



## Study on the Walker Percy's Vision about the Human Life Paving

Talwar Ramkrishna Hanumant, Research Scholar, Department of English, SunRise University, Alwar, Rajasthan (India)

Dr. Ashok Kumar, Associate Professor, Department of English, SunRise University, Alwar, Rajasthan (India)

E-mail: [krishna1444@gmail.com](mailto:krishna1444@gmail.com)

### Abstract

Generally speaking, Percy's novels explore the existential angst and despair of modern man. In a sense, his novels are the physician turned novelist's diagnosis of the malady afflicting the post-modern world. He is out and out a Christian novelist. Percy defines the Christian novelist as "a writer who has an explicit concern with nature of man and the nature of reality where man finds himself" He is of the view that the task of the present day novelist is to portray how the alienated man comes to himself and how his relationship with his family, his business and his Church is affected by the change in him. Percy insists that a modern writer should be "a passionate propagandist" showing men the way to redemption. The fictional heroes of Percy achieve redemption through self-exploration of the existential angst and despair experienced by them. According to him, scientific and technological advancements have given only material benefits to man. Financial security and social power and resulting self-actualization do not give man the much needed place of mind. In one of his talks with John Carr, Percy notes: "... man is neither an organism controlled by his environment, nor a creature controlled by the forces of history... nor is he a detached wholly objective, angelic being who views the world in God - like way and makes pronouncements only to himself or to an elite group of people. No, he is somewhere between the angles and the beasts" Catholicism enabled Percy, not only to form a view of man's fate, i.e., man as a wayfarer, but it also provided him with a system of morality to believe in. The modern man is caught up in 'everydayness', so much involved in the process of everyday life that he has become an "incommunicado, being able neither to speak for himself nor to be spoken to, he is both in the world he is travelling through and not in it". Man is a castaway, an exile marooned on an island where he has lived all his life and yet is not at home. He knows that life on the island is "something of a charade". According to Percy, in order to attain redemption, man to transcend his everydayness, a term used by him for the malaise besetting post second world war man. Everydayness causes a "generalized loss of awareness that walls a person off from his surroundings and diminishes his vitality"

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**Introduction:** It is universally acknowledged that Walker Percy is a physician-turned novelist pondering over the plight of the contemporary American society and his novels are nothing but a withering critique of what is spiritually insane in the contemporary American society and in the world at large pointing to a way out of this spiritual muddle, almost as "gospels of redemption". According to one modern critic, Percy's novels are 'important social documents which highlight the predicament of the contemporary Americans living in a materialistic society with total disregard for religious and ethical values. Born on May 28th 1916 in a family liable to suicide mania, at the age of just 12, Percy had the traumatic experience of witnessing his father, Le Roy committing suicide and lost his mother also three years after the death of his father. After schooling, he had developed special flair for science which led him to join University of North Carolina. Being fascinated greatly by the elegance, the order and beauty of science, he did continue his scientific studies at Columbia University's College of Physicians and took his M.D. degree at the age of twenty five. The fascination of science for Percy gradually gave way to more fundamental questions about life and his mind was more and more perplexed by "the nature and destiny of man; especially and more immediately the predicament of man in a modern



technological society" (Percy, 28). Eventually Percy realized that scientific and technological development and material concern of science have deprived man of the essential flavor of life. His readings of S. Kierkegaard, Gabriel Marcel and Martin Heidegger eventually led him to take shelter in Catholicism where he found the answer to the Malaise affecting the contemporary American society. In 1947, Percy, along with his wife Mary Bernice, embraced the Catholic Faith". If I had to single out one piece of writing which was more responsible than anything else for my becoming a Catholic", declares Percy, "It would be that essay of Kierkegaard" ( Dewey, 82)

### **"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



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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.

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