be an absolute if there are to be real *values*. If there is no absolute beyond man's ideas, then there is no final appeal to judge between individuals and groups whose moral judgments conflict. We are merely left with conflicting opinions.

But it is not only that we need absolutes in morals and values; we need absolutes if our existence is to have *meaning*—my existence, your existence, Man's existence. Even more profoundly, we must have

absolutes if we are to have a solid epistemology (a theory of knowing—how we know, or how we know we know). How can we be sure that what we think we know of the world outside ourselves really corresponds to what is there? And in all these layers, each more profound than the other, unless there is an absolute these things are lost to us: morals, values, the meaning of existence (including the meaning of man), and a basis for knowing. (145)

In his essay “The State of the Novel: Dying Art or New Science,” Percy explicitly addresses these same issues of lostness:

Indeed, the twentieth-century novel might be set forth as one or another aspect of disenchantment ranging from the gentle disillusion of the Marquand character to the derisive wise-acre disgust of Bob Slocum, with stopovers at the restiveness of the Hemingway expatriate, the metaphysical anxiety of the European existentialists, the apathy of Camus’ Meursault, the rampaging gallows humor of a Portnoy. Someone has in fact characterized the change in direction of the great body of poetry and fiction for the past hundred years as the Great Literary Secession, meaning that poets and novelists have, for whatever reason, registered a massive dissent from the modern proposition that, with the advance of science and technology and education, life gets better, too. This issue, I would suppose, must sooner or later be confronted by anyone, scientist or artist or layman, interested in trying to figure out how things are and how to

make life more tolerable both for oneself and for other people. Do we not indeed have the sense that the question grows daily more urgent? That there is a cumulative sense of crisis which allows us less and less room for temporizing? Something has happened, all right. But perhaps something worse is about to happen. (144-145)

Percy does not suggest that science is to blame for man's malaise; science has undoubtedly led to improvements in the quality of life. However, to say that science answers questions of meaning and purposelessness is altogether another matter. Percy has a Christian worldview; namely, that by recognizing and accepting the payment for Man's sin through the substitutionary death of Christ, Man can be reunited with God and thereby achieve transcendent meaning. Without this Christian worldview, however, Percy would undoubtedly agree that Man is "lost in the cosmos" (Percy's phrase).

Percy's Christian worldview should be seen as a reaction to the philosophy of the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855). Percy was emphatic in his views of Kierkegaard's work. Moreover, Percy refers to Kierkegaard often in his nonfiction and philosophical essays. In his essay "Diagnosing the Modern Malaise," Percy writes:

Christendom began to crumble, perhaps most noticeably under the onslaught of a Christian, Soren Kierkegaard, in the last century. Again I am not telling you anything new when I suggest that the Christian notion of man as a wayfarer in search of his salvation no longer informs Western culture. In its place, what most of us seem to be seeking are such familiar goals as maturity, creativity, autonomy, rewarding interpersonal relations, and so forth.

To speak of the decay of Christendom is to say nothing of the ultimate truth of Christianity, but only to call attention to a cultural phenomenon and the symbols with which it was conveyed. What concerns us here is that, from the perspective of the novelist, literary attempts to revive traditional expressions of Christendom are seldom undertaken anymore. Even when they were, it was often with the sense of a nostalgic revival of a way of life, or else undertaken with the skill of a great novelist in portraying a belief which he did not necessarily subscribe to. I am thinking in particular of the Southern Agrarians and of Faulkner's Dilsey. But most contemporary novelists have moved on into a world of rootless and isolated consciousnesses for whom not even the memory and the nostalgia exist. As Lewis Simpson put it: "The covenant with memory and history has been abrogated in favor of the existential self." (207-208)

Chapter I

Camus' The Stranger and Existential Despair

The comparing of Camus' The Stranger and Percy's The Moviegoer is nothing new. Each novel deals with existential angst; each novel grapples with metaphysical questions of ultimate reality; and each novel offers an answer to the question of whether life is worth living and, if it is, under what, if any, moral code. There are many more similarities between the two novels, as we shall see, especially in the realm of existential loneliness, sexual "re-entry" (Percy's term), and violence, but my purpose here is to show how each writer took a different path in addressing these issues.

It must be noted that Camus wrote the novel in the 1940s and his philosophical training as a student and young intellectual was that of a Western worldview; as such, when I refer to Camus' denial of God in the following pages, I mean to signify the God of Christianity as it has been "traditionally" understood in its broadest sense. Specifically, I refer to the belief that God is triune in nature (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). The Father is spirit; Jesus Christ is the spirit revealed in the flesh through the Incarnation; and the Holy Spirit is the means by which God communicates to those open to receive Him. In Mere Christianity, C.S. Lewis gives this example:

An ordinary simple Christian kneels down to say his prayers. He is trying to get in touch with God. But if he is a Christian he knows that what is

prompting him to pray is also God: God, so to speak, inside him. But he also knows that all his real knowledge of God comes through Christ, the Man who was God--that Christ is standing beside him, helping him to pray, praying for him. You see what is happening. God is the thing to which he is praying--the goal he is trying to reach. God is also the thing inside him which is pushing him on--the motive power. God is also the road or bridge along which he is being pushed to that goal. So that the whole threefold life of the three-personal Being is actually going on in that ordinary little bedroom where an ordinary man is saying his prayers. The man is being caught up into the higher kinds of life--what I called Zoe or spiritual life: he is being pulled into God, by God, while still remaining himself. (163)

Meursault, the protagonist of Camus' novel The Stranger, follows a path of existential loneliness and despair. The Stranger serves as a watershed book in terms of its expression of existential despair in a world void of transcendent meaning and of belief in a transcendent and Holy God. It is the story of a bachelor named Meursault who lives an uneventful life. He has few, if any, hobbies. He works as a shipping clerk in Algeria in the 1940s and he lives in an apartment that is sparsely furnished, resembling, in fact, a hotel room. The very sparseness of Meursault's room reflects the sparseness of his life and can be seen as a metaphor for the absence of meaning in his life. This is one of the reasons Meursault "distracts" himself via myriad women, sleeping, eating, etc.—to excess. My intention here is not to disparage The Stranger; on the contrary, I think its

literary merits are significant, especially as they personify the existential despair that pervades much of modern and postmodern literature. It is noteworthy, however, that Camus' Meursault personifies a modern day everyman who rejects belief in God and who alienates himself from other people. His atheism, his alienation, and his tragic end are inextricably linked. How Meursault's beliefs and attitudes influence his actions reveal much, I think, of Camus' own philosophy.

Instead of enjoying women or even more unimaginably in Meursault's world, one woman, within a sanctified union of marriage, he engages in sexual intercourse with little thought of its significance or appropriateness. He *decontextualizes* sex so that it serves as little more than a distraction from despair. Sartre, Kierkegaard, and even Percy would call this behavior "inauthenticity" or "bad faith" (Sartre's term). The major difference between the aforementioned and Percy (and Kierkegaard to some degree) is that Percy contends that there is an objective standard (God) by which humanity is measured. Anything less than transcendence renders the alternatives subjective and relative. This is what Ravi Zacharias meant in the above quote when he said that all philosophizing of life's purpose presupposes a response to the questions of God's existence or non-existence and, if He does exist, His nature.

Meursault also spends an overwhelming amount of time sleeping. It, too, serves to distract him from thinking about his life. Stated another way, it insulates him. It removes, or at least mitigates, the possibility of his realizing his own "everydayness" (Percy's term) and despair.

For the purposes of this paper the meaning of despair should be viewed through a Kierkegaardian lens. Perhaps a quote from Kierkegaard's Edifying Discourses in Various Spirits may illustrate the condition and predicament of despair:

Now, willing one thing does not mean to commit the grave mistake of a brazen, unholy enthusiasm, namely to will the big, no matter whether it be good or bad. Also, one who wills in this fashion, no matter how desperately he does it, is indeed double-minded. Is not despair simply double-mindedness? For what is despairing other than to have two wills? For whether the weakling despairs over not being able to wrench himself away from the bad, or whether the brazen one despairs over not being able to tear himself completely away from the Good--they are both double-minded, they both have two wills. Neither of them honestly wills one thing, however desperately they may seem to will it. Whether it was a woman, whom desire brought to desperation, or whether it was a man who despaired in defiance; whether a man despaired because he got his will or wills, one that he fruitlessly tries wholly to follow and one that he fruitlessly tries to avoid. In this fashion has God, better than any king, insured himself against every rebellion? But each rebel against God, in the last instance, is himself reduced to despair. Despair is the limit--"here and no further!" despair is the limit. Here are met the cowardly, timorous ill-temper of self-love, and the proud defiant presumption of the mind--here they are met in equal impotence. (207-208)

Briefly stated, then, despair is double-mindedness. The apostle James wrote, “A double-minded man is unstable in all his ways” (James 1:8, NIV).

Camus’ Meursault embodies double-mindedness. He is, in some regards, his own worst enemy regarding his unwillingness to break out of his apathy and lassitude. The Stranger is replete with scenes of Meursault being on the edge of a metaphysical breakthrough into meaning, but instead of that occurring, he reverts to mindless distractions. In the following scene, for example, Meursault recounts some of the events on the day of his mother’s funeral:

And I can remember the look of the church, the villagers in the street, the red geraniums on the graves, Perez’s fainting fit—he crumpled up like a rag doll--the tawny--red earth pattering on Mother’s coffin, the bits of white roots mixed up with it; then more people, voices, the wait outside a café for the bus, the rumble of the engine, and my little thrill of pleasure when we entered the first brightly lit streets of Algiers, and I pictured myself going straight to bed and sleeping twelve hours at a stretch. (22)

Rather than meditating on the loss of his mother, his most poignant moments of that day are of his longing for sleep. Arguably, a less estranged person would give more thought to the sadness of his mother’s death; Meursault, however, is all but unaffected.

Meursault passes his time through mild amusements and distraction:

Getting up was an effort, as I’d been really exhausted by the previous day’s experiences. While shaving, I wondered how to spend the morning, and decided that a swim would do me good. So I caught the streetcar that

goes down to the harbor. It was quite like old times; a lot of young people were in the swimming pool, amongst them Marie Cardona, who used to be a typist at the office. I was rather keen on her in those days, and I fancy she liked me, too. But she was with us so short a time that nothing came of it.

While I was helping her to climb on to a raft, I let my hand stray over her breasts. Then she lay flat on the raft, while I trod water. After a moment she turned and looked at me. Her hair was over her eyes and she was laughing. I clambered up on to the raft, beside her. The air was pleasantly warm, and, half jokingly, I let my head sink back upon her lap. She didn't seem to mind, so I let it stay there. (23)

In his book Youthful Writings, Camus wrote the following entry entitled "Contradictions" in 1933. These thoughts reveal themes that would occupy all of his later fiction and nonfiction writing:

Accept life, take it as it is? Stupid. The means of doing otherwise? Far from your having to take it, it is life that possesses us and on occasion shuts our mouths.

Accept the human condition? I believe that, on the contrary, revolt is part of human nature.

To pretend to accept what is imposed on us is a sinister comedy. First of all we must live. So many things are capable of being loved that it is ridiculous to seem to desire pain.

Comedy. Pretense. One must be sincere. Sincere at any price, even to our own detriment.

Neither revolt nor despair, moreover. Life with what it has. To accept it or revolt against it is to place oneself in opposition to life. Pure illusion. We are in life. It strikes us, mutilates us, spits in our face. It also illuminates us with crazy and sudden happiness that makes us participants. It is short.

That is enough. Still, make no mistake: there is pain. Impossible to evade.

Perhaps, deep within ourselves, life's essential lot. (210)

This diary-like entry into one of Camus' journals reveals, I think, much of Camus' attitude and philosophy; namely, that man's life is tragic. For Camus, man's freedom is his fundamental characteristic. This freedom is *thrust* upon man and he is, to use Sartre's phrase, "condemned to be free." When Camus writes that pain is impossible to evade, it is because man *must* choose. It is this inescapability that brings to mind Eliot's Prufrock and Shakespeare's Hamlet or even Faulkner's Darl Bundren or Heller's Yossarian. In similar ways, these men are all pierced with anxiety that arises when *having* to choose. Their suffering is due to their sensitivity in engaging or withdrawing from choice. In having to choose, each of them is paralyzed with doubt and despair. Camus suggests that each man's fundamental choice is either to endure the pain that is his lot or to succumb to despair. One of the problems of Camus' thinking, however, is how to anchor moral choices to an objective standard (God). His answer seems flawed in this regard; namely, without recognizing God as the transcendent embodiment of Truth, Good, and Beauty, one cannot anchor morality. Man becomes the arbiter of right and

wrong; and, in the Christian schema, this was and is man's greatest sin: He rebelled against God and became, as it were, the god of God. In so doing, he lost his designed purpose and identity. For the Christian, man's designed purpose is to live a life that brings honor and glory to God. Apart from the designed relationship, man wanders at his own peril until he recognizes his own rebellion and sinfulness. Admittedly, Camus suggests that rebellion is a temporary stay against despair, not a remedy to it. Is Camus, however, being intellectually honest and "sincere at any price" as he suggests?

St. Augustine writes in The Confessions, "thou hast made us for thyself and restless is our heart until it comes to rest in thee" (5). This is why Camus sees Sisyphus as a paragon for modern man. Universal Man (like Sisyphus) is condemned to perform this absurd play. For Camus, modern man is condemned in that he arrives upon life's stage without a script. Life's play is absurd in that man's actions and meaning can never be anything more than subjective; they do not have eternal or cosmic significance. Like Sisyphus rolling his rock to the top of the hill only to have it roll down again, man is free to rebel, yes, but his choices are ultimately meaningless. For Camus, Sisyphus (modern man) is not *inherently* valuable or sacred; rather he personifies man's futility. He, like modern man, can endure his lot or commit suicide.

Camus' philosophy colors his portrayal of Meursault in The Stranger. Meursault's universe, like Camus', is devoid of absolute values. By the end of the novel, it is obvious that Meursault is a nihilist. He commits a senseless murder and shows no remorse for it. He resembles Dostoyevsky's characters--the "underground man" or Raskolnikov, who does show remorse in Crime and Punishment. The main difference

between Meursault and Dostoyevsky's protagonists is that Meursault murders not for a philosophical value but from its absence; hence, his nihilism. Meursault's nihilism is paradoxical. He, like Camus, rejects God; yet he wants to posit his rebellion as a value.

David Sprintzen writes of this absurdity in Camus: A Critical Examination:

In the world revealed by the absurd, creation is gratuitous effort. Lacking an ultimate scale of values, art can have no precedence over ditch-digging. The salient question is this: Does a specific work of art assist in bringing into awareness a lucid consciousness that—in an attitude of complete indifference to ultimate questions—can exhaust that qualities of the present? All of Camus' heroes of the absurd were such because they were aware that their endeavors lacked any ultimate justification. The exemplary role of the creator arises solely from the fact that new things are brought into an existence without justification. In a task in which the temptation toward justification is perhaps strongest, the absurd creator refuses to give in. Knowing these works are gratuitous, the artist embodies this knowledge in them. (231-232)

After Meursault murders and rejects contrition, Camus describes Meursault's inner feelings:

It was as if that great rush of anger had washed me clean, emptied me of hope, and gazing up at the dark sky spangled with its signs and stars, for the first time, the first, I laid my heart open to the benign indifference of the universe. (154)

In this passage, Camus seems to suggest that Meursault's life will be better now that he has been emptied of hope. Outside of God, it is impossible to anchor statements of value. One can have "preferences"; but to imply that being "emptied of hope" is somehow better begs the question of how Meursault's resignation is morally better than any other choice. I think Camus' philosophy (and Meursault's) is one of resignation, not rebellion. The opening of The Stranger illustrates Meursault's attitude:

Mother died today. Or, maybe, yesterday; I can't be sure. The telegram from the Home says: YOUR MOTHER PASSED AWAY, FUNERAL TOMORROW. DEEP SYMPATHY. Which leaves the matter doubtful; it could have been yesterday. (1)

This opening is one of the most haunting in modern literature because we feel Meursault's despair. Here is a man totally estranged from his world; and his despair is palpable. That Meursault is the first person narrator of The Stranger augments our ability to sympathize with him despite his being an anti-hero. Traditionally, we would expect a character to be saddened by the death of his mother. But Camus turns our expected or traditional reaction on its head. Meursault is somehow removed from the world and one's emotional reactions to it. He evades an emotional commitment to his mother's death.

Upon hearing of his mother's death, Meursault readies himself to attend her funeral. He takes a bus to "The Home" where his mother has lived for three years and he is addressed by the warden of the retirement home. Somewhat piqued by the warden's tone and the implication that he is not a compassionate son, Meursault recounts silently to himself this interior monologue of his relationship with his mother years before:

That was so. When we lived together, Mother was always watching me, but we hardly ever talked. During her first few weeks at the Home she used to cry a good deal. But that was only because she hadn't settled down. After a month or two she'd have cried if she'd been told to leave the Home. Because this, too, would have been a wrench. That was why, during the last year, I seldom went to see her. Also, it would have meant losing my Sunday--not to mention the trouble of going to the bus, getting my ticket, and spending two hours on the journey each way. The warden went on talking, but I didn't pay much attention. (4)

Exemplified here are Meursault's pettiness and selfishness. Meursault's world is so small that he resents the inconvenience of attending his own mother's funeral. One can imagine his wondering why his mother couldn't have died at a more convenient time. When Meursault and his mother's friends are en route to the graveside, the driver of the hearse initiates a conversation with Meursault. It is noteworthy that Meursault almost never initiates conversation. His reticence is another indication of his self-imposed exile from others and the world. He seems to have chosen the safety of seclusion over the risk inherent in loving.

More important than his self-imposed exile, however, is Meursault's almost complete obliviousness of the most basic facts of his mother's life. The novel does not contain any dialogue between mother and son; this is significant because it is another example of how disconnected Meursault is even with his closest relative (his father is never mentioned).

In his rare conversations, Meursault's goal is brevity followed by silence. Upon returning from his mother's funeral Meursault goes to bed. After waking, he is at a loss for what to do, so he decides to go for a swim (23). While swimming, he recognizes a young girl named Marie who is a former co-worker. They swim flirtatiously together for a while and she returns to his flat where he seduces her. Camus concludes the scene when Meursault wakes up:

When I woke up, Marie had gone. She'd told me her aunt expected her first thing in the morning. I remembered it was Sunday, and that put me off; I've never cared for Sundays. So I turned my head and lazily sniffed the smell of brine that Marie's head had left on the pillow. I slept until ten. After that I stayed in bed until noon, smoking cigarettes. I decided not to lunch at Celeste's restaurant as I usually did; they'd be sure to pester me with questions, and I dislike being questioned. So I fried some eggs and ate them off the pan. I did without bread as there wasn't any left, and I couldn't be bothered going down to buy it. (25)

While spending the remainder of the afternoon alone, Meursault distracts himself by watching people from the balcony of his apartment. Boys and girls spill out from the movie theatre; parents and their children stroll languidly down the streets; meanwhile, Meursault observes from his flat overlooking the scene. Weary of watching, he decides to reenter his apartment, and he thinks to himself, "It occurred to me that somehow I had got through another Sunday, that Mother now was buried, and tomorrow I'd be going back to work as usual. Really, nothing in my life had changed" (30). Nothing had changed?

Indeed, here is a man that has so distanced himself emotionally from others and the world that he is scarcely affected by the death of his mother; it casts no pall over his disposition. He maintains his routine and merely speculates about his next day's work at his employer's business. To borrow Faulkner's phrase from his Nobel Prize Speech, it is as if Meursault is a witness to "the end of Man" and he is apathetic. Camus' philosophy is ultimately one of despair and this despair colors his portrayal of Meursault.

In his exegesis of The Stranger in "The New Nihilism and The Novel," Norman Podhoretz writes:

Reading Camus is like watching a man plunge over a precipice and then grab the edge of the cliff with his nails and hold on by God knows what miraculous instinct to survive. It hardly matters that this instinct is inarticulate, that Camus's solutions (submitting to the knowledge of the predicament, sharing the burdens of the oppressed) are no solutions—or at least nothing more than individual solutions. What matters is that he has looked upon the face of death and lived, that he has visited chaos and returned with the message that all we can do is try to *think* our way back into a world of meaning, to create a new world of meaning that makes no concession to the bankrupt philosophies of church or state. (52)

What Podhoretz doesn't say in his critique of Camus' philosophy is where or how a "new world of meaning that makes no concession to the bankrupt philosophies of church or state" can be found. Is one world as good as another? What is the criterion for judging what one's "new world of meaning" should be? It is my contention that

Podhoretz's criticism of Camus' hero reveals Podhoretz' philosophy of pragmatism and not that he has any hope of discovering what is *true*. In his characterization of Meursault as a modern day everyman, "All we can do" implies that perhaps Podhoretz assumes there is no answer other than a subjective practicality. That is, your choice is just as good as mine. In short, this is the philosophy of moral relativism. I do think Podhoretz is correct in recognizing that Camus' philosophy, as personified in Meursault, results in moral relativism. More importantly, however, is the fact that moral relativism is not an answer to man's alienation and sense of lostness; it is yet another effort by man to be the god of God rather than admitting his need for a Savior. For Meursault (and Camus), man can redeem himself via rebellion. The problem, however, is that Camus cannot provide any non-subjective reason for one to rebel or not to rebel. His philosophy does not speak to the "ought."

In "Stranger in Paradise," John Weightman compares The Stranger to other French existentialists and comes closer than Podhoretz to explaining the despair that Meursault experiences. Rather than despair being "a way" as Podhoretz suggests, Weightman argues that Meursault's experience reveals a metaphysical nihilism.

Weightman writes:

Meursault is . . . fleetingly aware of [a] theme that is implicit in Gide, Malraux, and Montherlant, but never clearly isolated by them: this the Absurd, the gap or uncertain connection between the consciousness and all phenomena, whether pleasurable or unpleasurable. (99)

Weightman adds, “the Absurdist awareness of the absence of any settled moral truth is worked into all the details of the story.” (99) What Weightman recognizes is the “gap” that exists between Meursault and the world. Epistemologically speaking, there is a disconnect between his individual consciousness and phenomena insofar as *meaning* is concerned. Meursault’s apparent apathy is a *natural* mood given the absurdity of his world. As Camus himself writes in The Myth of Sisyphus:

Writing in images rather than in reasoned arguments, [they are] convinced of the uselessness of any principle of explanation and sure of the educative message of perceptual appearance The work of art . . . is the outcome of an often unexpressed philosophy, its illustration and consummation.

But it is complete only through the implications of that philosophy. (75)

Meursault’s philosophical worldview is clear here. It is only through one’s “refusal to give in” that a person’s worth or nobility or character may be established. The universe is impersonal and it is up to each person to *construct* his own meaning; meaning is in no way inherent or essential. The *conviction* with which one acts is what is most important. As Sprintzen writes of Camus’ philosophy:

References to unity suggest the need to feel that life is the expression of an overriding purpose that gives direction to daily activity, thus saving it and releasing us from the insignificance that would otherwise follow from the inevitability of our death. (59)

Here Sprintzen has put his finger on the crux of the problem. Camus’ protagonist seeks to find meaning in his life; but how can he do this in a world devoid of a

transcendent and personal creator? Can an individual's actions have any real, significant, infinite meaning in a universe without God? These questions go to the heart of the matter. They bring questions of metaphysics and ultimate reality into existential experience wherein philosophical ideas manifest themselves in human flesh and blood. Philosophy is not reserved for academia but filters its way down into the lives of ordinary people who love, suffer, rejoice, yearn, long, hope, and die.

About a third of the way through The Stranger Meursault is offered a change in job responsibilities that would allow him to live in Paris and travel through France several months during each year. Moreover, Meursault is asked by Marie if he will marry her. The philosophical underpinnings of the following passage from The Stranger reveal much of Camus' ideas:

He then asked if a "change of life," as he called it, didn't appeal to me, and I answered that one never changed his way of life; one life was as good as another, and my present one suited me quite well.

At this he looked rather hurt, and told me that I always shilly-shallied, and that I lacked ambition—a grave defect, to his mind, when one was in business.

I returned to my work. I'd have preferred not to vex him, but I saw no reason for "changing my life." By and large it wasn't an unpleasant one. As a student I'd had plenty of ambition of the kind he meant. But, when I had to drop my studies, I very soon realized all that was pretty futile.

Marie came that evening and asked me if I'd marry her. I said I didn't mind; if she was keen on it, we'd get married. Then she asked me again if I loved her. I replied, much as before, that her question meant nothing or next to nothing—but I supposed I didn't.

“If that's how you feel,” she said, “why marry me?”

I explained that it had no importance really, but, if it would give her pleasure, we could get married right away. I pointed out that, anyhow, the suggestion came from her; as for me, I'd merely said, “Yes.” (52-53)

This passage illustrates the “great divorce” (C.S. Lewis' term) that Meursault has experienced. That is, there is a total disconnect between existence and meaning/purpose for him. He does not seem to feel qualitatively different from the animal world. None of his actions will resonate after he has passed away because he does not believe himself to be significant, let alone, inherently valuable or sacred. When Meursault is asked if he felt grief on the “sad occasion” of his mother's death, he recounts:

I answered that, of recent years, I'd rather lost the habit of noting my feelings, and hardly knew what to answer. I could truthfully say I'd been quite fond of mother—but really that didn't mean much. All normal people, I added as an afterthought, had more or less desired the death of those they loved, at some time or another. (80)

For Meursault, location is unimportant because of the tenuousness of his connections to other people. He is noncommittal towards his work, his lover Marie, and his mother. This noncommittal characteristic ends abruptly, however, when Meursault

becomes involved in the struggles of his neighbor Raymond, a fellow tenant of the apartment complex where Meursault lives. Raymond invites his friend Masson and Meursault to go for a walk on the beach. It becomes obvious to Meursault as they walk that Raymond has another agenda; namely, he wants to fight some local Arabs (the novel is set in Algeria) with whom he had fought before:

At the end of the beach we came to a small stream that had cut a channel in the sand, after coming out from behind a biggish rock. There we found our two Arabs again, lying on the sand in their blue dungarees. They looked harmless enough, as if they didn't bear any malice, and neither made any move when we approached. The man who slashed Raymond stared at him without speaking. The other man was blowing down a little reed and extracting from it three notes of the scale, which he played over and over again, while he watched us from the corner of an eye.

For a while nobody moved; it was all sunlight and silence except for the tinkle of the stream and those three little lonely sounds. Then Raymond put his hand to his revolver pocket, but the Arabs still didn't move. I noticed the man playing on the reed had his big toes splayed out almost at right angles to his feet. (70-71)

Still bitter from his earlier struggle with the Arabs, Raymond is intent upon revenge. While holding a pistol Raymond has given him, Meursault thinks to himself, "And just then it crossed my mind that one might fire, or not fire—and it would come to

absolutely the same thing” (72). Then it happens; Meursault fires five times into the body of one of the Arab men killing him instantly. I think that Meursault’s thought about the consequence of murder coming “to absolutely the same thing” illustrates his belief that life is absurd. If this is the rebellion that Camus writes of, it is not noble. Meursault’s actions are almost surreal.

The Stranger concludes with Meursault being visited by a Catholic priest. The priest asks Meursault if he will repent of his sin and accept Christ’s atonement:

I told him that I wasn’t conscious of any “sin”; all I knew was that I’d been guilty of a criminal offense. Well, I was paying the penalty of that offense, and no one had the right to expect anything more from me. (148)

Meursault rejects the offer—the gift—of salvation. He thinks to himself, “Nothing, nothing had the least importance, and I know quite well why” (152). Meursault is then sentenced to be executed for the crime of murder. As the novel concludes, Meursault has one last desire: “For all to be accomplished, for me to feel less lonely, all that remained to hope was that on the day of my execution there should be a huge crowd of spectators and that they should greet me with howls of execration.” (154)

It could be argued that Camus attempts to sanctify individual choice in a world that is neither sacred nor profane. If Meursault really believes that “nothing had the least importance,” is it not, then, fair to say that *his actions* don’t matter either? Meursault’s motive for murdering the Arab is just as meaningless as his whole life has been up to that point. In his world of estrangement, there is no reason not to murder since his life is only the sum of his choices. Like Dostoyevsky’s Grand Inquisitor, Meursault feels that if God

is dead, then all is permissible. Since there is no moral law-giver, there is no moral law. Since there is no moral law, his murdering the Arab is not inherently “wrong” because he has already ruled out the possibility of right and wrong in denying the existence of God. Camus’ character has ruled out the possibility of ethical absolutes and in so doing he has nullified his own value as an individual. The death of absolutes leads inexorably to the loss of justifiable values. In his book He Is There and He Is Not Silent, Francis Schaeffer offers this analysis of Camus’ position: “He argued that if there is a God, then we cannot fight social evil, for if we do, we are fighting God who made the world as it is” (296). I think Schaeffer’s statement is a fair assessment of Camus’ portrayal of Meursault in The Stranger because the novel dramatizes the bankruptcy of atheistic existentialism to explain meaninglessness. As a novel, The Stranger has few equals in terms of its power to elicit pity for its despairing anti-hero; but as an answer to man’s lostness and search for meaning, it fails to offer even solace, much less any answers. Given Meursault’s rejection of God, I don’t think an answer to meaninglessness is even possible.

Chapter II

Existential Hell in Sartre's No Exit

Jean-Paul Sartre's name (1905-80) usually evokes images of the philosopher sitting at a Parisian café amid a throng of devotees. Ironically, this incredibly popular philosopher, essayist, novelist, and playwright penned the phrase "Hell is other people" in his play No Exit. Like his contemporary Camus, Sartre grapples with how *meaning* in life can be explained philosophically in a world where God has, philosophically at least, died. Like Camus' Meursault, Sartre's characters face the dilemma of trying to establish the *ought* in morality without the anchor of a necessary being, or the *is*, or God. In The Tragic Protest David Anderson writes:

The difficulty is that Sartre, like all morally serious writers, is concerned not only with what men do but also with what they *ought* to do, not only with how they actually understand themselves but with how they *ought* to understand themselves. He wants to break down all the bogus structures, to strip off the layers of falsehood and self-deception, and to reveal the authentic being of man. But this implies a theory about the nature of "authentic" being which itself stands in need of some authentication. For the most part, Sartre's writings attempt to provide this negatively, by presenting to us a pageant of individuals who are manifestly living *inauthentically* and by leaving us to infer from their failure the lines along

which we are to look for success. This makes his novels and plays on the whole rather depressing and even inhuman (15)

In No Exit, as in all of Sartre's other plays and novels, the characters exist in a world without God. Thus situated, they struggle to find or create meaning in their lives through their actions. In Sartrean existentialism, as in Camus', the individual's choices are the only measure of one's worth. Whether one acts honestly or dishonestly is ultimately unimportant; what matters is only that he acts. In The Stranger, it is not important that Meursault commits a senseless and absurd murder; it is important, however, that he *authenticates* himself by accepting the consequence (death) of murdering. In other words, one's existence precedes one's essence, and it is by choosing that one creates his character. The character created cannot, however, be compared with God in Sartre's philosophy since he is avowedly atheistic. As David Anderson writes:

There is, therefore, a sense in which Sartre and other contemporary writers are creative and open to the future because it is free from stultifying moral prescriptions. The difference is that Sartre believes that such a life can be self-generated, whereas Jesus believed it could come only if a man opened himself up to the will of God. (90)

According to Sartre, then, one's meaning is *created*, not *discovered*. Meaning is not *essential* or in any way *inherent*; rather it is *conferred* through the subjective choice of the individual. Sartre denies the moral law or natural law that Christianity posits. In To Everyone An Answer Francis J. Beckwith explains how Christianity is unique in its claims and how and why the moral law exists:

First, there exists an eternally self-existing moral agent named God, who created the universe *ex nihilo*. The universe is completely and absolutely contingent upon God for its beginning as well as its continued existence. He is, among other things, personal, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, perfectly good, necessary and infinitely wise. God is not only the Creator of the visible and physical universe but also the source of the invisible and nonphysical one. He is the creator of human souls and the ontological source of the moral law, logic, and mathematics. (14)

It is, then, the moral law and God's existence which Sartre questions. He dramatizes the consequences of living without the moral law. Because Sartrean existentialism posits that one's existence precedes his essence, freedom is the noblest virtue. The curtailment or dissolution of one's freedom is, therefore, the vilest offense. Any limit of one's freedom becomes an enemy. In No Exit, however, Sartre's characters exist in hell because of their denial of absolutes in the realm of ethics. If there is any absolute, it is that one is free and the individual "ought" to avoid any infringement upon absolute freedom. In Deliver Us From Evil, Ravi Zacharias explains absolutes and what the denial of them means in the ethical realm:

An absolute is basically an unchanging point of reference by which all other changes are measured. Each discipline brings with it a handful of certainties by which others are developed. Those certainties, if assumed, must be previously demonstrated when used as absolutes. In contrast, relativism in ethics denounces absolutes and erects an indefensible system

that leaves all morality at the mercy of individual whim. *Relativism* is, therefore, only another word for *anarchy*, and that is why truth itself becomes elusive when there is no longer a point of reference. (219)

In No Exit, the three characters' hell is dramatized by their efforts to "fix" others into a position where their absolute freedom is denied; the hell that results comes when they recognize the futility of trying to change, or in some way, limit the other characters.

The setting for Hell in the play is a drawing room. There are only four characters, and one of these, Valet, only appears when the other three enter or exit the drawing room. As the play opens, Valet escorts Garcin, a middle-aged, pacifist journalist from Brazil into the room. One of the first things Garcin notices is that there are no mirrors or windows; in fact, the room is dark and dreary. Garcin hungers for feedback from others, but only on his terms:

Garcin: No windows. Only to be expected. And nothing breakable. But, damn it all, they might have left me my toothbrush!

Valet: That's good. So you haven't yet got over your--what-do-you-call-it?--sense of human dignity? Excuse me smiling.

Garcin: I'll ask you to be more polite. I quite realize the position I'm in, but I won't tolerate (4)

This longing for amenities (toothbrush and mirrors) and companionship is thematically important because it reveals the utter self-absorption of Garcin. As Valet rebuffs Garcin for being hurt by the paucity of amenities, Garcin says: "Yes, of course you're right. And why should one want to see oneself in a looking-glass?" (4) This remark, ironically,

foreshadows how Garcin will be “looked at” by the other two denizens of Hell; they will be his looking-glass and he will see himself through their eyes. Even before Valet turns to go away, Garcin cannot help but wound his escort with several barbed comments: “That is why there’s something so beastly, so damn bad-mannered, in the way you stare at me. They’re paralyzed.” (5) This theme of paralysis, of being “fixed” or frozen into position pervades each scene of the play. It is another example of how people become “hell” to one another. The whole setting—a drawing room, scarcely lit, decorated with only three couches, no mirrors or even toothbrushes, etc.—is one of containment and deprivation. The only luxury the three characters have, ironically, is each other’s company. As readers begin to realize this, the drawing room itself should fade in importance. Instead, the three characters’ conflicts with each other become the instruments of torture. Critic John Mason Brown describes the hellishness of the play:

The first misery suffered in his House of the Dead is claustrophobia. Hell, says one of his characters, is other people. It is also ourselves, because, in spite of what [M. Sartre] may preach as an Existentialist, as a dramatist he holds individuals accountable for their own doom. His hell is likewise the fearsome fate of being compelled to live with two other unbearable persons in a small windowless room. Not only this, but also of seeking help in vain from these companions, and then being engulfed all over again in the same pattern of repeated meanness. (211)

In addition to Hell’s claustrophobia, Garcin, Inez, and Estelle (the three main characters) begin to irritate each other early on in the play. Garcin confesses to being a

coward in life, and Inez professes that she is a lesbian; Estelle (an avowed nymphomaniac) feels trapped in the middle of a sexual struggle (16-17). Each character's pettiness emerges:

Inez: What's the point of play-acting, trying to throw dust in each other's eyes? We're all tarred with the same brush.

Estelle: How dare you!

Inez: In hell! Damned souls—that's us, all three!

Estelle: Keep quiet! I forbid you to use such disgusting words.

Inez: A damned soul—that's you, my little plaster saint. And ditto our friend there, the noble pacifist. We've had our hour of pleasure, haven't we? There have been people who burned their lives out for our sakes—and we chuckled over it. So now we have to pay the reckoning.

Garcin: Will you keep your mouth shut, damn it!

Inez: Ah, I understand now. I know why they've put us three together.

Garcin: I advise you to—to think twice before you say any more.

Inez: Wait! You'll see how simple it is. Childishly simple. Obviously there aren't any physical torments—you agree, don't you? And yet we're in hell. And no one else will come here. We'll stay in this room together, the three of us, forever and ever. . . . In short, there's someone absent here, the official torturer. (17)

What strikes the reader most about the three characters is their pettiness and self-centeredness. They are, ironically, *determined* to be free; their desires for autonomy at

any cost soon begin to clash with the others' equally selfish agendas. The result is that Hell becomes other people. In The Theatre of Jean-Paul Sartre, Dorothy McCall writes:

“Hell is—other people” is the central truth of No Exit. Within the play, it serves as a summing up of what has been dramatically revealed to us by the interaction of its three characters. It is important to remember, however, that within Sartre’s philosophy that formula has a limited and specific meaning. Sartre has emphasized this point: “The only valid relationship is with other people. That can go even to hell. In order for it not to be hell, *praxis* must exist. The characters of No Exit are in a passive, changeless situation in which each of them is inevitably fixed in his essence by the others.” Hell, then, is other people when they brand us with an image we cannot bear to accept as our own, and when we have no possibility to act so as to change that image. (124)

The competitiveness between the three characters is inevitable due to the absence of the ethical *ought*. Garcin shouts to Inez, “Will you keep your mouth shut, damn it!” because he realizes that only competition can exist for them in this relationship. Philosopher Francis Schaeffer clarifies the problems that arise in ethics when one disavows transcendent meaning:

He [Sartre] held that in the area of reason everything is absurd, but nonetheless a person can authenticate himself by an act of the will; everyone should abandon the pose of spectator and act in a purposeless world. But because, as Sartre saw it, reason is separated from this

authenticating, the will can act in any direction. On the basis of his teaching, you could authenticate yourself either by helping a poor old lady along the road at night or by speeding up your auto and running her down. Reason is not involved, and nothing can show you the direction which your will should take. (167)

It is no wonder, then, Garcin shouts to Inez and Estelle as the play concludes that “Hell is—other people!” No alternatives exist when the moral law, the *ought*, is removed from the realm of ethics. There is no reason to “love thy neighbor as thyself.” Instead, a kind of situation ethics enters wherein human interaction resembles not so much mutual benefit as paranoia. In Sartre’s philosophical tome Being and Nothingness, he grapples with this tension and despair and why he thinks hell is inevitably other people:

This freedom chooses then not to *recover* itself but to *flee* itself, not to coincide with itself but to be always at a distance *from* itself. What are we to understand by this being which wills to hold itself in awe, to be at a distance from itself? Is it a question of bad faith or of another fundamental attitude? And can one *live* this new aspect of being? In particular will freedom by taking itself for an end escape all *situation*? Or will it situate itself so much the more precisely and the more individually as it projects itself further in anguish as a conditioned freedom and accepts more fully its responsibility as an existent by whom the world comes into being? All these questions, which refer us to a pure and not an accessory reflection,

can find their reply only on the ethical plane. We shall devote to them a future work. (798)

It is telling that Sartre never produced his promised book on ethics.

Chapter III

Percy's The Moviegoer: A Christian Alternative to Existential Despair

Walker Percy's The Moviegoer takes up where the writings of Camus and Sartre leave us. The intellectual roads for Camus end in stoicism at best or despair, futility, and nihilism at worst. Camus claims that suicide is the fundamental philosophical problem. Nonetheless, Camus compares Universal Man's struggles with those of Sisyphus wherein each man is "condemned" to live a life of frustration. For Sartre, man's freedom is both his glory and his tragedy. Sartre claims that man's existence precedes his essence. A person's character is formed solely on the basis of his choices. The logical outworking of this assumption leads his most famous literary creation, Garcin from No Exit, to declare that "Hell is—other people." In his book Intellectuals, Paul Johnson describes Sartrean existentialism this way: "In essence it was a philosophy of action, arguing that man's character and significance are determined by his actions, not his views, by his deeds, not words" (229-230). Johnson continues his exegesis of Sartre's thought from an historical perspective (No Exit debuted in Paris in 1944):

Sartre used his new philosophy to offer an alternative: not a church or a party but a challenging doctrine of individualism in which each human being is seen as absolute master of his soul if he chooses to follow the path of action and courage. It was a message of liberty after the totalitarian nightmare. (231)

This idea of each individual being “master of his soul” is where Percy’s thought enters this intellectual scene, but his conclusions regarding existential angst and the nature of human relationships starkly contrast with those of Camus and Sartre. The Moviegoer is the story of a single, 30-something year old man named Binx Bolling, a stock and bond tradesman, living in Gentilly, a suburb of contemporary New Orleans. Like Camus’ Meursault from The Stranger, Binx is alienated. Even the opening of The Moviegoer resembles the opening of Camus’ The Stranger in the way in which the author portrays his lonely protagonist:

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 mean only 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)

From the opening of the novel, we learn that Binx is somehow different from almost everyone else. He is the topic of “talks” with his aunt. Percy seems to suggest that Binx is somehow not privy to something which most other people know. Binx has few if any friends and he occupies his free time by going to movies and seducing various women. In both novels, women serve as distractions from the malaise that plagues both men. In the early pages of the novel, Binx describes one of his outings:

On these occasions Linda becomes as exalted as I am now. Her eyes glow, her lips become moist, and when we dance she brushes her fine long legs against mine. She actually loves me at these times—and not as a reward for being taken to the Blue Room. She loves me because she feels exalted in this romantic place and not in a movie out in the sticks.

But all this is history. Linda and I have parted company. I have a new secretary, a girl named Sharon Kincaid. (5) In the example above, Binx is the consummate observer. He watches Linda and hypothesizes about their relationship. While Binx occupies his time with these women and movie-going, something causes him to come to grips with his shallow existence. He senses his emptiness even while in the relationship with Linda and longs for a metaphysical grounding for this emptiness. He terms it his “search”:

What is the nature of the search? you ask.

Really it is very simple, at least for a fellow like me; so simple that it is easily overlooked.

The search is what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life. This morning, for example, I felt as if I had come to myself on a strange island. And what does such a castaway do? Why, he pokes around the neighborhood and he doesn't miss a trick.

To become aware of the possibility of the search is to be onto something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair.

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)

This “everydayness” to which Binx refers is the enemy of his search. Prior to his search, Binx is all but unaware of his own shallowness. After realizing his own despair, he thinks “not to be onto something is to be in despair.” One recalls Jesus’ parable of the sower as recorded by the apostle Matthew: In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: ‘You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.’ (Matthew 13:14-15, NIV)

Christ’s reference to the manner in which people are “calloused” is akin to Binx’s recognition of “everydayness” as the enemy of purpose and meaningfulness in his life. Binx describes, albeit sarcastically, his search:

For, as everyone knows, the polls report that 98% of Americans believe in God and the remaining 2% are atheists and agnostics—which leaves not a single percentage point for a seeker. For myself, I enjoy answering polls as much as anyone and take pleasure in giving intelligent replies to all 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)

When Binx poses the question of whether 98% of other Americans have found what he is searching for, it seems reasonable to assume that God is the answer to his search. God is the antidote to everydayness. Belief in God, however, is not sufficient for Binx; everydayness can creep in. In The Sickness Unto Death, Kierkegaard writes, “. . . the specific character of despair is precisely this: it is unaware of being despair” (18). “Everydayness” in The Moviegoer is just such despair. Percy’s title, The Moviegoer, suggests at least two ideas: 1) that Binx (postmodern man) is the moviegoer (the observer) and 2) that actors “know” something that the observer doesn’t. What Binx envies about movie stars is their “peculiar reality,” he says (17). That is why Binx is a moviegoer. He wants to penetrate the movie stars’ reality. He sees them as “fitting into” the world; they are not estranged from it the way he is. In the following excerpt, Binx is walking through New Orleans when he spots the movie star William Holden. Binx catalogues the effect Holden has on a young couple who are awed by the aura of the famous actor:

Now they spot Holden. The girl nudges her companion. The boy perks up for a second, but seeing Holden doesn't really help him. On the contrary. He can only contrast Holden's resplendent reality with his own shadowy and precarious existence. Obviously he is more miserable than ever. What a deal, he must be thinking, trailing along behind a movie star—we might just as well be rubbernecking in Hollywood.

Holden slaps his pockets for a match. He has stopped behind some ladies looking at iron furniture on the sidewalk. They look like housewives from Hattiesburg come down for a day of shopping. He asks for a match; they shake their heads and then recognize him. There follows much blushing and confusion. But nobody can find a match for Holden. By now the couple have caught up with him. The boy holds out a light, nods briefly to Holden's thanks, then passes on without a flicker of recognition. Holden walks along between them for a second; he and the boy talk briefly, look up at the sky, shake their heads. Holden gives them a pat on the shoulder and moves on ahead.

The boy has done it! He has won title to his own existence, as plenary an existence now as Holden's, by refusing to be stampeded like the ladies from Hattiesburg. He is a citizen like Holden; two men of the world they are. All at once the world is open to him. Nobody threatens from patio and alley. His girl is open to him too. He puts his arm around her neck,

noodles her head. She feels the difference too. She had not known what was wrong nor how it was righted but she knows now that all is well.

Holden has turned down Toulouse shedding light as he goes. An aura of heightened reality moves with him and all who fall within it feel it. Now everyone is aware of him. He creates a regular eddy among the tourists and barkeeps and B-girls who come running to the doors of the joints.

I am attracted to movie stars but not for the usual reasons. I have no desire to speak to Holden or get his autograph. It is their peculiar reality which astounds me. (15-16)

The “peculiar reality” the movie stars possess is nothing more than the ease with which they exist in this non-world. Life is a script and the lines come naturally to them. For Binx, other people are actors on the stage of life while he, an audience of one, critiques the actors’ performances while remaining, at least theoretically, unaffected. Like Camus’ Meursault in The Stranger, Binx is more the observer of life than a participant in it.

When Binx narrates that he is interested in movie stars “but not for the usual reasons,” we begin to understand his worldview. He is a stock and bond salesman, but we learn very quickly that his heart is not in it. Binx resembles the proverbial scientist who is so involved in his work and theories that he has lost touch with reality. In the following passage, Binx describes the worldview he held *until* he realizes the possibility for a search:

Until recent years, I read only “fundamental” books, that is, key books on key subjects, such as War and Peace, the novel of novels; A Study of History, the solution of the problem of time; Schroedinger’s What is Life?, Einstein’s The Universe as I See It, and such. During those years, I stood outside the universe and sought to understand it. I lived in my room as an Anyone living Anywhere and read fundamental books and only for diversion took walks around the neighborhood and saw an occasional movie. Certainly it did not matter to me where I was when I read such a book as The Expanding Universe. The greatest success of this enterprise, which I call my vertical search, came one night when I sat in a hotel room in Birmingham and read a book called The Chemistry of Life. When I finished it, it seemed to me that the main goals of my search were reached or were in principle reachable whereupon I went out and saw a movie called It Happened One Night which was itself very good. A memorable night. The only difficulty was that though the universe had been disposed of, I myself was left over. There I lay in my hotel room with my search over yet still obliged to draw one breath and then the next. But now I have undertaken a different kind of search, a horizontal search. As a consequence, what takes place in my room is less important. What is important is what I shall find when I leave my room and wander in the neighborhood. Before, I wandered as a diversion. Now I wander seriously and sit and read as a diversion (69-70).

The above passage is one indication of the Christian worldview that begins to take shape in the novel. The image of the cross is important because it points both vertically and horizontally. Percy uses the terms *vertical* and *horizontal* to describe Binx's search. These directions correspond to the cross of Christ in their significance. The vertical direction represents Man's first purpose to worship and serve God. The horizontal direction represents Man's second purpose to evangelize or spread the Gospel of Christ. Just as Christ's literal shape during his crucifixion was both vertical and horizontal, so Man's life is to be first vertical in his relationship to God, and then to be horizontal in his relationship to others. Properly understood, this image crystallizes Man's designed role—first he is to know his relation to his creator. After worshipping God, Man then will know his proper relationship to others.

Another clue to understanding Binx's worldview is to consider the ideas prevalent in his choice of reading. With the exception of Tolstoy's novel, the others are scientific or philosophical books on time, biology, and physics. Binx recounts that after he completed the reading of The Chemistry of Life, everything had been explained in life except himself (70). In other words, a purely naturalistic explanation of the universe posits the theory that everything in the universe evolved through a blind, purposeless process of time, plus matter, plus chance. Percy lampoons this idea by having Binx think that everything is explainable except his own individuality.

In his biography Walker Percy: A Life, Patrick Samway offers this exegesis of Percy's objections to defining all of life's experiences in purely naturalistic terms:

For Walker, the sciences do not operate in a vacuum, and he wanted to demonstrate ways in which they should be more interconnected. He felt that “if Western man’s sense of homelessness and loss of community is in part due to the fact that he feels himself a stranger to the method and data of his sciences, and especially to himself construed as a datum, then the issue is no longer academic.” In particular, American psychiatry seemed indifferent to the themes developed by Kierkegaard and Marcel—particularly the sickness of modern man and the sense of homelessness that modern man has tried to transform into a happy place. Ironically, modern psychiatry, in Walker’s view, was unable to take into account the predicament of modern man, since the social sciences in particular evaluate illness as a deviation from a biological norm. Fromm posited that guilt occurs when people feel that their lives are running through their hands like sand: “This is the age of anxiety because it is the age of the loss of self.” (182)

What Samway has explained here is central to understanding Binx’s search in The Moviegoer. More important, however, is how unique Percy is in his answer to modern man’s lostness. In another of Percy’s books, Love in the Ruins, Percy writes of the “dread chasm that has rent the soul of Western man ever since the famous philosopher Descartes ripped body loose from mind and turned the very soul into a ghost that haunts its own house” (181). What Percy suggests is that purely biological and naturalistic explanations of the universe leave man feeling like a “ghost in the machine.” Rather than seeing man

as a cosmic accident, Percy is akin to Kierkegaard in his assertion that man is a pilgrim and a wayfarer. Kierkegaard said Hegel had explained everything in the world except what it means to be an individual man who has to live and die at a particular place and time. That is, individual men often become lost during philosophical abstractions. Hegel's dialectic of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis does not explain an individual's existential struggles in life. It is during this struggle to separate himself from the realm of theory that Binx begins his search.

Percy was greatly influenced by Kierkegaard, and in him he found a kindred spirit. Kierkegaard addressed the concerns that Percy (and Binx by extension) faced when trying to come to grips with man's lostness. After revisiting some Kierkegaardian ideas, we will be more able to understand why the above scene from The Moviegoer wherein Binx begins to "wander seriously" is central to understanding Percy's Christian answer to the lostness of man. In The Sickness Unto Death Kierkegaard starts out by showing how man is unique because he alone among creatures is filled with a sense of purpose; and if man longs for discovering his purpose, it is only because he has wandered from the One who designed each man's purpose—God Himself. Kierkegaard illustrates man's uniqueness among creatures in this passage from The Sickness Unto Death by addressing man's unique ability to despair:

If one were to stick to the abstract notion of despair, without thinking of any concrete despairer, one might say that it is an immense advantage. The possibility of this sickness is man's advantage over the beast, and this advantage distinguishes him far more essentially than the erect posture, for

it implies the infinite erectness or loftiness of being spirit. The possibility of this sickness is man's advantage over the beast; to be sharply observant of this sickness constitutes the Christian's advantage over the natural man; to be healed of this sickness is the Christian's bliss. (147-148)

Thus Kierkegaard affirms that there is a spirit of Man qua Man that differentiates him from everything else. To borrow the title from one of Mortimer Adler's books, there is a qualitative difference to man, and this makes all the difference indeed. Percy agrees with Kierkegaard in that despair is advantageous because it alerts man to the fact that he has lost something. Binx writes in one of his journal entries in The Moviegoer: "Explore connection between romanticism and scientific objectivity. Does a scientifically minded person become a romantic because he is a left-over from his own science?" (88). It could be argued that a fitting subtitle for The Moviegoer might read: "What Happens When an Individual's Theory Explains Everything in the Universe *Except* Its Author or His Reason for Theorizing."

In his book The God Who Is There, Francis Schaeffer expressed this idea shared by both Kierkegaard and Percy:

Man today seeks to deflect this tension by saying that he is no more than a machine. But if he were no more than a machine, he would find no difficulty in proceeding step by step down the line to the logical conclusion of his non-Christian presuppositions. Man is not a machine, however, even if he says he is. Suppose that a satellite were put into orbit around the earth with a camera that was able to photograph everything on

the world's surface. If this information was then fed back to a giant computer that did not need programming, it might calculate that everything behaved mechanically. But the final observer is not a computer but the individual man. There is always one person in the room who does not allow everything to be seen as machine-like; it is myself, the observer, because I know myself.

Christians must be careful at this place. Though the Bible says men are lost, it does not say they are nothing. When a man says he is a machine or nothing, he makes himself less than the Bible's view of fallen man. (135)

In the early parts of The Moviegoer, Binx is a victim of believing the philosophy of materialism. He acknowledges that after his theories of materialism failed to account for his unique reality, he knew that worldview was wrong. The measure of any worldview's claim to truth must be its correspondence to reality. Otherwise, it self-destructs.

Percy addressed the problem—almost the temptation—of seeing man as less than a fallen creature whose heart is seeking his home in God. He traces the modern and postmodern tendency towards nihilism back to Kierkegaard. In his essay “Diagnosing the Modern Malaise,” for example, Percy writes:

But what are we to make of a man who is committed in the most radical sense to the proposition that truth is attainable by science and that emotional gratification is attainable by interacting with one's environment and at the highest level by the enjoyment of art? It seems that everything is settled for him. But something is wrong. He has settled everything except

what it is to live as an individual. He still has to get through an ordinary Wednesday afternoon. Such a man is something like the young man Kierkegaard described who was given the task of keeping busy all day and finished the task at noon. What does this man do with the rest of the day? the rest of his life?

But my question and my discovery was this: if there is such a gap in the scientific view of the world, e.g., what it is to be an individual living in the United States in 1985, and if the scientist cannot address himself to this reality, who can? My discovery, of course, was that the novelist can, and most particularly the novelist. Oddly enough, it was the reading of two nineteenth-century writers, Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky, who convinced me that *only* the writer, the existentialist philosopher, or the novelist can explore this gap with all the passion and seriousness and expectation of discovery of, say, an Einstein who had discovered that Newtonian physics no longer works. (213)

In The Stranger, Meursault was invited by the priest to make a confession of sin and a profession of faith in Christ's grace as sufficient for salvation. In No Exit, Sartre intentionally has a Hell but never posits the existence of a Heaven. His characters reject the very existence of God. As a result, they now seek to distract themselves by describing their wasted lives to each other. In Percy's novel however, Binx realizes that there is a calling to an objective reality. This call leads him out of the morass that a philosophical presupposition to naturalism earlier led him to.

One of the reasons for man's lostness as portrayed in modern and postmodern literature goes back to a philosophical commitment to naturalism or materialism. The terms are synonymous in their belief that all reality is ultimately material or substance. To speak of man's soul or of love to a materialist is, therefore, preposterous. In To Everyone an Answer, J.P. Moreland describes the materialist or naturalist worldview:

According to *physicalism*, a human being is merely a physical entity. The only things that exist are physical substances, properties, and events. The human, therefore, is a physical substance—namely, a material brain or body. This physical substance has physical properties—a certain weight, volume, size, electrical activity, chemical composition, and so forth. There are also physical events that occur in the brain. When someone has an occasion of pain or an occurrence of a thought, physicalists hold that these are merely physical events that can be exhaustively described in physical language. One's conscious mental life of thoughts, emotions, and pain is nothing but physical events in one's brain and nervous system. (226)

The consequences of believing this philosophy are manifest in modern and postmodern literature. If man is nothing more than a construct of physical substances, all talk of a soul, purpose, meaning, lostness, God, and truth is nonsense. In fact, if there is nothing but physicalness and changing degrees of substance, there cannot be God (in the Christian tradition of a transcendent creator who is outside of His creation) or truth because truth, by its very nature, is unchanging and transcendent.

In their book I Don't Have Enough Faith to be an Atheist, authors Norm Geisler and Frank Turek offer many refutations of this philosophy of physicalism that pervades modern and postmodern literature:

In 1859, Charles Darwin wrote, "If it could be demonstrated that any complex organ existed, which could not possibly have been formed by numerous, successive, slight modifications, my theory would absolutely break down." We know now that there are many organs, systems, and processes in life that fit that description.

One of those is the cell. In Darwin's day the cell was a "black box"—a mysterious little part of life that no one could see into. But now that we have the ability to peer into the cell, we see that life at the molecular level is immeasurably more complex than Darwin ever dreamed. In fact, it is irreducibly complex. An irreducibly complex system is "composed of several well-matched, interacting parts that contribute to the basic function, wherein the removal of any one of the parts causes the system to effectively cease functioning." (144-145)

It is no wonder that the modern and postmodern novelist's world, after abandoning the Christian worldview, is lost and set adrift, as it were, in a cosmos he doesn't understand. In Percy's philosophical book Lost in the Cosmos, he describes modern man's predicament this way: The fact is that, by virtue of its peculiar relationship to the world, to others, and to its own organism, the autonomous self in a

modern technological society is possessed. It is possessed by the spirit of the erotic and the secret love of violence.

The peculiar predicament of the present-day self surely came to pass as a consequence of the disappointment of the high expectations of the self as it entered the age of science and technology. Dazzled by the overwhelming credentials of science, the beauty and elegance of the scientific method, the triumph of modern medicine over physical ailments, and the technological transformation of the very world itself, the self finds itself in the end disappointed by the failure of science and technique in those very sectors of life which had been its main source of ordinary satisfaction in past ages. (178-179)

This passage from Lost in the Cosmos may shed some light on why Binx begins his search after abandoning naturalistic philosophy. He realizes that the logical outworking of naturalistic philosophy is despair because it precludes the possibility of transcendence. This is why Binx, after reading The Chemistry of Life, feels “left over” (70).

Where I think Percy differs from most others is in his assertion that only the Christian worldview explains man the way he really is—free, sinful, and in need of salvation. When other philosophies try to either deny man’s freedom (behaviorism, positivism, Darwinism, etc.) try to deny objective morals (postmodernism) they all fail to account for man’s inherent value. For Camus and Sartre, existence precedes essence. It is one’s choices that determine a man’s character. Moreover, no one choice is inherently

better or worse since God has died; and absolute values died with Him. Percy rejects this view in that he views man's essence as preceding his existence. Embodying a Christian worldview, Percy believes that man is created in the image of God; therefore, each individual is intrinsically valuable because of the creation's imprint of God Himself. This is why Binx's search turns from vertical to horizontal.

Percy is ironically equipped to diagnose the modern malaise since he was trained primarily as a physician. He even served in such a capacity until he contracted tuberculosis. As a physician, he was saturated with the materialist/naturalist worldview; namely, that the universe is explainable in purely naturalistic terms. The supernatural is excluded as a possible explanation for the universe from the outset.

For the purposes of this paper, however, some measure of Christian theology should be kept in mind to better understand how Percy's ideas shape The Moviegoer. One indication in The Moviegoer of where Binx begins to turn from a materialist worldview to a Christian one is seen when he begins to understand his own alienation. Binx is with his girlfriend Kate and he replays the afternoon they spend together:

She refers to a phenomenon of moviegoing which I have called certification. Nowadays when a person lives somewhere, in a neighborhood, the place is not certified for him. More than likely he will live there sadly and the emptiness which is inside him will expand until it evacuates the entire neighborhood. But if he sees a movie which shows his very neighborhood, it becomes possible for him to live, for a time at least, as a person who is Somewhere and not Anywhere. (63)

After musing about people's hobbies, Binx thinks "As for hobbies, people with stimulating hobbies suffer from the most noxious of despairs since they are tranquilized in their despair. I must glide along as quietly as a ghost" (86). Binx is now coming to terms with his own exile by contrasting himself with others; at least he recognizes his despair. He knows enough to at least break out of his everydayness; his search will lead him somewhere or to someone.

As an avid moviegoer, Binx has developed an observer's keen eye for watching people, and he thinks he sees something that many others don't; namely, that they are lost in their everydayness without realizing it. Binx is beginning to come to terms with his own alienation from others. Binx's search is leading out of darkness and existential solitude into light and relationships.

Chapter IV

The Horizontal Search as Exemplified in The Moviegoer

Binx's search in The Moviegoer is leading him out of himself and into the world of others. When Paul addressed the Corinthians, he wrote: "Do not deceive yourselves. If any one of you thinks he is wise by the standards of this age, he should become a 'fool' so that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight. As it is written: 'He catches the wise in their craftiness'; and again, 'The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile.' So then, no more boasting about men!" (1 Corinthians 3:18-21). What Paul implores the Corinthians to admit is that nothing is responsible for man's lostness but sin—it is a rejection of God's manifestation in the person of Christ Jesus. God has given man more than enough reasons to believe. But man has chosen to become god himself rather than to submit to the first commandment that "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3). Was this not the way the serpent tempted Eve—with the promise that man shall become as god himself? In the Christian worldview, it is man's pride in himself that caused the original sin of disobeying God's command and, since then, all of creation has groaned: "For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children to God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time" (Romans 8:20-22).

This is what Paul tries to explain to the Philippians when he writes that Christ, “Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (Philippians 2:6-8). Through most of The Moviegoer, Binx envied the ease with which moviestars fit themselves into the world. As the novel develops however, Binx sees that his envy has been unjustified. His search, he says, has become horizontal. Naturalistic explanations have failed to explain the mysteries of human behavior; distractions (women) have failed to satiate for very long; even movies have left him empty. As a last resort, his horizontal search parallels the Christian pilgrimage.

There is no paucity of criticisms of God: Where was God on September 11, 2001? How could God allow such suffering? What did those people who died do to deserve death? The questions probe the very heart of man. These questions are, however, very legitimate and deserve an answer. What often go unnoticed, however, are the assumptions and presuppositions of the questions themselves. For example, when someone asks “Where was God when” the questioner has assumed and invoked a moral standard by which to judge. He has assumed an objective moral standard by which and through which he condemns an act as unjust or unfair. How can one call something unjust or unfair unless he knows, or thinks he knows, what is fair? This is what Lewis called the law of nature or the moral law. Next, we expand upon the concept of the moral law and how Percy uses it in a distinctly Christian manner in The Moviegoer.

The moral law is a concept that people often *assume* in ethical debates though they may be unaware of it. In the opening of Mere Christianity, C.S. Lewis gives this famous example to explain the moral law. He describes a disagreement between people and how the moral law is invoked as a standard that has been violated:

‘That’s my seat, I was there first’—‘Leave him alone, he isn’t doing you any harm’—‘Why should you shove in first?’—‘Give me a bit of your orange, I gave you a bit of mine’—‘Come on, you promised.’ People say things like that every day, educated people as well as uneducated, and children as well as grown-ups. Now what interests me about all these remarks is that the man who makes them is not merely saying that the other man’s behaviour does not happen to please him. He is appealing to some standard of behaviour which he expects the other man to know about. And the other man very seldom replies: ‘To hell with your standard.’ Nearly always he tries to make out that what he has been doing does not really go against the standard, or that if it does there is some special excuse. He pretends there is some special reason in this particular case why the person who took the seat first should not keep it, or that things were quite different when he was given the bit of orange, or that something has turned up which lets him off keeping his promise. It looks, in fact, very much as if both parties had in mind some kind of Law or Rule of fair play or decent behaviour or morality or whatever you like to call it, about which they really agreed. And they have. If they had not, they

might, of course, fight like animals, but they could not quarrel in the human sense of the word. Quarrelling means trying to show that the other man is in the wrong. And there would be no sense in trying to do that unless you and he had some sort of agreement as to what Right and Wrong are; just as there would be no sense in saying that a footballer had committed a foul unless there was some agreement about the rules of football. (3-4)

In this passage, Lewis highlights how people can overlook the *moral* manner in which objections themselves are raised by invoking an absolute standard (the moral law). What Lewis deftly points out is that oftentimes people assume an absolute law or standard but don't want to admit the giver of that law. For Lewis, Percy, and other Christians, this moral lawgiver is God. Inside the Trinity there is complete unity in diversity; this is the quintessence that unifies all the others. What exists in perfect form in the trinity is *relationship* in its holy reality.

In The Moviegoer, this concept of the moral law is illustrated when Binx undergoes the transformation from observer when he wrestles with purely materialistic explanations of life on the *vertical* plane to a participant when he commits to love his fellow man (Kate) on the *horizontal* plane. Binx rejects the materialistic explanation of the universe in light of the evidence that experience reveals to him; namely, that there are many experiences in life that cannot be explained by way of materialism. Binx goes from his life as a metaphysical leftover from the philosophy of materialism to a fellow journeyman (a wayfarer) who finds his bearings only in relationship to another. This is

why The Moviegoer is a comic novel rather than a tragic one. Rather than remaining isolated like Camus' Meursault or Sartre's denizens in Hell, Binx marries his longtime girlfriend Kate. In one of the final scenes of the novel, Binx and Kate are on a bus and Binx notices a college-aged young man reading The Charterhouse of Parma. Binx, the former romantic, empathizes with the young man silently. He surmises what the young man's thoughts are like and why he might be reading the novel. What type of personality might the young man have? What is he longing for? What is the relationship between this young man's reading Stendahl and being alone in New Orleans during Mardi Gras? Having seen an earlier version of himself in this young man, Binx asks him how he likes the book. Percy writes thus of the exchange:

Now he closes his book and stares hard at it as if he would, by dint of staring alone, tear from it its soul in a word. "It's—very good," he says at last and blushes. The poor fellow. He has just begun to suffer from it, this miserable trick the romantic plays upon himself: of setting just beyond his reach the very thing he prizes. For he prizes just such a meeting, the chance meeting with a chance friend on a chance bus, a friend he can talk to, unburden himself of some of his terrible longings. Now having encountered such a one, me, the rare bus friend, of course he strikes himself dumb. It is a case for direct questioning. (215)

Binx then peppers him with a few run of the mill questions about what college he attends, his hometown, etc. The young man is so immersed in the romantic, movie-like quality of the novel that he invariably emulates the larger-than-life characters in the novel and fails

in his ability to converse with another person in the here and now. The young man is a victim of romanticism. He is a dreamer. He resembles the early Binx in that he is mired in the idea of romanticism and is missing out on the reality of an actual relationship. Just as Binx is a metaphysical leftover at the beginning of the story, so this fellow is a romantic whose search has not yet become horizontal. In this scene, Percy intimates that the young man on the bus is unaware of his despair. His “search” is still vertical; that explains why he retreats when Binx tries to establish a bridge of civility, a relationship, between them. Percy concludes the scene: “In fact, there is nothing more to say to him. The best one can do is deflate the pressure a bit, the terrible romantic pressure, and leave him alone. He is a moviegoer, though of course he does not go to movies.” (216)

What Percy elucidates here in his half-joking way is the tragedy that as a romantic, the young man longs for just such an encounter with a kindred spirit while on a bus ride in New Orleans; but because of his conviction that what he wants is always doomed to be just out of reach, he will be continually frustrated. How does the young man bridge this chasm? In typical Percy fashion, he leaves the question unanswered (at least in The Moviegoer). But he does have Binx reveal these words in an interior monologue: Is it possible that—For a long time I have secretly hoped for the end of the world and believed with Kate and my aunt and Sam Yerger and many other people that only after the end could the few who survive creep out of their holes and discover themselves to be themselves and live as merrily as children among the viny ruins. Is it possible that—it is not too late? (231)

In the above quote, Percy suggests that it is only in the realm of relationships, not theories, that meaning is discovered. Instead of Sartrean existentialism wherein Hell is other people, Percy sees honest relationships as the horizontal medium wherein meaning is found. In The Moviegoer, it takes Binx from reading books on chemistry and physics (theory) to marrying Kate (reality).

Throughout The Moviegoer, Binx continues to attend the movies because they personify what it would mean to fit into the world without being plagued by self-consciousness. In the scene where Binx sees William Holden in New Orleans, and the facades that the passers-by adopt to ingratiate themselves with the movie star, Binx is aware of the way Holden “gels” in the world. Holden, the actor, is the one who seems at ease but the “real people” seem embarrassed by the mundaneness of their lives. I think Percy is suggesting that everyone is acting to some extent but it is only through an honest relationship with another that any semblance of honor can truly be said to accompany the journey of a wayfaring soul. This is why, I think, The Moviegoer ends with Binx committing to a relationship with his fiancée. Binx, unlike Camus’ Meursault in The Stranger or Sartre’s three characters being Hell to each other, finally relates to another in an “I-Thou” relationship. In “Walker Percy and the Self,” Lewis Jerome Taylor, Jr. explains Percy’s ideas this way:

Existentialist that he is, Percy traces the problem of the times not to faulty societal or economic structures, but to failure of the individual. It is rooted essentially in the universal human tendency to take the easy way of floating on the tide of external influences and thereby forfeiting one’s

sovereignty and the place on which one is given to stand. Because of this, a person becomes lost to himself as a self, he lives outside of himself and does not know who he is. He is in despair, and the worst kind of despair is that which is so successfully covered up by diversion that one is hardly aware of it. (400)

Taylor also recognizes Percy's Christian worldview when he writes: "Walker Percy is a Catholic who specifically asserts his belief in the Christian understanding of man and salvation. He also specifically acknowledges that he sees his mission as a writer as that of conveying the Christian truth to an age for which the traditional words have worn so smooth that they no longer take effect" (400). Percy sees individuals as fellow pilgrims created in the image of God and, therefore, *intrinsically* valuable. It is by recognizing this intrinsic value that relationship manifests itself in love as the supreme ethic. Love emerges in human relationships insofar as it resembles the perfect love that exists within the triune godhead. Though we are sinful because of original sin, we can be restored to fellowship with God (vertical plane) by accepting the gift of salvation through faith and grace, and then share that love with others (horizontal plane) and thereby emulate the supreme love that eternally exists in the triune godhead.

In his essay "Diagnosing the Modern Malaise," Percy writes of the novelist's burden this way, and I think it can be applied to an exegesis of The Moviegoer insofar as it portends hope for modern man:

The point is that, in a new age when things and people are devalued, when meanings break down, it lies within the province of the novelist to start the

search afresh, like Robinson Crusoe on his island. Tree bark may seem a humble place to start. But one must start somewhere. The novelist or poet in the future might be able to go further, to discover, or rediscover, not only how it is with tree bark but how it is with man himself, who he is, and how it is between him and other men. (221)

Conclusion

It has been my goal to show how Percy's view of man as evidenced in The Moviegoer and some of his nonfiction differs from the views of man as seen in Camus's The Stranger and Sartre's No Exit. The French existentialists assumed that God was dead. As stated by Ivan in Dostoyevsky's The Brothers Karamazov, if God is dead, then everything is permitted. The death of God means the death of absolutes. In the absence of moral absolutes, values are reduced to mere opinions. This is why Meursault in The Stranger found no ultimate value in living after murdering the Arab. He felt no remorse and he rejected the idea of God who promises forgiveness to those who earnestly admit their sin, believe in the substitutionary death of Christ as the only infinite sacrifice sufficient to redeem mankind's sin, and confess belief in such. For Meursault did not believe in God, so any talk of sin was moot. There was no transcendent meaning and thus, there was no ultimate purpose to his life.

Sartre's characters in No Exit also believed in a world devoid of a transcendent creator. Their actions were the only things that created their essence. What ultimate value could they have ascribed to their choices? Why should they have treated one another civilly rather than violently? Hence, they came to the only conclusion permitted to ones with no belief in a transcendent and personal creator—Hell was other people. Anyone who interfered with one's own autonomy was at the least irritating and at worst torturous.

In Percy's The Moviegoer, however, the existence of the moral law manifests itself in the maturation of the protagonist Binx Bolling as he emerges from the angst of existential doubt caused by the feeling of being "left over" where naturalistic philosophy fails to explain the individual. Binx gets engaged in the existential sense and in the literal sense; he eventually marries and fulfills a role as a husband. He finds his completion only in the realm of a relationship. The triumph of Binx is that he realizes the bankruptcy of atheistic existentialism and/or naturalism to explain his plight. Why does Binx attend the movies? Ostensibly, it is because he enjoys them. What I think Percy suggests to us, however, is easily missed if we're too quick to judge. The world of the movies is fantasy. Percy uses Binx's movie-going as satire. What really matters most are the honest relationships that people create with one another. Just as the boy reading Stendahl on the bus was a tragic figure of one who is a victim of mental movie-going (i.e., attaching some reality to actors' lives that is not really there), so is much of the postmodern world if it thinks that it can redeem itself through endless subjectivity and distractions in a world devoid of transcendent meaning. Percy argues that both modernism and postmodernism fail to remedy modern man's malaise.

Rather, those worldviews laugh at man through tear-stained eyes. In his essay, "Why Are You a Catholic?" Percy offers these winsome words:

In the old Christendom, everyone was a Christian and hardly anyone thought twice about it. But in the present age the survivor of theory and consumption becomes a wayfarer in the desert, like St. Anthony; which is to say, open to signs.

I do not feel obliged to set forth the particular religious reasons for my choosing among the Jewish-Christian religions. There are times when it is better not to name God. One reason is that most of the denizens of the present age are too intoxicated by the theories and goods of the age to be aware of the catastrophe already upon us. (314)

If postmodern man continues his tendency to devalue himself through naturalistic philosophy or the logical out-workings of atheistic existentialism or if he continues to distract himself and destroy the sacredness with which God created him, he makes himself, as Schaeffer said, less than the Bible's, and Percy's, view of fallen man. It is my contention that the works of Percy can serve as a canary in the coalmine that is the soul of modern man.

Works Cited

Works Cited

- Anderson, David. The Tragic Protest. Rpt. in Contemporary Literary Criticism.
Ed. Carolyn Riley. Detroit: Gale, 1975.
- Augustine. The Confessions. Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004.
- Beckwith, Francis J. To Everyone an Answer. Downers Grove: IVP, 2004.
- Brown, John Mason. "The Beautiful and the Damned." Rpt. in Drama for Students. Ed.
David Galens. Detroit: Gale, 1999.
- Camus, Albert. The Myth of Sisyphus, and Other Essays. New York: Vintage, 1991.
- . The Stranger. New York: Knopf, 1946.
- . Youthful Writings. New York: Paragon, 1990.
- Dostoyevsky, Fyodor. The Brothers Karamazov. New York: Buccaneer, 1976.
- Geisler, Norman L., and Frank L. Turek. I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist.
Wheaton: Crossway, 2004.
- Holy Bible: New International Version. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002.
- Johnson, Paul. Intellectuals. New York: Harper & Row, 1988.
- Kierkegaard, Soren. Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death. Princeton UP,
1954.
- Lewis, C.S. Mere Christianity. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956.
- McCall, Dorothy. The Theatre of Jean-Paul Sartre. Rpt. in Contemporary Literary
Criticism. Ed. Carolyn Riley. Detroit: Gale, 1977.

- Moreland, J.P. "Physicalism, Naturalism and the Nature of Human Persons." To Everyone an Answer. Ed. Francis J. Beckwith. Downers Grove: IVP, 2004.
- Percy, Walker. Lost in the Cosmos. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1983.
- . "Diagnosing the Modern Malaise." Signposts in a Strange Land. Ed. Patrick Samway. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1991.
- . The Moviegoer. New York: Knopf, 1961.
- . "Why Are You a Catholic?" Signposts in a Strange Land. Ed. Patrick Samway. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1991.
- Podhoretz, Norman. "The New Nihilism and the Novel." Doings and Undoings. Rpt. in Contemporary Literary Criticism. Ed. Carolyn Riley. Detroit: Gale, 1973. 52.
- Samway, Patrick. Walker Percy: A Life. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1997.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. Being and Nothingness. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956.
- . No Exit and Three Other Plays. New York: Knopf, 1976.
- Schaeffer, Francis A. He Is There and He Is Not Silent. Westchester: Crossway, 1972.
- . How Shall We Then Live? Old Tappan: Fleming H. Revell, 1976.
- . The God Who Is There. Westchester: IVP, 1968.
- Sprintzen, David. Camus: A Critical Examination. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1988.
- Taylor, Lewis. "Walker Percy and the Self." Rpt. in Contemporary Literary Criticism, Ed. Carolyn Riley. Detroit: Gale, 1976.
- Weightman, John. "Stranger in Paradise." Rpt. in Contemporary Literary Criticism. Ed. Carolyn Riley. Detroit: Gale, 1973, 99.

Zacharias, Ravi. Can Man Live Without God? Nashville: Word Publishing Group, 1994.

---. Deliver Us From Evil. Dallas: Word Publishing Group, 1996.

---. Jesus Among Other Gods. Nashville: Word Publishing Group, 2000.