Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer* as Romantic Comedy

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Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer*, winner of the 1962 National Book Award, has most often been analyzed in Kierkegaardian terms. Percy's wide reading in the European existentialists warrants this approach, and it is generally agreed that an understanding of Kierkegaard's three stages —from aesthetic to ethical to religious—is necessary to perceive the development of protagonist Binx Bolling in *The Moviegoer*. In addition to the existential approach, a look at the structure of the novel provides an equally profitable avenue of investigation. Walker Percy undergirds *The Moveigoer* with a comic structure. In a conventional comic plot, the hero begins the story separated from his final reintegration. In this final unity, the society changes, restructuring itself around the returned hero. Such a pattern fits *The Moviegoer*. Percy, however, alters important comic elements to suggest a change in the comic construction. Binx returns to society, but without a complete integration. Instead, Binx returns having achieved a new consciousness, thus creating a Romantic comedy.

Before examining how Percy alters comic conventions of comedy to create a Romantic comedy, an understanding of the conventional comic situation—the individual initially separated from society but reintegrated by the end—is necessary.

1. The Individual and Society

The tension between the individual and his community is at the heart of the comic situation. The individual in conventional comic structure intially stands outside his society for any number of reasons:

He may be self-ignorant, defective, silly, or merely ugly. To some degree, his stance outside of his community results from the rigidity of the society. The comic plot resolves this tension by moving towards reintegrating the outcast. Thus, traditional comic structure ultimately affirms the society.

Plato and Aristotle recognize that the individual who is different from those around him is potentially comic. For Plato, the individual's separation is due to his self-ignorance. For example, in *Philebus*, Plato shows how the self-ignorant person, lacking knowledge of the qualities of his soul, fancying "himself better in point of virtue than he really is," will live in "ignorance and silliness • • • a misfortune."[1] If this person has strength enough for vengeance upon his society, the situation is "odious and repulsive • • • injurious to a man's neighbor as well as himself."[2] This state of affairs is comic, however, if such a person is weak, therefore unable to take vengeance upon society. These persons, weak and ignorant, are "truly • • • *comic* figures."[3] For Plato, then, the comic situation occurs only when the society remains safe from the vengeance of the individual from his society, arguing that an essential part of the comic situation is the stability and maintenance of the society. It should be pointed out that Plato's analysis perceives the comic situation as a static one, with the individual, through his self-ignorance, defects, or ugliness, more or less permanently sundered from his society.

Comedy, however, does not leave the individual stranded from his society (while tragedy usually does). A major function of comedy is to bring the individual back into society, for as E. M. W. Tillyard says, comedy "assumes that society must be made to work, that creatures must somehow learn to live together."[4] The function of comedy, then, is not merely to point out the individual's defects for a good laugh. According to James P. Kincaid, comedy "works to establish the harmony of society by eliminating or converting the individuals."[5] In the process of moving towards the final harmony Kincaid speaks of, the comic story usually seeks a path of conversion rather than elimination. Elimination or expulsion of characters runs the risk of upsetting the comic ending, moving what is normally a festive comic end towards pathos and even

tragedy.[6] Usually, says Frye, the dramatist in the last scene "tries to get all his characters on the stage at once."[7]

The overall comic movement, then, is one which moves the individual from an initial point of separation to one of involvement in his society. Frye neatly sums up: "The theme of the comic is the integration of society, which usually takes the form of incorporating a central charactor into it."[8]

Comedy usually achieves this final stage-filling integration in two diverse ways. First, comedy points out the defects of the individual, seeking as it does to educate and correct. Likening comedy to a mirror, William Hazlitt, as quoted in D.J. Palmer's edition, *Comedy: Developments in Criticism*, sees comedy as "constantly and successfully expose [ing] the follies and weaknesses of mankind to ridicule."[9] As a result of this sometimes painful exposition, "man, seeing their most striking peculiarities and defects pass in gay review before them, learn either to avoid or conceal them."[10] Perhaps the most succinct explanation of comedy's instructive function, as D.J. Palmer points out, is found in Sir Philip Sydney's discussion of the poet in *An Apology for Poetry:*

> Comedy is an imitation of the common errors of our life, which he representeth in the most ridiculous and scornefull sort that may be; so as it is impossible that any beholder can be content to be such an one.[11]

The individual, seeing such defects so plainly, is educated and converted, enabling him to return to society.

The second way in which comedy seeks to achieve a final stage-filling harmony focuses not on the individual but on the rigidity of his society. In rejecting the ignorant or ugly individual, even though such defects bring no harm to the society itself, the society reveals its tendency toward rigidity. Henri Bergson attributes this tendency to society's insistence that individuals live in a state of "reciprocal adaptation."[12] Because of this insistence, "society will be suspicious of all *inelasticity* of character, of mind and even of body."[13]

The rigid society, one "controlled by habit, ritual bondage, arbitrary law and the older characters," gives way inevitably to "youth and pragmatic freedom."[14] In this case, the comic movement concludes with the triumph of the individual over the society, and the story closes when, as Frye says, "all the right-thinking people come over to his [the hero's] side."[15]

Comedy thus has a double attack. Comedy, on the one hand, focuses on the individual, ridiculing his defects and seeking to instruct and convert him; on the other hand, comedy reveals the rigidity of the society, its lack of acceptance and freedom. Ian Donaldson refers to this process as *leveling*. According to Donaldson, comic leveling, emphasizes "not so much . . . the reversal of roles or the triumph of the underdog as . . . the artificiality of all social distinctions in the face of human passion and incompetence."[16]

Thus, comedy, in exploring the tension between the individual and his society, usually seeks to create a final harmony either by revealing the rigidness of the society, or by education the individual, or both. Frye speaks of this double action of comedy:

> The essential comic resolution, therefore, is an individual release which is also a social reconciliation. The normal individual is freed from the bonds of a humorous society, and a normal society is freed from the bonds imposed on it by humorous individuals.[17]

This final harmony prevails in what is called new Comedy. New Comedy, which follows a pattern set forth in the plays of the Roman playwrights Plautus and Terence, "unfolds what may be described as a comic Oedipus situation."[18] In this situation, the young man overcomes an opponent, usually his father, wins the girl he loves, and gets married. The marriage, the "tonic chord on which it [the comedy] ends," not only signals the end of the comedy, but it also signals the beginning of a new society which crystallizes around the hero. New Comedy offers "the birth of a renewed sense of social integration."[19]

This pattern appears to be operative in *The Moviegoer*. In *The*

Moviegoer, Binx overcomes a fatherly figure, his great-aunt Emily, and marries the girl he loves, Kate. His marriage to Kate in the Epilogue signals the end of the novel and the beginning of a new society. Given this general movement, *The Moviegoer* could be regarded as a modern version of New Comedy.

2. New Comedy Altered in the Moviegoer

Although *The Moviegoer* fits the overall pattern of a New Comedy, moving as it does from Binx's isolation in Gentilly to his marriage to Kate, Percy alters three elements—the love Binx has for Kate, the nature of the blocking character, and the society which appears at the end of the "Epilogue." These alterations point to Percy's more radical alteration, his use of Romantic comedy, a form of comedy which upholds the hero's return to society without his actually rejoining it.

First, Binx's love for Kate is obscured by his early love for Sharon. Through the first half of the novel, Binx concocts an elaborate scheme designed to seduce his secretary, which, occupying the entire middle section of the narrative, involves a trip to the Gulf Coast and to the Smith's fishing cabin. During this time, Kate is scarcely mentioned. As a point of comparison, in *The Tempest* Ferdinand declares his love for Miranda upon his first sight of her and spends the rest of the play proving to Prospero, the blocking figure, that his love is worthy of Miranda. Thus, while in New Comedy, the action consists of the hero's overcoming of obstacles to his love,[20] in *The Moviegoer* the action consists of Binx's discovery of his love.

When Binx finally does discover his love for Kate, he offers it with little conviction. His first offer of marriage comes veiled in his rather outlandish scheme of managing a gas station.

> "What do you think of this for an idea?" I tell her about the service station. . . . "You could stay on here at Mrs. Schexnaydre's. It is very comfortable. I may even run the station myself. You could come sit with me at night, if you liked. Did you know you

> can net over fifteen thousand a year on a good station?"
>
> "You sweet old Binx! Are you asking me to marry you?"
>
> "Sure." I watch her uneasily. (p. 95)

In the fourth section of the novel, on the train ride to Chicago, Binx repeats his proposal for marriage. This time Binx is more direct, but he comes off sounding more like a therapist than a suitor. Says Binx,

> "Very well. Lose hope or not. Be afraid or not. But marry me anyhow, and we can still walk abroad on a summer night, hope or no hope, shivering or not, and see a show and eat some oysters down on Magazine." (p. 154)

This proposal of marriage, offering at best a life of seeing shows and eating oysters, hardly meets the expectation of other comic figures. Early in Act I of *The Tempest*, for example, Ferdinand, upon his first sight of Miranda, immediately offers to make her the queen of Naples.

By the end of the novel, after Binx's confrontation with Emily, he cannot even propose the marriage. After Kate reports to Binx that she has told Emily of their plan to be married, Binx only responds, "'Are we?'" (p. 184).

Because of Binx's early, confused love for Sharon, and his tentative proposals, his marriage to Kate is puzzling. Lewis Lawson, for example, holds that though Binx does marry Kate, they will not "live happily ever after. Existence will remain precarious for them."[21] Because marriage usually provides the "tonic chord" for comedy, the uncertainty regarding Binx's marriage to Kate alters the comic ending; Percy carefully appears to suggest that the reader look elsewhere for the resolution.

Second, Emily appears to have all the qualities of a blocking character, yet she undertakes no blocking action in the novel. One of the chief functions of the blocking character is to provide the obstacles for the hero, and in comedy, the blocking action leads to a comic clash in which the younger comic hero overcomes the older blocking figure, and sets up a new society.[22] In *The Moviegoer*, the point at which we expect a

comic clash, when Binx returns from Chicago and faces Emily, results only in Emily's virtual monologue on man's place in the universe. When Binx speaks at all, it is with few words.

Both Emily and Binx recognize that they are not so much clashing as simply not at all understanding each other. When Binx returns from Chicago, Emily begins her speech to him with "I am not saying that I pretend to understand you" (p. 174). Binx responds to one of Emily's questions with "my objections, though they are not exactly objections, cannot be expressed in the usual way. To tell the truth, I can't express them at all" (p. 178).

Most telling in this scene is Binx's apparent defeat, a defeat which would never occur in New Comedy. Frye writes that "the normal comic resolution is the surrender of the *senex* [usually the hero's opponent and usually the father] to the hero, never the reverse."[23] Yet, Binx does not achieve victory of any kind over Emily. Binx leaves his aunt's house in despair. It appears that Emily has destroyed Binx; for him,

> Nothing remains but desire, and desire comes howling down Elysian Fields like a mistral. My search has been abandoned; it is no match for my aunt.... (pp. 180—81)

Not only is Binx clearly defeated by Emily here, but in the "Epilogue" he ostensibly follows her admonition to "use his brain and make a contribution" (p. 48).

In fact, rather than functioning as a blocking character, opposing and creating obstacles for Binx, Emily shows a great trust in him, and she recognizes (without understanding how) that he alone is capable of helping Kate. It is to Binx that Emily turns when Kate appears to be particularly depressed. Emily seems also to know that he and Kate have a unique relationship. During her tirade against Binx in the final section, Emily pointedly asks how Binx could betray "the great trust and affection she [Kate] has for you" (p. 176). Though she looks like a blocking character, her attitude is at least one willing to consider Binx and Kate together, which is decidedly not a blocking characteristic.

Emily, in fact, functions in the story to bring Binx and Kate together. With Binx, Emily engages in grave discussions about the latest bad news about Kate. Conversely, when Kate asks Binx "What do you suppose she [Emily] and I talk about?" Kate answers sharply, "You. I'm sick of talking about you" (p. 41). Through Sunday dinners at her house, Emily provides weekly opportunities for Binx and Kate to be together. Emily, in her grave talk with Binx, instructs him to talk alone with Kate, to "fight with her, joke with her" (p. 30). Thus, beneath the characteristics of a blocking character, then, Emily may hold at worst a Prospero-like attitude that sees in Binx's love a "swift business" which she "must uneasy make, lest too light winning/Make the prize light" (*The Tempest*, Act I, Scene ii, 449—52).

Percy offers, but then subverts, a comic convention. He sets up an expectation for Emily to be the blocking character; he gives her all the important characteristics. But she undertakes no blocking action. Just as the reader must look elsewhere for evidence of comic resolution, he must also look elsewhere for the blocking action.

Finally, while New Comedy presents a new society at the end of the story, the society at the end of *The Moviegoer* in many ways appears to be the same one present at the beginning. New Comedy begins with one kind of society—one "controlled by habit, ritual bondage, arbitrary law and the older characters"—to another kind—one "controlled by youth and pragmatic freedom."[24] The characters in charge of the society at the beginning of most comedies, as Kincaid points out, are usually converted or eliminated by the end,[25] and the new society "crystallizes" around the hero.[26]

In *The Moviegoer* it appears that it is Binx who is converted.[27] He even settles down in "one of the very shotgun cottages done over by my cousin Nell Lovell" (p. 187). Earlier in the novel, Binx's meeting with Nell, and Nell's subsequent discourse on her projects and her values, summon forth from Binx one of his more violent reactions.

> A rumble has commenced in my descending bowel, heralding a tremendous defecation . . . there is nothing to do but shift around as

> best one can, taking care not to fart. . . . I get to thinking about her and old Eddie re-examining their values. Yes, true. Very good. and then I can't help wondering to myself: why does she talk as if she were dead? Another forty years to go and dead, dead, dead. (p. 84)

Finally, Binx also yields to the pressure from his great-aunt Emily to "use his brain and make a contribution" (p. 48) by entering medical school. In fact, Emily still appears to be in charge of the society. At the beginning, Emily forcefully invites Binx to lunch for a serious talk, and he dutifully obeys. In the "Epilogue," Binx is still in Emily's service, running errands for her.

In altering the New Comic conventions of the hero's love, of the blocking figure, and of the final society, Percy appears to be offering the possibility that within its overall structure as New Comedy, *The Moviegoer* contains at heart a despairing, rather than triumphal, return to the same society. If this is the case, then Binx predicts the pattern for his own life when he criticizes the movies for screwing up the search. "The movies," says Binx,

> 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. (p. 18)

As Zeugner says, it is possible to see Binx's final commitment to Kate and to medical school as "a final, ironic twist—a collapse into the everydayness that Bolling had striven to avoid."[28] Most critics reconcile this tension in the ending by appealing to the influence of Kierkegaard on Percy. Lewis Lawson, for example, finds that Binx confronts the death of his half-brother, Lonnie, without attempting to escape the pathetic event in role-playing.[29] Binx's return to society reveals his

newly found faith, a central characteristic of Kirkegaard's knight of faith.

As Frye points out in *A Study of English Romanticism*, there is a form of comedy which upholds the hero's return to society without his actually rejoining it, offering another interpretive framework for Binx's return in his "Epilogue." This form of comedy fuses the Romantic tendency to move the hero away from society with the apparently opposite comic tendency to affirm society. Frye argues that the Romantic movement had as its main emphasis "the demoting of the conception of man as primarity a social being living in cities."[30] This turning of the individual away from society seems at first to be incompatible with the comic insistence upon the reintegration of the individual. Frye resolves this by finding this isolated individual returning to society—as called for by comic conventions—with "an expanded consciousness" typical of the Romantic quest.[31]

3. Romantic Comedy in *The Moviegoer*

In *The Moviegoer* Percy incorporates into the New Comic form a Romantic hero. Despite Binx's own denunciations of Romanticism, he exhibits several characteristic—his sensitivity to nature, his suffering, his passage through a personal crisis, his questing nature—which, taken together, strongly argue for his Romantic temperament. Most importantly, in the "Epilogue" Binx achieves by his return to society an expanded consciousness, the hallmark of the Romantic hero.

The assertion that Binx is in any fashion a Romantic hero appears to counter his own rejection of Romanticism, or at least what he identifies as "English Romanticism." When he receives a letter from his war buddy, Harold Graebner, he considers his own previous letter-writing activity, an activity marked, he says, by "long, sensitive and articulate letters" (p. 74). Binx denigrates this style:

> A regular young Report Brooke was I, '—full of expectancy.' oh the crap that lies lurking in the English soul. Somewhere it, the English Soul, received an injection of romanticism which nearly killed

it. (p. 74)

His statement only affirms his Romantic characteristics. It is this injection of Romanticism which, combined with scientific objectivity, led to Binx's search. Immediately after this rumination on English romanticism, he makes a note to

> 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? (p. 74)

This precisely describes Binx; due to his "scientific objectivity" and his vertical search in which he read all the "key books on key subjects" (p. 60), he finds himself outside of the universe, obliged, as he says, "to take one breath and then the next" (p. 60). And so he undertakes a search.

Moreover, like many Romantic heros, Binx is "quite extraordinarity sensitive to his environment,"[32] and he is characteristcally Romantic in the distinction he evidently makes between the sublime and the beautiful aspects of nature. As Abrams points out, the influences between the sublime and beautiful are the "contrary influences" which form Wordsworth's poetic soul. The sublime, says Abrams, includes the awe inspiring and terrifying aspects of nature . . . the 'awful' and the 'grand,' elements 'in tumult,' 'the midnight storm,' the roaring ocean and waste wilderness.'"[33] These aspects are seen in several of his descriptions. There are, for example, several late-night storms, the most notable one interrupting his telephone conversation with his great-aunt Emily.[34]

> Lightning strikes somewhere close, a vicious bolt. The clap comes hard upon it, in the very whitening, and shakes the house. (p. 92)

The ferocity of the storm is too easily lost in the padding of his laconic tone. Yet his description leaves little doubt as to the severity—

there is the "vicious bolt," the clap, a whitening, and the house shakes. Binx describes another late-night storm, which, while not a roaring ocean, is a roaring lake. Of the weather on his date with Linda, he says,

> it was the blackest sky I ever saw; a black wind pushed the lake toward us. The waves jumped over the seawall and spattered the street. The manager had to yell to be heard.... (p. 12)

Binx clearly has an awareness of the sublime aspect of nature.

Along with his descriptions of the power of the weather, Binx reveals a sensitive awareness of the smaller, beautiful things, thus filling out what are the two main categories of nature according to Romantic development. The beautiful in nature, says Abrams, consists of "the gently and 'fearless' aspects of nature . . . 'tranquil scenes,' 'gentle breezes,' 'a garden with walks and banks of flowers.'"[35] For Binx, the beautiful in nature consists of his awareness of birds and of the moon.

Binx's narrative is replete with references to birds; he describes how "earlier in the evening lake swallows took alarm and went veering away to the swamps" (p. 88); and "Bullbats hawk the insects in the warm air .... They dive and utter their thrumming *skonk-skonk* and go sculling up into the bright upper air" (p. 62); and "over the swamp . . . a flock of redwings rattie like gourds and ride down the cattails, wings sprung out to show their scarlet epaulets" (p. 130). Again, Binx's straightforward description belies the pleasure he obviously takes in noticing, naming, and describing birds.[36]

Also Binx often takes quiet walks. Once with Kate, they wander along

> the dark paths of the campus and stop off at my weedy stoop behind the laboratory.... A lamp above the path makes a golden sphere among the tree-high shrubs. (p. 69)

On another of these walks, this one at three o'clock in the morning, Binx notices the moon.

> The wind veers around to the north and blows away the storm until the moon swims high, moored like a kite and darting against the fleeing shreds and ragtags of cloud. (p. 92)

Though Binx records no transforming experience, his description nevertheless echoes that of Wordsworth's on Snowdon.[37]

Binx turns to nature because he is a seeker. In response to the suffering which he undergoes as a figure isolated from society, he considers the possibility of a search. Such a search involves proceeding as a castaway proceeds: "he pokes around the neighborhood and he doesn't miss a trick" (p. 18). Just as Wordsworth turns to the beautiful and the sublime in nature after suffering the effects of fixing his hopes on the French Rebolution, so Binx appears to turn to nature for some clue to his separation from society.

This suffering itsself is a characteristic of the Romantic mind. In his remarks on William Wordsworth's *Prelude*, M. H. Abrams posits that the poet, having suffered, desires somehow to account for the suffering; according to Abrams, Wordsworth assumes that "if life is to be worth living there cannot be a blank unreason or mere contingency at the heart of things; there must be meaning."[38] While Wordsworth's suffering came at the hands of the failed French Revolution and his own enslavement to "Lockean sensationism and its 'philosophy of mechanism,'"[39] Binx suffers from a similar enslavement to scientific thinking. When Binx undertook his vertical search, a search in which he read all the fundamental books, he sought, in typically scientific fashion, "the big one, the new key, the secret leverage point" (p. 70).[40] The result of such thinking, however, is, as he discovers, that "though the universe had been disposed of, I myself was left over" (p. 60). Binx is living therefore with the pain of having a self, but not knowing what it is, or where it belongs, if it belongs.[41]

It is notable that Binx awakens to the possibility of a new way of seeing the world through an abruptly unexpected (though if Binx can be believed, rather painless) awakening. It is while wounded in Korea, with his shoulder "pressed hard against the ground as if somebody sat on me"

(p. 16), that Binx first becomes aware of the possibility of a search. Just as the failed French Revolution marked the beginning of the end of Wordsworth's enslavement to "Lockean sensationism," so also Binx's wounding marks the beginning of the end of his days as "a creature of sensation."[42] In "Walker Percy's Indirect Communications" Lawson speaks of Binx's wounding as his first experience "in the presence of eternity."[43]

Binx also appears as a Romantic hero in his status as a seeker. In the first pages of the novel, Binx tells the reader of his newly awakened sense of the possibility of the search. This search is a central image for *The Moviegoer*, and most critics agree with Lawson, who finds quite simply that "*The Moviegoer* is the story of the revival in Binx of the possibility of a search."[44] The search itself is an important Romantic image.[45] Binx's unwillingness or inability to reveal the object of his search further suggests Binx's Romantic nature. Abrams notes that

> especially common . . . . is the story form of the pilgrimage and quest—the journey in search of an unknown or inexpressible something which gradually leads the wanderer back toward his point of origin.[46]

This precisely describes Binx's journey. While Binx implies that his search is for God, he concludes, "Truthfully, it is the fear of exposing my ignorance which constrains me from mentioning the object of my search" (p. 19). Indeed, in the "Epilogue" Binx simply says he has "not the inclination to say much on the subject" (p. 187).

The Romantic search for meaning as a result of and in the face of suffering usually involves a journey through a personal crisis. For Wordsworth, for example, this occurred as a result of his faith in the French Revolution and his turn from nature. For Binx, the crisis results from his faith in his exile in Gentilly, his moveigoing, his moneymaking, and his pursuit of his secretaries. After Emily indicts Binx for his behavior, he undergoes a moment of profound crisis in which he disparages not only his society, but also himself and any possibility of knowing. This moment for Binx occasions his bitter denunciation of his society as a

"shit-house of scientific humanism" (p. 180), and his own despair of "knowing less than I ever know before . . . I know nothing and there is nothing to do but fall prey to desire" (p. 180).

Consumed with desire, and knowing nothing, Binx calls Sharon, only to find she is not home. Binx talks with Sharon's roommate, Joyce, and his conversation with her reveals the chaos and absurdity caused by his despair. He calls from a phone booth, a

> little pagoda of aluminum and glass, standing in the neutral ground of Elysian Fields at the very heart of the uproar of a public zone . . . trim and pretty on the outside but evilsmelling within. (p. 181)

Binx notices "the rhymes in pencil and the sad cartoons of solitary lovers" (p. 181). Outside, chaos reigns: "the east wind whistles through the eaves . . . and presses against its fittings" (p. 181); the ocean wave in the playground spins with its Petrouchkan music faster and faster:

> *iii-oorrr iiioorrr* goes the dry socket on its pole in a faraway childish music and the children embrace the iron struts and lay back their heads to watch the whirling world. (p. 182)

Just as the wave spins "outrageously past all outrage," and the "children embrace the iron struts for dear life" (p. 182), so Binx himself behaves past all outrage, "grinning like a lunatic . . . hold[ing] on for dear life" (p. 182), talking to Joyce like Marlon Brando, "a reedy insinuating voice, full of winks and leers and above all pleased with itself" (p. 182). Binx admits, "it is too much trouble to listen" (p. 182). He cannot escape the chaos. His personal crisis is not merely a matter of seeing the chaos around him; he must also face the absurdity which prompts him not only to "behave past all outrage," but also to sound absurdly pleased with himself.

Binx thus exhibits important qualities of the Romantic consciousness. His personal crisis, which results from his search, is towards an unknown goal. His sensitivity to the beautiful and the sublime nature further

reveals his development towards a Romantic consiousness. This Romantic consciousness towards which Binx moves is marked by a sense of possibility.

Binx's moment of awareness of possibility coincides with the comic moment of what Frye calls "ritual death." Frye sees a "potentially tragic crisis near the end" of comedy.[47] These crises, which Frye terms "ritual deaths," are part of a frequent comic pattern in which the artist "tries to bring his action as close to a catastrophic overthrow of the hero as he can get it, and then reverses the action as quickly as possible."[48] While Binx waits for Kate, he despairs. "She has spoken to my aunt and kicked me out" (p. 181), he thinks. Binx's vision of the world is one of death and desolation. The east wind whistles; the playground ocean spins and makes a demonic Petrouchkan music; "Elysian Fields glistens like a vat of sulfur; the playground looks as if it alone had survived the end of the world" (pp. 182—83). When he with relief says, "at last I spy Kate" (p. 183), the crisis is over and the comic ending is imminent.[49]

The arrival of Kate also opens Binx to possibility, thus marking the dawning of his Romantic consciousness. Kate arrives suddenly and she appears to Binx as a bomber pilot. He says, "at last I spy Kate; her stiff little Plymouth comes nosing into my bus stop. There she sits like a bomber pilot, resting on her wheel and looking sideways at the children and not seeing" (p. 182). The sudden arrival of Kate sparks in Binx full recognition for the first time of possibility. Immediately after he spies Kate, he reflects,

> 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? (p. 183)

With the arrival of Kate, Binx realizes the possibility for regeneration. Regeneration remains merely a possibility, but even as a possibility it

reforms his vision of the world. Whereas moments earlier, he despaired of knowing anything, after he sees Kate, he asks himself, "Is it possible it is not too late?" (p. 183).

Binx's new consciousness is characterized by possibility, and he emphatically repeats this point: "Is it possible that—" (p. 183). When Kate tells him that she will need extended treatment and may never change, Binx simply replies, "You might" (p. 185). This sense of possibility is dramatically shown in the last scene before the "Epilogue."

Sitting in Kate's car outside the church, Binx remembers it is Ash Wednesday. He sees a Negro enter the church, and then leave. Binx watches him and considers.

> His forehead is an ambiguous sienna color and pied: it is impossible to be sure that he received ashes. When he gets in his Mercury, he does not leave immediately but sits looking down at something on the seat beside him. A sample case? An insurance manual? I watch him closely in the rear-view mirror. (pp. 185—86)

As usual, Binx is carefully observant. But now, he sees the world in terms of possibility. Of the Negro's presence in the church, Binx wonders,

> It is impossible to say why he is here. Is it part and parcel of the complex business of coming up in the world? Or is it because he believes that God himself is present here at the corner of Elysian Fields and Bons Enfants? Or is he here for both reasons: through some dim dazzling trick of grace, coming for the one and receiving the other as God's own importunate bonus? (p. 186)

Just as Binx is newly aware of the impossibility of discerning why the Negro came to the church, he also is aware that anything is possible.

Binx has achieved a consciousness of possibility which allows him to live in the world, but the world cannot yet comprehend Binx's behavior, much less his mind. Though Binx returns to society at the close of the

novel, because he is a Romantic hero he remains apart. His separation is one which he accepts, for it is a separation of being misunderstood, not of mis-understanding. Binx has reached Morse Peckham's "positive Romanticism," a romanticism which "offers explanations which are not shared by the society of which one is a part."[50] Thus, in the "Epilogue," Emily reconciles herself to Binx without understanding him; she, as well as Kate, finds him "comical" (p. 187). All he can do is "plant a foot in the right place as the opportunity presents itsself" (p. 188), a lonely vocation, yet one which nevertheless he must undertake as a part of society.

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1) Plato, "Philebus," in *Comedy: Developments in Criticism*, ed. D.J. Palmer (London: Macmillan Publishers, Ltd., 1984), p. 25.

2) Plato, p. 27.

3) Plato, p. 26.

4) E.M.W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare's Early Comedies* (New York: Barns and Noble, 1965), p. 34.

5) Kincaid, p. 596.

6) See Northrop Frye's discussion in *Anatomy of Criticism* (p. 165) on the potentially upsetting result of the elimination or expulsion of characters in comedy.

7) Frye, "Argument," p. 76.

8) Frye, *Anatomy*, p. 43.

9) William Hazlitt, "Modern Manners Fatal to Comedy," in *Comedy: Developments in Criticism*, ed. D.J. Palmer (London: Macmillan Publishers, Ltd., 1984), p. 51.

10) Hazlitt, p. 51.

11) Sir Phillip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry*, ed. G. Shepherd (London, 1965) as quoted in *Comedy: Developments in Criticism*, ed. D.J. Palmer (London: Macmillan Publishers, Ltd., 1984), p. 12.

12) Henri Bergson, "Laughter," in *Comedy*, ed. Wylie Sypher (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1956), p. 73.

13) Bergson, p. 73.

14) Frye, *Anatomy*, p. 169.

15) Frye, "Argument," p. 75.

16) Ian Donaldson, "Justice in the Stocks," in *Comedy: Developments in Criticism*, ed. D.J. Palmer (Macmillan Publishers, Ltd., 1984), p. 107. See also Frye's discussion in "The Argument of Comedy," p. 76.

17) Frye, "Argument," p. 76.

18) Frye, "Argument," p. 74.

19) Frye, "Argument," p. 76.

20) Frye, *Anatomy*, p. 164.

21) Lawson, "Indirect," p. 889.

22) Frye, *Anatomy*, p. 164.

23) Frye, "Argument," p. 59.

24) Frye, *Anatomy*, p. 169.

25) Kincaid, p. 596.

26) Frye, *Anatomy*, p. 166.

27) Robert Brinkmeyer concludes his discussion on *The Moviegoes* in *Three Catholic Writers of the Modern South* (pp. 129—33) arguing that Binx converts to the Roman Catholic faith.

28) John F. Zeugner, "Walker Percy and Gabriel Marcel: The Castaway and the Wayfarer," *Mississippi Quarterly*, 28 (Winter 1975), 31.

29) Lawson, "indirect," p. 889.

30) Northrop Frye, *A Study of English Romanticism* (New York: Random House, 1968), p. 37.

31) Frye, *Romanticism*, p. 46.

32) John Edward Hardy, "Percy and Place: Some Beginnings and Endings," in *Walker Percy: Art and Ethics*, ed. Jac Tharp (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1980), p. 5.

33) M.H. Abrams, *Natural Supernationalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: Norton Press, 1971), p. 97.

34) For Binx's description of the weather and the sky, see pages 20, 45, 62, 71, 88, 91, 130, 180.

35) Abrams, p. 97.

36) For Binx's references to birds see pages 28, 31, 50, 63, 87, 107, 129, 164.

37) For Binx's references to the moon, see pages 110, 156.

38) Abrams, p. 95.

39) Abrams, p. 144.

40) In "Walker Percy's Indirect Communications," Lawson analyzes *The Moviegoes*, based upon Percy's essay, "The Coming Crisis in Psychiatry." Lawson

finds the novel to be a critique of modern psychiatry's failure to "understand the apparently well-adjusted man who is in fact suffering desperately from alienation" (p. 871). The failure, says Lawson, lies within the scientific under pinnings of modern psychiatry. See Poteat's work, *Walker Percy and the Old Modern Age*, for an extended look at Percy's fiction as a diagnosis of and reaction to Cartesian thought.

41) In "Moviegoing in *The Moviegoer*," Lawson says "Binx experience[s] . . . suffering from his immediate world by virtue of his practice of the scientific method" (p. 27).

42) Lawson, "Moviegoing," p. 132.

43) Lawson, "Indirect," p. 880.

44) Lawson, "Indirect," p. 881.

45) See Frye's description of the quest as the central image of romance in *Anatomy of Criticism*, pp. 187—90.

46) Abrams, p. 193.

47) Frye, *Anatomy*, p. 179.

48) Frye, *Anatomy*, p. 178.

49) Frye, *Anatomy*, p. 170. Frye finds comic artists often employing what he calls a "gimmick" or "Hollywood weenie" to bring about a comic ending from the brink of tragedy.

50) Morse Peckham, "Towerds A Theory of Romanticism," *PMLA*, 66 (Spring 1951), 21.

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