



## A brief note on Walker Percy's Vision of Human Life Paving the Way for Redemption in his Fictional World

\*Dikshita Pattar and \*\*Dr. Naresh Kumar

\*Research Scholar, Department of English, OPJS University, Churu, Rajasthan (India).

\*\*Associate Professor, Department of English, OPJS University, Churu, Rajasthan (India)

Email- [pattardikshita@gmail.com](mailto:pattardikshita@gmail.com)

**Abstract:** it may be stated that Percy's novels offer a ray of hope to the modern man who is too much involved in the ways of the world. Almost all his novels like *The Movie Goer* portray men who regenerate into salvation and redemption through a new understanding of their life and their roles in the society. Too much of faith in science and technology contaminates man's daily existence making him fall a prey to restlessness and despair. In a state of utter restlessness of things falling apart, Percy's heroes are projected as damned men seeking redemption. Even when man flees from God, seeking the pleasures of the world, he has unquenchable thirst for God. The journey's undertaken by Binx in *The Movie Goer* and Will Barret in *The Last Gentleman* are symbolic of man's quest for a spiritual anchor – God- that can secure him against his sense of alienation and everydayness. Percy conceives human existence in the temporal world only as a sojourn which prepares them for eternity. In a nutshell, it may be said that the protagonists of Percy, only through inter-subjectivity, authenticity and love, are redeemed from their malaise. The redeemed Binx and Will Barret do breath pure and uncontaminated air and see the world a new and afresh.

[Pattar, D. and Kumar, N. **A brief note on Walker Percy's Vision of Human Life Paving the Way for Redemption in his Fictional World.** *Rep Opinion* 2021;13(9):1-4]. ISSN 1553-9873 (print); ISSN 2375-7205 (online). <http://www.sciencepub.net/report>. I. doi:[10.7537/marsroj130921.01](https://doi.org/10.7537/marsroj130921.01).

**Keywords:** Walker Percy's Vision, Human Life, Redemption in his Fictional World

### Introduction:

Walker Percy, one of the greatest Catholic novelists of the twentieth century, was born in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1916. He was the son of a prominent lawyer-father who could trace his ancestry back to the Percys of Northumberland and an equally illustrious mother who had French Catholic ancestors.

At age 16, Percy was orphaned, together with two brothers, when his father committed suicide, using the same 20-gauged gun with which his own father had shot himself. As if the loss of his father were not enough to set Percy's life ajar, his mother died soon thereafter in a mysterious car-drowning.

The three boys were adopted and raised in Greenville, Mississippi, by William Alexander Percy, a distant kinsman. He was a distinguished plantation owner-lawyer-poet as well as an ex-Catholic who had lost his faith and become a self-described Stoic. This noble man was to have a deeply shaping influence on Walker Percy, providing him a sterling example of the highly moral and cultured humanist who, because he lived without recourse to Christian faith, would serve as the ghost haunting all of Walker's work.

Will Percy's memoir, entitled *Lanterns on the Levee* (1941), is an essential book for understanding Walker Percy's own life and work. In

his preface to the book, Walker says that he owes Uncle Will, as he called him, an unpayable debt.

Percy studied first at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, where he was awarded his B.A. degree in chemistry with high distinction. He then took his M.D. degree from Columbia University, concentrating in pathology, although he seriously considered psychiatry as his specialty. Yet Percy also spent three of his Columbia years undergoing psychoanalysis, a sign that he was a troubled man who would not be satisfied with the worldly success that he was already winning.

During his residency in pathology at Physicians and Surgeons Hospital in New York City, as he was doing research on the cadavers of tuberculosis victims, Percy himself contracted the disease. He spent his long recuperation in an upstate New York sanatorium reading mainly philosophy and fiction, especially the work of Søren Kierkegaard and Albert Camus, Fyodor Dostoevsky and Leo Tolstoy, Jean-Paul Sartre and Thomas Mann - but also, thanks to a Catholic fellow-patient, the theology Thomas Aquinas. These thinkers and artists probed the human condition, Percy discovered, in ways that made him wonder whether he was meant to be a writer rather than a physician.

Percy would never in fact practice medicine at all, though he would retain the diagnostician's

impulse “to thump the patient and to find out what’s wrong,” as he put it. Having gradually recovered from tuberculosis, Percy nonetheless remained personally at sea, not knowing what to do with himself. He was a wanderer, both spiritually and geographically.

#### “A city of the dead”

Tom More gradually discovers that the split state of American moral and spiritual life cannot be knit back together by the workings of even the most sophisticated machine. It requires a far more radical remedy, as More finally learns.

In the meantime, he becomes ever more discouraged. Though his nation seems to be prospering despite its deadly divisions of right and left, More himself is miserable. The three women whom he has at his beck and call cannot bodily satisfy him, nor can he stop the ramblings of his mind by guzzling endless gin fizzes and having free sex. He prospers only when he is mocking the twin idiocies of our culture, since he can find no vital alternative to them.

More begins to discern that the cleft culture he inhabits is, in fact, a living hell. Though his suburb is called Paradise Estates, it is in fact a precinct of Perdition. Unlike nearly everyone else, More detects the poisonous odours pervading the moral atmosphere like gas from an extermination camp. Far from being a place whose inhabitants might glimpse the Beatific Vision, it is a realm of unacknowledged Perdition.

Nowhere do these invisible hellish forces assert themselves more dramatically than in a scene involving Father Rinaldo Smith, the pastor of a small remnant of faithful Roman Catholics. One Sunday as he stood to deliver the homily, Father Smith fell stone silent, unable to utter a word. After the parishioners rushed him to the sacristy, they then had him committed him to a local psychiatric hospital, assuming that he had suffered a nervous collapse. There he explains his aphasia as a speechlessness that has not been caused by brain malfunction. He declares, instead, that “they’re jamming circuits.” He refers not to electronic gremlins or glitches but rather to the “principalities and powers.” “They’ve won and we’ve lost,” Father Rinaldo continues. “Their tactic has prevailed,” he elaborates. “Death is winning, life is losing ...” In one of the novel’s most haunting sentences, the modest little priest confesses, “I am surrounded by the corpses of souls. We live in a city of the dead.”

Here Percy begins to move beyond the limits of Kierkegaard, though at times one wishes he might

have remained more tentatively Kierkegaardian than so acerbically Catholic. At his worst, Percy employed his art to spew venom against the “culture of death” and the “age of ashes.” Angrily and often impatiently, he warned of the wrath to come, as if he were himself the bringer of this final sentence of doom.

He likened the aim of his work, in fact, to the function of the proverbial canary in the coalmine. When the oxygen supply falls low, the bird keels over and the miners make their hasty exit. So does Percy, when he operates as scold, bid us to abandon this earthly city to its own sorry devices. Hence the sheer unleashed fury of Percy’s final novel, *The Thanatos Syndrome*. Percy acts as prophet most legitimately when he does not employ his art for propaganda, thus violating both his fiction and his faith. Instead, he speaks with the authority of his own Catholic Church and its moral teachings, especially its papal encyclicals and letters.

#### Backing into the Kingdom

At his best, especially in his early work, where he does not feel compelled to preach, Walker Percy fictionally depicts a more excellent way than the way of our living death. For the same Tom More whom we have seen dwelling in hell begins to discover that the demons in his own life need to be driven out.

Four of these non-Kierkegaardian moments stand out from others.

Early in *Love in the Ruins*, More bursts out in both rage and grief against the *merde* in which he is living, as he slashes his wrists on Christmas Eve. He attempts this nihilist act of self-murder after watching Perry Como — presumably a Catholic of Italian descent — dressed nattily in his cardigan and sitting contently on his stool, as he croons sacrilegiously about the holiest night of the year: “I’m Dreaming of a White Christmas.” Yet, like the Prodigal Son, the self-lacerating More suddenly “comes to himself,” squeezes his bleeding wrists into his armpits, and hobbles like a hobo to the house of a doctor-friend to be sutured. “Bad as things are still when all is said and done, one can sit on a doorstep in the winter and watch sparrows kick leaves.”

Yet something far greater is required of More than such a quiet Panglossian resignation to his own little garden spot. Thus does he commit himself to the psychiatric ward at a local hospital. There he enjoys some of the happiest moment of his life.

### Walker Percy's Triad: Science, Literature and Religion

Walker Percy's novels, essays, and interviews express the views of a writer interested in developing an integral vision of what it means to live as a human being in the disordered twentieth century. As a thinker, Percy found himself placed in a world in which ways of knowing — scientific versus poetic, empirical versus intuitive — had come to be seen as separate if not entirely antithetical. For Percy, this situation was due mainly to the pervasive influence of a corrupt form of science, called "scientism," in all areas of life. The task he set about in fiction and in his discursive writings was to demonstrate, directly and indirectly, the epistemological coherence that he believed was attainable by the modern mind through the study of the human use of language. This attainable coherence would make possible a reunification of an authentic scientific viewpoint and the arts. In one sense, Percy's whole career can be seen as an attempt to undermine the regnant ideology of scientism on the one hand, and, on the other, to heal the rift between science and the arts by demonstrating that, although they approach the truth in different ways, science and the arts are wholly compatible because they share an integral metaphysical foundation. Both science and the arts are concerned with the search for truth, and truth, Percy said, echoing the Scholastics, cannot contradict itself.

In his 1989 Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities, entitled "The Fateful Rift: The San Andreas Fault in the Modern Mind," Percy offered one way to heal this rift when he suggested that contemporary social scientists should emulate the artist's approach to the study of human experience. Speaking of literature in general, he said:

*...these "sentences" of art, poetry, and the novel ought to be taken very seriously indeed since these are the cognitive, scientific, if you will, statements that we have about what it is to be human. The humanities, in a word, are not the minstrels of the age whose role is to promise "R and R" to tired technicians and consumers after work. Rather are the humanities the elder brother of the sciences, who see how the new scientist got his tail in a crack when he takes on the human subject as object and who even shows him the shape of a new science (Signposts, 288).*

Percy's claim for the cognitive, scientific value of literature as a norm for the fully human was rooted in his belief in man's uniqueness as a creature who symbolizes. Human beings are namers who are capable of discovering truths about reality, which

exists independent of mind and can be defined with reasonable accuracy. Yet literature and science approach truth in different ways. The goal of the scientist, Percy argues, is to express a "general truth" about things and events. However, science cannot express the truth about a unique existence. "The great gap in human knowledge to which science cannot address itself by the very nature of the scientific method is, to paraphrase Kierkegaard, nothing less than this: what it is like to be an individual, to be born, live, and die in the twentieth century" (*Signposts*, 151). The individual writer, however, can address this question because he "finds himself in league with the individual, with his need to have himself confirmed in his predicament" (151). Still, Percy's insistence in the Jefferson Lecture on the "cognitive, scientific" value of literature implies a single metaphysical foundation for the two ways of knowing and expressing truth. In effect, Percy's Jefferson Lecture was a call for a radical reintegration of science, the arts, and — I believe — religion, by a reconsideration of their epistemological root in the nature of being itself, discoverable through the study of language. Paradoxically, Percy saw this reintegration as possible for some educated citizens only after a thorough absorption of the scientific method: "it is *only* through, first, the love of the scientific method and, second, its elevation and exhaustion as the ultimate method of knowing that he becomes open to other forms of knowing — sciencing in the root sense of the word — and accordingly, at least I think so, to a new kind of revival of Western humanism and the Judeo-Christian tradition" (*Signposts*, 192). Percy's belief in the possibility of this revival underpins his own epistemological journey as philosopher as well as the whole monumental effort of his writing career.

To understand Percy's argument for reintegration, certain basic terms need to be clarified. Like his philosophical mentor, Charles Sanders Peirce, Percy understood the term "science" and the act of "sciencing" to mean any search for knowledge about being and existence with the aim of uncovering demonstrable truth (Peirce, 189-94). "Science" in the sense that Percy often used it has as much to do with ontological perspective as it does with a specific method; specific method is governed by the first principles or assumptions from which it derives. Percy wished to reaffirm this basic notion of "science" against the degenerate "scientism" that claimed authority in all areas of life. In his essay "Physician as Novelist" he distinguished "between scientism as an all-pervading ideology and the scientific method as a valid means of investigating

the mechanisms of phenomena" (*Signposts*, 192), while in an earlier essay, "Culture: The Antinomy of Scientific Method," Percy noted how allegiance to scientism precludes consideration of science's deeper, ontological basis: "once the scientific method is elevated to a supreme all-construing world view, it becomes impossible to consider a more radical science, the science of being" (*Message*, 235). Scientism exists as one of the major idols of the modern Western world, manifested particularly in popular interest in the occult and the magical. This interest, for Percy, represented "a loss of interest in science in favor of pseudo-science" (*Signposts*, 323). But paradoxically, he believed that one "happy outcome of this turn of events may well be a new alliance of science and religion, such as existed in medieval times against the old and new Gnosticism which periodically threatens the openness and catholicity of both science and Christianity with its appeal to the occult and mystical powers of the elite few" (323).

As for the terms "religion" or "religious," Percy shied away from using them whenever possible because he believed such traditional terminology had become devalued almost beyond usefulness. In fact, near the beginning of the Jefferson Lecture he argued that the "sciences of man are incoherent" and that "the solution to the difficulty is not to be found in something extra-scientific, not in the humanities nor in religion, but within science itself" (*Signposts*, 271). Percy wished to avoid grounding his argument for a "new anthropology" in a crippling dependence on conventional, worn-out definitions of science, religion, and the arts. But characteristically, he turned to language — particularly etymology — in his attempt to reaffirm their authentic relationship. Just as he referred to the root meaning of the word "science" (*scio*=to know) to affirm its true sense, so also in the Jefferson Lecture he defined "incoherence" in its root sense as "not sticking together." Following Percy's strategy, I would argue that the term "religious" understood in its root sense — "to bind fast or hold together" — is both appropriate and necessary to understand the kind of integral vision of art and science Percy wished to describe, in spite of his claim that the solution to the "incoherence" in modern social sciences is *not* to be found in religion.

More importantly, I believe his proposed reintegration of science and art would itself be

incoherent without the synthesizing power of a religious perspective — and a specifically Christian perspective at that. Percy's claim that genuine science's coherence does not *depend* on religion is accurate in the strict sense, it seems to me. But since he goes on to argue that coherence can be found through semiotics — the study of man as a language user — the question of the ontological roots of language, hence the religious, is inevitably raised. That is, the question of language's ultimate source and authority to define being must be addressed if the notion of "coherence" is finally to have any validity.

#### Corresponding author:

Dikshita Pattar  
Research Scholar, Department of English,  
OPJS University, Churu,  
Rajasthan (India).  
[Email-pattardikshita@gmail.com](mailto:Email-pattardikshita@gmail.com)  
Contact No.- 7508328073

#### References:

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

9/3/2021