

Summary

A feminist, close reading of Walker Percy's The moviegoer.

Resumo

Leitura feminista e minuciosa do livro The moviegoer do escritor americano contem-

porâneo Walker Percy.

Gesture and Style

in The Moviegoer

My first idea was the building itself. It looks like a miniature bank with its Corinthian pilasters, portico and iron

scrolls over the windows. The firm's name, Cutrer, Klostermann & Lejier is lettered in Gothic and below in smaller letters, the names of the Boston mutual funds we represent. It looks far more conservative than the modern banks in Gentilly. It announces to the world: modern methods are no doubt excellent but here is good old-fashioned stability, but stability with imagination. A little bit of old New England with a Creole flavor. The Parthenon façade cost twelve thousand dollars but commissions have doubled. The young man you see inside is clearly the soul of integrity; he asks no more than to be allowed to plan your future. This is true. This is all I ask.¹

Gesto e Estilo em The Moviegoer

Geste und Stil in The Moviegoer

Emory ELLIOTT*

In the midst of the existential lament of John-Jack-Binx-Rollo-Bolling, the humor of this passage may not at first be apparent. Like an image out of a novel by Fenimore Cooper depicting the comic amalgam of styles in America, the façade blends elements of European and American regional architecture to convey a permanent, ambiguous advertising slogan of puritanical austerity and classical

splendor. Behind the façade lurks a paradoxical confidence man/pilgrim who does not believe himself to be the soul of financial integrity and stability that he advertises but who does yearn for psychological integrity. Encumbered in his search for spiritual meaning and self-knowledge by the very jumble of cultural fragments projected on the façade, Binx does wish ironically on a more profound and idealistic level to plan people's lives, and he waits to plan lives — his own and others. But like his literary forbearers, the unreliable narrators Miles Coverdale, Jake Barnes, and Nick Carraway, and Melville's Pierre and the failed Southern searcher Quentin Compson, Binx may be unable to escape the double-bond of narcissism and self-deception which makes him a self-righteous critic of his world who employs irony to deny the implications of his own participation and responsibility. Or like another set of literary predecessors, Huck Finn, Ike McCaslin, Warren's Jack Burden, and Ellison's Invisible Man, he may be able to cast off some of the layers of the façade of the Puritan, Enlightenment, Euro-American Southern self to discover some remnant of a human soul worthy of a future.

This comic passage points to the conflict between the public and private man which is at the thematic center of *The moviegoer* and of the critical controversies surrounding the text. The problem of the book as it is usually posed is what sort of resolution does Binx achieve at the end of the novel? After all his high-minded talk of malaise, everydayness, cultural collapse, and the need to search for new values and a personal spiritual calling, Binx's situation at the conclusion is ambiguous at best or is at worst a sentimental acceptance of his Aunt Emily's imposed mission. Of his spiritual seeking, Binx says in the Epilogue, "I have not the inclination to say much on the subject" (187).

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and he retreats behind the hard-boiled language of a Hemingway anti-hero: "much too late to edify or do much of anything except plant a foot in the right place as the opportunity presents itself — if indeed asskicking is properly distinguished from edification" (187-88). He seems to have advanced only slightly from the soldier his aunt told him to be when he was eight to the rank of drill sergeant. After seeming to prepare his heart, and the reader, for his spiritual conversion, he is now "shy" on the subject of religion. He appears embarrassed and awkward about all that has gone before and quick to complete his manuscript: "Reticence, therefore, hardly having a place in a document of this kind, it seems as good a time as any to make an end" (188). A reader may well feel that Binx's Celestial Railroad ride from New Orleans to Chicago has merely come full circle to bring its pilgrim-seeker to an unexpected but hardly transformed station in life. Such ambiguity has led many critics to seek out the real Walker Percy himself to ask him what this all means.²

When critics prepare for these interviews, they learn the essential biographical facts. Percy had a tragic childhood. His father committed suicide when Walker was eleven, and his mother died in an automobile accident when he was fifteen. He was raised by a second cousin, William Alexander Percy, a "bachelor-poet-lawyer-planter" who imparted to Walker the Greek-Roman Stoic vision expressed by Aunt Emily in *The moviegoer*. Walker went to the University of North Carolina to study chemistry and to Columbia University medical school. During two bouts with tuberculosis, he read extensively in French and Russian literature and philosophy. In the late 1940s he married, converted to Roman Catholicism, settled permanently in Covington, Louisiana, and began to write essays about alienation, existentialism, malaise, and the failure of Christianity in the modern world. He published his first novel *The moviegoer* in 1961.

Noting the obvious autobiographical elements in the novel, critics often assume that Binx's resolution parallels Percy's own quest for answers. Like Percy, Binx is a young man who sees through the sham of public rhetoric and discovers the meaning of alienation, malaise, and nausea. Turning aside from the false values of materialism and empiricism, Binx, like Percy, was led by European philosophy to discover a new sense of purpose upon which to base a radically new plan for life.³

The problem with this reading, however, is that it is not borne out by the text, especially that of the final chapter and epilogue. It also overlooks another dimension of Percy's work that he himself sometimes mentions but that criticism has tended to slight — his debt to American writers. At various times, Percy has said that he admires the works of Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, Twain, Hemingway, Faulkner, O'Connor, Welty, Ellison and Wright, and he dots his works with literary allusions and with references to American history and popular culture. In fact, alertness to the many allusions to American predecessors can reveal some quite delightful parodies of the styles of other writers. *The moviegoer* opens with allusions to the opening of *Absalom*, *Absalom!* where Quentin is summoned by a note to visit his Aunt Rosa, and Mr. Sartalamaccia's story of the hunting party at Roaring Camp recalls Faulkner's *The bear*, including the breaking of Binx's watch, which alludes to both works. When he tells of how Judge Anse (remember Anse Bundren in *As I lay dying*) ordered him, like Thomas Sutpen, to build him a lodge, Mr. Sartalamaccia "waits until the words, the very words, speak themselves" (177). And, of course, when they speak, they appear in italics. These humorous evocations of America and American literary traditions are not merely part of a veneer of Americanism that Percy lays over the philosophical, European core of his work, in the way that Binx employs the gestures of movie actors to mask his inner

emptiness. Instead, style and gesture are an integral part of the work as a whole, and call attention to the subtle forms of communication, both verbal and non-verbal, that operate between the characters. Body movement, physical mannerisms, silences, and shifts in tone often impart coded messages between characters and may suggest to the reader other possible explanations of the novel's resolution.

Close attention to the functions of style and gesture in *The moviegoer* not only provides a key to the novel's ending, but it also can help us account for the intricacy of Binx's relationships with Kate and Aunt Emily and explain the meaning of his comment in the Epilogue that "both women find me comical and laugh a good deal at my expense" (187). Percy himself has been accused by several critics of sexism, and he does admit that his female characters do not fare too well.⁴ However, the women in *The moviegoer* may fare better than it at first may appear.

In order to see the roles of Emily and Kate in the novel clearly, it is necessary to make distinction between the narrator and the narrative audience he addresses and the author and his authorial audience. Binx makes certain assumptions about social and cultural attitudes that he believes he shares with his projected narrative audience. For example, Binx assumes that his readers share his liberal attitudes on race and social class and are dismayed, with him, at the racist and aristocratic attitudes Aunt Emily exhibits in her final outburst about the decline of the old South. While it is possible that Percy may also make that assumption about his authorial audience, he makes other assumptions of which Binx is never aware. Percy's literary allusions and parodies of the style of other American writers, for example, are signals to the author's audience of another level of communication at work to which Binx is not privileged.

Once the reader begins to distinguish between these two narrative voices, he or she may also

recognize other elements of the narrative to which Binx is blind. He never records a conscious recognition of the fact, for example, that he never really proposed marriage to Kate but that she transformed his suggestion that she might visit him to watch television into a proposal upon which they finally both act. Binx's belief that Kate is mentally disturbed to the point of not being able to control her life may prevent him from seeing the degree to which she controls his life. Actually, his life is much more controlled by Emily and Kate than he realizes. The ways in which Kate subtly uses style and gesture to control Binx's destiny are immediately evident because they are never apparent to Binx himself. Focus upon the function of style and gesture within the text reveals the fallacy of the autobiographical interpretation of *The moviegoer* and suggests that Binx is hardly the godlike prime mover that Kate proclaims him to be.

It is at first perhaps hard to imagine that Binx himself could be the victim of another's use of style, for he is so conscious of using externals to represent a chosen image of the self in order to achieve his desires. The most humorous and revealing example of his process of self-projection is his experience in choosing a car. He adheres to the Madison Avenue association of cars with sex. "You say it is a simple thing surely... to pick up a good-looking woman and head for the beach on the first fine day of the year. So say the newspaper poets. Well, it's not such a simple thing..." (99). "The car itself is all important." Initially, he chose a car that fit the image he wished to present of himself as a reliable young businessman. But on his first date with Marcia in his Dodge Ram Six sedan, he "discovered to my dismay that my fine new Dodge was a regular incubator of malaise." He recalls, "We sat frozen in a gelid amiability. Our cheeks ached from smiling... Marcia and I returned to New Orleans defeated by the malaise. It was weeks before we ventured out again" (100).

Confident that his sexual failure here (which parallels similar failures with Sharon and even Kate) was the fault of a car rather than himself, Binx buys a symbol of sexual potency, a red MG: "My little red MG... is immune to the malaise. You have no idea what happiness Marcia and I experienced as soon as we found ourselves spinning along the highway in this bright little beetle. We looked at each other in astonishment: the malaise was gone!" (100). When Binx sets out to seduce Sharon who, he says, will bring him the greatest "happiness" yet, Percy has his narrator describe their ride in the MG in the imagery of Binx's movie fantasies. The comic linking Binx's hyperbole of the car in battle to the serious notion of cultural malaise signals the gap between the author and his narrator:

For the stakes were very high. Either very great happiness lay in store for us, or malaise past all conceiving [Freudian slips on Binx's part? Intentional puns on Percy's part?...] I spin along the precipice with the blackest malaise below and the greenest of valleys ahead... [It seems to me that I catch a whiff of malaise. A little tongue of hellfire licks at our heels and the MG jumps ahead, roaring like a bomber through the sandy pine barrens and across Bay St. Louis. (101)]

Binx assumes that the audience of his document shares his belief in the power of the material object to symbolize his sexual potency and attract Sharon to him, just as he had assumed that the building of Gentilly had brought him business. In the debate between Isabel Archer and Madame Merle in *The portrait of a lady* (a book alluded to through Percy's choice of "Merle" as the name for Kate's psychiatrist), Binx clearly sides with Merle that one's physical objects are an expression of oneself. But just as Gilbert Osmond's house and Binx's office building may present a deceptive façade, so too the gloss of the MG conceals sexual timidity and even

impotence. Binx fails to note the contradiction in his theory about the MG's immunity when he and Sharon returned from the failed weekend and "the MG becomes infested with malaise" (133). When Sharon rejects his last desperate overture of his hand on her thigh with her firm "Son, don't you mess with me", he reports: "Very well, I won't, I say gloomily, as willing not to mess with her as mess with her, to tell the truth" (134). Kate says earlier that Binx is "Colder [than she]. Cold as the grave" (70). Sharon, having discovered herself to be a victim of false advertising rather than malaise, rushes back to renew her affair with the man she now intends to marry and over whom Binx expected to triumph. Kate, on the other hand, patiently persists in her own search of the real Binx and in the process to prepare him, not for grace, but for herself.

In spite of his MG, like bravados about his affairs with his secretaries, it is evident that Binx fears women, needs to feel in control in his relations with them, and finds it painfully difficult to communicate with women on a serious level. As he admits at the outset, his affairs with Marcia and Linda were superficial and ended in "telephone conversations... made up mostly of long silences" (15). In such silence he is not unlike his father, who left the marital bed to sleep in the back yard and who took ten-mile hikes alone. When Binx, who like Melville's Pierre is also on a search for his father, asks his mother if his father was a good husband, she answers that "... he was a good walker" (123). Lacking a strong self-image as a man, the way that he can conceive of himself with women is by invoking his fantasies of different movie actors and imitating their language and gestures. While he claims to be attracted to the Amazon type of woman with a helmet-like Prince Val haircut whom he sees on the bus and says mockingly that "[m]ost men are afraid of them" (17), he does not approach the girl even when he detects an inviting smile. Instead, he becomes absorbed by his thoughts of the search. Only Kate is able to

reach him, and this is because she knows his secret language and how to appeal to him indirectly through style and gesture.

Kate is first mentioned in the third sentence of the book, and she is constantly in touch with Binx; as Sharon reports, many people say they are married. Yet Binx's efforts to evade Kate's love and the serious commitment she represents causes him to diminish the importance of her presence for his narrative readers. Thus, the authorial reader must infer much about her importance in Binx's life. For example, from the knowledge she displays of his ideas about movies, it is evident that they have lengthy conversations together that Binx does not report. Just as Binx knows the language of the Catholic catechism well enough to banter with Lonnie about sacrifice and grace, Kate knows about Binx's search and understands his notion of repetitions and revolutions. When they attend *Panic in the streets* together, she asks "Is this part of the repetition? Part of the search?" (69)

Because he cannot let himself see the degree of her romantic interest in him and of his attachment to her, Binx has developed strategies for ignoring her or dismissing her advances as signs of her mental instability. Like John Marcher in James' *Beast in the jungle*, he seeks for something and yet refuses to recognize what is in front of him. Kate says "[i]t is possible, you know, that you are overlooking something, the most obvious thing of all. And you would not know it if you fell over it" (70). Not having read his Henry James and thus unable to recognize the parallels between his search and Marcher's wasted life, Binx answers with a dull "What?" and then is puzzled: "She would not tell me. Instead, in the streetcar, she becomes gay and affectionate toward me. She locks her arms around my waist and gives me a kiss on the mouth..." (70). Still Kate has achieved her purpose, for in spite of his insistence to his readers that he loves Sharon Kincaid, Percy's readers note that it is to Kate that Binx's mind repeatedly returns.

There are three scenes in particular in which Percy zooms his lens in upon Kate's romantic overtures to Binx and his unconscious evasions. One of the frequent hints that Kate and her aunt may actually be scheming to make this match occurs as Binx prepares to speak with Kate for the first time in the action. His aunt has summoned him for the purpose of this meeting, and as he prepares to descend to the basement to speak with Kate, he notes: "...I can see my aunt sitting by the fire.... She opens her eyes and, seeing me, forms a soundless word with her lips." When Kate tells him a few minutes later that she and her aunt talk about him all the time, there is a slight hint that he may be on the verge of suspecting that this whole meeting has been staged, but Kate quickly changes to her "objective" tone which distracts his possible suspicion. Her pose and gestures during this scene, however, are reminiscent of a movie scene played by Bette Davis. As Binx observes, she has even gotten into costume for this tele-à-tele: "As if to emphasize her sallowness and thinness, she has changed into shirt and jeans. She is as frail as a ten year old, except in her thighs" (39). Just as he has shared with her at previous times his search and ideas about moviegoing, perhaps he may also have revealed — as he does throughout the text — the attraction he feels toward certain boyish characteristics in women (he later notices Sharon's boyish cheek and boy's pants) and his weakness for women's hips as their most sexually exciting feature. But her particular costume certainly triggers the appropriate fantasies: he remembers that "Sometimes she speaks of her derriere, sticks it out Beale Street style and gives it a slap and this makes me blush because it is a very good one, marvellously ample and mysterious and nothing to joke about." He says that at the moment "[s]he has the advantage of me..." as she taunts him about his mission from his Aunt to counsel her. "You're to tell me all sorts of things," she says, but when he falters, she says prophetically: "It will end with me telling you" (39-49).

Even as Binx reports small details of her appearance and movements he continues to believe that his interest in her is no more than paternal. "She is in tolerable good spirits. It is not necessary to pay too much attention to her." But pay attention he does, in spite of himself, and perform she does: "Kate stretches out a leg to get her cigarettes.... Pushing back her shingled hair, she blows out a plume of gray lung smoke and plucks a grain from her tongue. She reminds me of college girls before the war, how they would sit, seeming old to me and sullen-silent towards men..." (41). Could Kate's pose be consciously designed to give him this repetition and take him back across the void of the last ten years after the war to the vitality of his early twenties? The extent of the couple's past intimacy is suggested when Kate's new scientific tone suddenly reminds him of conversations they used to have about her social work, and one case in particular comes to Binx's mind: he remembers Kate saying "— and all the while it was perfectly obvious that the poor woman had never experienced an orgasm." 'Is such a thing possible!' I would cry and we would shake our heads in the strong sense of our new camaraderie." Given Kate's appeal and the direction of Binx's thinking, it is not surprising that he brings up the matter of her impending marriage to Walter. But now he is coming too close to her anxieties, and she uses his broach as an opportunity to start a quarrel. The terms of the argument, however, suggest what may be on both of their minds. She accuses him and his aunt of patronizing Walter at lunch. But when she uses the phrase "[w]hat a lovely pair you are," referring to Binx and Emily, he turns it to themselves: "I thought you and I were the pair," to which Kate snaps "You and I are not a pair of any sort." Binx remarks to the reader, "I consider this" (41-43).

Given the fact that only a few minutes before Binx felt that it was "not necessary to pay any attention to Kate," this serious act of consideration of this remark represents

quite a heightening of interest, yet he seems still oblivious to the possible design for him that may underlie her series of sexual gestures. But designs are certainly being made upon him by his aunt, as he discovers in the next scene when she proposes that he move back to her home and prepare to attend medical school. Both his aunt Emily and his mother have long hoped that Kate and Binx should be married. Does Emily have this in mind for Binx's future, as well, and is Kate's approaching wedding date and her real love for Binx the actual source of her present psychic crisis? But marriage is a word that Binx never uses in regard to Kate, until she proposes it.

On the night that Kate comes to see Binx at three A.M., and he fears for her mental state, he tries to humor her by speculating about how they could live together. He has come into money and speculates about buying a service station and living his life in his present apartment: almost casually he says "We could stay on here at Mrs. Schexnaydre's. It is very comfortable. I might even run the station myself. You could come sit with me at night, if you liked." To this rather dreary prospect, which would not at all seem to suit Kate's romantic mood of the moment, she still replies with enthusiasm "You sweet old Binx! Are you asking me to marry you?" "Sure," he says while telling the reader "I watch her uneasily." Binx expects her to play off of this bantering remark in their usual language games, but to his surprise and dismay, he sees that she is serious. Kate exclaims, "Not a bad life you say. It would be the best of all possible lives," and Binx despairs: "She speaks in a rapture — something like my aunt. My heart sinks. It is too late." Binx's conclusion is that Kate has slipped over the edge emotionally and is no longer herself, but his mental association with the tone of her voice and that of his aunt is most significant, especially in view of the later situation where she and her aunt live together with him and laugh at his expense. This time Binx recog-

nizes the movie actress that Kate is playing: "— as enraptured and extinguished in her soul, gone, as a character played by Eva Marie Saint," but he fails once more to understand that he is not just a casual observer of her performance but her intended audience (95).

The turning point in their relationship occurs on Monday night when Kate proposes that she accompany him to Chicago. The preparation for that suggestion is especially well-staged. He is again being sent — this time by Sam — to counsel her. Even Sam appears to further the relationship by depicting Kate as a Russian Princess of the old aristocracy and by apparently proposing to her himself, which Kate later reports to Binx to make him jealous. Although Kate is supposed to be in a very disturbed mental state, she seems quite well-prepared for this meeting:

Kate sits... and cheerfully makes room for me in the loveseat. Not until later do I think why it is she looks so well: she is all dressed up, for the first time since Christmas. It is the scent of her perfume, her nylon-whispering legs, the white dress against her dark skin, a proper dress fluted and flounced and now gathered by her and folded away from me.
(141)

Though Binx remembers this picture later, at the time he is distracted and appears to pay little attention to her. As she talks on, he is listening to the dinner conversation from downstairs. Perhaps detecting his distraction, she picks up upon the idea that he had proposed marriage again: "I thought about your proposal and it seemed to me that it might be possible after all" (143). While Binx appears not even to notice this remark, he does begin to become sleepy — the same reaction he had when his aunt told him of her plans for his life and the same reaction he has later on the train. Like Jack Burden in Warren's *All the king's men*, Binx escapes into sleep. When he awakens, he is on the train

with Kate on a kind of pre-marriage mock honeymoon. Binx is still drowsy, and Percy adds a touch of Freudian humor to Binx's dream on the train when Binx imagines standing in line in a crowded bookstore to buy a copy of *Technique in marriage*: "I noticed that nearly all the crowd jamming against me are women, from middle-aged one-fifty pounders" (151). If his fear is that women are pressing in on his life and that he may need such a book in his relationship with Kate, it is soon borne out when Kate seduces him and he proves impotent.

In his non-fiction works, Percy often writes about linguistics and the function of language, and he has commented upon the concept of defamiliarization that he learned from the Russian formalists. Binx plays with the notion of defamiliarization when he speaks of how the movies take aspects of ordinary life and make them more real by putting them on the screen. His experience of seeing *Panic in the streets*, in a theater in the very neighborhood in which the film was shot, defamiliarizes the area for him and enables him to see it more clearly. Similarly, Binx describes his experience of talking with his half-brother Lonnie about religions as decentering language and thus making it better able to be heard: "Lonnie's monotonous speech gives him an advantage, the same advantage foreigners have: his words are not worn out. It is like a code tapped through a wall. Sometimes he asks straight out: do you love me?" (131) By altering the usual form of speaking, Lonnie gets Binx's attention. Lonnie is the only other character besides Kate who also understands Binx's way of reading movies, and the experience of seeing *Fort Dobbs* at the Drive-in with Lonnie is for Binx "a good rotation" (116-17).

Less apparent is the skillful way that Kate uses the process of defamiliarization to get Binx to see her more sharply. By altering her speaking style, tone, and gestures and playing out roles from the stage and screen in the character of her

own person, she alters and varies her self-presentation. For example, in her telephone conversations with Binx she is unconventional: he says "[f]or some reason or another she feels obliged to keep one jump ahead of the conventional. When I answer the phone, instead of hearing 'Hello, this is Kate' [which Kate knows would be everydayness], there comes into my ear a low-pitched voice saying something like: 'Well, the knives have started flying,' which he then has to interpret: 'which means that she and her mother have been aggressive,' or 'What do you know, I'm celebrating the rites of spring after all,' which turns out to mean that she has decided in her ironic and reflected way to attend the annual supper given for former queens of the Neptune Ball". She ends this conversation by hanging up abruptly. Binx observes: "There comes a silence and a click. But this doesn't mean anything. Abrupt hang-ups are part of our analytic way of talking." The only danger with Kate's device is that what is first defamiliarized may soon become conventional. But she strives to keep him off guard (57-58).

There are two key passages that would seem to weigh against the suggestion that Binx is guided toward his fate, consciously or unconsciously, by Kate. One is the exchange in which Kate says that she will only be able to survive in marriage if he tells her what to do. First, appealing to his sense of mission and duty, she says she is "never too bad" when she is with him; then, touching his own insecurity and reversing roles, she says that he is "nuttier" than she is. The point that Binx is really sicker than Kate is made throughout the book, and is, I believe, correct. Next, she reminds him of his marriage proposal and successfully provokes his jealousy by saying that Sam has also proposed. Then, she suddenly shifts her tone to a hard-boiled Brett Ashley style, and she risks all by forcing him to defend the notion that they could make a successful marriage: "Can't you see that for us it is much too late for such ingenious little schemes?" Binx notes that her voice

is steadier, but he attributes this change to the motion of the train. By this tactic, however, she forces Binx for the first time to take a stand in favor of their marriage, but after they debate the issue, it is clear that Binx still does not take her seriously. As he says, "I do not, to tell the truth, pay too much attention to what she says" (153-55).

But shortly Kate takes a new tack: She "shakes her head in the rapt way she got from her stepmother," and she resorts to complete female submission. She tells Binx he is her God ("You are the unmoved mover"), and that the marriage will work if in all things he should tell her what to do. She proclaims her total submission to his will and gives him a passionate kiss. This ancient strategy of declaring her own helplessness serves a double function: it assuages Binx's fear of women by making him feel that she is unthreatening, and it encourages him to think of her as easily seduced. She is, like Alice Doan in *The house of the seven gables*, hypnotized by a man's power and open to the suggestion of his will. Meanwhile, lest Percy's readers begin to think that Kate is really not in control of this scene, he has Binx look out the window at a symbol of female power: "The moonlight seems palpable, a dense pure matrix..." (156-57).

Binx, however, is not an easily moved, unmoved mover, so Kate takes a more direct approach: "I feel awful. Let's go up to your roomette." There she tells him of her discussion with her psychiatrist about her desire to have an affair, and calling Binx Whipple, she reports her sexual fantasies sparked by reading "a Frenchy version" of *Tillie the toiler* comics in which Tillie is taken by Whipple in the laundry room. Later when Binx tries to explain his sexual failure with Kate to his imagined Rory Calhoun, he admits: "The truth is I was frightened half to death by her bold (not really bold, nor whorish bold but theorish bold) carrying on." So while on the surface, it may seem that Kate is putting herself in his control, she ac-

tually uses shifts in tone and gesture, and antic poses to direct the entire scene; the only thing she cannot control is Binx's libido. The final word goes to Kate, who invokes both Romeo's Juliette and Hamlet's Ophelia in her mocking "Good night, sweet Whipple. Now you tuck Kate in. Poor Kate.... Good night sweet Whipple, good night, good night, good night." Percy, of course, invokes Eliot in *The wasteland* (157-159).

Even if the seduction is a physical failure, however, it is a psychological victory for Kate, for when they arrive in Chicago the next day, Kate assumes firm and permanent command of the relationship. "Kate looks after me," he says (160). Binx has become a submissive husband even before the wedding as Kate attends to the practical details of life, just as she had purchased the train tickets while he slept. The extent of her dominance is most apparent in the scene after his confrontation with Aunt Emily. The meeting itself deserves attention, for Emily is a master of style and gesture, employing the rhetoric of the Puritan jeremiad and the enlightenment language of republican virtue to chastise him while wielding a sword-like letter opener: "We both gaze down at the letter opener, the soft iron sword she has withdrawn from the grasp of the helmeted figure on the inkstand." In a phallic recollection Binx notes that the tip of the sword was bent because as a boy he had used it to try to pry open a drawer, and he still worries that she suspects him. Hypnotized by her gestures, he cannot take his eyes off the sword: "We watch the sword as she lets it fall over the fulcrum of her forefinger.... Then, so suddenly that I almost start, my aunt sheathes the sword and places her hand on the desk. Turning it over, she flexes her fingers and studies the nails...." If Kate has been learning some of her gestures from her stepmother, as Binx earlier suggested, she has a powerful model to imitate (174-76).

When a limp Binx leaves this meeting, he meets a Kate who is --

"as brisk as a stewardess" flying high as she tells him "You're stupid stupid stupid.... I heard it all, you poor stupid bastard" (180). She directs him to go home and wait for her, which he dutifully does. But when she does not arrive in fifty minutes, he panics and tries to call Sharon. When her roommate says she is out with her fiancé, he makes a play in Brando style for the roommate. Only when he sees Kate's "stiff little Plymouth" — a car more fitting Binx's puritan nature than his MG — does Binx regain composure. Then, for the first time, he accepts the idea that he will marry Kate by announcing that she is "my own fiancé, Kate Cutrer (183). In case the symbolism of Emily's sword and the name Cutrer which Kate and Emily share is lost on the reader, Percy earlier had Binx meet a knife salesman who exhibits what Binx refers to as his "cutter." It is significant that Binx did not tell his aunt that he was going to marry Kate, since that would have made all the difference in her attitude toward their trip together to Chicago. Kate rebukes him for the oversight, and again calls him an "idiot." While he wants to attribute his silence to stoic heroism, it is more likely that, as perhaps wary-eyed Kate suspects, he still had not accepted the proposal of marriage as genuine. To seal the matter, Kate immediately tells her aunt herself who is then soon reconciled to him, as Emily should be since he is going to do everything she wished.

The other scene that might suggest that Kate is as weak and dependent in their relationship as she pretends to be is the final one in the Epilogue in which she tells him that she cannot go downtown without knowing that he is thinking about her constantly. This is a curious situation, because he has just explained that within the past year she went on her own on a lark to hear Marian Anderson perform in Dallas — certainly a much bolder trip than a streetcar ride downtown. But close reading of the scene suggests another possible motive for her

claim of dependency.

In this relationship dependence is mutual, and Kate knows Binx well enough to understand his precarious psychic state. She is always in danger of having him drift away into his dreams of the search, into sleep, or into total psychic withdrawal. Just as she had devised strategies to get his attention before marriage, so she must constantly defamiliarize herself to hold his interest and keep the marriage alive. In this final scene Percy has Kate give a small demonstration of her continued use of cinematic gestures. She has Binx pick a cape jasmin with which she then strikes a pose. She tells him to picture her in a very particular way: "I'm going to sit next to window on the lake side and put the cape jasmin in my lap.... And you'll be thinking of me in just that way?" (190-91)

By having him think of her in this defamiliarized and highly particular image of her — not a vague image of a wife — she forces herself upon his imagination, just as she had done with her antic poses during their courtship. In the final image of *The moviegoer*, as an entranced Binx watches her, Kate frames herself as in a scene from a movie: "Twenty feet away she turns around. 'Mr. Klostermann? Mr. Klostermann.' I watch her walk toward St. Charles, cape jasmine held against her cheek, until my brothers and sisters call out behind me" (191).

The reasons for the ambiguity of the ending of *The moviegoer*, then, is that for Binx's narrative audience the ending presents only one side of a more complex situation that Percy has inscribed in the text indirectly for his authorial audience. Binx believes that he has made independent and conscious choices, grounded in his reading of Kierkegaard, to move from the aesthetic to the moral and the religious stage of spiritual development. He believes that he has accepted responsibility to take care of Kate and to embrace all of the values that

he had so fiercely rejected earlier, including living in "one of the very shotgun cottages done over by my cousin Nell" (187). But even that term "shotgun," which evokes the image of a man marrying against his will, reminds the authorial reader that Binx's final situation was not exactly his idea. He is like Miles Coverdale in *The Blithedale romance*, who thought he was in love with the girlish Priscilla but was actually entranced by the more sexually threatening Zenobia. On Friday, Binx thought he was in love with Sharon, but by Wednesday he was engaged to Kate.

As in all novels with unreliable narrators, the authorial reader is privileged to view the narrator's world in a larger frame than he can himself perceive. In that larger world, it is Kate who saves Binx, and in so doing perhaps also saves herself. For Kate and Emily recognize that he is their white hope for any future the Cutrer family and the South may have. Binx is a Quentin Compson who lives because Kate holds his attention. By learning his secret language of moviegoing, and using the gestures and techniques of communication of the cinema — such as shifts in tone, cuts, framing, and posing — she makes herself into a character in the movie he wishes his life to be. Playacting as Ophelia, Juliette, Eva Marie Saint, a Russian Natasia, Bette Davis, and Tillie Toiler, she gives him the experience of the heightened reality, as he calls it, of the movies that he longed for in his life. Just as her aunt has the power to scare the wits out of Binx in a way that he confesses to find "not altogether unpleasant," Kate keeps herself in his mind so that his document, as he calls the book, is on the conscious level an account of his search for the meaning of life amidst modern malaise and everydayness, but is on the unconscious level a record of how people may learn from art how to survive everydayness and create interest and meaning for one another. □

NOTES

- 1 *The moviegoer* (New York, 1961). All references are to this edition.
- 2 Of the several existing volumes of interviews with Percy, the most useful for this essay was Lewis A. Lawson and Victor A. Kramer, [eds.] *Conversations with Walker Percy* (Jackson, Miss., 1985).
- 3 Of the recent studies of Percy's life and thought, I found the following most helpful: Jerome Taylor, *In search of self: life, death and Walker Percy* (Cambridge, Mass., 1986); essays by Harold Bloom and Tony Tanner in *Walker Percy*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York, 1986); William Rodney Allen, *Walker Percy: a Southern wayfarer* (Jackson, Miss., 1986); Jack Tharoe, *Walker Percy* (Boston, 1983) and the collections he edited, *Walker Percy: art and ethics*, (Jackson, Miss., 1980); Panthea Reid Broughton, *The art of Walker Percy: stratagems for being* (Baton Rouge, 1979); Mary K. Sweeny, *Walker Percy and the modern world* (Chicago, 1987); Martin Luschel, *The sovereign wayfarer: Walker Percy's diagnosis of the malaise* (Baton Rouge, 1972); John Edward Hardy, *The fiction of Walker Percy* (Urbana, 1987); Robert Coles, *Walker Percy: an American search* (Boston, 1978); Patricia Lewis Poteat, *Walker Percy and the old modern age: reflections on language argument, and the telling of stories* (Baton Rouge, 1985).
- 4 Lawson and Kramer, *Conversations with Walker Percy*, p. 278.