

## EXISTENTIAL DILEMMA IN WALKER PERCY'S *THE MOVIE GOER AND LOVE IN THE RUINS*

**SURINDER KUMAR VERMA**

Associate Professor, Department of English, S. D. (PG) College Panipat

**SATINDER KUMAR VERMA**

Associate Professor of English, Sanatan Dharma College, Ambala Cantt

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### ABSTRACT:

Walker Percy, one of the major South American novelists dealing with the predicament of contemporary man, focuses on existentialistic streaks in his fictional world. Like others, he has adopted this fictional method for the analysis and development of character and also as a new structure for the achievement of narrative progression.

**Key words:** existentialism, alienation, estrangement.

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### INTRODUCTION

The present paper investigates Walker Percy's *The Movie Goer* and *Love in the Ruins* as an evidence of existential dilemma that the chief characters in the novels suffer on account of their conflict of sensibility and choices. Percy, one of the major South American novelists dealing with the predicament of contemporary man, focuses on existentialistic streaks in his fictional world. Like others, he has adopted this fictional method for the analysis and development of character and also as a new structure for the achievement of narrative progression.

He knew himself as a part of American history, a larger meaning, whether it was America the colossus, the juggernaut, the great melting pot into which he did not want to melt. There is, as a result, an unconscious depth in his writing. As in existential fiction Percy's novels take place in a prolapsed world, often cut off from the ordinary workaday world, where characters are haunted by the past and bound by the absurdity of their situation. Percy adds to this two states of narrative consciousness, one of perception and the other of reflection, and also a sense of the grotesque.

Percy's interest in existentialism can be documented from his many philosophical articles as well as from the novels themselves. The most important of these essays, "The Man on the Train: Three Existential Modes," is a study of alienation, its causes and possibly its cure. He is fascinated by the psychological condition of displacement, the kind of existential estrangement from self and surrounding that Albert Camus described so brilliantly in *L'Étranger*. The alienated man no longer knows or cares who he is, where he is going, or why he is going there. He is Percy's man on a train, the commuter, staring blankly out the window at a landscape that both terrifies and bores him - bores him because it is all too familiar, terrifies him because he does not know what awaits him when he steps off the platform - alone.

His characters have a life of their own and are at best uncertain clues to their author's private attitudes and views. All, however, share a condition that Percy felt to be the common lot of perceptive postmodern humans everywhere: existence in a secular post-Cartesian world that offers at best illusory prospects of wholeness. Their options were either to accept passively their situation

as aliens in that world or to seek a remedy that the world cannot provide.

Walker Percy's alienated man is lonely and unloved, an isolated forlorn consciousness. He can find peace, however, through social communion, through sharing his concerns with someone equally or even more greatly plagued. The Bomb, for example, is not a real source of anxiety for him because when everything else fails, he can always turn to his good friend back from Washington or Geneva who obliges him with his sober second thoughts—"I can tell you this much, I am profoundly disturbed."

There is a comfort in sharing such dread, a warmth like spending a sheltered evening by a cabin fire while the wind and sea roar outside. A far more disturbing question, according to Percy, is "What if the Bomb should not fall? What then?" This question implies no hope of deliverance, no way of escaping what Percy calls everydayness, no way out of the rat trap that the Bomb would bring so comfortably and so quickly. Percy believes that a sense of well-being often accompanies a public catastrophe, that the individual exorcises his personal fears when he knows that his suffering will be shared.

Walker Percy's characters have a life of their own and are at best uncertain clues to their author's private attitudes and views. The characters, however, share a condition that Percy felt to be the common lot of perceptive postmodern humans everywhere: existence in a secular post-Cartesian world that offers at best illusory prospects of wholeness. Their options were either to accept passively their situation as aliens in that world or to seek a remedy that the world cannot provide.

Percy is an existentialist, thanks largely to his conversion by way of Kierkegaard though also to his deep debt to Sartre and Kafka and Camus. Yet Percy was opposed to the most fundamental proposition of Continental existentialism: the notion that we inhabit a cosmic void wherein all meaning and value are entirely human inventions. Far from being any sort of absurdist, Percy held that our existence is inherently vexed, not because the welkin rings empty, but because we have an innate and irrepressible hunger for God, a transcendent yearning that modernity has sought to answer with pseudo-satisfactions. It is true that he honored the atheistic existentialists because, even in their denial that our longing can be divinely fulfilled, they nonetheless discerned its gnawing presence. He saluted them also for discerning the utter inability of modern science to account for our troubled human condition. Thus was Percy a peculiar kind of existentialist. Thus, Percy depicts the complex fate of his characters having a certain worldview as depicted in his novels.

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**PURVA MIMAANSA**