

Theme of Victimization in Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer*

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This paper attempts to establish that the theme of victimization is prominent in Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer*. The protagonist of *The Moviegoer*, Binx Bolling is the victims of the change in the cultural outlook in South where man is becoming more and more money conscious, self-centred having attraction for the luxuries and physical satisfactions. Percy's protagonist gets abstracted in this world by the cultural and scientific revolutions in America. He suffers because he is lost in the fantasies of the new world. He recovers at the end of this novel by realizing the reality of the changing world in which he is fated to live.

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The Theme of Victimization in Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer*

Walker Percy's place in American literature is as individual as the man himself. He is a satirist, humorist, poet, and a man of faith. Percy's fictional world is a replica of the contemporary America in all its richness, variety and complexity and reverberates with the spirit of America which is essentially secular though the remark is a little too adulatory, it jauntily points out the comic and the prophetic character of his novels and the Percyian vision of future America. The theme of victimization is found to be one of the prominent themes in all his novels. The protagonists of his novels illumine their ironic fate which is decided by the existing conditions in which his protagonists live and the temptations they face. In fact, they are creations of the change that has taken place due to the scientific and technological development in contrast with the conservative attitude of South Americans. In *Walker Percy and the Postmodern World*, Mary K. Sweeny says, "In his novels Walker Percy presents his

view of modern man lost to himself in the categories in which science and technology have placed him” (1).

Percy becomes popular as a novelist when his first novel, *The Moviegoer*, got the National book Award of 1962. The reason for the book to receive wide popularity among the readers was its textual richness. It consists of a variety of themes drawn from the lives of contemporary Americans. This novel unveils the concealed reality of the life of Americans through its thematic concern and also warns of the forthcoming destruction of American social life. Many critics have analyzed the novel to disclose the life currents that flow through it but the book is so rich in themes that one always finds something new with every new reading. The theme of victimization is one of the major themes which have not yet captured the attention of the critics of this novel. The protagonist of *The Moviegoer*, by name “John Bickerson ‘Binx’ Bolling” reveals this fact.

In the beginning of the novel, *The Moviegoer*, itself Binx Bolling appears as a man of material world. He is a stock and bond broker from a well-to-do middle class family nearing the thirtieth of his age when one longs to enjoy the pleasures of material world and multiply money to the maximum extent. He is a model citizen of Gentilly, “a middle-class suburb of New Orleans.” He realizes his existence in this world by keeping his wallet “full of identity cards, library cards, credit cards,” and he owns “a flat olive-drab strong-box, very smooth and heavily built with double walls for fire protection” in which he keeps his “birth certificate, college diploma, honourable discharge, G.I. Insurance, a few stock certificates and a deed to ten acres of a defunct duck club down in St. Bernard Parish” (1).

Percy introduces Binx with all the belongings which are quite essential to live in a material world. But a man of the material world is not happy only with the minimum requirements for his life. He takes pride in possessing the luxurious amenities like “a first-class television set, an all but silent air conditioner, and a very long lasting deodorant” (7).

Binx uses perfumes, and he is very much alert for the announcements and ads broadcast on radio and shown on TV. He is a fan of film actors and actresses. He goes to movies or watches TV and very often spends week-ends on the Gulf-coast. Percy provides frequent references to films, film actors, TV programmes, and ads on TV, radio, and in news papers to assert the importance of mass media in the material world of today. Thus through all these details of Binx's possessions, and his day to day activities Percy manifests that Binx Bolling lives in a material world and he is fascinated by the life of comfort and luxury. But what Percy puts forth through all these details is the upper layer of the life of materialist Binx. As we proceed further in the depth of the novel we find Percy loosening the threads of Binx's life-fabric to reveal of what quality, in reality, is the fabric made.

The mass media, particularly movies and TV play a vital role in creating illusory images in the minds of the viewers. If such images are created in the mind of an individual the individual desires to act in accordance with these images. In the process he has to deviate from the traditional and natural ways of life which his inner conscience does not permit him to do. Ultimately it results into a conflict. The self of the individual is divided into two, one favouring the external material world while the other favouring the inner spiritual world. In trying to be true to both at the same time the individual's life becomes ironical and his failure to be true to both ultimately leads him to despair. Percy has cleverly exploited the electronic media in his novel, *The Moviegoer*, to manifest the inner conflict of its protagonist. In *The Fiction of Walker Percy*, John Edward Hardy observes "Percy is hardly the first novelist to appreciate the profound influence of the films on the development of all other fiction in our time" (11).

Binx Bolling, being born and brought up in the material world of the modern age, shares the banalities of this age. His frequently attending to movies forces him to interpret the day to day happenings in his life, family, and society in conformity with the film images

created in his mind. When Aunt Emily discloses to him the bad news of his brother Scott's death it reminds Binx of the scene in a movie which describes "a great tragedy" in the life of a man who, in a boat accident, loses his memory. Binx recollects this image because of its similarity with the happening in his life.

It is not only his going to movies which accords Binx his material identity, there are other activities too. Apart from the work of a stock broker he performs the work of a searcher. Binx goes on search, for what he does not know, but he wants to find out something mysterious, the ultimate truth of life. While on search he goes on observing the world around him. He observes people from South and also people from North. *The Moviegoer* is actually an account of Binx's pilgrimage from New Orleans to Chicago and back. His eyes work like a camera and go on taking snap shots of those individuals who come in the range of his eyesight for he is as much movie camera as moviegoer. His camera catches minute details of the changing appearances of people and their surroundings. It enters the houses and churches to capture discussion[^] at the dining-table and the performance of religious rites.

Binx finds that men in America move with masks over their faces. They try to deceive others by hiding their real faces. The true face is revealed only during the moments of catastrophes. Binx witnesses the behaviour of a person when he is on his return journey from Chicago to New Orleans. After careful observation of this person; "How does he sit" "How does he read...?" and what does he read? Binx comes to a conclusion that the person pretends to be reading just to receive others attention; he is longing for his recognition by somebody" (214). His suffering reflects over his extraordinarily well-modelled face. The people in New Orleans look to Binx like the participants of the parade held in celebration of Mardi Gras during Carnival. The participants put masks over their faces and pass by merry making with the pretention that they have forgotten the pain of crucifixion which, in reality, they cannot. Binx also, being a member of the same society, makes faces. Whenever he is around Emily,

his aunt, he pretends to be an honest and hard worker. Ironically his family members do not understand what sort of person he is.

Binx Bolling is obsessed with death right from his early age. “I remember when my older brother Scott died of pneumonia: I was eight years old” (3). He recollects his past in connection either with somebody’s death or deadly events in somebody’s or his own life. He is obsessed with death, not the fear of death, but the sense ‘that everyone is dead, himself particularly. Binx’s recollection of his brother’s death also reminds him of the deadly location where his aunt, Emily, had disclosed to him the sad news of Scotty’s death. The location “behind the hospital” with “the power plant and blowers and incinerator of the hospital” on one side, and “a row of Negro houses” on the other side with “hot meaty smell” is an abode of death on the earth (3-4). Constant references to Binx’s world as a “dead world” strengthens the notion. The name of the place “Elysian Fields,” where Binx lives as a tenant to Mrs. Schexnaydre, indicates a place where one lives after death.

Man, obsessed with the fear of death, in spite of his being handsome, prestigious, intellectual and rich, is always engrossed by an inward suffering. The “night time prowling” of Binx’s father who suffered from insomnia is the best example of this. Binx’s father, a member of a well-to-do, royal family, could not get sleep even in the “healthful” porches where Binx and his brother Scott used to get a sound sleep “on even the coldest nights,” but “He tossed like wounded animal” even in “A Saskatchewan sleeping bag from Abercrombie” which proved to him “the corpse of his dead hope”(M.85).

When Binx grows up he is haunted by the memories of the past. During night time he suddenly wakes up breaking his dreams at three O’clock in the morning. He says: “At night the years come back and perch around my bed like ghosts” (144). And during daytime he is caught in the grip of everydayness. The grip of everydayness is so strong that “nothing breaks it but disaster” and it is felt in every nook and corner of the material world. Binx observes the

snobbishness of people from all walks of life when he witnesses the religious functions performed in Biloxi. He understands that people attend mass functions just to put on a show; otherwise they hardly know anything about religion. If somebody asks them about religion they get embarrassed: “eyes are averted, throats are cleared, and there occurs murmuring for a minute or two until the subject can be changed” (159). He sees everybody coming to church a big snob. He knows that the position of church has degraded to a post office” in the material world of Biloxi where everybody comes to show what he is not in reality. In "Basking in the Eye of the Storm: The Ethics of Loss in Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer*," Richard Pindell has rightly judged that “The world of *The Moviegoer* is a bazaar of life styles, a costume room” (106). In this novel Percy pulls together a variety of persons, businessmen, actors and actresses, officials, newly married couples, and common persons to present a living picture of the American society that had fallen victim to the material world.

Binx, like the tradesmen of the material world, is totally absorbed in the money-making business. The ups and downs of the market upset his mind. He finds people around him possessed by money without caring for romantic love. In Sharon Kincaid, “one of those village beauties of which South is prodigal” Binx sees the pure romantic love (65). Binx knows that though such beauties are found in New Orleans “by the millions,” as common as sparrows, “No one marvels at them; no one holds them dear” in this world; “even their men pay no attention to them, anyhow far less attention than they pay to money” (65). Binx loves her and yet his materialistic mind treats her as “an item on a list.”

Percy establishes a close relationship between Binx's love for money and his love for Sharon. “If ever my business should suffer because of my admiration for Sharon, then my admiration for Sharon would suffer too” (102). If there is money then only there is love. In this material world Binx does not expect the possibility of a money-minded person forsaking everything for the sake of love; but on the other hand he expects in this world the exploitation

of love for the sake of money. “The trick, the joy of it, is to prosper on all fronts, enlist money in the service of love, and love in the service of money. As long as I am getting rich I feel that all is well” (102). Binx’s intimacy with Sharon enhances her work efficiency in the office. Binx knows that a slight deviation in their intimacy will hamper his business; so he tries to please her in all respects. He offers her sandwiches, coffee, makes likable gestures, and condescends tactfully her acquaintances.

Binx’s camera eye catches the activities at a business-point where people are busy making money. He presents how businessmen play deceptive tricks for raising money. In Chicago while in the company of decent businessmen Binx comes to know that high-class businessmen are of deceptive nature. So he believes that even great businessmen with fine appearances are not to be trusted. One Mr. Sartalamaccia, a contractor and owner of the housing development, tries to trap Binx but he himself gets trapped by his own deceit. At the age of thirty Binx feels that his life has been a “dark pilgrimage on this earth” knowing less than what he knew before. He senses that the century in which he lives is:

...the great shithouse of scientific humanism where needs are satisfied, everyone becomes an anyone, a warm and creative person and prospers like a dung beetle, and one hundred percent are humanists and ninety eight percent believe in God, and men are dead, dead, dead; and the malaise has settled like a fall-out and what people really fear is not that bomb will fall but that bomb will not fall - on this my thirtieth birthday, I know nothing and there is nothing to do but fall prey to desire. (228)

At last Binx understands that in this material world there remains’ nothing important in life, everything is dead except desire which “comes hawling down” on man like the cold wind from north. Binx compares the American society with the little pagoda of aluminium and glass, trim and pretty on the outside but evil smelling within. In such a society Binx feels his

self not in communion with him. As a result he has to undergo mental torture. Ultimately he realizes that in this world a new life is possible only to those who survive in the end creeping themselves out of the holes finding the whole past world in ruins.

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