

## Undefined Man: Sartrean Reading of American Novelist Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer*

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**Abstract:** This paper is an exploration of the cross-cultural influence of Jean-Paul Sartre on Walker Percy, through a detailed analysis of the novel *The Moviegoer*.

Jean-Paul Sartre was a twentieth century French existentialist philosopher whose theory of existential freedom is regarded as a positive thought that provides human beings infinite possibilities to hope and to create. It is specifically significant when the world is facing global crisis in economics, politics, and human behavior.

*The Moviegoer* was the first novel by Walker Percy, one of the few philosophical novelists in America, who was very much influenced by Jean-Paul Sartre. Binx Bolling, the existentialist hero in the novel, must decide how to live his life in this world. He does not feel comfortable when Aunt Emily makes family stories to transfigure him, and when she preaches Stoicism as instructions in how to become a man. As an intentional consciousness, he feels he loses all the ability to think and to act. He starts a metaphysical search hinted by a new way of looking at the world around him to transcend "everydayness." The paper is an attempt to apply Sartre's theory of existential freedom as an approach to see how Binx resists, falls into, and resists again Aunt Emily's tricks and traps of confinement and becomes a man undefined.

**Keywords:** Being-in-itself, being-for-itself, being-for-others, existential freedom, undefined

### 1. Introduction

Walker Percy was one of the few philosophical novelists in America. His novels are first philosophy and then literature. Though he was influenced the most by Soren Kierkegaard, the nineteenth century Danish existentialist philosopher, he no doubt had a great deal of affinities with Jean-Paul Sartre, the twentieth century French existentialist philosopher. His first novel *The Moviegoer* was written after he read Sartre's *Nausea*. *The Moviegoer* tells the story of an existential hero Binx Bolling who must decide how to live his life in this world. Binx engages in a "search," a search for meaning, "a search that is what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life" (Percy, *MG*, 1961, p.17)<sup>1</sup>. His aunt Emily tries to confine Binx into a man she wishes him to be; however, Binx keeps a sense of wonder, grasping the freedom of choice, and making himself an undefined man, a man with the ability and possibility to become anew, to transcend. Sartre's theory of existential freedom is applied

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<sup>1</sup> *MG*, in this paper is the abbreviation of the novel by Walker Percy *The Moviegoer*.

as an approach to see how Binx is resisting, falling into, and resisting again Emily's tricks and traps of confinement and making himself a man undefined.

## 2. Sartre's Influence in the US and Percy's Affinity with Sartre

### 2.1. Jean-Paul Sartre

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) was a key figure of the twentieth-century philosophy and literature. As the icon of existentialist philosophy, Sartre presented numerous writings, rich in ideas, both to his contemporaries and to the generations that followed. His famous phrase "Existence precedes essence" claims that the human being is fundamentally free and no other being or God controls him, and he makes his own world through his project. Sartre proposed the view that centered on the notion of absolute freedom and choice. Conceiving each individual as empowered with this freedom and choice, this view was no doubt highly demanding and required not only private but also public engagement. Existentialism is a philosophy for the actual individual in the real world, a concrete practical philosophy (Daigle, 2009, p. 1; Craib, 1976, p. 4).

Sartre is a total intellectual who wrote vast literature that contributed to philosophy, literature, drama, and cinema. In 1938, his most famous philosophical novel *Nausea* was published by Gallimard. *Being and Nothingness*, the first important philosophical text was published in 1943. The two important plays are *The Flies* in 1943, and *No Exit* in 1944, which make the audience think about the human condition and reflect on important ethical problems, and which are an occasion for Sartre to revisit his philosophical ideas in a different form. His other philosophical and literary essays include *Anti-Semite and Jew* in 1946 and the important text of the public conference *Existentialism Is a Humanism* in 1946.

When Sartre first visited the US in 1943, he was not warmly welcomed. His philosophy was regarded only as a French vogue and later described by the magazine and newspaper reporters as despair. The title of the report itself "French and American Pessimism" by Albert Guerard (1945) in *Harper's Magazine* expressed clearly the leitmotif of pessimism (p. 276). Sartre strongly denied this negative charge by the critics and commentators; however, Oliver Barres (1947), a Yale Divinity School student, declared in a review of *Existentialism* that "no matter how Jean-Paul Sartre tries to wriggle out of the accusation, his existentialism is a philosophy of despair" (p.14). The first article on Sartre in *Life*, "Existentialism: Postwar Paris Enthrones a Bleak Philosophy of Pessimism", impressed the readers with a list of words describing the man in Sartre's philosophy, a very sad, hopeless man with no future. Bernard Frizell (1946), a novelist and Paris correspondent for *Life*, wrote, "man is fearful, impure, hesitant, evil, guilty, egotistical, self-enclosed, unapproachable, tragic and worried" (p. 59). Barres deplored Sartre's emphasis on individual isolation: "This is man's world, says Sartre, and no one can help him out of it. Here on this mysterious sea of drowning swimmers, arms trash the water in panic and voices cry out for help, but all in vain" (p. 14). John Lackey Brown, a professor of French at Catholic University before the war who was a Paris correspondent for the *New York Times* between 1945 and 1948, argued in his article "Paris, 1946: Its Three War Philosophies" that "Few mortals can live the courageous and hopeless despair preached by Sartre" (quoted in Fulton, 1999, p. 29).

Like the magazine and newspaper reporters, many professional philosophers viewed Sartre's philosophy as an evanescent postwar mood that revealed no universal truth. His thought was viewed to be only a literary movement, being philosophically naïve, antiscientific, failing to place the individual within the world of sense data, away from American analytical philosophy. However, there were some voices that reminded people of this new thought from Europe. Columbia University professor Justus Buchler (1947) felt it necessary to remind colleagues: "To call it a mere reflection of modern confusion, [...], seems at best an oversimplification." Buchler also found value in the attention Sartre paid to the moral categories of despair, absurdity, and the choice of oneself (p. 449). William Barrett was one of the few American philosophers of this period who actively encouraged colleagues to consider the merits of existentialism. He said that Sartre's philosophy's "very somberness went against the grain of our native youthfulness and optimism" (Barrett, 1961, p. 9). This old theme surfaced once again in the response to Sartre. As the editorial board member of *Partisan Review*, Barrett was eager to introduce Americans to new currents circulating in Europe, and he himself wrote "What Is Existentialism?" and *Partisan Review* published it as a separate pamphlet in 1947. The five American philosophers Barrett, Buchler, Grene, Kraushaar, and Roy Sellars, though they revealed disagreements on different points at different times, all highly praised Sartre's reinforcement of the idea that the individual had a certain freedom to choose and an obligation to choose responsibly. They also positively responded to his effort to understand social interaction through the vantage point of the individual. They praised Sartre for recognizing that increasingly bureaucratic and technological societies tended to produce a sense of social alienation and loss of personal identity. They applauded his attention to the difficulties of mass society for the individual. Buchler praised particularly the fact that existentialists "have caught forcefully the great fact of tragedy in modern life," that is, the sense of purposelessness of meaningful activities as common contemporary problems in complex industrial societies (p. 449).

In the 1950s as the popularity and fashion of existentialism increased, the American thinkers slowly moved away from the popular view of it and "demonstrated its relevance to American culture" (Cotkin, 2003, p. 104). By the end of 1940s, New York City became the intellectual and cultural center of the United States. These thinkers started to regard Sartre's thought as a philosophical endeavor to be taken seriously.

Many aspects of an existential perspective among New York artists can be detected. Novelist Saul Bellow's first novel *The Dangling Man* (1947) showed existential themes and had affinity with Sartre's *Nausea*. As an aesthician at the University of Cincinnati, Van Meter Ames (1951), in "Existentialism and the Arts," an article published in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, applauded Sartre's vision of art "as a creative activity in the service of freedom and control for a good life" (p. 256). Catherine Rau (1950), at the University of California, Berkeley, also praised Sartre in "The Aesthetic Views of Jean-Paul Sartre," an article published in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* for presenting art as an engine for democratic social progress (pp. 146-47). As argued by Ann Fulton (1999), the American scholars particularly appreciated Sartre's emphasis on "individual freedom, personal responsibility, and authenticity, [which are] interlocking concepts in Sartrean morality" (p. 73). According to Fulton (1999), "The drift of American philosophy away from *a priori* ethical values meant that Sartre's central moral premise would find resonance in the United States", and American philosophers

“acknowledged that the moral ambiguity of Sartre’s universe mirrored the situation in which many people in the mid-twentieth century Western society found themselves” (p. 74).

Marjorie Grene published in 1948 *Dreadful Freedom: A Critique of Existentialism*, which helped to popularize existentialism in America. She described existentialism as a “penetrating statement of our old disheartenment, a new expression of an old despair” (p.149). She especially appreciated its emphasis on revolt and responsibility. She decided Sartre’s main contribution was precisely its correction of philosophies that found values emerging from factors largely independent of human choice: “It is the attempt to show the genesis of human values from the core of humanity that makes some of Sartre’s ethical analysis—if not valid, at least terribly interesting” (p.10). She also noted that “What the existentialist admires is not the happiness of a man’s life, the goodness of his disposition or the rightness of his acts, but the authenticity of his existence” (Grene, 1976, p. 50).

Hannah Arendt published her monumental work *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in 1951. In 1964 she published two essays “What is Existenz Philosophy?” and “French Existentialism” in *Partisan Review* and *The Nation*. She found “French existentialism courageously refused to turn to the past for inspiration or nostalgia”, “engaged the problems of the world” “heroically and rebelliously”, yet she “detected a hint of nihilism in French existential philosophy” (Cotkin, 2003, p. 137). The professor John Wild produced *The Challenge of Existentialism* in 1955 in which he discussed existentialism as a philosophy that concerns the individual’s “freedom and dignity” (p. 25).

In 1956, Walter Kaufmann’s anthology *Existentialism: From Dostoevsky to Sartre* was published in America. This anthology became the course reading material for undergraduates in universities and it indicated that the interpretation of existentialism shifted from mere philosophy to both philosophy and literature. Kaufmann voiced high praise for Sartre on his thought, personality, and versatility. It is known that existentialism had come to the attention of a wide international audience through the work of Jean-Paul Sartre. “Even Heidegger’s great prestige in Germany after the second World War is due, in no small part, to his tremendous impact on French thought” (p. 40). Sartre was a philosopher in the French tradition, and it was hard to imagine how much attention he would receive in philosophical history in later years, however, there was no doubt that he would be remembered for his “unprecedented versatility: he is much more interesting than most of his contemporaries ...” (p. 41).

*Irrational Man* (1958), written by William Barrett, professor of philosophy at New York University, was one of the most popular books of existentialism penned by an American and according to Fulton (1999, p. 116), it became a “bestseller” in its field. “Barrett explored not only the historical context of existentialism but its sociological significance as well” (Fulton, 1999, p. 116). In his book he stated that “the essential freedom, the ultimate and final freedom that cannot be taken from a man, is to say *No*. This is the basic premise in Sartre’s view of human freedom: freedom is in its very essence negative, though this negativity is also creative” (Barrett, 1958, p. 215). He treated Sartre as a man in a moment of heroism.

Hazel E. Barnes, who translated Sartre’s works into English, discovered French existentialism with fascination. She entered in 1948 on “her life quest to make French existentialism central to the discourse of American intellectual life” (quoted in Cotkin, 2003, p. 151). Moreover, in her memoir *The Story I Tell Myself* (1977), she showed her French existentialism in a new light that

gave great emphasis to the “optimistic aspects of Existentialism” (Barnes, 1977, p. 162). Barnes translated Sartre’s fundamental work *Being and Nothingness*, which was a great success. Not only did she translate the language, but also the style of Sartre. She had the intention to translate the mood of French existentialism into something that Americans were familiar with and felt useful. In a particularly fascinating way, Barnes intended to transform the pessimistic elements of existentialist doctrine into a humanistic perspective. She asked readers to think about the commitments of Sartre to greater freedom. With her translation of *Being and Nothingness* into English in 1957, Sartre’s philosophy was introduced to the English world, and he gathered a reputation in the intellectual world. His name was increasingly becoming popular.

It is reasonable to claim, as Bernard-Henri Levy did in the title of his book *Le Siecle de Sartre* (2000), that the twentieth century was “Sartre’s century.” Again as Benedict O’Donohoe and Roy Elveton titled their book *Sartre’s Second Century* (2009), the twentieth-first century is very possibly “Sartre’s second century,” because his works of philosophy and literature continue affecting the minds of people and the world.

## 2.2. Walker Percy

“Walker Percy, I understand, was ‘an existentialist,’” said his brother Phin Percy in an interview with David Horace Harwell. “He had a fierce regard for man’s fate” (Harwell, 2006, p. 179). He has become one of the few philosophical novelists in America. He started his career as a medical student. Unfortunately, he contracted tuberculosis during his internship at Bellevue Hospital. However, he got his turning point in life due to this misfortune. As a patient rather than a doctor, he read books by novelists and philosophers which his scientific education had prevented him from discovering. These were the existentialists and their thoughts. He learned from Kierkegaard that man is essentially free and from Sartre that man is free to choose how to live, one takes on a tremendous responsibility for the consequences of his acts. His discovery in New Mexico’s desert, the “locus of pure possibility...[where] what a man can be the next minute bears no relation to what he is or what he was a minute before,” (Percy, *LG*, 1967, p. 356)<sup>2</sup> struck him as the motif for further thought on the human condition of existence. The historian Lewis Baker (1983) wrote that Walker Percy “emerged from the desert committed to exploring the inner side of life through art” (pp. 179-80). Percy’s novels are philosophy first, then literature. His first novel *The Moviegoer* (1961), published by Knopf, tells the story of Binx Bolling, an existential hero who must decide how to live his life. As Percy’s breakthrough in writing, the book received the National Book Award in 1962. *The Last Gentleman* (1966), his second novel nominated for the National Book Award, received critical praise for the credible sensibility of its hero, Will Barrett. The third novel, *Love in the Ruins*, which portrays a hero called Dr. Thomas More, a deliberated choice of name, met his readers in 1971. By 1975, Percy had published nearly two dozen articles, essays, and reviews on language, alienation, and faith, which later were collected into a book called *The Message in the Bottle*. The two novels following the *Message* are *Lancelot* (1977) and *The Second Coming* (1980). Percy’s second nonfiction work is *Lost in the Cosmos* (1983), which takes the philosophical, linguistic, and

<sup>2</sup> *LG*, in this paper is the abbreviation of the novel by Walker Percy *The Last Gentleman*.

psychological ideas he advanced in the *Message* and puts them in a more popular form. His other novel *The Thanatos Syndrome* (1987) is a sequel to *Love in the Ruins*.

Percy defined himself as the sort of novelist he has in mind in *The Message in the Bottle*:

I locate him not on a scale of merit—he is not necessarily a good novelist—but in terms of goals. He is ... a writer who has an explicit and ultimate concern with the nature of man and the nature of reality where man finds himself. Instead of constructing a plot and creating a cast of characters from a world familiar to everybody, he is more apt to set forth with a stranger in a strange land where the signposts are enigmatic but which he sets out to explore nevertheless. (pp. 102-03)

The critic Lewis A. Lawson (1985) wrote that Percy was primarily a moralist, and a stylist and writer of poetic prose secondarily (p. 509). Gail Godwin (1987), writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, agreed that Percy is “a strongly persuasive moralist,” noting that he has a talent of “being able to dramatize metaphysics,” probing into the big questions: Where did man come from? What does he know? How does he know? Where is man bound for after life? (p. 23). His parents’ death and his own suffering from the disease tuberculosis gave him a unique experience and distinguished him from other writers. Most critics say that Percy is no wiser than other writers when he is writing, but he is subject to “species of affliction which sets him apart and gives him an odd point of view. The wounded man has a better view of the battle than those still shooting” (Percy, *MB*, 1975, p. 101)<sup>3</sup>. With the background of a physician and scientist, the novelist Percy diagnosed the spiritual illnesses of Western man. In his existential novels, he examined and dramatized the illnesses of his hero, and prescribed him steps to a cure. Percy’s novels usually end in fellowship. He built a dialogue of husband and wife, son and father-figure, priest and confessor, or psychiatrist and patient, creating a bond between these people, which is so powerful a medicine against the malaise of alienation and despair in a rootless mass society.

Though Percy is influenced the most by Soren Kierkegaard, the nineteenth century Danish religious existentialist philosopher, however, he no doubt has a great deal of affinity with Jean-Paul Sartre, the twentieth century French existentialist philosopher. His answers in the Self-Interview *Questions They Never Asked Me* (1989) revealed to us that his thoughts and ideas go in line with Sartre’s concepts in *Being and Nothingness*:

A: ... (and what in this day and age I think a serious writer has to be): an ex-suicide, a cipher, naught, zero — which is as it should be because being a naught is the very condition of making anything. This is a secret. People don’t know this. Even distinguished critics are under the misapprehension that you are something, a substance, that you represent this or that tradition, a skill, a growing store of wisdom. Whereas in fact what you are doing is stripping yourself naked and putting yourself in the eye of the hurricane and leaving the rest to chance, luck or providence. (Percy, 1989, pp. 82-83)

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<sup>3</sup> *MB*, in this paper is the abbreviation of the novel by Walker Percy *The Message In The Bottle*.



Percy states that zero, or naught is a precondition for a writer to make anything, to create anything new. Being zero or naught gives the writer the possibilities of being free, free to think and free to act. This sense of freedom derives from Sartre's central term to his existential freedom--nothingness. Nothingness is the emptiness inside the human being. With the possession of the emptiness in him, the conscious being is made possible to perceive the world and act in it. Nothingness brings freedom. Percy understands the meaning of nothingness, and the possibilities freedom could offer to writers.

Percy once wrote an essay called "Symbol as Hermeneutic in Existentialism," in which he praised Sartre's insight into the human condition. Percy credited Sartre with accurately describing the "predicament" of being human: the feeling of inner emptiness; of nothingness; the inability to know what one is, to discover an identity or name that fits; and the consequent desire to seek out ways of living in "bad faith"—assuming a false identity, an impersonation, to fill in the void. Moreover, both would agree that to live authentically means to recognize the uniqueness of one's situation, refuse to live in bad faith, and take responsibility for one's choices and actions (Scullin, 1991, p.110).

Percy spoke highly on Sartre's thought on human condition, especially the "predicament" of being human: the human individual being thrown into the world with nothing as a guide; the burden of freedom constantly takes him away from being an authentic man, but being in "bad faith," which is self-deceiving, recognizing himself as a defined man. However, both Percy and Sartre applauded the uniqueness of any individual who takes responsibility when making authentic choices and taking actions.

Once Percy told interviewers that "What I admire most ... is the modern French novel. I like its absolute seriousness in its investigation of human reality. A novel like Sartre's *Nausea*, for instance, is a revolution in its technique for rendering a concrete situation, and it has certainly influenced me" (Brown, 1967, p.15) and "I think the European novelist is much more metaphysically oriented than the American novelist; ... he has much more interest in the nature of reality, [and] what reality is like. I always was closer to Frenchmen like Sartre or Camus or Marcel" (Cremeens, 1985, p. 31).

As he tried to remember, Percy believed that his interest in existentialism started from Sartre, through reading his *Nausea* (Carr, 1985, p. 60). Percy said in an interview with Bunting: "I was influenced by Sartre in his first novel, *Nausea*, which is to me very good and very well done. It influenced me because the idea of having a certain belief and then trying to communicate it through a novel, through a concrete situation — a man set down in a certain situation — was very exciting" (Bunting, 1985, p. 44). "It was precisely this interest in philosophy which led directly to the writing of a novel, '*The Moviegoer*,' Percy told Serebnick. Like French thinkers and novelists, "I use the fiction form as a vehicle for incarnating ideas, as did Jean-Paul Sartre and Gabriel Marcel. I long ago decided that my philosophy is in the vein of the existentialist, as theirs were" (Keith, 1985, p. 9).

As a novelist, Percy is distinctive from other writers since he used to be a physician, a scientist. This provides him with double vision to view the world, and for his heroes to search in their lives. Hobson (1988) wrote that Percy "uses art to reveal truths about the human predicament" (p. 12). According to Percy, science is unable to say anything meaningful about the individual but only about how the individual is *like* other men. Existentialism really

concerns the human being as an individual. Percy believed that existentialism “[...] means a concrete view of man, man in a situation, man in a predicament, man’s anxiety ... I believe this view of man could be handled very well in a novel, and I was interested in phenomenology, which is very strongly existentialist: the idea of describing accurately how a man feels in a given situation” (Carr, 1985, p. 61).

The existentialist Percy tries to present to the readers a new view of human existence. He is the one who has the power to make independent choices about how he should live and think, and he is the one who is on the search, a lifelong search. Sartre says the human individual is free to make a choice and that choice bears responsibility. When he is making the choice, he is creating his value. If he is making a choice by taking the freedom given to him, he is following a path to an authentic self. If not, he is in “bad faith.” Human beings are “condemned to be free,” free in making choices, in making decisions and creating values. The human being has no defined nature as being-for-itself is not what it is and is what it is not, and the human being is always in the process of projecting a new identity as he is making new choices and creating new values. Percy’s hero is not following advertisers or experts, and he is not willing to be defined by set values and judgment, and he is making his own choices, and projecting a new self, searching for a new self, the authentic self. This new view of the human individual by Percy is in Sartre’s eye the authentic self, searching for a true life that bears meaning.

By saying undefined, I particularly mean the non-fixed nature of man, or no established identity which is made possible by nothingness in which freedom is infinite and absolute. Man will never cease to create himself into new essence. He is always able to move toward the future, and he is a man of hope. That is the positive tone of Sartre’s existential philosophy.

### 3. Scholarly Research on Walker Percy’s *The Moviegoer*

Cold War culture is one of the major perspectives in the analysis of Percy’s *The Moviegoer*. Early in 1997, Margot Henriksen in her study of American Cold War culture says that Binx in *The Moviegoer* suffers from malaise, the evidence of Cold War anxiety. To elaborate more on Henriksen’s study in Cold War culture, Virginia Nickles Osborne writes a study in 2009. She does not believe that Binx is journeying through an existential search to deal with the alienation of the modern age, but thinks that Binx is attempting to “negotiate” the “complex position” in the Cold War American South; however, he remains unable to achieve it. Binx is aware of the war situation and the atomic threat, and also makes efforts to “reconcile the southern past with the present uncertain American culture,” but finally finds no way out (pp.106-25). They both have the doubt that southern culture has integrated into the mainstream American culture.

Different from their ideas, however, in an analysis of the South’s modernization in *The New South*, Numan Bartley (1995) argues that in *The Moviegoer* Binx’ experience points up an increasingly individualized society and that the American southern literature has moved away from its regional concern and joins the rest of the nation in the age of alienation. The southerners “shed [ding] the values of an older South, the New South had become a place where credit cards defined an individual’s identity” (pp. 266-267).

The following studies address searches, especially the existential searches of Binx Bolling. Stylistic analysis of the novel by Richard Pindell (1989, p. 103), “Basking in the Eye of the



Storm,” discusses the role of Binx who exemplifies Miss Flannery O’Connor’s statement “At its best, our age is an age of searchers and discoverers, and at its worst, an age that has domesticated despair and learned to live with it happily.” Binx becomes a searcher who learns to practice the arts of openness and kindness and finds the true relationship with the community by the end of the novel; and who also, according to Percy, “enjoys his alienation” (Brown, 1967, p. 7). Binx in both positive and negative ways performs his roles. Lewis A. Lawson (2003), in his “From Tolstoy to Dostoyevsky” writes that *The Moviegoer* demonstrates a philosophical transition from Tolstoy to Dostoyevsky in Walker Percy through his protagonist Binx Bolling. Percy (1975, p. 86) states that the artist needs to look “for truth within himself” which is manifested in his essay “The Man on the Train.” Percy regards Dostoyevsky as the great artist on the depiction of the alienated person searching for God. In “The Dream Screen”, Lewis A. Lawson (1994) addresses from the perspective of dream and fantasy Binx Bolling’s recollection of his search, believing that the movie screen is his dream screen where the typical stories of a man’s life are shown (pp. 25-55). In his essay *Walker Percy and the Little Way*, John J. Desmond (1991) states that Percy sets this opposition between the comfortable life in the Little Way (referring to Gentilly) and the life of search. However, the real issue, he argues is not to choose one or the other, but to pursue “the big search for the big happiness” within this “sad little happiness of drinks and kisses, a good little car and a warm deep thigh” (*MG*, pp. 110-11). Binx recognizes the feeling of despair out of the everydayness of “drinks and kisses” and attempts to search for truth within himself to overcome despair. This Little Way, a language symbol, serves as the means to reconcile the “big search” and the “sad little life” (Desmond, 1991, p. 290). William Rodney Allen (1986), in his second chapter “Self-Deception and Waking Dreams in Gentilly” believes that “*The Moviegoer* shows the profound influence of European existential thought. [...] [It] is the best French existential novel in our language” (Allen, 1986, p. 19). Percy denies the major influence on him by American writers, and the first novel convincingly shows the fact. Despair is a favorite term of the existentialists, and despair arises out of man’s awareness of his freedom; however, “authentic” man faces it while “inauthentic” man hides it. *The Moviegoer* is a journey of exploration of existential anguish from start to finish, and it is essentially Binx’ progression from diversion to admission of despair or from “inauthentic” to “authentic” choice. The above essays have compared *The Moviegoer* loosely with several other writers’ novels in exploring the existential issue. This paper will specifically apply Sartre’s existential freedom in exploring how Binx seeks ways to keep himself alert so as to become a man undefined. The focus of this paper is on Sartre’s philosophy’s positive tone, with being-for-itself never willing to be objectified by being-in-itself, with being-for-itself possessing infinite freedom made possible by nothingness to create oneself into new identity. Sartre’s idea is conceived as a motion state of the human being always projecting toward the future. The human being is a free and conscious being, a man of hope.

#### 4. Key Concepts of Sartre’s Existential Freedom

Atheistically speaking, man is free in the sense of not being determined. He will be what he will have made of himself and responsible for what he is. Ontologically speaking, man is free in the sense of possessing nothingness within himself. He is propelled by nothingness to make

himself into something.

Sartre presents two modes of being in one world to demonstrate the freedom embedded in each individual being. They are being-in-itself (*en soi*) and being-for-itself (*pour soi*). **Being-in-itself** is its own foundation. It is founded upon itself and not upon any other thing. It is self-sufficient, uncreated and unchanging. It has always been and will always be. Being-in-itself is an object which has the determined essence, like mountains, stones, or chairs, “all this is not human” and “unconscious being” (Busch, 1990, p. 23) and it is “solid and massif”(Warnock, 1970, p. 94). It is characterized as what it is, as being subjected to the principle of identity. Sartre claims that being-in-itself is full, a fullness of being without lack that makes changes possible, and it is “as full [...] as an egg” (Sartre, *RP*, 1973, p. 62)<sup>4</sup>. **Being-for-itself** is not its own foundation. It does not exist fundamentally. It borrows its being from being-in-itself and is entirely dependent on something other than itself (Cox, 2009). It is not an object with a determined nature. It is the subject or human consciousness like the stream, winding its way toward possibilities, making himself in whatever way he chooses. He won’t cease to open and expand himself toward a possibility of being; he will never be able to fully achieve that possibility, for new possibilities always arise before man dies. Therefore, as long as he is alive, man is never subjected to the principle of identity.

The discussion of two modes of being demonstrates to us how man exists in this world. While being-in-itself is an object always being what it is, being-for-itself is a subject, as a totally free being, never being what he is, and being what he is not and he continues to open, expand and create himself toward future possibilities. This freedom is absolute, and he is condemned to be free.

Talking about man’s relationship with others, however, Sartre has a third mode of being, being-for-others, which to some extent confines human freedom. Therefore, it is necessary to see how being-for-others is specifically described. **Being-for-others** is referring to human relationship. While I see the other person who is a subject, being-for-itself, this subject appears to be an object, a mere being-in-itself who is congealed by my gaze, and who is no different from all the inanimate bodies I perceive around myself. However, his gaze at me reveals himself to me as being-for-itself, a subject, a consciousness, a free agent, able to transcend itself and project to the future. And his gaze at me also makes him able to transcend me, to change me from a subject a moment ago, being-for-itself, into an object, being-in-itself, from a free project into a determined thing—as I can change him by my gaze. In Sartre’s words, I am “objectified” by his gaze. When looking at the other person, I become the master, and when he is looking at me, the other person makes me a slave, losing the power to project, indicating a conflict in our relationship, with two transcendences trying to get the dominant part.

Sartre’s “gaze” does not mean precisely the gaze of the eyes of the other person, as physiological organs, which look at me: it means the other person as a subject, a human consciousness. We do not exist by ourselves, but we exist with others. We are living under the judgments and evaluations of others. This gaze of the other person includes all kinds of judgments and evaluations. When being gazed at, I become the object in the eyes of the other person, to whom I am reduced to the status of being judged and evaluated. He is able to describe

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<sup>4</sup> *RP*, in this paper is the abbreviation of the novel by Jean-Paul Sartre *The Reprieve*.

me, to conceive me, and even to predict my thought and my act. He is making his assessment on me. I am deprived of any freedom to act, think or to perceive. Of course, I can gain back my freedom by looking back at the other person, to reduce him from his subjectivity into a petrified object, losing the power to project toward possibilities. Sartre realizes that this whole relationship between one human being and another is “a conflict.” He says, “Hell is Other People” (*NE*, 1955, p. 47).<sup>5</sup>

### 5. Emily’s Confinement as Being-in-itself, and Binx’s Wonder as Being-for-itself

It is significant for Binx to have this awakening and recovery. Binx has the awakening so that he starts his search, the metaphysical search that is initiated by a new way of looking at the world around him. Binx has a desire to preserve a sense of wonder, the spirit of exploration of the way things are and the way human beings are. He strives to find some kind of “lodgement and anchorage” in the world without giving in to the false standards and dead values and empty gestures of the world inhabitants (Tanner, 1986, p. 9). Binx has been struggling each day with the pain of malaise, or the boredom of everydayness. He is trying to escape from his Aunt Emily’s confinement, keeping himself in a state of freedom, freedom to think, to perceive, and to act. He is trying to be a man of consciousness, an undefined man.

Binx remains peculiarly open to other people’s stories. Although he remains apprehensive about them, he has discovered the charm and seduction of properly told stories. He wishes to find from their stories of past experience the coherence of a life, thus he can make his past life meaningful to his present state, to make his world an orderly world. This cooperation in other people’s stories is a dangerous game however. When Binx becomes a character in other people’s stories, he runs the risks of disappearing altogether when that story no longer holds.

Aunt Emily is a stoic preacher: “A man must live by his lights and do what little he can and do it as best he can. In this world goodness is destined to be defeated. But a man must go down fighting. That is the victory. To do anything less is to be less than a man” (Percy, *MG*, p. 53). Binx doesn’t know how he accepts what his aunt preaches even if it sounds so right. Her goodness does not provide enough ground for his search. What he needs is more than Stoicism can offer. Yet, he has not found any place to stick himself in the world. He finds his search absurd. He does not dislike his aunt and he is not disappointed at visiting her.

Aunt Emily is the most powerful storyteller Binx knows, one whose stories surely will not dissolve before his eyes. And Binx is not disappointed. She is able to make everything she says come true before his very eyes, erasing all other narratives with a word and giving him a ready-made identity. Aunt Emily playfully calls him

an ingrate, a limb of Satan, that last and sorriest scion of a noble stock.

What makes it funny is that this is true. In a split second I have forgotten everything, the years in Gentilly, even my search. As always, we take up where we left off. This is where I belong after all. (p. 28)

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<sup>5</sup> *NE*, in this paper is the abbreviation of the novel by Jean-Paul Sartre *No Exit and Three Other Plays*.

Powerful influence as it is, Binx immediately forgets even his alienated life he experiences in Gentilly, he forgets the times he has woken up rigid as a stick with rage and despair in the Garden District, and he forgets the search. He is at the brink of losing the ability to be aware of the reality. He belongs to this family anyway.

Emily has been playing roles in this family and played well. Emily has played all the proper roles with the proper emphasis. Her grey eyes are powerful. Emily enforces the roles played around her. She has requested Binx to talk to him about the problem of Kate and has shown him a row of bottles found in Kate's room. She with expectation waits for Binx to come up with the right answer. But Binx "finds that his new found clarity of vision has left him" (Reimers, 1999, p. 235). "With her watching me, it is difficult to see anything," he remarks. "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" (Percy, *MG*, p. 30). When he falls back into Emily's version of reality, taking up where they had left off, he surrenders "willy-nilly" to her world and can no longer *see for himself*.

Sartre says, "Hell is — Other People" (*NE*, p. 47). He means that hell is a place that people are deprived of freedom in thought and action while other people are also a place where people are deprived of freedom in thought and action. Other people are a hell. The moment when the other gazes at you, your conscious being becomes inert, stays inactive, and has no ability to perceive. Your freedom as a conscious being is confined by the freedom of the other. This is what Sartre says being-for-itself is turned by another being-for-itself into being-in-itself, an object with no ability to judge.

Emily is clear that to make a life real, to be someone, one has to take control of the stories oneself. She has the capacity to create her coherence in a world that doesn't make full sense by itself. She creates main characters and gives them their roles until her world has all the coherence in a history book. Here as Binx is studying the photos of his father and uncles, Emily approaches him and offers her version of what it means.

"We'll not see their like again. The age of the Catos is gone. Only my Jules is left. And Sam Yerger. Won't it be good to see Sam again?"

This is absurd of course. Uncle Jules is no Cato. And as for Sam Yerger:

Sam is only a Cato on long Sunday afternoons in the company of my aunt. She transfigures everyone. Mercer she still sees as the old retainer. Uncle Jules she sees as the Creole Cato, the last of the heroes — whereas the truth is that Uncle Jules is as canny as a Marseilles merchant and a very good fellow, but no Cato . . . So strong is she that sometimes the person and the past are in fact transfigured by her. They become what she sees them to be. (Percy, *MG*, p. 49)

Emily is strong to transfigure others and make them play the roles she has decided for them. Here she is going to transfigure Binx, making him play the role she has decided for him. Kate has become resistant to her nature of reality. Now she has to get Binx as his target to shore it up. But she is smart enough to see that Binx is also not completely trustworthy. She is clever to choose her weapons with care and handle them strategically. These strategies worked well for her to soften Binx in the past. Emily sits at the piano and plays the tune creating a friendly atmosphere.

We talk, my aunt and I, in our old way of talking, during pauses in the music. She is playing Chopin. She does not play very well ... But she is playing one of our favorite pieces, the E flat Etude. In recent years I have become suspicious of music. When she comes to a phrase which once united us in a special bond and to which I once opened myself as meltingly as a young girl, I harden myself. (p. 47)

This time Emily's trap has not successfully caught Binx and she has miscalculated. Binx is not taken in. It turns out that this seeker's observations of the world have not entirely been forgotten and her careful and sweet arm of "we" has been resisted. He is unwilling to be passively and girlishly again melted into "our favorite pieces" and "our old way of talking." Binx's sense of wonder provides him with the awareness of the fact that determines the reality. He is aware that Aunt Emily is trying to mold him into a man of what she wishes to be. Vaguely nausea is emerging within him. Binx is not cooperating. He feels her words, music and intention erode his free will, and his intellectual ability. His conscious being is in a danger of being petrified.

Aunt Emily misses this point momentarily that Binx is not cooperating. She unveils to Binx her plan for saving Kate and bringing Binx himself back into her sphere of influence: Binx will move back into her house, enroll in medical school, be around to save Kate whenever she becomes too abstracted from her life, and take the responsibility. Of course, she waits for Binx' response, but fails to get one. She starts her duty role of being a mother instructing him the doctrine of a noble man. However, her doing so with sweetness and soft tone fills Binx with discomfort and an obvious disguise of her determination to form Binx into the one who follows her version of life.

"What is it you want out of your life, son" she asks with a sweetness that makes me uneasy.

"I don't know'm. But I'll move in whenever you want me."

"Don't you feel obliged to use your brain and to make a contribution?"

"No'm"

She waits for me to say more. When I do not, she seems to forget about her idea. (pp. 52-53)

Binx is not willing to enter Emily's plan because he has seen through the game she plays. But in absence of a purpose in his own life, he compromises by offering to play the role anyway. This is not enough for Emily however. Emily realizes she has missed the mark, but is not ready to give up, yet continues her use of weapon to win his yielding to her reality. She tells Binx that she believes that the world is torn apart, but she does not understand why and what this destruction will bring to them, yet Binx as a member of a young generation may save it: "I no longer pretend to understand the world. The world I knew has come crashing down around my ears ... It's an interesting age you will live in — though I can't say I'm sorry to miss it. But it should be quite a sight, the going under of the evening land" (p. 53). Binx believes that he has found someone who understands what is happening to his world and who has found a way to deal with it.

For her too the fabric dissolving, but for her even the dissolving makes sense. She understands the chaos to come. 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. What's wrong with this? All I have to do is remember it ... she is right. I will say yes. I will say yes even though I do not know what she is talking about. (p. 53)

But, to his own surprise, Binx hears himself saying: "As a matter of fact I was planning to leave Gentilly soon, but for a different reason. There is something—" (p. 53) without simply saying yes to Emily. In her face of the story, his search has been absurd. He remains unable to acquiesce to her reality.

Emily believes that Binx is fully back on her side, yet, this is an error that wise Emily makes. She also thinks that Binx's leaving Gentilly is a recovery from his wounded soul from the cruel battle of Korean war, and away from his *Wanderjahr* experiment for the past four years out of her sight. Binx's heart sinks. He realizes that they are in fact not talking about the same thing at all. "They do not understand each other after all. If I thought I'd spent the last four years as *Wanderjahr*, before 'settling down,' I'd shoot myself on the spot" (p. 54).

Emily's stories do not make a coherence for her life for she is transfiguring stories into a false one that fits her reality and purpose. Her stories are not able to make a coherence for Binx's life either for the transfigured ones do not make any sense. Her instruction of the doctrine of Stoicism is not enough to help him. Her convenient label for Binx as a spoiled young man playing around with secretaries, going every night to movies, abandoning his love of scientific calling and love of books and music during the four years in Gentilly bewilders Binx. Her label does not work for his search. Instead it makes Binx's already alienated life depart further.

Sartre's being-for-others is the third mode of being, referring to human relationship. Its very nature is a conflict. One being-for-itself, a subject is gazing at another being-for-itself, another subject, then these two subjects are not the equal subjects in this gazing game. The first subject is turning the second subject into an object under his look, which means the first subject is the master and the second a slave whose freedom is deprived of. He is deprived of the nature of being-for-itself, human consciousness that derives from nothingness, meaning freedom, which has the power to project its very being to the future. He is now turned into being-in-itself, an object, an inanimate object that has the nature of a thing, the determined essence, making changes impossible.

Sartre's gaze does not precisely mean the physical gaze of the other person, and it means all kinds of judgments and evaluations of the other person. The second subject who is being gazed at is under the judgment and evaluation of the first subject. The second subject depends in the being on the freedom of the first subject, which is not his. He is losing all the possibilities of his own toward future.

In the case of Binx, he is being gazed at by Aunt Emily. He is being transformed into being-in-itself, a solid thing that is unable to move. He is being judged and evaluated by Aunt Emily. He is even being formed by her into a man of what she wishes. While she is making judgment of Binx and when she is trying to persuade him to follow her doctrine and morality, in terms of Binx as a conscious being, she is depriving him of his free consciousness, his freedom to think, act, and perceive, his possibilities to create and change. In a word, he is deprived of his



possibilities of wonder, of his own search. He is being dragged back to his alienated, inert state of life, with no differences from others. He is unable to do his search.

While Emily, as a doctrine preacher, a child raiser, and morality guardian, is saying that his abandonment of science and music and his acceptance of the common little suburb Gentilly have wasted his talent and intellectual ability, Binx tries to point out to Aunt Emily that his love of science and books is not the idea of his. It has little to do with his own choices—it has always been Emily who discovered the ideas and the noble ideals *for* him. When Binx realizes that he has been living by *her* light, and not by his own, and he has been living like automatons without being aware of his own consciousness and he has been congealed by Emily's fixed value system, Emily's classifications stop working on Binx once and for all.

It is rather significant for Binx to distinguish knowledge from choice. Emily believes that all it takes to do right is to know what right and good are. As for her doctrine of Stoicism, to be a man of noble deed, he must go down fighting for the goodness of the world. That is the victory and to do anything less is to be less than a man. To Emily, knowing what is right should automatically lead to doing what is right, that is, knowing is doing. But for Binx knowing is different from doing. Doing is action that is out of choice. Thus knowing is different from choice. Knowing is only knowledge. It is not yet man's action, and only when he is taking action, he is making a choice. As for the promise Emily wishes Binx to make on his 30<sup>th</sup> birthday, she thinks that Binx is old enough to know what he should do and what he will do. She says to him: "You will be thirty years old. Don't you think a thirty year old man ought to know what he wants to do with his life?" (p. 54). What Binx ought to know is knowledge and what Binx wants to do is choice. Knowledge is something already established. But choice is based on freedom. In spite of his promise to Emily, his resistance to her way of looking at the things has not diminished, for it is based in a different view of how to make one's way in the world. He keeps linking how he sees his own life and the people around him to the problem of *choice*. All those who have given themselves up to the world live and speak as automatons who have no choice in what they say and do anymore. He has now discovered that under Emily's influence, he has grown up not much different from those automatons—he has always let Emily make his choice, aesthetic, philosophical and life choice for him, surrendering to her particular power to organize the world for him. It is clear that this relationship has now changed, and that he will somehow have to find a new way of choosing the right thing to do. This is what Sartre states about freedom and choice: Man is condemned to be free. Freedom is absolute and it is something man cannot possibly escape. It is destined that man has to face it and embrace it. Man is not determined by other things, man is only determined by what he perceives, what he thinks and what he does, which means that man is only determined by his own action in whichever way he chooses. With nothingness as its heart and being-for-itself as its fundamental structure, the ontological view sets human being free. For Binx, grasping the freedom that derives from nothingness and making his choice for his action lead him to his authenticity, while escaping from the freedom by following social conventions or others' evaluations or judgments leads him to bad faith. Binx refuses to become an automaton and resists being in bad faith. "Bad faith" ethically speaking is presented as something being-for-itself ought to avoid while striving for authenticity. Binx keeps his sense of wonder as the way to keep his being-for-itself not slip into being-in-itself, which means that he is aware he is his own future and in

the mode of *not being*. Sartre says that being-for-itself is what it is not, and is not what it is. It is always in the state of becoming and projecting. The possibilities are opened up and limitless. Binx's keeping his own way of seeing the people and the world is to keep himself open to the possibilities, which propel him to become what he makes of himself rather than being defined by other things or people. He is a man who is always in the process of making himself a new self, a man who is undefined.

## 6. Conclusion

Binx Bolling's metaphysical search is a search for meaning in life. He is struggling each day with the pain of malaise, and the boredom of everydayness that affects people in modern life. He desires to keep a new way of looking at the world around him, for he wishes to become a conscious being with ability to think, and to make his own choice. Aunt Emily does not understand what Binx thinks and does, and she never wishes to. As a stoic preacher, a child raiser, and a family guardian, she confines him to become a man she wishes him to be, molding him into a man of unconsciousness. That is a man, according to Sartre, defined, who has the nature of a thing and who has no possibilities to change, or to create. Being infused with Emily's vivid stories, intimate relations, and beautiful music, Binx unconsciously falls into Emily's tricks. He forgets about his malaise out of the comfortable years in Gentilly, and he even forgets about his search. He wakes up a little, sinks back again, and after that wakes up a little more, for he is unwilling to give in to those false standards, dead values, and empty gestures of the world. He is unwilling to be determined by others' evaluations. Man is not determined by God or any other things. And man is only determined by what he perceives, and what he acts. He will become what he makes of himself. Binx grasps the spirit of freedom and projects himself a man undefined.

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