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This paper explores the concept of despair in Walker Percy's 1962 National Book Award winning novel The Moviegoer. It explores the philosophy of Kierkegaard's The Sickness unto Death as an important antecedent of the novel's portrayal of Binx Bolling's existential crisis. Additionally, the paper discusses Walker Percy's own thought about the devaluation of subjective experience in a modern scienctific world. Using these concepts as a vocabulary, the paper performs a reading of the text of the novel. The text asserts that the reader's own valuation of God and objectivity determine the possiblity or nonpossibility of Binx's salvation by faith.

Since its publication in 1962, Walker Percy's novel The Moviegoer has achieved widespread critical and popular success. It won the National Book Award and remains in print and available to the public. The novel is easy to read and yet because it attempts to make some sense of the nature of modern life it is difficult to understand. The Moviegoer relates the partial autobiography of Jackson Bickerson "Binx" Bolling. It is set for the most part in New Orleans during the week before Binx's thirtieth birthday several years after the Korean War. The novel uses Binx's present tense narration, a large amount of his personal speculation and memories to create a character on the edge of crisis. This paper will attempt to understand the origin, nature, and solution of this crisis as it appears in Binx Bolling. In order to do so most effectively one must understand several concepts not explicitly stated within the text. Through knowledge of existential philosophy and several of Walker Percy's own beliefs the reader gains an immense leverage upon the text. The result of this leverage is a much more thorough and comprehensive reading of The Moviegoer.

In general terms Binx Bolling's crisis is a form of existential despair. Specifically, the novel recognizes the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard as an important antecedent to its concept of this crisis, but the novel is not simply a gloss on Kierkegaardian terms. Instead, the novel uses subtle alterations of a model laid out in Kierkegaard's The Sickness unto Death to examine the nature of the modern self. The form of these alterations, this paper argues, can be discovered by first understanding Kierkegaard's model and then adding to that model information from Walker Percy's essays. The novel uses these concepts as a starting point and through the characterization of Binx Bolling it sets about to

explore what effect they have upon him. It is important to note that this paper does not concern itself with the veracity of these concepts. Instead, it is important to recognize that they constitute a vocabulary necessary for this reading the text of The Moviegoer.

The movement of the novel is of Binx Bolling's movement from a man in the throes of existential despair to a man who is at least capable of dealing with that despair. Binx's life is a simple set of events. He is either describing the problems he sees, attempting to escape from those problems, or attempting to deal with them. His life in Gentilly, a New Orleans suburb, up to the beginning of the novel has been an exercise in escape. As the plot of the novel progresses, it becomes increasingly evident that an attempt to ignore his despair will have dire consequences. Even as Binx is slowly failing to escape his despair, he is participating in the construction of a relationship with Kate Cutrer, his step-cousin. This relationship will set the stage for his ability to deal with despair. The story of The Moviegoer is the tale of the failure of Binx's escapism and the construction of a relationship that will allow him to stop just at his lowest point and begin to rebuild a life for himself. A reading of the resolution of the novel depends upon how the reader understands one particular relationship in the novel: that of humanity's relation to God and humanity's value of objectivity.

The text of The Moviegoer begins with an epigram from Kierkegaard's The Sickness unto Death. That text is an extended meditation on the nature of despair and at times it leans very far into abstraction. In it Kierkegaard defines what the human self is, describes the relationship of despair to the human self, and discusses the meaning of this model of the self in regards to Christian faith.

Kierkegaard sees a human being as the "synthesis" of two parts, "the infinite and the finite, the temporal and the eternal" (Kierkegaard 351). He understands a synthesis to be "a relation between two." Kierkegaard leaves the actual mechanism of this relation in abstraction and gives no metaphor for its illustration. However, this level of abstraction does not seem to impede Kierkegaard's progress toward his point. He continues by stating, "considered in this way, a human being is still not a self" (351). Kierkegaard understands that a human self is actually a triadic structure, formed of the temporal part, the atemporal part, and yet another part. This third part of the self is the relation between the temporal part of a human and the atemporal part of a human. However, Kierkegaard believes that it is not enough that the relation between the temporal and the atemporal exist. For the human self to truly be formed, that relation must itself be able to relate to itself. The human self is not the third part, the bond between the temporal and the atemporal, but it is the actual process of that third part relating to itself. This needs further clarification. If the liberty of changing the parts of the self into men giving lectures at a rally is taken, perhaps a more concrete concept of the human self can be illustrated. The first speaker talks on the subject of infinity. To his left, a second speaker is giving a talk on specificity or finiteness. In between them is yet another speaker. The microphones of the speaker on infinity and the speaker on specificity are turned down low so that the center lecturer must transmit all of their words. In some sense he is transmitting their words. However, he is not a passive third party and he forms his own lecture based upon the substance of the speaker to his left and right. If one were to imagine that these three speakers were contained within each human being, then one would have a good general idea of

what Kierkegaard is talking about. The human self is the center speaker's ability to use the two parts of humanity to give a talk of his own. Perhaps this metaphor will help the reader make sense of such abstract statements as "the self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation's relating itself to itself in the relation."

Kierkegaard's subject in The Sickness unto Death is despair. He understands despair to be a "misrelation" in the process of the self (353). When the relation between the temporal and the atemporal elements of man becomes skewed, there is despair. This event would be similar to the central speaker's refusal to include one of the other two speakers in his own speech. In Kierkegaard's view this can only occur by a skewing towards the finite and away from the view of man as spirit. The effect of this is an "impotent self consuming" (355). When the center speaker begins to exclude the eternal from his speech, he is attempting to totally remove the eternal from the stage. This is impossible according to Kierkegaard because it is impossible to remove the eternal from the self. Kierkegaard thinks that it is possible to have "despaired in such a way that you did not realize that you were in despair" (361). The man who does not realize that he is in despair is the man who has ignored the presence of the eternal in his own self. This man is ignorant of the entire proceedings on the stage of the self; he has not looked upon himself and seen God. This man could appear very happy and yet at the same time be suffering a horrible affliction of the self. It is also possible to have "carried this sickness inside of you as your gnawing secret" (361) This is the type of despair that occurs when one is aware of the process of the self, but one doubts the ability of God to deal with despair. This is the lack of faith and according to Kierkegaard it corresponds to sin. When one understands that one is "before God" and one

continues to doubt, then this is sin. These are the two main options for despair. One can be in despair because of ignorance of God, or one can be in despair through lack of faith in God. The overall effect of both of these variations is the same, "everything is lost to you" (361).

This brief section does not represent the full extent of Kierkegaard's arguments in The Sickness unto Death, but now enough understanding of his model has been reached that we may continue onto Walker Percy's own essays. Percy in his essay The Message in the Bottle argues that there are two types of understanding, knowledge *sub specie aeternitatis* and what he calls "news." The valuation of these types of knowledge will come to have great bearing upon the discussion of self as found in The Moviegoer. Percy believes that the first type of knowledge can be reached by an individual, "using his own scientific, philosophical, and artistic efforts" (125). Percy holds that "this kind of [knowledge] may be arrived at (has in fact been arrived at) independently by people in different places and can be confirmed (or rejected) by people in still other places" (126) The other type of knowledge, news, "cannot possibly be arrived at by any effort of experimentation or reflection or artistic insight. It may not be arrived at by observation [...] at any time. It may not even be arrived at [...] any time (since it is a single nonrecurring event or state of affairs)" (126). Percy claims that an alienated individual will:

> make a distinction between the sentences which assert a piece of knowledge *sub specie aeternitatis* and the sentences announcing a piece of news which bears directly on his life. The scientist and logician, however, cannot, in so far as they are scientists and logicians, take account of the special character of these news

> sentences. To them they are empirical observations of a random order and, if significant, they occupy at best the very lowest run of scientific significance: they are the particular instances from which hypotheses and theories are drawn. (128)

Roughly these disctinctions are the distinctions between objective knowledge and subjective knowledge. Objectivity (whether it is scientific, artistic, etc.) is by definition atemporality. It is an abstraction of specificity in order to grant that knowledge freedom from the element of time. Percy is claiming here that an individual whose valuation of knowledge places objective knowledge as more important than subjective knowledge is incapable of dealing with subjective knowledge as valuable of its own account. It is this valuation that Percy sees as having plagued the Christian faith in recent years and that forces Kierkegaard to place faith in opposition to rationality. "Christianity cannot appear otherwise than as the Absolute Paradox once one has awarded total competence to knowledge *sub specie aeternitatis*, once one has disallowed the cognitive content of news as a category of communication" (Message 146). Percy argues that the "stumbling block to the scientist-philosopher-artist on the island is that salvation comes by hearing, by a piece of news, and not through knowledge *sub specie aeternitatis*. But scandalized or not, he might at least realize that it could not be otherwise. For no knowledge which can be gained on the island, on any island anywhere at any time, can be relevant to his predicament as a castaway" (Message 146) At this point it must be recognized that Percy's argument hinges upon a certain view of mankind, that of the castaway from Heaven. Percy's concepts rely upon Kierkegaard's definition of mankind as equal parts God and Man. Percy's belief

lead him to conclude that if mankind could only reinstate a valuation of the subjective form of knowledge then the value of the Christian Gospels would be salvaged from their objectification and irrelevance.

It is possible to understand the rise of this objective posture in a different light however. Percy sees the rise of the "objective posture" as an external event to the self. According to Percy, the self (even though a new valuation of data has occurred) is in essence the same synthesis of atemporal God and temporal man that has existed since the Fall of humanity. However, the possibility exists that the rise of the objective posture actually constitutes a fundamental redefinition of the elements of the human self. The possibility that mankind has traded the atemporality of the objective posture for the atemporality of the Christian God arises. This would be, in effect, the substitution of the voice of God in the self for the voice of an objective community. The human self would, using this definition, become a relation between objective and subjective parts. Of course anyone speaking from a Christian perspective, such as Kierkegaard and Percy, would deem this substitution an impossible act. It is from this difference that two very separate readings of The Moviegoer become possible.

The rise of an objective mindset would have a rather large effect upon the nature of self, even if the fundamental principle of synthesis of the temporal and the atemporal remained the same. In the Kierkegaardian model, despair exists because of the misrelation of the Godly part of the self. For a society that has replaced God with objective community, the nature of "misrelation" changes. From a Christian perspective misrelation is the inability to understand God as a part of the self or the inability to maintain faith in God. Both of these descriptions

of despair depend on God as a reference point. However, when God is replaced in the human self, that reference point changes. It is no longer inherently good to swing to the atemporal side of the self. Now the only definition available to man of a "misrelation" is a relation in which one or the other side is excluded totally. In Kierkegaard's scheme there is a set proportion of temporality and atemporality. This proportion is contained within the idea that paradoxically God is the timeless specific and that a move towards the timeless is a move towards the specific. Without the paradox of God, a move towards the objective is a move away from the specific. Despair in the modern paradigm, whose definition remains that of a misrelation in the process of the self, becomes an inability to balance what appear to be forces in total opposition to each other. While it is true that the subjective is contained within the objective, just as the temporal aspect of man is contained within the Godly aspect, that objectivity fails to place any value upon the subjective. Without God balancing the self, the modern self becomes a horrible tug of war. Percy believes the rise of objectivity to have occurred outside of the human self and consequently he believes that all humanity need do is find a way to re-value subjectivity and then the ability to believe in God becomes a rational one. "But scandalized or not, he might at least realize that it could not be otherwise. For no knowledge which can be gained on the island, on any island anywhere at any time, can be relevant to his predicament as a castaway." The modern self must likewise find some way to revalue subjectivity. For if he does not the only choices that exist are an objective posture in which his own experiences are of little importance or a subjective posture in which he becomes totally isolated from the rest of humanity. For this type of man there can be no

final realization of God.

Now this paper can turn to the task of reading The Moviegoer. According to the model outlined earlier there are two rough concepts of what we might find there. The main difference between these readings occurs in the novel's ending. One reading is that Binx Bolling has recently become aware of the inability of scientific objectivity to account for his own specific self and consequently must restore the value of the subjective in order to be reconciled with God. Another reading is that Binx Bolling has recently become aware of the inability of scientific objectivity to account for his own specific self and is desperately seeking an effective method of balancing the separate forces of community and subjectivity within his own self. Indeed, the task of sorting out between them might prove to be unsuccessful because their aspects are so similar and the subject is never discussed explicitly. There is talk later in the novel of how "it is impossible to rule out God" (MG 146). What is a reader to make of the statements that Binx Bolling's "unbelief was invincible from the beginning" and that "if God himself had appeared to [Binx], it would have changed nothing" (145)? The movement of the novel advances in a similar manner in either case however. Binx must quit his old attempts to hide from his own self through ignorance and diversion, and must begin to accept the subjective as a valuable aspect of his life. He accomplishes this through his relationship with Kate Cutrer.

The first chapter of the novel serves to introduce the reader to many of the important characters and to introduce to the reader several important concepts of the text. We learn that before the start of the novel, Binx Bolling lived a "very peaceful" life in Gentilly, a suburb of New Orleans. There he is a "model tenant

and a model citizen" who takes "pleasure in doing all that is expected" of him. "It is a pleasure to carry out the duties of a citizen and to receive in return a receipt or a neat styrene card with one's name on it certifying, so to speak, one's right to exist" (7). Once he thought of going into "law or medicine or even pure science" or perhaps of even "doing something great" (9). Now though he has given up the "old longings" and is "living the most ordinary life imaginable" (9). He is the manager of a brokerage firm and with his free time he usually watches television or goes to a movie in the company of one of his secretaries. The reader also learns that the act of going to the movies and the company of his secretaries plays a similar role. They make Binx feel "very good" (5). This first day of the novel things have changed and his life has become "complicated" (10) The complicating event is the reoccurrence to Binx of the idea of a "search." This search has its foundations in an experience that Binx had during the Korean War. As he lay wounded under a chindolea bush, an "immense curiosity" was awakened in Binx (10). He subsequently recovered and forgot all about this curiosity and failed to follow up on it. On the morning of the first Wednesday of the novel he wakes having in a sense relived this traumatic experience. His own personal articles "looked both unfamiliar and full of clues" (11). This awareness of the familiar as the unfamiliar is the experience of the subjective rather than a dependence totally upon the objective knowledge of the world. It is this mindset that allows the search to become possible. He characterizes his search thus: "the search is what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life" (13). The implication here is that most people are sunk in the everydayness of their own lives. This "everydayness" is the reliance of the self upon objective

concepts rather than upon the sum of an individual's experience. Binx continues his definition a little later by claiming, "to become aware of the possibility of the search is to be onto something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair" (13). One who is not aware of the possibility of a search is not aware specifically because he allows his surroundings to define his own self. Despair is the acceptance of the everydayness as one's life. Should one fail to defeat despair in Binx's world, the consequences are enormous. Binx claims that the "movies are onto the search, but they screw it up." He mentions a "fellow coming to himself in a strange place" who then "takes up with the local librarian, sets about proving to the local children what a nice fellow he is" and "in two weeks time he is so sunk in everydayness that he might just as well be dead" (13). Binx's judgment here is a harsh one. Everydayness is oblivion. In the failure to recognize the individuality of the self, the self is "just as well" as destroyed. This type of despair occurs when one slides too far away from one's individuality and absorbs too much of the community as one's self. Failure to defeat despair for Kierkegaard is sin.

His relationship with his Aunt Emily Cutrer is the most powerful example of his struggle with socially enforced objective values. Emily Cutrer's life can be understood as a form of intellectual elitism, a belief in the "world of books and music and art and ideas" (45). Her emphasis is upon the "lofty regions of Literature and Life" (46). She is so effective at espousing her beliefs that they can come to control those around her. She calls Uncle Jules a "Cato" and a Cato he becomes. "So strong is she that sometimes the person and the past are transfigured by her. They become what she sees them to be" (49). The role of Emily Cutrer and her effects upon Binx's consciousness have been noted by a number of critics.

Micheal Kobre considers Emily "the most dominant influence in [Binx's] life" and that she is the embodiment of "the expectations of a traditional community" (26-27). He goes on to correctly outline that community as the upper class Stoicism of the Old South. In addition, he recognizes that the community Emily represents holds a great power over Binx. Kobre even comes close to outlining Binx's struggle against his aunt's values in the correct light. He claims that Binx's resistance to Emily's "sentimental [..] pessimism" "derives from his aunt's character and the values she received from earlier generations of the Bolling family" (30- 31). What needs to be added to this reading is a definition of Aunt Emily as the pure example of a misrealtion of the self. Emily seems to have absorbed all the ideas of her society and to use them as if they were her own. Binx has participated in this society and used its norms for almost all of his life. Emily has had "charge" of him since his early youth (MG 3) and even at that age she was instructing him the correct manner of living. "'Scotty is dead. Now it's all up to you. It's going to be difficult for you but I know you're going to act like a soldier.' This was true. I could easily act like a soldier. Was that all I had to do?" (4) Even at this early age, her expectations for Binx provide a path upon which his individuality is unimportant. The only necessity is to walk the path. This path corresponds to the one that Binx's social group would have him walk. It is a conglomerate of objective cultural symbols: "It seems so plain when I see it through her eyes. My duty in life is simple. I go to medical school. I live a long useful life serving my fellowman." (54) By referring to Binx as "an ingrate, a limb of Satan, the last and sorriest scion of a noble stock," Emily casts Binx personality in terms of her society and "in a split second [he has] forgotten

everything, the years in Gentilly, even [his] search" (26). Thus one can see Emily almost as a true personification of the everydayness. She invokes the idea of the soldier, the doctor, the everyman rather than addressing Binx as a unique entity. Emily stands upon one side and Binx's search upon the other. The pull of the everydayness is strong. So strong in fact it actually has the power to transfigure sight. When Emily shows Binx the bottles found on Kate's armoire, even a disruption of Binx's physical ability to examine is impeded: "But instead she shows me something and searches my face for what I see. With her watching me, it is difficult to see anything. There is a haze. Between us there is surely a carton of dusty bottles-*bottles?*-yes, surely bottles, yet blink as I will I can't be sure" (27). Under the pressure of the everydayness, objects lose their undefined nature and take on meaning. This meaning is controlled by the society and in this example Binx is not free to make his own associations to the bottles. There is an expectation upon the part of the community that he "see" these bottles for what they really are (in this case true evidence of Kate's drug addiction). Virtually every object one can see is clouded with a similar application of cultural symbols. It was only through Binx's experience in Korea that he manages to break free from this objective "haze" and begin to see himself not as an Everyman but as Binx.

It is important to understand why Binx is "living uneventfully in Gentilly" in the first place (6). After the war when he attempted to live in the Garden District where Emily lives, he would alternate between periods of total rage during which he would fire off his own opinion to editors on a "variety of subjects" and a coma like depressive state (6) Now Binx is aware of his self, but he has no conceptual method for dealing with that awareness. He moves out of the phase where

Kierkegaard would understand him as "unaware" and into the phase where he "doubts" the ability of faith to deal with his self. The modern perspective understands Binx as having become aware of his previous sublimation in objectivity. As a consequence of this awareness, Binx must seek some method of balancing his newfound subjectivity and objectivity. When he cannot, he suffers first a swing in the direction of subjectivity, and quickly fires off his opinions to a variety of editors. Then Binx suffers a swing in the direction of objectivity, an objectivity that refuses to acknowledge Binx himself, and the result is a coma like state where Binx can only stare at the ceiling.

He could not live under such a constant struggle and so he retired to Gentilly in an attempt to come to some engaged state between rage and coma. The substance of Binx's life in Gentilly, however, has been no better than life under his aunt's roof. He spends his time managing "a small branch office" of his uncle's brokerage firm (6) and in the evenings he usually watches television or goes to the movies in the company of his secretary. His life in Gentilly has been an unsuccessful attempt to reconcile the two parts of his self. Because the movies are "onto the search but they screw it up," they can set about discussing what it is to be a subjective self, but they work towards the absorption of that subjectivity into society as fast as possible. Money is likewise totally under the domination of the objective cultural rather than the subjective individual. Binx's life as a stockbroker is an attempt to balm his pain by seizing cultural symbols for his own. This method was not successful when he lived with his aunt and it will prove to be similarly ineffective later in the novel.

However, there is some hope. As J.P. Telotte notes, Walker Percy has argued

that man must, in order to function properly, "effect his natural role as symbol monger and that any dysfunction of the language process could precipitate or correspond to an existential predicament." The solution to this predicament can also be sought in the concept of mankind as a symbol monger. "Provided that man can open himself up to the intersubjective possibilities of communication, if he braves the risk of caring for others, the possibility remains that he may re-establish that most fundamental of human communities, "the I-Thou" relation" ("Symbolic" 232). Martin Luschei has stated that "the most hopeful way open to us in the depths of the malaise leads to intersubjectivity" (52) and he describes the relationship thus:

> Suppose I find myself, in this state of consciousness, confronted by an older man at a cocktail party. I am apt to be on the defensive, thinking of him not as you but as he, perhaps even as it. We have no genuine encounter. But then this stranger says to me, "I am glad to meet you. I once knew your parents." Suddenly a relaxation of tension takes place and a bond is created. Instead of being merely juxtaposed to him, I am with him. [...] I am no longer simply alongside him, as a chair is alongside a table, but "lifted right out of the here and now." This unknown person I have just met accompanies me on a sort of magic voyage. We are together in "what we must call an elsewhere." (53)

This "magic voyage" is actually the recognition of the value of the subjectivity rather than the objectification of the other. When a person can understand that another person is not simply there in the same manner as a piece of furniture, then

recognition of the value of the other's subjectivity occurs. This would provide, according to the model of the Christian self, the emphasis on subjective knowledge necessary for a faith in God. Through the non-Christian model, this recognition of subjectivity and the simultaneous recognition of the other provide a method for understanding one's own self. It provides a reconciliation of the objective and the subjective. This is accomplished because the self is recognized by something not bound by its own subjectivity. Binx notes that other people treasure moments in their lives such as " the summer night one met a lonely girl in Central Park and achieved with her a sweet and natural relationship" (7). Binx though claims that he has been through all that and it is "not much to remember" (7). Rather than attempt to achieve a relationship such as this, he spends his time seeking happiness in the arms of a disposable series of secretaries. The long term effectiveness of these relationships to numb Binx's rising individualism can be determined by the fact that he has had to trade them out one after another. They are at best temporary stays. His relationships fail because they can not achieve a certain manner of communication. This communication between the two partners is one that simultaneously allows the partners to identify themselves and appease the part of their personality rooted in the community. This is the idea of intersubjectivity. Walker Percy claims that "besides the symbol, the conception, and the thing, there are two other terms which are quite as essential in the act of symbolization. There is the 'I,' the consciousness which is confronted by the thing and which generates the symbol by which the conception is articulated. But there is also the 'you.' Symbolization is of its very essence an intersubjectivity" (Message 281). Binx describes this communication that he longs for and is denied

by his secretaries. These relationships would start as "careless raptures" which brought great happiness to both people. However, just when Binx "thought [their] relationship was coming into its best phase" the relationship would end (MG 9). This best phase is described by Binx:

> The air in the office would begin to grow thick with silent reproaches. It would be impossible to exchange a single word or glance that was not freighted with a thousand hidden meanings. Telephone conversations would take place at all hours of the night, conversations made up mostly of long silences during which I would rack my brain for something to say while on the other end you could hear little else but breathing and sighs. When these long telephone silences come, it is a sure sign that love is over. (9)

The point at which Binx believes the relationship is the "best" is the one where simple conversation became impossible and each statement was accompanied by "a thousand hidden meanings." Hidden that is to the observer, but not to the individuals to whom they invoke a specific context. Binx and his Lindas began to expand their interaction beyond the bounds of dating the boss/secretary. As Binx says, it is their inability to communicate that is a sure sign that their bond has been broken. These relationships fail for Binx because they fail to reconcile his subjectivity with a more general objectivity.

Binx can neither regain the easy old way of existing in a predefined world and nor forge a new world of meaning with his secretaries. This is because his secretaries, beautiful though they are to Binx, are trapped in the world of objective meaning. They cannot accept a new set of symbols and this makes Binx doubt the

power of communication to address his self. He suffers not only of the existential dilemma, but also of a language dysfunction. Binx must instead turn to someone who has been ripped from the fabric of meaning like himself. He must seek a new world with Kate Cutrer. Their bond is their tenuous existence between the place where one allows meaning to be denoted by the world and where meaning is denoted by the self and ignored by the world. They must strive to gain a dialogue, a relation between themselves. If there is a perfect God, then Binx has lost the ability to value God's method of communication and the only method to restore faith is through intersubjectivity. If there is no perfect God within his self, then intersubjectivity does not serve as a waypoint on the journey to faith. Instead, it is the final goal. Only through it can one come to reconcile the disparate parts of the self.

In order to come to any sort of resolution in this struggle a variety of things must occur between Binx and Kate. They must recognize that they have both recognized the inability of objectivity to account for subjective experience. This is the first step in recognizing each other as individuals rather than as objects. They must actually seek resolution to their problems in the other and give up on the their attempts to obliterate self. Binx must get over his belief that symbols cannot actually communicate. These things can occur through an ongoing communication between Binx and Kate. Where Binx's relationships with his secretaries were doomed to fail because of the inability of both parties to accept new symbols, Kate and Binx are free to denote new things and to change their symbols upon failure. It is only after this process of intersubjectivity that they can balance the individual and communal aspects of the self. The recognition of their bond occurs

in their first few passages together in the novel. This first passage will also demonstrate the strained nature of Binx and Kate's conversation. The only obstacle is that Binx doubts the ability of intersubjectivity to accomplish this task because he has undervalued all subjective experience.

> "Well? Aren't you supposed to tell me something?"
> "Yes, but I forget what it was."
> "Binx Binx. You're to tell me all sorts of things."
> "That's true."
> "It will end with me telling you."
> "That would be better."
> "How do you make your way in the world?"
> "Is that what you call it? I don't really know. Last month I made three thousand dollars-less capital gains."
> "How did you get through a war without getting killed?"
> "It was not through any doing of yours."
> "Anh anh anh." It is an old passage between us, more of a joke now than a quarrel. "And how do you appear so reasonable to Mother?"
> "I feel reasonable with her."
> "She thinks you're one of her kind."
> "What kind is that?"
> "A proper Bolling. Jules thinks you're a go-getter. But you don't fool me."
> "You know."
> "Yes."
> "What kind?"
> "You're like me, but worse. Much worse." (MG 43)

The item he was supposed to communicate in the immediate context of the story is of course asking Kate to "go to Leijers" and to watch the parade. Binx comes clothed in the everydayness because earlier he has been transfigured by his Aunt Emily, forgetting even his search. Kate, however, is well aware of the sway of the objective everydayness here. She prods Binx into a realization of it himself. Kate, then, chides Binx and tells him that he was supposed to communicate to her more than just that one thing. His failure to remember to tell her the individual thing, the search, removes his ability to share any unique symbols at all. She, then,

offers him a proposal, a twin of their later marriage. She links their lives together. "It will end with me telling you." About this prospect, Binx seems pleased and gives an affirmative. She is empowered by this to investigate his life. It serves as an invitation to truly examine Binx rather than to rely on past readings or Emily's understanding of him. Now Kate attempts to deal with Binx as an individual with fresh symbols. She begins to attack Binx's use of Aunt Emily's values as his own. Kate begins by asking Binx about how he makes his way in the world. Where does he stand, what are his goals? Literally, what is the substance of his life, his path? After a moment of doubt, Binx, because he has forgotten his search momentarily, answers her with talk of his job and his money. This avoids the larger issue that lies underneath his job and his money. The stockbroker Binx is answering Kate's question rather than the searcher Binx. He cannot so easily leave behind the life he has constructed for himself. He understands her proposal as a temporary stay, another one of his failed secretarial relationships. If it is not under the sway of his aunt's power, then it must be the temporary balm of those relationships. Binx is wary of them and he will not leave behind his selfless use of the community values. Kate tries a different route, she asks him about his war experience. She is in effect forcing him to apply his observational powers to his own life. Look at your own life Binx and tell me why is it that you are alive. How did you make it through a war? Do you remember your own individuality? His answer is a sharp joke. It is a personal attack, which both of them laugh off as a joke, but it demonstrates the fear that Binx hides. Kate's questions have started an unpleasant trend, asking after Binx himself rather than the everydayness with which he has shrouded himself. At this point the narrator Binx feels the need to

stop showing us the action and steps into to explain away this little "passage." He claims it is a meaningless joke, a repeated conversation whose fresh meaning has been dulled in the same manner that talk about the weather is dulled between strangers. The reader however understands that Binx's war experience is actually the opposite of a dulled, meaningless joke. If Binx can attack Kate personally then she can use the details of what she understands about him against him as well. She addresses his chameleon tendencies, the suppression or malleability of his own individuality. "How do you appear so reasonable to Mother?" His response is that he truly feels reasonable with her, which implies that his personality can adapt itself to whatever is demanded of it. He need not be anything except what community wants him to be. This is a sharp observation by Kate and in effect, she is calling his bluff. I can see through your screens she tells him. I understand how scared you are because I share that fear. Binx must acknowledge her line of questioning at this point. She has claimed that "you're like me, but worse. Much worse" (MG 43)

This first conversation ends with Kate receding in anguish into her version of Binx's everydayness, her "objective" tone" (44). Binx reveals to the reader that he is actually aware of what has occurred. He addresses Kate's "dialectic" swing and states his own uneasiness "over the meagerness of her resources." What he fears is that she will swing into "some kind of dead-end where she must become aware of the dialectic" (46). Binx doubts the ability of anyone to sufficiently deal with knowledge of the dialectic. His own life up to this point has been a failed attempt to deal with that very awareness. His relationship with the everydayness has been a rough one. He cannot live totally under the sphere of his Aunt and his attempt to

create his own system of symbols has left him grasping at fleeting secretarial relationships. He still thinks that Kate is unaware of the process. However, soon in anger she puts him off telling him "You and I are not a pair of any sort" (47). She is telling him that because of his refusal to participate with her in the creation of symbols; they cannot help each other and so why talk about it. If Binx will not follow her along and help her build up the symbols they both need so desperately, then their relationship will be a failure. Binx then turns and makes a last appeal to his aunt's way of life. He desperately wants to "remember" her solutions to his problems of the self (54). Yet these solutions fail to encompass Binx's search; Emily's symbols only manage to account for part of the self and to someone sunk in them certainly Binx's "idea of a search seems absurd" (54). When Binx and Kate speak again, Kate reveals to him that she is indeed aware of the process of the self. She tells Binx about the car accident that killed her first fiancée, Lyell Lovell. She claims that "it gave me my life. That's my secret, just as the war is your secret" (58). The violence of the accident shocked her for the first time into recognition of the subjective nature of reality. It showed her the everydayness, just as Binx saw it for the first time while he lay wounded in a ditch in Korea. The first chapter ends with Kate, in despair, trying to adopt all of Binx's symbols as her own. Binx's role in this relationship sounds very much like his role with Sharon, "it has to do with her becoming something of a small boy and my not paying attention to her" (61). Binx notes that "she understands my movie going but in her own antic fashion" (63). Rather than using the movies as an attempt to regain the symbols of the world, Kate is attempting to absorb Binx's life as her own. She uses his language referring to a street as "certified." Binx believes this method is

doomed to failure:

> She sounds better but she is not. She is trapping herself, this time by being my buddy, best of all buddies and most privy to my little researches. In spite of everything she finds herself, even now, playing out the role. In her long nightmare, this our old friendship now itself falls victim to the grisly transmogrification by which she unfailingly turns everything she touches to horror. (63)

By not addressing her own individuality Kate is simply trying in yet one more way to abolish her self. She is trying to escape the pain of loneliness by the destruction of the self. Binx on the other hand is in the same position as with one of his secretaries. There is no interchange. They have recognized that they share an ability to define their own lives and yet neither can muster the strength to try. The cost of failure is too great.

The subsequent chapters of the novel can be dealt with in a somewhat shorter fashion than the first. In them the themes introduced in this first chapter are played out. The second chapter begins with Binx's description of his latest secretarial love, Sharon Kincaid. Binx continues to seek solstice from happy, carefree beauties rather than to seek companionship with Kate. This is because he has failed to admit the truth of Kate's statement, "You're like me. But worse." Binx is in denial that his construction of a life out away from Emily's sphere has been anything but a great success. He seeks his own image in his secretaries and yet that image is not to be found in them. They have not yet become aware of their own precarious existence as either castaways or searchers. Binx sets out to seduce Sharon during this chapter. He encourages her to accompany him on an

unnecessary business trip and learns that she is "already having dates" (71). This does not seem to slow Binx down and soon Sharon and Binx are traveling together out in the world. "It is a great joy to be with Sharon and to make money at it and to seem to pay no attention to her. As for Sharon: she finds nothing amiss in sitting in the little bucket seat with her knees doubled up in the sunshine, dress tucked under" (95). This is in sharp contrast to a relationship of intersubjectivity. Binx is acting as though he is paying no attention to her, as if she were an object and Sharon seems content to allow this to be so.

The second chapter finds Kate and Binx involved in an ongoing process of bonding. A slow advancement into the realm of intersubjectivity has started. Yet, unlike with his secretaries, this relationship begins to bloom at this stage rather than ending. Binx notes that with him "Kate feels obliged to keep one jump ahead of the conventional. When I answer the phone, instead of hearing "Hello, this is Kate," there comes into my ear a low-pitched voice saying something like: "Well, the knives have started flying," which means that she and her mother have been aggressive toward each other" (66). Rather than the "long silences" Kate and Binx's speech is struggling to "keep one jump ahead of the conventional." Binx admits "this is something of a strain for both of us, as I say, but I am glad to hear from her" (66).

Kate and Binx both experience an event during this chapter that will advance the urgency of their struggles. For Binx it is the demand by his uncle Jules that he should travel to Chicago on business. He claims

> that it is his fortune and misfortune to know how the spirit-presence of a strange place can enrich a man or rob a man but

> never leave him alone, how if a man travels lightly to a hundred strange cities and cares nothing for the risk he takes, he may find himself No one and No where. (99)

This is a declaration that the objective values of a place can affect the subjective value of a traveler to that place. If a person who recognizes his own subjectivity is not careful, his own sense of individualism can be suppressed by the objective values of society. Binx recognizes this trip as the end of his "life in Gentilly, [his] Little Way, [his] secret existence among the happy shades of Elysian Fields" (99) Kate as well has recognized the end of her own previous life. She has "discovered that a person does not have to be this or be that or be anything, not even oneself. One is free" (114). She has embraced total subjectivity and has left behind the oblivion of the everydayness. At the Binx remains doubtful of the value of subjectivity and his hesitancy to venture out with her, instills in her a great fear. Binx and Kate end the second chapter on the edge of a cliff, their ability to ignore despair is dropping away even as their perceptions of their own selves are increasing. Hope for the future of the couple is found in their persistence to communicate. "And my telling you would do no good. Tell me anyhow" (114).

The third chapter is the story of an extended attempt by Binx to deal with the fear of isolation that awareness of the self brings with it. He convinces Sharon Kincaid to venture out along the Gulf coast with him. Early in the chapter, Binx illustrates the danger involved in such an attempt and names it the "malaise." This concept explains why Binx remained hesitant to accept Kate's idea that "one is free." The identification of the self as an entity separate from the community does bring with it freedom. However, the identification of a subjective aspect of the self

can bring with it crushing loneliness and horrible responsibility for all actions taken by the self. The malaise is the "pain of loss," specifically the separation of the self from the world and the people in it, and "there remains only you and the world and you no more able to be in the world than Banquo's ghost" (120).

In order to suffer from the malaise, some sense of the process of self must first be achieved. For if one is entirely within the everydayness then in a sense one is not a self and cannot "suffer." Recognition of the process of self occurs through comparison of symbols. When Binx talks of his little "Red Ram Six" which he drove on a trip with his secretary Marcia, this symbolic process is evident. It was the perfect car for a "young Gentilly business man" (121). It should have invited no more attention than the brand of gasoline used to actually run the car or the name of a type of grass alongside the road. Yet, because it brought to mind so exactly the perfect image of a couple in a Dodge ad, comparison to that image was invited. This communal image attempts to identify what it is to be a couple and to own a new Dodge car. Yet, Binx and Marcia understand that this image contains nothing of their own individual selves. This act of comparison breaks down the everydayness by identifying the self and at the same time fails to reconcile the traveling couple with society. Without the numbing effect of everydayness to dull their sense of self, the two are caught in the malaise. Binx attempts to divert the painful recognition of the self with a sexual gesture, a despairing act since it attempts to ignore the self that the advertisement has highlighted. Binx notes the new freedom they experience because of the recognition of the self and at the same time their desire to be freed from the responsibility of choice. "We were free, moreover, to do that or anything else, but instead on we rushed, a little vortex

of despair moving through the world like the still eye of a hurricane" (121).

With this fear of isolation in mind Binx sets out with Sharon. Binx believes that his new car, a red MG, is "a miserable vehicle" with "a single virtue" (122). It is immune to the malaise. The reason that it is immune to the malaise can be located in the fact that conversation between its occupants is nearly impossible. There is no chance that they will begin to communicate with each other and realize the precarious nature of their selves because, "the noise [in the car] was deafening, the wind was like a hurricane" (122). After a slight car accident, Binx and Sharon are "restored to the anonymity of our little car-space" (125). When they eventually leave that anonymous space, they get into a conversation. The result of this conversation is that Binx realizes that Sharon is not who he assumed her to be and that consequently she cannot offer any permanent reconciliation between of his self. "The remarkable discovery forces itself upon me that I do not love her so wildly as I loved her last night. But at least there is no malaise" (MG 135). Binx realizes at this point that any relationship with Sharon will not provide a permanent solution to his problem. He claims that "it is not a bad thing to settle for the Little Way, not the big search for the big happiness but the sad little happiness of drinks and kisses, a good little car and a warm deep thigh" (MG 135-136). Sharon here has been totally objectified, she is thrown in as a set of lips and a thigh. Indeed, Binx's Little Way will soon prove to be ineffective for dealing with his own problems. The chapter finishes out in an episode that takes place in Binx's mother and stepfather's fishing camp. He had been taking Sharon there presumably to seduce her, but when they arrived the fishing camp is full of Binx's Catholic brothers and sisters. It is during this episode that Binx talks with his

invalid half brother Lonnie. Binx reveals to the reader that Lonnie "has the gift of believing he can offer his sufferings in reparation for men's indifference to the pierced heart of Jesus Christ. For another thing, [Binx] would not mind so much trading places with him. His life is a serene business" (137). Lonnie and Binx apparently share a form of the intersubjective relationship, in as much that they are both aware of the process of the self. "He looks around at me with the liveliest sense of the secret between us; the secret is that Sharon is not and never will be onto the little touches we see in the movie and, in the seeing, know that the other sees" (143). This seems be an example of an intersubjective relationship, but there are several problems. The extent of Binx's identification with Lonnie is that he like Binx is a moviegoer. Lonnie believes as a Christian. Binx however describes his own condition as invincible unbelief (145). He cannot believe that God is simply a demonstrable part of the world. He cannot however rule God out. He claims that the only starting place for his search lies within the nature of his self, his "own invincible apathy" of God. The reason that this is an effective starting point for Binx's search is that it will lead him to a better understanding of the nature of the self as a temporal/atemporal synthesis. It is literally beyond the current ability of his self to believe in God, even if "God presented himself, nothing would be changed" (147) He would only be able to view God from an objective standpoint, as a hallucination or a sign of insanity. In addition, Binx believes still that "the only sign is that all the signs in the world make no difference" (147). Binx steadfastly maintains doubt concerning the ability of communication to restore a valuation of the subjective. He talks of religion with Lonnie as if were a "game played by his rules" (163). Chapter three ends in

failure. Binx has been unable to defeat the isolation of the malaise through his relationship with Sharon. He is no further along the road to reconciliation between subjectivity and objectivity.

Chapter four finds Kate having tried a similar ploy to Binx's trip with Sharon. She has tried to "break out, or off, off dead center" by taking "six or eight capsules" (181) Having temporarily suppressed her own self, everything seemed "so—no 'count." This is not what she had expected the total freedom from objectivity to feel like. Her final attempt to deal with her internal misrelation on her own is a failure and thus she "urgently" tells Binx that she is going with him (182). So, off they go to Chicago. Binx's low valuation of the subjective becomes apparent as the major obstacle in their relationship.

> "You don't know what I mean," she cries in the same soft rapture. I know what she means all right. But I know something she doesn't know. Money is a good counterpoise to beauty. Beauty, the quest of beauty alone, is a whoredom. Ten years ago I pursued beauty and gave no thought to money. I listened to the lovely tunes of Mahler and felt a sickness in my very soul. Now I pursue money and on the whole feel better. (196)

Binx still believes symbols lack the power to defeat despair. He thinks that true reconciliation of the self cannot occur and the attempt only brings about a greater pain. One should attempt as hard as one can to sink back into the symbols of the community because during the moments when one is successful in doing so one feels "better." Kate then tells Binx that she finally understands their specific natures. She outlines herself as someone whose misrelation in the process of the

self has pushed her more towards her atemporal side, the side that according to Kierkegaard should be God. She calls herself a "religious person" and says "what I want is to believe in someone completely and then do what he wants me to do. If God were to tell me: Kate, here is what I want you to do [...] you think I would not do it?" (197) Binx though according to her has erred upon the other side of self. He has swung too far into individuality. He cannot even acknowledge the other because he doubts symbols as an indication of the other. He is "the most self centered person alive" (197). Kate then attempts to pull Binx out of his individuality by using sex. It is a failure. Their bodies were "neither hallowed by sacrament nor despised by spirit" (200). Without God's approval or disapproval though, this act lacks the power to symbolize unity or separation. If only God was a part of their paradigm, the sex act would locate Binx and Kate somewhere, anywhere along in the process of moving towards God. Without God holding the atemporal end of the self, though, the act itself does not symbolize anything in and off itself and thus fails to prove to Binx that symbols can indeed work. As soon as they step off the train, what Binx describes as the "genie-soul" of Chicago settles upon him. Binx spent a long time building up his own objective symbols in Gentilly and using those symbols to understand his self. Now though, he has been ripped from those symbols and is shown how tenuous those attempts to construct meaning by himself actually were. Not even Binx's love of business and his bond with other businessmen resists the total decimation of Binx's old way of existence. "But I have to get out of here, good fellows or no good fellows. Too much fellow feeling makes me nervous, to tell the truth." (206) Even the movies do not seem to help. After Binx and Kate watch The Young Philadelphians, Binx notes "Outside,

a new note has crept into the wind, a black williwaw sound straight from the terrible wastes to the north" (211). Their trip ends abruptly with a summons from Aunt Emily. She believes that Binx has violated some sort of trust in taking Kate off to Chicago. At the end of the chapter Binx is left wondering, "what are we to say, after all, and suppose the right word fails us" (218). The tenants of Binx's "Little Way" have been stripped from him. Sexuality, the joy of business, and moviegoing have all failed to deal with the despair that Binx feels. Further, he remains doubtful of any method that would serve to reconcile his disparate parts as he and Kate travel back home to confront Emily.

The last chapter begins with Aunt Emily attacking Binx. She declares that she has failed to understand his life. He is not the person that she "had placed great hopes" in and he is a "stranger" to her (221). He has violated all of the rules and codes she lives by and has abused Kate in the process. Binx desperately attempts to maintain some sense of participation in Emily's symbols, for he knows now that his girl chasing, movie watching, and moneymaking are incapable of helping him. "I try as best I can to appear as she would have me, as being, if not right, then wrong in a recognizable, a right form of wrongness. But I can think of nothing to say" (222). Emily gives credence to Binx's worst fear that words, and symbols, have no power to address the world. "There is another one of my hidden assumptions. All these years I have been assuming that between us words mean roughly the same thing, that among certain people, gentlefolk I don't mind calling them, there exists a set of meanings held in common" (222). Emily's symbols have already failed Binx, in truth before the start of the novel, but now he becomes totally isolated in his subjectivity. Binx leaves Emily despairing of everything. If

even words do not work then the entire process by which he and Kate have been growing closer is a failure as well. Their interaction has only accomplished what he thought it would, the destruction of his way of life. It is at this moment when Binx reaches his lowest point:

> Now in the thirty-first year of my dark pilgrimage on this earth and knowing less than I ever knew before, having learned only to recognize merde when I see it, having inherited no more from my father than a good nose for merde, for every species of shit that flies—my only talent—smelling merde from every quarter, living in fact in the very century of merde, the great shithouse of scientific humanism where needs are satisfied, everyone becomes an anyone, a warm and creative person, and prospers like a dung beetle, and one hundred percent of people are humanists and ninety-eight percent believe in God, and men are dead, dead, dead; and the malaise has settled like a fall out and what people really fear is not that the bomb will fall but that the bomb will not fall. (228)

He abandons his attempt to reconcile the atemporal and the temporal parts of his self. His search "is no match for my aunt, her rightness and her despair, her despairing of me and her despairing of herself" (228) He believes that words have failed him and that Kate has been taken back into the fold of the everydayness. Further, he totally doubts the ability of that an objective community to recognize his own individual self. The only thing left to do is to "find a girl" to seek respite from the pain of total isolation from community. His attempt to get back in touch

with Sharon only gets him in touch with her roommate Joyce. Binx is quite forward and suggests that Joyce and he meet. "It is too much trouble to listen" though (230). This "Little Way" has already been ruled out and Binx is only saved by Kate's return. Kate arrives like a "bomber pilot" and upon seeing her Binx realizes that their words have mattered. Communication between their selves had occurred. Binx sees her and "she could be I myself, sooty eyed and nowhere" (231). Binx has stepped over from the isolation he has felt previously and realizes that his symbols have gotten through to Kate. She has resisted the everydayness and is left isolated and a nonentity, except for her definition in regards to his own self. He is the thing against which she will measure herself. Binx realizes now that he can participate in a community of meaning that does not ignore his self. He reaches the intersubjective condition of shared meaning with the words "she could be I myself." Binx now realizes that there is only one thing he can do with the rest of his life, "listen to people, see how they stick themselves into the world, hand them along a ways in their dark journey and be handed along, and for good and selfish reasons" (233). He has realized that symbols do have the power to address subjectivity and that they can serve as some balm to that self. He now believes that by using symbols he might help others to achieve what he has achieved, a reconciliation of community and self. It is not too late for people to "discover themselves to be themselves and live merrily as children" (231). In the Epilogue, one sees that Binx has set about writing down his struggle. He will continue his relationship with Kate while providing something for her to measure herself against. He no longer flees from the everydayness in order to define himself and no longer suffers isolation from society.

This is the best life such a man could lead. Binx has managed to gain freedom from the total grip of objectivity without suffering total subjective isolation. One reading of the end of the novel is that Binx has not yet come to the point where he can recognize God through symbols. He will not ever be able to do so, because he has excluded God from the beginning. After Binx's faith in symbols has been restored, he watches the "middle class" black fellow coming out of church,. The man probably has received ashes on his forehead as part of the Ash Wednesday ritual. For Binx though, "it is impossible to be sure that he received the ashes" (235). Binx cannot tell whether the man is participating in religion as a part of "the complex business of coming up in the world," as a part of society, or whether this has been a true symbol and God himself is present here on the street corner to receive that symbol. Binx has realized though that there is a third option, that both are true. To Binx though, it remains "impossible to say" (235). However, he has uncovered a way of coping through the participation in symbolization. He has balanced his self by coming to see value in the subjective as well as the objective. Binx in the Epilogue demonstrates that he has read Kierkegaard and understands the nature of his limitations.

> I have not the authority, as the great Danish philosopher declared, to speak of such matters in any way other than edifying. For another thing, it is not open to me even to be edifying, since the time is much later than his, much too late to edify or do much of anything except plant a foot in the right place as the opportunity presents itself. (237)

His newfound reconciliation has not turned him into a new age prophet. He has

no gospel to deliver unto the masses. All he can do is examine what people say and their bond to the world. If possible he will help them come to some reconciliation in their process of the self as they help him to do the same. Edification implies a direction and Binx's self remains a relativistic point in between community and individualism. It is a stable existence now that he can participate in symbolism properly and by doing so he has come to revalue his own subjectivity. However, it remains a position that offers no ultimate truth.

However, a word about Christianity is necessary at this point. As J.P. Telotte has noted:

> Percy believes that this alienation [that Binx suffered] is partly the natural consequence of the primal Fall of Man, that universal estrangement from God and the meaning that He infused into the world. [...] Perhaps man has finally come to the point, [...], where he no longer adequately uses or even properly understands that gift of language by which he deals with his fallen world. A converse and more hopeful principal also suggests itself; if man recognizes this interrelationship, he may uncover a way of coping with his situation through those linguistic abilities. (Charles 73)

One must recognize God's place within the self in order to seek salvation. Once located anywhere in the process of a movement towards God, even in sin, a goal becomes evident. This belief changes Binx's what could be understood as words of comfort over Lonnie's death to his brothers and sisters into a declaration of his newfound faith. Binx responds with a simple "Yes" to Donice's question about the Rapture. The possibility or nonpossibility of Binx's salvation by God depends

upon the posture of the reader. The text is obscure enough to support both ideas. If a reader believes that the rise of objective scientism has occurred within the realm of the self, then Binx is incapable of experiencing salvation. However, if a reader understands this objective posture to be external to the human self, then the possibility of salvation is present.

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