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The Existential Quest: Exploring Walker Percy's Reimagining of the Literary Journey

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Abstract

The theme of Quest has always been a fundamental pursuit in case of every protagonist's life. As a Postmodern Writer, Walker Percy, demystify the canonical tenets of Quest, by introducing existential characters, who have to fight their own conscience before they can identify their quest and take that journey. This research paper explores the reimagining of the classical quest theme in the novels *The Moviegoer* and *Lancelot*. While the second novel is a direct allusion to the Arthurian Legend and hence Quest is inevitable part of the narrative; the first book is a figment of the Modern man's life and the struggles he undergoes in finding a purpose in life. This investigation underscores the contribution of Percy in creating the Modern man, who grapples with the reality of lives and complexities of existence in the post war era.

Key Words: Postmodern narrative, Existentialism, Walker Percy, Existential Angst, Quest, Reworking.

Introduction

The novels taken for research heavily rely on the theme of quest. However, though they directly allude to the Medieval quest theme, the journey that Walker Percy makes his protagonists undergo is not the typical medieval quest of slaying a demon or saving a damsel, rather it is a modern day quest where the hero has to save himself from the decadence and anarchy that is prevalent in the society, caused by the society itself. For Binx, the evil that he had to fight was his loneliness and depression. Jack Bolling found a way before he turned into Lancelot Lamar. He was fortunate enough to find an adventure in Kate and with Kate. Jack Bolling's travel around the states of America, his experience in Mardi Gras and most importantly his obsession with art and literature prevented him from turning into a lunatic or hurting himself like Lancelot Lamar. But in case of Lancelot Lamar, all of this has

happened, he has had a wife, Lucy, who is dead; he now has a beautiful wife who wants to become an actress. Lancelot has more than what Binx could ever imagine or dream of, in terms of money, fortune and women. Yet, Lancelot is more discontent than Binx. Lancelot was in a pseudo state of happiness before he realises and finds out his wife is having an affair with Merlin.

Reimagining the Quest: The novels *The Moviegoer* and *Lancelot* were created nearly twenty years apart from each other, yet their themes collide and they are read as supporting novels as Walker Percy has common elements in portrayal of characters with a hint of madness in these novels. Both the novels have converging points including their protagonists being heavily depressed and undergoing existential crises. They are common in their characteristic traits; they both are people who are seeking a journey of self-discovery and the same shall be explored within the purview of this research paper. The war has created an impact in both these characters, in *The Moviegoer*, the protagonist Jack Bolling's father dies before the War with *The Shropshire Lad* in his pocket. Jack Bolling fails to feel remorse at the death of his own father; rather he finds it ironic for him to have died with a book about war veterans and celebration of soldiers. Though published nearly twenty years later, *Lancelot* as well is replete with discussions of war and its association with bravery.

One particular mention provides an interesting point in *Lancelot*, as the characters Merlin and Lancelot discuss the poem *Ode to the Confederate Dead*, one of the rarest poems of war, written by Allen Tate. Walker Percy unites the two men by their ideology towards war and their respect for the soldiers.

This version of Walker Percy, where the union of characters for the sake of history and literature despite their differences is refreshing. *Ode of the Confederate Dead* is a long poem that is written as a salutation for the soldiers who have lost their life in confederation; but it is also a poem on mental health and wellbeing. The mindset of the soldiers who have gone to war with adrenaline rush, peer pressure and valour is discussed in literature, it is only in the beginning of the Twentieth Century that the authors discuss the aftermath of the war and the impact it creates in the minds of the war veterans.

You know the unimportant shrift of death and praise the vision

And praise the arrogant circumstance Of those who fall

Rank upon rank, hurried beyond decision –

Here by the sagging gate, stopped by the wall. (Ode of the Confederate Dead)

The trench becomes a metaphor to represent the suffocation one endures while waiting for another soldier from the opposite line to come just to be shot dead. This inhuman ruthless killing of human beings in the name of war is interrogated by several artists in the Twentieth Century, yet it was the time when the world faced two of its terrific wars followed by years of impending doom while the nations went into the state of Cold War, deciding whom to support and whom to reject, which ideals to choose and which one to leave. The poem's discussion of collective trauma makes it a connection point between Lancelot and Merlin. For these men who may be different, yet they are from the same generation which has seen and felt trauma. They have lost people whom they love to war and this becomes their code. The novel *Lancelot* is set in 1977, hence the bravery and fondness that was visible in *The Moviegoer* fades and debates on the vitality of the war come to a fore.

His blue gaze engaged me with a lively intimacy, establishing a bond between us and excluding the others. Somehow his offense against me was also an occasion of intimacy between us. I felt it too. Things were understood and unspoken between us. It went without saying for example that actors are dumbbells. Not even Margot followed us when he spoke of Tate's "Ode to the Confederate Dead" and Hemingway's nastiness to Fitzgerald. (Lancelot 38)

In the course of *The Moviegoer*, there are plots and summaries of movies that Walker Percy provides through Jack Bolling; but he does not mention the name of some of the movies. This complicates the existing plot further as the readers struggle for reference. The idea behind this kind of

narration is again to stay in course of the novel, and use real movies or fictional plots to represent a non existing movie; to change the course of the novel and provide necessary diversion for the readers. While intertextuality is seen as a narrative technique that incorporates known materials or sources to provide a universal appeal; Walker Percy chooses to challenge his readers by drawing inspiration from non existing storylines or movies and lesser known books and films. This narrative style is unique and used by Walker Percy to portray the struggle of Jack Bolling further. Jack Bolling is not a connoisseur of art, neither is he an art critic but watching movies are his way of life, he neither has a genre or style of cinema he is particular about; despite him being the moviegoer, he simply goes to movies to find an outlet. Having established this, now the researcher would focus on various elements of intertextual references in the novel *The Moviegoer*.

Memory loss is an essential trait of post war literature and movies. There are several movies that create a scope of memory loss for their protagonists most of who are soldiers or war veterans. While the essence of any art form is escapism, movies dealing with memory loss provide a scope into the person's life to escape from the reality and live a different life after having forgotten one's identity. During the World War and its aftermath, several movies were created in this genre, the predominant ones being *Random Harvest* (1942) and *Singing in the Dark* (1956). While the connection point between both the movies is memory loss and war, they are set a decade apart from each other. Jack Bolling expresses about his aunty and her advice for him to act like a soldier. Binx's elder brother Scott dies of pneumonia and the aunt has to tell the bad news to the younger brother, who is just a child. Aunt Emily sits the boy down and asks him to act like a soldier, to be brave and stronger. As a child Binx wonders, "I could easily act like a soldier. Was that all I had to do?" (*The Moviegoer* 8)

This act of acting like a soldier is so much etched in Jack Bolling's memory that even after he grows and when he faces a huge problem, he puts on a stoic front and goes on with his life. It must be understood that this is how depression works, it ruins the mental state little by little till one cannot do it anymore. Out of loneliness and solitude that Jack Bolling experiences, he is slowly turning into depression even when people are around. In the first page, the author Walker Percy provides the mental state of Jack Bolling who is with Linda, by revealing the stark difference between two people of the same age. Their wants are different and so are their needs. Thus Jack Bolling goes ahead and mentions a made up movie without the title. He is more engrossed in its plot. The movie is about a man who has memory loss; he loses everything - friends, family and money. Jack Bolling connects with him and is optimistic about the turn of the events. Eventually, the man finds himself another woman to love and lives in a houseboat by the river. Jack Bolling establishes that he is looking forward to escape from his life with a tasteless women and a boring job as a stock broker. The allusion to the non named movie, preempts the future that is in stock for Jack Bolling.

The movie was about a man who lost his memory in an accident and as a result lost everything: his family, his friends, his money. He found himself a stranger in a strange city. Here he had to make a fresh start, find a new place to live, a new job, a new girl. It was supposed to be a tragedy, his losing all this, and he seemed to suffer a great deal. On the other hand, things were not so bad after all. In no time he found a very picturesque place to live, a houseboat on the river, and a very handsome girl, the local librarian. (*The Moviegoer* 8, 9)

The next reference that Jack Bolling makes is when he is describing his lifestyle. His is not an existential elevated principle. He is clear that his life is different from movies, and in movies the seeking for spirituality as well as a woman is different, in a way filmy. However in real life, meeting a woman or achieving an spiritual elevation does not happen in the same way. This makes the reader wonder, why does he choose movies as a means of escapism, when his idea of real and reel is clear. The author Walter Percy creates Jack Bolling as a rounded character, he is a man of multitude. He is not a man who knows the truth, but he is seeking truth. He is a work in progress. Hence he errs and falls on the way, it is this, as a matter of fact, that makes him a perfect character. Jack Bolling is relatable to everyone

irrespective of the century or decade one is born in. Jack Bolling knows the difference between real and reel yet he chooses to spend his time thinking about the celluloid world, because real life does not provide him with the same excitement as movies do.

I too once met a girl in Central Park, but it is not much to remember. What I remember is the time John Wayne killed three men with a carbine as he was falling to the dusty street in *Stagecoach*, and the time the kitten found Orson Welles in the doorway in *The Third Man*. (*The Moviegoer* 12)

One of the major elements in reading a work with intertextual reference is that the work itself cannot be perceived in isolation. The readers feel the same, in case of the novel *Lancelot* as well. For a person to understand the story of Lancelot Lamar simply reading the novel *Lancelot* by Walker Percy will not suffice. The work itself has to be read alongside the Arthurian Legend and Myth of Lancelot as points of reference, followed by all the other mentions in the novel. Lancelot Lamar, being a bibliophile, amasses a lot of literary wealth into the scope of the narrative, similar to that of Jack Bolling. Both Bolling and Lamar are depressed, though for different reasons. There is melancholia in both their airs. Lamar is in agony because his wife has cheated on him, he has committed a murder and now he is caught in a mental asylum; on the other hand Bolling is depressed because he feels lonely and does not have anything to do but retrospect. While Lamar wonders about the reason behind his wife's transgression, Jack wonders about the working of the Universe. While these two reasons may seem as if there is no direct connection between them, there is a connect. Both their preoccupations arise out of their inability to understand the human mind and heart. As Jack Bolling puts it:

It seemed like a fine idea, sleeping in shelters or under the stars in the cool evergreens, and later hopping freights. In fact this was what I was sure I wanted to do. But in no time at all I became depressed. [...] As for me, I stay home with Mrs Schexnaydre and turn on TV. Not that I like TV so much, but it doesn't distract me from the wonder. That is why I can't go to the trouble they go to. It is distracting, and not for five minutes will I be distracted from the wonder. (*The Moviegoer* 34)

Lancelot Lamar does not project his mental state as openly as Jack Bolling. He does not want people to know about him, but his depression pushes him to the verge of madness so much that he starts assuming that he lives in Arthurian Legend itself. It is at this juncture the lines between the real and fiction blurs in the world of Lancelot. He is not Lancelot, the medieval knight, but he is King Arthur himself, and his conversation are with Percival. In the first chapter of the novel, a stranger meets Lancelot, whom Lancelot refuses to have a conversation with. In the second chapter, when the man or a figment of Lancelot's mind appears before him, Lancelot welcomes the figure and gives him the identity of an omnipresent listener. This person does not have an identity, he does not even have a name, but lots of pseudonyms that Lancelot identifies him with. Lancelot states that he has known the person from his childhood and it is not the first time they encounter each other. This makes the listener an omniscient entity as well. He nomenclatures the listener as follows:

Later you were known variously as Harry Hotspur, a misnomer because though you were pugnacious you were not much of a fighter. Also as Prince Hal, because you seemed happy only in warehouses. Also as Northumberland, after the house you lived in. Also as Percival and Parsifal, who found the Grail and brought life to a dead land. (*Lancelot* 11)

With this depiction of the listener has a part of literary history that transcends the ages, the narrator Lancelot provides Percival immense scope. Yet, it is clear even from the little information that is provided about Percival that he is nothing like the Percival of the Arthurian Legend. While he Lancelot calls him the "The Knight of the Unholy Grail" in the Legend Percival is led to the Holy Grail because of his purity. There are versions that state that Percival died a virgin while others state he was faithful to only one woman his entire life; unlike Lancelot who had several women in his life including Lady Elaine and Guinevere.

However, Lancelot Lamar is not able to agree with the victory of Percival in fiction or in truth. Hence he ridicules the listener by calling him Prince Hal, and projecting Percival as a person who was happy only when in whorehouses. Yet, the anger that he projects on the listener Percival is not enough, for this anger arises out of failure. According to the legend, amongst the 13 knights in the Arthurian Legend only two Knights encountered Holy Grail, one is Galahad and another being Percival. Percival is a man with such goodness that he encounters the Holy Grail much earlier but does not know its significance and hence he loses it and vows to find it in his lifetime, which he does. Despite other Knights yearning and sacrificing their lives for the same Quest they are not successful. This hurts Lancelot Lamar and he projects his dissatisfaction on Percival.

[...] but what he really had in mind and in his heart wanted to be and couldn't have been more different from was that old nonexistent Catholic brawler and adulterer, Lancelot du Lac, King Ban of Benwick's son, knight of the Round Table and—here was the part he could never get over—one of only two knights to see the Grail (you, Percival, the other); and above all the extraordinariness of those chaste and incorrupt little Anglican chapels set down in this violent [...] (*Lancelot* 84, 85)

Walker Percy creates Lancelot Lamar and situates him in the nuthouse as he calls it from the first instance in the novel; yet he is an intelligent, well read man. This changes everything that is to understand of him. As the readers progress with Lancelot Lamar, it becomes clear that he is insane, for his reactions are unfathomable. He talks about the death of his wife and in the next instance quotes a children's rhyme. He communicates with Anna through the wall that divides them, and decides that since Anna has undergone the violence to the same extent as he has, they both can create a perfect order together.

Somehow Lancelot fails to understand the extent of transgression that Anna has undergone with that of his wife's and his own sin. Since he has come to terms with his wife's affair, Lancelot assumes that Anna should also come to terms with the physical trauma, rape and mental agony that she has experienced. He goes to the extent of stating that similar to him who has come in terms with the transgression of his wife, Anna should do likewise. But he does not cease there, he states that Anna should begin to enjoy the abuse, as he has enjoyed the revelation. He states that he is going to be let out legally for the murder weapon is nowhere to be found. He is also sent out of the asylum for he is mentally fit. But both the readers and Percival do not agree with his statements.

In the end his aim is to create a new order; this is ironical, almost parodying the Arthurian Legend. Arthur's New Order is for the sake of the better world while here the world that Lancelot imagines are lopsided with its dose of immorality to mankind, while women are assumed to have no agency towards their sexuality or themselves. Walker Percy captures this deterioration of Lancelot by his own words.

Then, to my astonishment, I mortally offended her. I suggested that she had suffered the ultimate indignity, the worst violation a woman can suffer, rape at the hands of several men, forced fellatio, and so on, that I too had suffered my own catastrophe, and that since we had both suffered the worst that could happen to us and come through, not merely survived but prevailed, we were qualified as the new Adam and Eve of the new world. If we couldn't invent a new world and a new dignity between man and woman, surely nobody could. (*Lancelot* 186)

Walker Percy tends to capture the interconnectedness between the age and the literature through his characters Jack Bolling and Lancelot Lamar. Both of these men are settled; they belong to upper class society; they have strong opinion on things; they are in favour of soldiers and war; they have great grasp over the literature of the past and of their age; they have huge artistic sensibility. At the same time they are also dissatisfied, they are depressed, they are emasculated and find it difficult to understand and please women. They are constantly in look out for family and settlement. While Jack

Bolling represents younger Lancelot Lamar; Lancelot simply is older Jack Bolling. The mental agony that they are undergoing towards the society, relationship and gender at large is one and the same.

Walker Percy weaves this as a phenomenon of the age. There is underlying unhappiness and dissatisfaction in the mind of all the characters. If Kate is seeking a way out of her loneliness through her pills and suicidal thoughts, Margot is nonetheless different for she is seeking the same through extramarital affair. They are both women with strong opinions and ideals. They are not the women one encounters before the war, they are both nouveau woman; their wants and needs have shifted. Family is not their top priority anymore, for they want to achieve something for themselves.

Kate finds that satisfaction in education, while Margot feels that her passion is in the film industry. Here are two women who would go to any extent to achieve their dreams, and they decide to pursue them. The other ancillary characters such as Linda or Sharon are not any different either, They are passionate about their wants as well as their careers. Sharon is showcased as a woman who is superior, in her hardworking nature and at times her knowledge, to Binx.

On the other hand, the readers have Binx who is a stock broker who is not satisfied with his work and wants to travel the world, read books and watch films; while Lancelot himself though a lawyer chooses to lounge and read his Raymond Chandler with no worry of the world. Unfortunately for them, this lack of passion for their work is construed by the society as emasculate and this directly projects in their opinion about themselves. Jack Bolling simply projects this by quitting his job and settling in a different place, and most importantly by realising that he is ordinary as his aunt has always told him. This realisation that one is normal and not something different, is vital for Jack Bolling. When Kate goes to pursue medicine, Jack Bolling quits his work and agrees to live with Kate.

In June Kate and I were married. It was practicable to wind up my business affairs in Gentilly and to accompany my aunt to North Carolina sooner than I expected, [...] My aunt has become fond of me. As soon as she accepted what she herself had been saying all those years, that the Bolling family had gone to seed and that I was not one of her heroes but a very ordinary fellow, we got along very well. Both women find me comical and laugh a good deal at my expense. (*The Moviegoer* 170)

While Lancelot can do nothing except stay in correctional facility until he is released, once he does he would inherit his wife's property and live with the woman in the next room for he feels that the violation that she has endured in form sexual abuse all her life has transformed her into the purest of souls. Lancelot foregoes his namesake Lancelot the Knight, and decides to become King Arthur himself by creating a newer order, for he finds that the older order is decadent and immoral in its nature. He realises that the society ought to be such that the women has to be subservient to men, and men should extent control over the women. He questions the sexual right of women. In their tonality, both *Lancelot* and *The Moviegoer* are phallocentric in narration. While both the protagonist set to realise their own truth and project their understanding of spirituality, their affiliation to God or spirituality is simply singular and lacks multiplicity.

Conclusion

The time frame of the 1960s and 70s were tumultuous in the history of America, for it was trying to overcome its history with pressure in the form of protest from all sides. The women were seeking equal rights, similarly the Black Americans were staging protests for equality and emancipation. It is only after the Vietnam War that America realised the need to be inclusive of the Asians, Africans and others. Walker Percy captures this confusion of 'othering' someone through his characters Lancelot and Binx for both are sexist, male chauvinistic and racist. The mere word Negro is used several times in both the novels.

Yet, these characters are also broken, undergoing severe existential crises. The author, identifies quest to that of a purpose in classical sense. In the end of the novels, both identify their quest, be it right or wrong. Jack Bolling realises his happiness in Art, in watching movies and reading books while Lancelot has an elaborate plan of leaving the mental asylum, taking his inmate Anna along with him and starting a few lives with his daughter Siobhan. He invites Percival/ Readers as well to join him in the brave new world that he will establish once he escapes the prison.

Both the novels taken for analysis do not have the classical quest-based tenets, such as a mentor/ philosopher, a damsel in distress, a villain or even a revenge motive. The journey of the protagonists is a tumultuous one in a world where fact and fiction are blurred. Collective trauma of war, and as its repercussive existential angst leads to this distorted sense of reality which Walker Percy captures precisely and succinctly.

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