
DESPAIR AND ALIENATION OF MODERN MAN IN SOCIETY

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the literary and philosophical work *The Moviegoer*, which was written by the American writer Walker Percy. The book itself was strongly influenced by the philosophy and thoughts of the existential philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. The study solves an existential problem of modern man's alienation, despair and crises in the modern age. Except for Walker Percy's work *The Moviegoer* I focus solely on Søren Kierkegaard's book *Sickness unto Death*, especially its concept of despair and self-consciousness.

Keywords: Percy, Kierkegaard, despair, modern man, society

"To become aware of the possibility of the search is to be onto something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair." (Walker Percy)

"Insofar, then, as the self does not become itself, it is not itself; but not to be itself is precisely despair." (Søren Kierkegaard)

1. Introduction

Walker Percy (1916-1990) belongs among the best-known authors of the American South. He was born in Alabama, and after the tragic death of his parents he was adopted together with his brothers by his wealthy uncle, who was engaged in literature. In spite of his uncle's great influence young Walker preferred to study Medicine and started working as a pathologist in York. He was not brought into closer contact with literature until his three-year-long stay in a sanatorium near Lake Saranac Sanatorium in the Adirondacks, where he underwent tuberculosis treatment. Due to his illness he was forced to give up his occupation, and he dedicated his free time to the study of the works Kafka, Sartre, Heidegger, Dostoyevsky and Kierkegaard.

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Right from the beginning, Percy was strongly inclined to the philosophical idea of existentialism, which is proven by his orientation to Kierkegaard and Sartre, and to works of the philosopher and journalist Albert Camus, or the dramatist, writer and philosopher Gabriel Marcel, one of the representatives of Christian existentialism. Percy's view most closely matched the literature and ideas of the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), whose influence on the literature and cultural life of the USA had shown itself in the 20th century [1]. Percy was bonded to Kierkegaard also by similar life experience. Same as he himself he lost his loved ones and later in life suffered from serious illness.

In 1943 Percy began to assert himself through his literary works, and thanks to his existentialism-influenced novels he was called "an American Christian existentialist" [2]. He identified himself internally with Kierkegaard so much so that he implemented Kierkegaard's ideas into his own work. Apart from other things, he elaborated on Kierkegaard's idea of three life stages.

Another important philosophical attribute of Kierkegaard, which Percy has implemented into his own philosophical thinking, is the so-called '*rotation method*'. Kierkegaard used this concept in his work *Either/Or*. According to Kierkegaard, this method can lead to a state of despair because all activities of man can become commonplace and boring. "I don't feel like doing anything. I don't feel like riding – the motion is too powerful; I don't feel like walking – it is too tiring; I don't feel like lying down, for either I have to stay down, and I don't feel like doing that or I would have to get up again, and I don't feel like doing that, either. Summa Summarum: I don't feel like doing anything." [3] This philosophical interpretation is in further detail formulated by Michael Watts: "The aesthete, Kierkegaard predicts, realizing and responding to the futility of one's hedonistic finite aims, will yearn to experience a more meaningful life" [4]. When feelings of absurdity, despair and boredom with everything come to their culmination, man gets a strong desire for a meaningful life, and if it is not found he seeks new experience and once again lives through disappointment and despair.

Percy was responding to the era in which he had lived. Thus, one of the main themes of his literary work is the existential despair of the modern man who tries to find his way toward creating a relationship with the world. Similar to Kierkegaard, Percy directed his attention to the suffering of the individual and his experience of solitude in the middle of the social prosperity enjoyed only by the successful ones [5]. These elements are emerging in all six of Percy's novels: *The Moviegoer* (1961), *The Last Gentleman* (1966), *Love in Ruins* (1971), *Lancelot* (1977), *The Second Coming* (1980), and *The Thanatos Syndrome* (1987).

2. Percy's novel *The Moviegoer*

Among Percy's best-known creations, which were written on the basis of philosophical observation of Kierkegaard's works, is *The Moviegoer* (1961). The

work was awarded the *National Book Award* (1962). It begins with the famous quote from Kierkegaard's *The Sickness unto Death*, which clearly foreshadows the existential backdrop of the whole novel. The analysis of despair and its different forms represents a distinct philosophical feature of the work. Kierkegaard defines the despair as a "sickness of the spirit, of the self" [6] and distinguishes these following types: "In despair not to be conscious of having a self (not despair in the strict sense); in despair not to will to be oneself; in despair to will to be oneself" [6]. Based on the concept of despair according to Kierkegaard, "despair must be considered primarily within the category of consciousness; whether despair is conscious or not constitutes the qualitative distinction between despair and despair. Granted, all despair regarded in terms of the concept is conscious, but this does not mean that the person who, according to the concept, may appropriately be said to be in despair is conscious of it himself." [6, p. 29] Kierkegaard defines despair as a sickness unto death and describes attributes of the despair which are stronger than the sickness unto death itself. "[T]his sickness of the self, perpetually to be dying, to die and yet not die, to die death. For to die signifies that it is all over, but to die death means to experience dying, and if this is experienced for one single moment, one thereby experiences it forever. If a person were to die of despair as one dies of a sickness, then the eternal in him, the self, must be able to die in the same sense as the body dies of sickness. But this is impossible; the dying of despair continually converts itself into a living. The person in despair cannot die." [6, p. 18]

3. Kierkegaard and the human self

In the scope of this study it is important to understand how Kierkegaard perceives the human self. Kierkegaard says: "The self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation's relating self to itself in the relation" [6]. A human being is consecutively interpreted as a synthesis denoting the relationship between: "the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short, a synthesis" [6]. Kierkegaard defines the human soul as a relationship of the self that tries to find a balanced ratio in the relationships of its existence. It is a relationship to the finality, reality, to one's self, to the human choice and freedom. If the self creates a relationship only with infinity, it reaches a despair in which there is absolutely no finality at all. In this state of despair the self tries to escape itself. In this case, the self appears to be selfish, and it revels in its own goals and ambitions and focuses only on the material and hedonic side of life, where there is no place for spirituality and a deeper understanding of one's existence or of one's own self. Kierkegaard continues: "Considered in this way, a human being is still not a self" [6]. If there is no foundation for the self in the above-mentioned relationships, the self dissolves into a state of despair. "The human self is such a derived, established relation, a relation that relates itself to itself and in relating itself to itself relates itself to another." [6, p. 14] On the basis of this ratio, Kierkegaard defines two forms of despair. He divides the

personal despair between conscious and unconscious. If the despair is unconscious, the self can be, despite its mindlessness, content and successful. If the despair is conscious, the consciousness in question is only partial because full consciousness of one's own despair or one's own self takes ultimate understanding of oneself, of which no human being is capable. Kierkegaard argues that, "The despair that is conscious of being despair and therefore is conscious of having a self in which there is something eternal and then either in despair does not will to be itself for in despair wills to be itself" [6, p. 47]. This philosophical consideration can be defined as a meditation on the character of the despair here and there penetrating deep into the abstraction characteristic of Kierkegaard. The work *Sickness unto Death* was written by Kierkegaard under the pseudonym Anti-Climacus [7]. According to him despair is a sickness of the human spirit and is not an indication of a lack of human virtue. The ability to dwell in despair is characteristic only of human beings. The only way out of this deplorable state of being is to embrace the synthesis of the temporal and the eternal in an act of faith: "Hopelessness only changes to hopefulness when a person is confronted and liberated by the living Christ in the existential encounter that leads to a 'jump of faith'. Only in this painful but freeing experience, only in this intense, personal, and existential encounter with the reality of the living God, can the human being for the first time truly belong to God." [8]

4. Walker Percy and his concept of despair

The despair is the main attribute analyzed by Percy in his book *The Moviegoer*. Percy's existential topic cannot be more profoundly understood until the essence of existential despair is interpreted in the right way. Generally understood, the crisis of the main character Binx is a form of existential despair. This on its own is fundamental for understanding the modern man's crisis, his solitude, inner suffering, and conflicts. In his main work the author does not limit himself strictly to Kierkegaard's conditions set in his book *The Sickness unto Death*, but he implements fine changes in his model and afterwards investigates the character of the modern self. Kierkegaard defines what the actual human self is and describes the despair influencing man, but Percy adds his own ideas to the model and thus makes it more complex.

Percy tells the story of Binx, the offspring of an old and respectable southern family. He enjoys his life carelessly as a hedonist. Most of his free time he spends driving his luxurious car, enjoying women's company, and searching for new acquaintances, exploiting all the perks of wealthy living. As time goes by he comes to the realization that he lacks a purpose in life and has no idea of how to find it. According to Kierkegaard's philosophy, he finds himself in the stage of unconscious despair. The individual feels lonely and loses himself in the ordinariness of everyday life. The only way out is seeking; as Percy points out, "To become aware of the possibility of the search is to be onto something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair. The movies are onto search, but they

screw it up. The search always ends in despair.” [9] Despair is defined as the lack of an aim, a lack of a purpose in life, and a lack of an awareness of the self in the scope of the concept of self-consciousness. Kierkegaard says that one has to see despair as a problem of consciousness. “However, despair must be considered primarily within the category of consciousness; whether despair is conscious or not constitutes the qualitative distinction between despair and despair. Granted, all despair regarded in terms of the concept is conscious, but this does not mean that the person who, according to the concept, may appropriately be said to be in despair is conscious of it himself.” [6, p. 136] It is of importance in every man’s life to determine a meaningful purpose that holds something unique, something to elate him.

To have no aim, to seek nothing, means to feel and experience nothing, to have no values to free oneself from the absurdity of human existence and to help him develop his own self.

Another attribute of despair according to Percy is ordinariness. “Everydayness is the enemy” [9, p. 145], Percy says. The ordinariness of everyday life becomes a burden for the individual and thus intensifies his feelings of despair. Further, Percy states, “The everydayness is everywhere now, having begun in the cities and Peking out the remote snoods and corners of the countryside, even the swamps” [9, p. 145]. The individual has to face it and find the purpose of his existence, discover the attributes for reviving his life’s joy. Otherwise the individual “is so sunk in everydayness that he might just as well be dead” [9], with no ideals. The one who is not aware of the option of seeking is not aware of it mainly because of the fact that he allows his surroundings to form him, to form his very self. This way despair becomes a form of acceptance of ordinariness as a possible way of life. The consequences can be fatal for the character of the individual. The inability to discern the individuality and the needs of one’s own self can end with the complete destruction of one’s individuality. In other words, this means being drowned in ordinariness, being blinded by it so much that the higher meaning of human existence is in this case absolutely missing.

Percy claims that the man of the modern era experiences another kind of despair - the solitude of the individual in their relationship with other people. Despite spending time with friends and close relations, the person comes to the realization that the only thing they have in common and are able to share is silence. In today’s families, people experience a feeling of emptiness. “The fact is, we have little to say each other. There is only this thick sympathetic silence between us. We are comrades, true, but somewhat embarrassed comrades. It is probably my fault.” [9, p. 41] Modern society also plays an important role, particularly the consumerism ruling it. The life of Binx is a mirror of what consumerist society believes to be successful and ideal. One attribute is success at work, the other success with women. “For years now I have no friends. I spend my entire time working, making Money, going to movies and seeking for company of women.” [9, p. 41] The man gets into the vicious circle, is strongly limited by it, isolating himself from social life because he is not able to

integrate into society. Binx indicates that he has no friends - despite his good social status, despite being a bachelor, despite financial prosperity. Kierkegaard defines similar situations as follows: "Surrounded by hordes of men, absorbed in all sorts of secular matters, more and more shrewd about the ways of the world - such a person forgets himself" [6, p. 33]. Here an attribute of the modern era is clearly apparent. Man does not have time to meditate, to think about himself, to develop his spirit and spiritual knowledge. He chases after hedonic experiences. The society accepts success, and only the one who is successful is perceived positively and accepted. In this context Kierkegaard highlights: "But to become fantastic in this way, and thus to be in despair, does not mean, although it usually becomes apparent, that a person cannot go on living fairly well, seem to be a man, be occupied with temporal matters, marry, have children, be honoured and esteemed – and it may not be detected that in a deeper sense he lacks a self" [6, p. 32]. Gradually despair is once again transformed into the subsequent solitude and a feeling that the individual has become a stranger in a society that does not understand him and that he does not understand, either, which causes the human self "to sink ever deeper into suffering in loneliness" [10]. The main character Binx undergoes a crisis of stagnation in his own personality and is thrown into a state of apathy. There is a feeling of futility in everything surrounding him, and in many aspects he is similar to Kierkegaard: "For sometime now the impression has been growing upon me that everyone is dead. It happens when I speak to people. In the middle of a sentence it will come over me: yes, beyond a doubt this is death. There is little to do but groan and make an excuse and slip away as quickly as one can. At such times it seems that the conversation is spoken by automatons." [9, p. 100] The same kind of inner despair was experienced by Kierkegaard, too. In society he managed to appear merry and carefree, but in his heart he was experiencing an emptiness of his own doing and the futility of his own existence. In his *Journals and Papers* he writes, "I have just come from a gathering where I was the life of the party. Witticism leapt from my tongue, everyone laughed and admired me – but I left (yes – that dash ought to be as long as the radii of the Earth's orbit-----

----- and wanted to shoot myself." [Pap. I A 161] It is obvious, that Kierkegaard experienced anxiety in his life as an aesthete. His melancholy and uneasiness entered his mind and enhanced his feeling of solitude.

The main character of the book describes the feelings of an individual desperately trying to find meaning in life and his own self in such activities as going to the cinema. Art in general, and in this case especially film, plays a special role in how Binx sees the world. The process of going to the cinema helps him to imagine ways to override his despair. It helps him to at least find in this way the meaning, structure, purpose and identity missing in his own life. Although going to the cinema offers only a simulacrum of reality, he is able to fill, at least in part, the emptiness of his existence. Thus, Binx describes his own feelings and the situations in his own life in terms of his moviegoer experiences

and those of the actors who play a role in the moviegoer's. Since he lacks his own identity but at the same time yearns for real legitimacy, it is much easier for him to accept the attitude of the actors in the movies as his own and identify with them. Based on Kierkegaard's understanding, it is stated that we, as human beings, "do not will to be what we are in our being human" [11]. There is one other reason for Binx to go to the cinema. He observes other spectators and analyzes how this specific human society influences him. He defines his feelings as follows: "I am hardly ever depressed by a movie and Jane Powell is a very nice-looking girl, but the despair of it is enough to leave young one in the stomach. I look around the theatre. Mr Kinsella has his troubles too. There are only a few solitary moviegoers scattered through the gloom, the afternoon sort and the most ghostly of all, each sunk in his own misery." [9, p. 74] The suffering is perceived by Percy as a substantive sign of despair. It consumes the man to an extent when he is not able to focus on things and people around him. Binx becomes the individual who is searching for a solution, searching for his own individuality and purpose, the individual yearning to break out from his suffering: "If I did not talk to the theatre owner or the ticket seller, I should be lost, cut loose metaphysically speaking" [9, p. 75]. Man *qua* individual needs inescapably to find himself; he feels the need for the social audience of other people and positive social interaction to escape his own self, to deal with his own suffering [9, p. 75]. Yet he still feels alone in the crowd, feels lost, misunderstood, like a stranger whom no one understands. Even though he is searching, his inner deliverance is in communication with other people. He has a strong desire to attempt to talk and to share his inner self with them. Kierkegaard describes this state as follows: "This is the state in despair. No matter how much the despairing person avoids it, no matter how successfully he has completely lost himself (especially the case in the form of despair that is ignorance of being in despair) and lost himself in such a manner that the loss is not at all detectable." [9, p. 21]

The main character of *The Moviegoer*, Binx, as well as Kierkegaard's aesthete, is not content with life; he feels empty inside and has to face the ever stronger feeling of despair and anxiety. He is fully aware of the absurdity of his existence. Kierkegaard claims that the desperate man "is trying to dispose of the despair by his own means but he still is desperate and the putative effort pushes him into the deeper despair with all his power seeks to break the despair by himself and by himself alone - he is still in despair and with all his presumed effort only works himself fall the deeper into deeper despair" [6, p. 14]. Percy defines a specific kind of despair that he calls *malaise*. This term was explored by French philosopher Albert Camus. Percy writes, "What is malaise? You ask. The malaise is the pain of loss. The world is lost to you, 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." [9, p. 120] Binx sinks into so-called temperamental anxiety, which arises from an awareness of the fact that the emptiness of one's existence is not remedied by the accumulation of wealth or searching for new love affairs: "You say it is a simple thing surely, all gain and

no loss, to pick up a good-looking woman and head for the beach” [9, p. 120] But as Kierkegaard claims, “when the enchantment of illusion is over, when existence begins to totter, then despair, too, immediately appears as that which lay underneath” [6, p. 44]. And this is exactly the nature of the issue that Binx is clearly realizing his despair and is experiencing it intensively. “Unless, of course, the woman happens to be your wife or some other every day creature so familiar to you that she is as invisible as you yourself.” [9, p. 120-121] He sinks into the futility of everything around him. “Whenever one courts great happiness, one also risks malaise” [9, p. 121], writes Percy.

Kierkegaard and Percy both write about man’s solitude in the middle of a society characterized by its objectivity and lacking in passion. They do not understand the world they live in, and they are full of uneasiness. They only navigate through their lives; they lack inner joy of life; they do not exist. Their futile lifestyle brings them in the end to a state of despair. According to Kierkegaard, an individual starts to realize his own despair and faces the feeling of “despair over oneself” [6, p. 20]. Soren Kierkegaard’s term ‘Angst’ became the central term of existentialism [12]. In this stage, he is aware of his despair. Due to the despair that an individual has to face, he constantly has to despair over something. Kierkegaard claims that the despairing person “with all his power seeks to break the despair by himself and by himself alone - he is still in despair and with all his presumed effort only works himself all the deeper into deeper despair” [6, p. 14].

Walker Percy describes in further detail this type of despair as follows, “Surely I have seen them before too, at the zoo or Marine land, him gazing at the animals or fishes noting every feature with the same slow lack of wonderment, her gazing at nothing in particular but not bored either, enduring rather and secure in his engrossment” [9, p. 129]. This lifestyle is characteristic of modern man. He is not interested in the others, he becomes a loner, and it brings him deeper into despair and hopelessness. Kierkegaard argues, “he may try to keep himself in the dark about his state through diversions and in other ways, for example, through work and busyness as diversionary means, yet in such a way that he does not entirely realize why he is doing it, that it is to keep himself in the dark” [6, p. 48]. This is so because such individual desperately lacks “a deeper, existential basis, related to the deepest aspirations and, yes, fears and doubts of the individual - a desire permeated by passion” [13].

However, Walker Percy finds a way to break out of the anxious feeling caused by human existence, using a concept of Kierkegaard’s called the *rotation method*. Binx experiences the positive rotation method. He finds warm Southern nights and the Western Desert very stimulating. “A rotation”, he says, “I define as the experiencing of the new beyond the expectation of the experiencing of the new.” [9, p. 144]

In his final epilogue, Binx confesses that he understands the limits of his human nature and indicates that he has read the philosophical works of Kierkegaard. He argues, “As for my search, I have not the inclination to say much on the subject. For one thing, I have not the authority, as the great Danish

philosopher declared, to speak of such matters in anyway other than edifying.” [9, p. 237] In the context of existential despair, Percy says, “I would reverse Kierkegaard’s aphorism – the worst despair is that despair which is unconscious of itself as despair – to: the best despair and the beginning of hope is the consciousness of despair in the very air we breathe and to look around for something better” [2, p. 67]. There is clearly an apparent tinge of hope. This statement is also confirmed by his words in his book: “There is only one thing I can do: listen to people, see how they stick themselves into the world, hand them along a ways in their dark journey” [9, p. 233].

5. Conclusion

The aim of this study is to highlight Percy’s excellent work *The Moviegoer*, which reflects the unique existential questioning of a man facing feelings of alienation and despair. In his novel Percy analyzes in depth the existence of modern man. He makes an effort to understand the cause and the problem of his alienation and encourages him to seek the renewal of his own self-confidence. Kierkegaard’s model of despair and comprehension of the human self, as explained in his work *The Sickness unto Death*, became a guideline for Percy’s analyses, by which he certainly does not mean to condemn human society. It is not his aim to damn man to eternal despair or to the feeling of hopeless solitude, but to confirm the uniqueness of human existence. For every unique individual, these ideas can be guidelines for the restoration of a meaningful life and inner fulfillment.

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