The University of Southern Mississippi
The Aquila Digital Community

Master's Theses

Spring 5-2014

Refocusing Ecocriticism: Going Deep with Walker Percy's The Moviegoer

Ivan Anderson Philippoff
University of Southern Mississippi

Follow this and additional works at: https://aquila.usm.edu/masters_theses

Recommended Citation
Philippoff, Ivan Anderson, "Refocusing Ecocriticism: Going Deep with Walker Percy's The Moviegoer" (2014). *Master's Theses*. 26.
https://aquila.usm.edu/masters_theses/26

This Masters Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by The Aquila Digital Community. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of The Aquila Digital Community. For more information, please contact Joshua.Cromwell@usm.edu.

The University of Southern Mississippi

REFOCUSING ECOCRITICISM:

GOING DEEP WITH WALKER PERCY'S

THE MOVIEGOER

by

Ivan Anderson Philippoff

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate School
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts

Approved:

_Charles B. Sumner____________________
Director

_Katherine H. Cochran_________________

_Martina M. Sciolino__________________

_Maureen A. Ryan_____________________
Dean of the Graduate School

May 2014

ABSTRACT

REFOCUSING ECOCRITICISM:

GETTING DEEP WITH WALKER PERCY'S

THE MOVIEGOER

by Ivan Anderson Philippoff

May 2014

The field of scholarship known as ecocriticism is growing rapidly. Members of the field must endeavor to define ecocritism's goals and parameters to prevent fragmentation and lack of focus. While most professed ecocritics agree that increased awareness and respect for the environment must be of paramount importance, some disagreement exists concerning the best methods to achieve this goal. One of the issues that requires clarification involves whether proponents of ecocriticism should adopt a more ecocentric or anthropocentric perspective of the environment. The former views humanity as part of a worldwide community and views nature as valuable in its own right. The latter judges nature's value in respect to its use to humanity. This essay presents the two arguments and suggests that, in order to truly change public perspectives of the environment, ecocriticism must advocate an ecocentric perspective of humankind's relationship to the environment. To support this argument, I look to Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer* and present Binx Bollings as an example of humanity's reigning anthropocentric tendencies. Bollings' pattern of observing his environment as a commodity to serve his needs prevents his being able to connect meaningfully with his surroundings and stimulates a sense of isolation and alienation.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The writer would like to thank the thesis director, Dr. Charles Sumner, and the other committee members, Dr. Katherine Cochran and Dr. Martina Sciolino, for their guidance and encouragement on this project.

I would also like to thank Principal Dina Holland and the amazing faculty and staff at St. Martin High School for supporting me and enabling me to continue my studies. Thanks for being tolerant of my absences and of my frequently distracted mind.

Without the support of my incredible wife and the love of my children, none of this would be possible. Christy's strength and Julia's and Bryce's laughter carried me through many exhausted days and nights. Thank you for being my family.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ii

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS iii

CHAPTER

I. INTRODUCTION 1

II. WALKER PERCY AND *THE MOVIEGOER* 4

III. ECOCRITICISM'S ANTHROPOCENTRIC ARGUMENT 25

IV. CONCLUSION 29

IV. WORKS CITED 45

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The earth is in a state of crisis. Ecocriticism has emerged as an example of the literary profession's propensity for responding to the most pressing concerns of society, and it has become the focus of worldwide conferences, journals, presses, and specifically-designated programs of study in major universities. The rapid growth is likely due to increasing environmental concern and the general consensus that action must be taken. This expansion is particularly evident in the growth of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE), an organization founded in 1992 devoted to ecocritical concerns. According to the organization's website, ASLE now boasts a membership of over 1,450 "teachers, writers, students, artists and environmentalists interested in the natural world and its meanings and representations in language and culture" (Cokinos, *asle.com*) Yet despite the field's expansion, conflicting opinions about the parameters and the goals of ecocriticism threaten its cohesion as a movement. One such concern is whether ecocriticism's efforts should espouse a more *anthropocentric* or *ecocentric* method to address environmental issues. In this thesis, I will present some prevailing attitudes concerning this dichotomy, and I will use the character Binx Bollings from Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer* to demonstrate the inadequacies of an anthropocentric perspective in raising environmental consciousness. Binx's anthropocentrism creates a sense of alienation and a divide between himself and his surroundings. Since ecocritics ultimately aim for a stronger relationship with one's environment, his detachment offers a useful argument for maintaining a more ecocentric perspective in the field of ecocriticism. Before addressing *The Moviegoer*, however, it is

important to examine the primary differences between anthropocentric and ecocentric perspectives of the environment.

At present, the majority of industrial, scientific societies hold a decidedly anthropocentric view of the environment. Ecocritics often describe this perspective as "shallow" or "social" ecology because it places humankind at the center of the world's ecosystems. Timothy Clark refers to shallow ecology in less pejorative terms as *reform environmentalism* (1). Clark explains the tenets of reform environmentalism:

> For the most part reform environmentalists advocate measures within the given terms of capitalist industrial society ("sustainable development", carbon offset schemes, conservation charities with glossy magazines, etc.). Environmental politics becomes essentially a matter of long-term prudence for human interests and quality of life, the protection of aesthetically attractive landscapes and their associated leisure pursuits. Reform environmentalism also informs a new kind of customer piety, with its sometimes extraordinary language – such that buying a slightly less destructive make of car becomes "saving the planet." (2)

Clark's somewhat caustic portrayal of reform environmentalists belies their importance. Members of this faction work within the existing social and political systems to seek regulations and policy changes that protect the natural environment and extend the availability of natural resources for human consumption. It is important to note, however, that reformists are often restricted by the very political, historical, and social structures they seek to alter. Clark illustrates the dilemma: "If they don't use the language of resource economists—language that converts ecology into 'input-output models,' forests into 'commodity production systems,' and which uses the metaphor of human

economy in referring to Nature—then they are labeled as sentimental, irrational, or unrealistic" (Clark 3). Shallow ecology is ultimately anthropocentric in that it is concerned with protecting the earth strictly for human consumption and enjoyment.

"Deep ecology" is a term coined by Arne Naess in 1972 to describe a balanced, more ecocentric relationship between man and nature (65). Rather than viewing nature as a valuable resource for human beings to use and enjoy, deep ecologists seek to promote "an ecocentric understanding of the environment, an understanding which is to be gained by existing in harmony with unspoiled nature" (Bennett 32). Bill Devall and George Sessions view deep ecology as "a way of developing a new balance and harmony between individuals, communities, and all of Nature" (7). Deep ecologists seek to alter the pervasive anthropocentric tendency of believing that nature exists to support humanity and that the value of nature may only be determined by its value for human use (Clark 2). Deep ecologists do not wish to protect the earth's natural systems *for* human consumption, but rather *in spite of* human consumption. They reject the reform environmentalists' assumption that the natural environment can be preserved through manipulation of current structures of thought and action. Given that existing systems have done little to alleviate environmental concerns or to redefine the paradigms within which humans perceive themselves and their relationship with natural environments, I would argue that ecocriticism must focus on the principles of deep ecology.

CHAPTER II

WALKER PERCY AND *THE MOVIEGOER*

In my effort to direct the field of ecocriticism toward the principles of deep ecology, I turn to Walker Percy and *The Moviegoer.* Though not considered typical fare for ecocritical analysis, *The Moviegoer* offers valuable insights concerning human perceptions and the environment, and it is adept at downplaying the significance of the culturally, socially, and historically determined environments to which some ecocritics are beginning to gravitate. In *Practical Ecocriticism,* Glen Love recognizes that in order to understand the relationship between humans and the environment, we must first discover what it means to be human (6). This discovery, of course, motivates much of Walker Percy's writing. Though trained as a medical doctor, Percy shifted his focus to the existential illnesses of society. He noticed that science is unable to explain crucial information about what it means to be a human, and he blames this gap in our understanding for our alienation, malaise, and despair. Though Percy often focuses on the spiritual meaning of humanity, his methods support the search for man's place in nature as well. Both goals require a restructuring of thought processes and a willingness to question one's current perspectives and physical attachments. Percy and deep ecologists agree that we must search for a more authentic realization and appreciation of our place in the world. Deep ecologists assert that the solution requires a connection with natural environments that are as unmediated by human interference as possible.

In his nonfiction, Walker Percy frequently comments upon the plight of mankind in the modern age. His essay "The Loss of the Creature" discusses the human tendency to create "preformulations" of an event or "thing" (47). According to Percy, people often visit a place hoping that it measures up to their image and expectations rather than

expecting to engage with the place on its own terms and accept it for what it offers. He uses the Grand Canyon to illustrate the difficulty of having an authentic experience of a place that has been surrounded by a preformed complex. He explains that sightseers visiting the Grand Canyon measure their satisfaction not by the immediate experience, but "*by the degree to which the canyon conforms to the preformed complex,*" that is, the image that they have created in their minds based on postcards, advertisements, travel brochures, "expert opinions," etc. (47). This method of appraising environments represents a very anthropocentric endeavor because the sightseers, either consciously or not, exert their will on the environment. If the experience conforms to expectations, the sightseers feel that "this is it". If the experience is not at least as wonderful as the preformed image, the sightseers become bored and disillusioned. Approaching the environment with preconceived notions about what one hopes to gain binds the viewer in the consumer + commodity relationship. There is an ironic twist for the sightseer who achieves the "this is it" moment. He begins immediately to require certification and affirmation that the experience is "genuine". In Percy's terms, he eagerly gives up the "sovereignty" of the experience to an expert who may then return the experience as genuine (49). This is due to the unconscious desire to return to the role of consumer who longs to be presented with the commodity that he desires.

In *The Moviegoer*, Walker Percy offers another example of the artifice that is imposed upon a setting by historically and socially-imposed preformulations of place. Binx describes the old Bollings place in Feliciana Parrish, dubbed Lynwood by a druggist's daughter from upstate New York and then restored and permanently placed as a historic southern home on the Azalea trail, where admiring visitors pay a dollar a head to witness history. In seeking an association with a place that is dictated by historical and

cultural preformulations, people are seeking the "it" experience without realizing that in its very nature as a designated "historic" home, Lynwood cannot possibly provide an authentic experience. No real connection with place is possible because the place has been defined before their arrival. Percy's awareness of the pitfalls of identifying with history explains why he describes himself as a southern writer, but one who lives in the South on his own terms and "in such a way as not to succumb to the ghosts of the Old South or the happy hustlers of the new Sunbelt South" (*Signposts* 4). In his discussion of Percy's legacy to contemporary southern writers, Farrell O'Gorman notes that Percy represents a shift in the "orientation" of southern fiction. O'Gorman connects Percy with Flannery O'Connor and observes that both writers are "most clearly distinguished from their predecessors by their ultimate concern with not a tragic regional history but rather the radically comic mystery they saw permeating every aspect of the contemporary world they so often critiqued" (99). In *The Moviegoer*, Percy writes of southern places in a way that emphasizes the shortcomings of depending upon history and of striving for the "this is it" moment. The novel takes place in the South, but Percy's perspective allows for the principles illustrated in *The Moviegoer* to be applicable far beyond the southern region.

Binx Bolling is a sightseer searching for the "this is it" experience. As such, he approaches his surroundings from a decidedly anthropocentric position. His interactions with the world around him are based on his expectations of results and his need to be distracted from his alienation. Binx clearly exhibits the confusion, the alienation, and the malaise that Percy believes to plague society, and he struggles to distract himself through his pursuit of money, women, and place-- none of which will satisfy a search for greater self awareness. Percy presents Binx as an example of mankind's isolation from

itself and of man's desire to understand what it means to be a human being. Binx's alienation and malaise manifest in his thoughts, dialogue, and behavior. What distinguishes Binx from the rest of humanity, however, is that he is not only aware of the missing element but also willing to search for it. He comments, "To become aware of the possibility of the search is to be on to something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair" (13). Binx professes that he is not aware of either the goal of the search or how to achieve results, but as the novel progresses and the pressures of society increase, it becomes apparent that his answer is not to be found in the places he looks.

The essence of deep ecology is also a search for what it means to be a human being. Deep ecologists would recognize Binx's alienation as a desire to awaken wholes greater than the sum of their parts and to recognize himself as a member of an ecological community. Deep ecologists believe that this desire manifests in a yearning to connect with the natural world. Arne Naess writes that deep ecologists "keep asking more searching questions about human life, society, and Nature as in the Western philosophical tradition of Socrates," and he recommends asking specifically "whether the present society fulfills basic human needs like love and security and access to nature, and, if it does not, whether we simply accept the underlying assumptions that prevent fulfillment" (qtd. in Devall 65). By the end of the novel, it would appear that Binx's inability to discover a deeper understanding does indeed lead him to accept the limitations and abandon his search.

Through Binx's shallow attachment to artificiality and his inability to overcome his alienation, Percy demonstrates the need for asking these deeper questions about existence. To emphasize the need, Percy uses settings for this novel that traditionally have been romanticized as places imbued with significance and depth. Binx's responses

to these settings illustrate the impossibility of achieving a profound awareness of self through artificial or preformulated settings. The traditionally celebrated settings are reduced to shells. Binx's unexpected yet honest reactions to these environs illustrate that the novel does not adopt the previously mentioned notion of value being determined by human beings; instead, it demystifies these recognizable settings and redirects one's attention to the search for true worth that may be found through a deeper understanding of existence. With Binx, we wander through New Orleans during carnival season, spin along the highway to a Civil War fort on the Gulf Coast, visit a rustic fishing camp on Bayou des Allemands, and ride a train to Chicago. Along the way, Binx's memory takes us to natural places through which a man might supposedly identify and understand himself: a houseboat bought for manly pursuits, a hiking expedition along the Appalachian Trail, and, perhaps most significantly, a ditch during the Korean War. This novel is busy, dynamic, and full of movement; however, Binx achieves little satisfaction in his relationships with these socially defined destinations. We join Binx on these adventures only to share in his disillusionment upon arrival. Each place is marked by human alienation and shaped by history, and each teaches Binx nothing about his current existence.

As we begin to traverse the succession of places in *The Moviegoer*, it is useful to examine the potentially ambiguous notion of *place*. In *The Environmental Imagination,* Lawrence Buell recognizes the importance of distinguishing the notion of *place* from that of *space.* He sees *place* as being identified not only by physical markers but also by social consensus. Places have predetermined meanings and significance, whereas *space* is needed as "elbow room for meditation or leisure to fill" (*Future* 63). Spaces are open areas that may be experienced without preexisting expectations. Places exert their own

reality on an individual without letting a person in that place establish his or her own identity. This concept applies not only to cities, but also to less inhabited areas such as the Sahara Desert or the Great Barrier Reef. These places carry certain histories and inspire presuppositions and, like many locales, are considered to hold a mystical power or influence that may be transferred to an individual. In his discussion of space and place, Buell describes world history as the process of spaces becoming places (63). He points out the possibility that all knowledge is "situated," that is, attached to a place and defined by that attachment. "The meanings of places may be rooted in the physical setting and object and activities," says geographer Edward Ralph, "but they are not the property of them—rather they are a property of human intentions and experiences" (qtd. in Buell 253). Binx is unable to achieve a comfortable inner *space* through interactions with established external *places*.

Buell's idea of place versus space relates to Percy's concept of place versus nonplace. Percy cautions against succumbing to the attraction of *places*: "The more delectable a place, the quicker it is ingested, digested, and turned to feces" (*Signposts* 5). According to Percy, "Free people have a serious problem with place, being in a place, deciding which new place to rotate to. Americans ricochet around the United States like billiard balls" (*Signposts* 5). This constant movement is indicative of people's desire to identify with a "this is it" place that will serve their needs. Percy devotes considerable time to this place/nonplace distinction in his essay "Why I Live Where I Live." He speaks of Covington, Louisiana, his hometown, as having an "attractive lack of identity, lack of placeness, even lack of history" (*Signposts* 6). He explains that after just one visit, he decided, "This is the nonplace for me!" (*Signposts* 7). He continues to celebrate the anonymity of his chosen locale: "The best thing about Covington is that it is in a

certain sense out of place and time but not too far out and therefore just the place . . ." (*Signposts* 9). Percy elects to distance himself from identification with a place and its history because doing so frees one from expectations and allows the self to emerge. For Percy, much of this self-emergence hinges on a religious connection and on his writing; for deep ecology, the important facet is the spiritual connection to the natural world and the freedom from the manmade distractions that promote anthropocentrism. In "Why I Live Where I Live," Percy expresses fears that living in New Orleans may be too "seductive," thereby suggesting that renowned environments might exert their own power over individuals and prevent the emergence of the self (*Signposts* 9).

New Orleans is a place steeped in history and anthropocentric preformulations. Percy's depiction of Binx Bolling's New Orleans at first embraces the stereotypical image and the seductiveness referred to above: "I alight at Esplanade in a smell of roasting coffee and creosote and walk up Royal Street" (14). After this original alight, however, the idealized New Orleans begins to fade in the fog of Binx's malaise, and the "ironwork on the balconies sags like rotten lace" (14). Percy then invokes the height of New Orleans imagery by having a parade pass by. Now, we are in a place defined by its history and expectations. For Binx, however, it is just another lunch hour, and little attention is given to the parade. In fact, we learn that parades are put on by a "krewe" and that "Anyone can form a krewe" (17). Binx not only rejects identifying with the pageantry and artificiality of the scene which has become commonplace, he also manages to reduce his involvement to an additional anthropocentric reaction. He evaluates the scene for ways that it may serve him. The mundane encroaches:

> Red tractors pulled the floats along; scaffoldings creak, paper and canvas tremble. Linda, I think, is one of half a dozen shepherdesses dressed in

> short pleated skirts and mercury sandals with thongs criss-crossed up bare calves. But they are masked and I can't be sure. If she is, her legs are not so fine after all. All twelve legs are shivery and goosepimpled. A few businessmen stop to watch the girls and catch trinkets. (17)

"Goosepimpled legs, creaking scaffoldings, a few businessmen, and trinkets" describe a parade in New Orleans in a manner that is indicative of the demystifying effect that Percy's descriptions and Binx's reactions have on settings that one might expect to be focal points of interest. While some authors might linger upon such a recognizably New Orleans event to exploit the mystique of the locale, Binx quickly reduces it to boredom and a casual curiosity concerning female legs. Percy urges the reader to focus on the alienation of the setting and to abandon any urge to instill it with meaning. Binx does not fall prey to the deception, nor does nature. The cold pulls the artificial layers away from the scene and leaves goose bumps instead.

In respect to New Orleans, Binx recognizes the artifice of identifying with a place dictated by history and tradition. He "can't stand the old world atmosphere of the French Quarter or the genteel charm of the Garden District" (6). Binx distrusts the traditions that Aunt Emily espouses so adamantly, and he also distrusts his own ability to avoid alienation by seeking refuge in a constructed image. Aunt Emily's identification with her preformulated idea of the city is her crutch to escape alienation, but for Binx, living in the past is not the best way to fill the void in his present existence. Aunt Emily exhibits strong similarities with shallow ecologists in her treatment of her environment. She strives to protect the identity of New Orleans, but only because it serves her interests to do so. Aunt Emily "transfigures everyone . . . . All the stray bits and pieces of the past, all that is feckless and gray about people, she pulls together into an unmistakable visage

of the heroic or the craven, the noble or the ignoble. So strong is she that sometimes the person and the past are in fact transfigured by her" (49). When Binx attempts to broach the subject of the search with Aunt Emily, she immediately places it within her anthropocentric, historical context, calling it a *Wanderjahr* and likening it to his father's experience: "a fine year's ramble up the Rhine and down the Loire, with a pretty girl on one arm and a good comrade on the other" (55). In effect, she makes light of his search in order to place it within her realm of rational understanding. In applying a label, *Wanderjahr,* she negates Binx's sovereignty and reduces his efforts to an established stereotype.

As a famous city, New Orleans is certainly attended by preformulations. discussed earlier in "The Loss of the Creature". Martyn Bone asserts that *The Moviegoer* provides evidence of Percy's "postsouthern scepticism towards the traditional southern 'sense of place'" (69). I would add that though Percy identifies with the South, both *The Moviegoer* and "The Loss of the Creature" demonstrate that he would be skeptical of any sense of place defined by the tradition surrounding it, southern or otherwise. Like Percy, Binx also chooses to leave New Orleans, and in his description of Gentilly, there are echoes of Percy's advocacy of nonplace (or space):

> Evening is the best time in Gentilly. There are not so many trees and the buildings are low and the world is all sky. The sky is a deep bright ocean full of light and life. High above the Lake a broken vee of ibises points for the marshes; they go suddenly white as they fly into the tilting salient of sunlight. Swifts find a windy middle reach of sky and come twittering down so fast I think at first gnats have crossed my eyelids. In the last sector of apple green a Lockheed Connie lowers from Mobile, her running

> lights blinking in the dusk. Station wagons and Greyhounds and diesel rigs rumble toward the Gulf Coast, their fabulous tail-lights glowing like rubies in the darkening east. Most of the commercial buildings are empty except the filling stations where attendants hose down the concrete under the glowing discs and shells and stars. (*Moviegoer* 73)

In the above passage, Binx apparently achieves considerable relief from his alienation and malaise. A deep ecologist would call attention to the role of the open sky and the flocks of birds operating on their own terms, seemingly oblivious of Binx's presence and ask, "How important are the images of nature in this description? Do the Lockheed, buses, and station wagons play the central roles in Binx's apparent relief and sense of wholeness?" I would argue that Binx's description of the "best times" in Gentilly represents his acceptance of the environment around him for what it is and his realization that it exists around him but not to serve him. This heightened awareness and limited amount of distraction are achieved both by his being entirely in the present and by his being exposed to a natural world that exhibits its own sense of order and wonder.

Unlike Percy's visitor to the Grand Canyon for whom "there is no present; there is only the past of what has been formulated and seen and the future of what has been formulated and not seen," Binx is, for the moment, existing in the environment without expectations (48). Notice, too, that there are none of Buell's markers to demonstrate the existence of placehood. Though Binx refers to Mobile, there are no signifiers that proclaim location. He moves to Gentilly to break with tradition and to achieve a level of freedom from his historical roots, but his eventual dissatisfaction with Gentilly illustrates the space to place transition. He moves to Gentilly for *space,* but when it becomes a

place with which he creates a self-serving relationship Based on preconceived expectations, it is used up, and he slips back into the malaise.

One of Binx's preferred escapes from the malaise is to drive to the Gulf Coast in his MG with his current Linda or Marcia (the names of secretaries/girlfriends). The MG is the only car he has found that is immune to the malaise. He and Sharon Kincaid make the trip and visit Ship Island. At first, this trip does not meet his preformulations: "I had hoped for an empty boat this time of year, a deserted deck where we might stretch out in the sun. Instead we are packed in like sardines" (128). Remarkably, this unexpected turn of events is not depicted as entirely unpleasant. Though Binx and Sharon are surrounded by "at least a hundred children," Binx uses no language that may be interpreted as negative (129). Binx, in fact, finds solace in the unexpected and the unprecedented as opposed to an experience hinging on preformulations. This unsolicited immersion into a community is a hint of what deep ecologists hope to achieve in natural environments. True communion cannot be demanded, but if one is present and accepts the opportunity, it may be achieved. They reach Ship Island and disembark near the remnants of a Civil War fort. Here is another opportunity for Percy to place Binx in the role of the detached tourist. Note the tone that Percy uses to reduce the reader's interest and involvement with the historical site. Like the Grand Canyon, the pressure of history and countless visitors has reduced the site to a fragment of itself:

> We land near the fort. A decrepit brick silo left over from the Civil War and littered with ten summers of yellow Kodak boxes and ticket stubs and bottle caps. It is the soul of dreariness, this "historic site" washed by the thin brackish waters of the Mississippi Sound. The debris of summers past piles up like archaeological strata. (129)

As he did during the parade by noticing "goosepimpled" legs, Binx reduces the scene to a collection of mundane details, for celebrating the history of the old fort holds no interest for him. This trip represents a diversion. Once again, Binx has an agenda and definite expectations regarding the outcome. As such, the trip teeters on the verge of malaise. Will the preformulations be met? Yes. Binx and Sharon frolic in the waves and embrace each other, and Binx confesses that he has been planning this picnic all week. Here Percy offers another glimpse into the danger of preprogrammed expectations. As the two confess to planning and desiring to share this time together, the magic and the spontaneity of being in the present fade. Binx is aware of the change. "The remarkable discovery forces itself upon me that I do not love her so wildly as I loved her last night. But at least there is no malaise and we lie drowsing in the sun, hands clasped in the other's back, until the boat whistle blows" (135). The distraction has worked; Binx has forgotten about his alienation and his need for the search for the time being. As they drive home, Binx muses to himself about the pleasures of the "Little Way, not the big search for the big happiness but the sad little happiness of drinks and kisses, a good little car and a warm deep thigh" (135). Percy describes the Little Way as a talent for everyday life rather than the heroic deed. The Little Way is very anthropocentric. It involves the ability to experience personal pleasure and satisfaction in the midst of the alienating influences of the twentieth century. For Binx, who is struggling with the need to search for a deeper understanding, the distractions and the immediate affirmations of the "Little Way" are very appealing.

When Percy describes his life in Covington, it is easy to think that he has adopted his own Little Way. He describes it as "a pleasant, uninteresting place," where one can "visit local bars, eat crawfish, and drink Dixie beer and feel as good as it is possible to

feel in this awfully interesting century" (*Signposts* 9). The crux is that Percy, like Binx, cannot accept the Little Way without feeling the need for a deeper understanding of the Little Way. Binx's awareness of the search prevents him from being entirely convinced that the Little Way is *his* way, but in his musing about its virtues, he seems to be considering it. He suggests that he and Sharon stop at his mother's fishing camp. His musings must have reminded him of the camp, for the Smiths seem to be immersed in their own Little Way.

The Smiths' fishing camp at Bayou des Allemands provides a surprise for Binx similar to the one he experienced on the boat to Ship Island. Here again, Binx is welcomed into a community that he did not expect to find, and his alienation is again circumvented. He had thought that the camp would be deserted, but when he and Sharon arrive, they are met by his mother and his stepfather and their family. Binx does not like to visit them at their house in Biloxi, where history is thick, "dreariness sets into the marrow of my bones," and "the smell of two thousand Sunday dinners clings to the curtains" (139). However, everyone feels the difference at the camp:

> Water laps against the piling. The splintered boards have secret memories of winter, the long dreaming days and nights when no one came and the fish jumped out of the black water and not a soul in sight in the whole savannah; secrets the children must find out and so after supper they are back at their exploring, running in a gang from one corner to another. Donice shows me a muskrat trap he had left last August and wonder of wonders found again. (139)

Percy's description alternates from the serene beauty and tranquil unity of the bayou to the absurdity and frivolous activity of the household. Binx's mother, in particular, seems

driven to distract herself from deeper questions and realizations. According to Binx, "Any event or idea which does not fall directly within the household regimen, she stamps at once with her own brand of the familiar," and he admits that "her domesticity will begin to get on my nerves" (138). The loss of Duval, her favorite son, has led her to employ every device, including God, to the service of "the one enterprise she has any use for: the canny management of the shocks of life" (138). If Aunt Emily uses family history to guide her "Little Way," Binx's mother uses the homemaker's role. Through constant activity and distraction, she is able to maintain an even keel and avoid facing either the pleasant or the unpleasant mysteries of life. Everything must be "colloquial and easy, even God" (142).

That night, after driving to the Moonlight Drive-In with Sharon and Lonnie, Binx calls the evening a "good rotation" and explains the concept: "A rotation I define as the experiencing of the new beyond the expectation of the experiencing of the new. For example, taking one's first trip to Taxco would not be a rotation, or no more than a very ordinary rotation; but getting lost along the way and discovering a hidden valley would be" (144). Binx's trip to Ship Island with Sharon was an ordinary rotation that followed expectations until the unexpected meeting with the Smiths and the movie with Lonnie. The moviegoing experience allows Binx to rotate, viewing life from a different angle without precedence or preconceptions. Percy describes Binx as "nearly beside himself," but I feel that the connotation suggests that he is "outside himself" (144). Through movies, Binx is able to release his own preformulations and accept what is offered. He notes that Lonnie and Sharon are both aware of the "great happiness" and that they "have the sense to say nothing" (144). Binx feels a shared degree of understanding with Lonnie, and again there is a sense of community. It is in these moments when life and its

wonders are experienced in a way that is not dictated either by history or personal modes of qualification that Binx comes closest to escaping his alienation. When he wakes up at three o'clock on the porch of the camp, however, the "everydayness" has claimed him once again. He can no longer escape the camp's very nature as a *place*, and it can no longer provide the relief he seeks. As if the brief respite from alienation negated Binx's ability to distract himself, on the way home the MG becomes infested with malaise.

The Ship Island scene and the fishing camp scene each contain moments of satisfaction for Binx. I referred to these as moments wherein Binx feels as if he were in a community. I would argue that while these moments are possible among within the confines of historically or socially mediated paces, the anthropocentric location prevents any lasting connection with the environment. Naess comments on the "oceanic" feeling referred to by Freud and others in an attempt to describe the connection deep ecologists feel with nature: "—that they are connected with something greater than their ego, greater than their name, their family, their special attributes as an individual" (76). Naess describes this fundamental intuition as the "religious component" of deep ecology, and he distrusts the ability of human-mediated environments to develop this more wholistic manner of existence. The anthropocentrism that characterizes Binx's adventures prevents more than temporary episodes of this connection and abandonment of ego.

In the form of recollections, we are taken to places that might better the connection to the natural world sought by deep ecology. However, the places are reduced so drastically by anthropocentric expectations and attitudes that the possibility of achieving the connection becomes impossible. One such episode surrounds a houseboat purchased by Binx and his friends on Vermillion Bay near Tigre au Chenier. One might presume that the boat would provide a connection between Binx and his environment.

The concept sounds attractive to deep ecologists, but in reality, the boat was never intended as a communion with the natural world. In fact, Binx notes that the expected hunting and fishing did not occur. Instead, the boat was a vehicle of distraction wherein gambling, drinking and anthropocentrism reign. Walter would ask, "Goddamn, this is all right, isn't it? Isn't this a terrific set-up, Binx?" (40). The houseboat is Walter's "this is it" for the time being. Binx was bored by the houseboat because it did not meet his expectations or serve his needs. It neither informed the search nor provided an acceptable distraction: "To tell the truth I like women better" (40). In another example, he recalls hiking the Appalachian Trail with friends: "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" (41). Like the houseboat, hiking the Appalachian Trail was attached to the expectation of a received dividend. It would seem that Binx felt that the boat and the trail were there to provide his specific idea of what "communing with nature" might be. The relinquishment of the self was never performed, so connection and community could not be established. Binx left the Appalachian Trail to live in Gentilly, and he has lived there ever since. Percy's reduction of these idealized adventures in nature further illustrate that ecocentrism requires a mental change, not just a change in procedure and practice. The novel focuses on an ongoing spiritual self-realization that must be achieved through genuine understanding, not prescribed shifts in location.

How can one achieve this revelation in awareness and awaken one's ability to seek a deeper understanding of existence? In *The Moviegoer*, Percy points to life-or-death experiences as providing the impetus for a restructuring of worldviews. Binx and Kate have both undergone such experiences, and because of these events, they re-

examine their own existence and become aware of the overwhelming alienation that characterizes life as a human being. Their awareness brings them closer. Binx had his experience in the war, and Kate was involved in an accident in which her fiancé was killed for her depression and "bad times." Kate confides to Binx that the accident "gave me my life. That's my secret, just as the war is your secret" (58).

Binx credits his experience with the war as providing a defining moment and awakening the knowledge of the search within him. The one time he can remember breaking free of the grip of everydayness was when he lay bleeding in a ditch face to face with a dung beetle. This scene is of extraordinary value from a deep ecological perspective. The moment was not about conflict or engagement with other people; it was about a moment when he was unable to seek distraction, and his engagement with the natural world offered the opportunity for enlightenment. As the dung beetle scratched around in the leaves six inches from his nose, Binx was overcome by an "immense curiosity" (145). This is the moment of unexpected communion that stimulates deep ecologists to interact with nature on its own terms. Despite being a man engaging in perhaps the *most* socially- and historically-laden activity—war—Binx has a moment that puts all of his presuppositions into question.

Because of their experiences, they are both aware that the Little Way—allowing oneself to be distracted and accepting imitations of understanding imposed by humanity's current alienation —has its limitations. Like Binx, Kate still believes that location is the key, but unlike Binx, who searches for the right "place," she longs for a place removed from artificial history. In that respect Kate appears more open to abandoning the anthropocentric tendency toward preformulations. She relishes the thought of being an Anyone Anywhere. When Kate learns that Binx must leave for Chicago, she wants to go

and requests that they leave that night on a train. There is a sense of optimism and excitement during this scene, and Binx reflects with astonishment: "When it comes to a trip, to the plain business of going, just stepping up into the Pullman and gliding out of town of an evening, she is as swift and remorseless as Della Street" (183).

Just as he does when Binx alights in New Orleans, Percy begins the train ride by embracing the stereotypical mystique and proffering a "this is it" opportunity to the reader:

> No sooner do we open the heavy door of Sieur Iberville and enter the steel corridor with its gelid hush and the stray voices from open compartments and the dark smell of going high in the nostrils—then the last ten years of my life take on the shadowy aspect of a sojourn between train rides. It was ten years ago that I last rode a train, from San Francisco to New Orleans, and so ten years since I last enjoyed the particular gnosis of trains, stood on the eminence from which there is revealed both the sorry litter of the past and the future bright and simple as can be, and the going itself, one's privileged progress through the world. (184)

This poignant description of a train ride as an experience that might reduce ten years of one's life to a shadowy sojourn lulls one into a sense of satisfaction, as if Percy wants to offer the experience of the Little Way before shaking the reader out of this mystique-inspired torpor and back into the realm of empty preformulations. He begins with the word "But" then proceeds to describe the porter as "a black man with palms the color of shrimp and a neck swollen with dislike" (184). The roomettes are compared to "little coffins for a single person" (184). Binx notices other passengers sticking their heads out of roomettes into the corridor "for some sight of human kind" (184). The ride out of New

Orleans is marked by Binx's inability to focus on city-like cemeteries before "they set themselves off into the distance like a city seen from far away." As they travel over the suburbs, they ride "at a witch's level above the gravelly roofs" (185). Through these descriptions, the train ride takes a decidedly dark turn, and the emotion is of being swept along unnaturally, without control. The train is the site of a struggle. It is neither a distraction nor an escape. Even their lovemaking on the train is a struggle. Binx accepts Kate's offer, but he and Kate were scared and "shook like leaves" (200). The romance promised by the train was as empty as any other distraction.

By the time the two arrive in Chicago the trip is doomed. The idea of *place* as escape has been nullified. Binx finds Chicago unbearable. They briefly attend the convention until Binx is overwhelmed and they depart for the Chicago suburbs to find Harold Graebner, with whom Binx shares what he thinks is an emotional connection. Though Binx is determined to find community with Graebner, a man who once saved his life, the two are restless, realizing that their bond is found only in the past. Binx notes that "there is no *place* to come to rest (italics mine)," and so they "stand formally in the informal living area" (210). Binx can find no comfort in this space because he cannot exist in the present. Graebner drives them to the commuter station and drops them off ten minutes later.

Binx and Kate return to New Orleans, disillusioned but united in their realization of the fact that the human condition is plagued by artifice. It is no surprise that Percy describes the post-Mardi Gras scene in stark reality. This is no joyful homecoming, but rather a somber realization that the malaise cannot be defeated by physical location, nor is it a physical presence that can be evaded. There is a sensation of despair, but there is also a glimpse past the façade. Canal Street is nearly empty, and the "confetti and finery"

are swept into “soggy heaps in the gutters” (218). These are the remnants of many people’s attempts to distract themselves and indulge in the mystery and romance of a historically predictable place. Binx and Kate, however, have found a sense of communion with each other within the world of alienation and isolation. In the epilogue of the novel, Binx has abandoned his search for a deeper understanding of the human condition in favor of more mundane satisfaction. Though Percy’s own search led him to Christian existentialism, he seems to be describing Binx when he notes that “the Christian notion of man as a wayfarer in search of his salvation no longer informs Western culture. In its place, what most of us seem to be seeking are such familiar goals as maturity, creativity, autonomy, rewarding interpersonal relations, and so forth” (*Signposts* 208). These are the qualities that enable one to get through an ordinary Wednesday afternoon. Binx and Kate have found these goals in each other.

CHAPTER III

ECOCRITICISM'S ANTHROPOCENTRIC ARGUMENT

The Moviegoer effectively demystifies the preformulated environments in which Binx Bolling encapsulates himself and removes their potential for achieving a deeper understanding of how to live one's life. Percy addresses the urban environment as a social construct and as a shield with which people try to protect themselves from deeper realization. In "The Loss of the Creature," Percy agrees that people wish to find places that are unspoiled. He defines "unspoiled" as places that are "left physically intact" and also "not encrusted by renown and by the familiar" (*Signposts 51*). Unfortunately, he also realizes that current mindsets must abandon the attachment to existing systems of perception before a deeper understanding may be realized.

There are a growing number of ecocritics who challenge the movement's deep ecological tendency to reside in the wilderness and in unspoiled nature. Buell notes that "Environmental criticism's working conception of 'environment' has broadened in recent years from 'natural' to include also the urban, the interweave of 'built' and 'natural' dimensions in every locale, and the interpenetration of the local by the global" (*Future* 12). Michael Bennett believes that traditional ecocritism overlooks "a variety of environmental concerns that are central to urban life" (32). Characterizing environmental concerns as central to urban life reflects a very anthropocentric stance, yet Bennett tries to invoke deep ecocriticism to defend his argument. He refers to the four deep ecological principles established by Devall and Sessions, who assert that these necessary principles can only be developed through experiencing wide open spaces: 1) developing a sense of place, 2) redefining the heroic person from conqueror of the land to the person fully experiencing the natural place, 3) cultivating the virtues of modesty and humility and 4)

realizing how the mountains and rivers, fish and bears are continuing their own actualization processes (Devall & Sessions 110). Bennett casually asserts that "each of these four qualities, (minus the bears) can just as easily be found in urban environments," and he criticizes ecocriticism for failing to recognize this fact (32).

There are problems with Bennett's criticism. For example, the first of the principles refers to developing a sense of place, but a human being surrounded by an urban milieu is not developing a sense of place for himself or herself. Rather, this person is at best inheriting a packaged version of someone else's "place". As noted earlier, "place" and "space" are not to be conflated. Buell notes that "grounding in place patently does not guarantee ecocentrism, place being by definition perceived or felt space, space humanized, rather than the material world taken on its own terms" (253). Allowing the natural world to exist on its own terms is, of course, an important facet of deep ecology. Buell does not dismiss the possibility of achieving an ecological insight into an urban environment, but he believes that to do so would require achieving "environmental humility" and "an awakened place-awareness that is also mindful of its limitations and respectful that place molds us and vice versa" (*Environmental Imagination* 253). This humility is difficult to achieve within the confines of a city, where one is surrounded by evidence of human beings' domination of nature. The tendency is to identify with the place in a subjective manner that is influenced by anthopocentrism. Geographic orientation, socioeconomic levels, and political and historical markers are ubiquitous within a city. In this respect, place has already been determined, and a human being is adjusting to a preset, artificial reality.

The second and third principles that are invoked by Bennett in his defense of social ecocriticism are equally difficult to justify as valid points in his argument.

"Distinguishing the heroic conqueror of the land from the person fully experiencing the natural place" and "cultivating the virtues of modesty and humility" as aspects of ecocriticism may only be hinted at in an urban environment. To fully experience a natural place requires, first, a natural place, and as long as the earth is paved and the parks are manicured, city dwellers have conquered the land. By the same token, while modesty and humility may be practiced in an urban environment, these virtues will likely be directed toward other people according to social structures instead of the natural environment.

Bennett expects an enormous leap of faith from his readers when he includes the fourth principle as being easily experienced in urban environments. Mountains and rivers and fish (he flippantly dismisses the bears) may indeed be continuing their own actualizing processes in urban environments, but these processes have become reactionary, hinging upon the activities of humans. Binx's inspirational dung beetle was continuing his own actualization process in his ecosystem independent of human interference. Species that exist within urban environments necessarily adapt to respond to human influence. Obviously, a squirrel in Central Park has different daily routines and experiences than a squirrel living in the woods in Canada.

In his attempt to integrate metropolitan spaces into the ecocritical landscape, Bennett discusses the merits of social ecology and quotes Murray Bookchin, the man most identified with the social ecology movement. Bookchin asserts that "our basic ecological problems stem from social problems" (33). This statement is a truism and does not necessarily reflect a disagreement between deep and social ecologies. The issue is whether we can effect a cure for our ecological problems through studying the relationship between culture and nature within a city. When Dana Philipps lists the

duality of “social” versus “deep” among ecocriticism’s “hard problems,” he freely admits that he is unable to offer solutions. Of course, the identity of ecocriticism is not strictly dualistic. One can certainly imagine analyses that are situated between these two poles, and there will always be room for ecocriticism to overlap other structures of analysis, but the word ecocriticism must refer to a specific doctrine of respect and humility toward the environment. My concern is that focusing on humankind as the central character in our global ecosystem will not stimulate the change in consciousness that is required to bring about real solutions for ecological issues.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

Ecocriticism was formally established with the awareness that the literary profession must focus more on "the most pressing contemporary issue of all, namely, the global environmental crisis" (Glotfelty xv). To accomplish the movement's aim of preservation, ecocriticism must not only reexamine environmental awareness through existing systems of thought, but it must also combat the anthropocentric perspectives and attitudes of humanity. When choosing the name *ecocriticism,* Cheryl Glotfelty borrowed from a 1978 essay by William Ruekert entitled "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism." She chose the word ecocriticism over *environmental literary criticism* because of the interpretive connotation of the root *enviro-*, which implies that humans are at the center of a dualistic relationship with their surroundings. The prefix *eco-* implies a level field among interdependent communities of both human and nonhuman agents. Her choice reflects one of the major tenets of ecocriticism: the abandonment of an anthropocentric stance. Ecocriticism must address nature not just as the setting for human activity but as the major player in the ecological environment in which humans exist.

Like deep ecologists, Percy would argue that there are areas of human existence that defy rational explanation. For asking the same questions as Percy, deep ecology is criticized for being irrational and unscientific. Naess recognizes that these questions have been asked by humans in all cultures and in all time periods: "What does it mean to be a unique human individual? How can the individual self maintain and increase its uniqueness while also being an inseparable aspect of the whole system wherein there are no sharp breaks between self and the *other?*" (65). *The Moviegoer* demonstrates that the

answer may be to search for unmediated experiences and to adopt a mindset that questions the nature of humanity. If ecocriticism is to accomplish its goal of achieving a more ecologically aware society, then it must somehow elevate our regard for natural environments unmediated by human social and historical construction and force our awareness to move beyond the confines of urban or suburban existence.

WORKS CITED

Bennett, Michael. "From Wide Open Spaces to Metropolitan Places: The Urban Challenge to Ecocriticism." *Isle: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 8.1 (2001): 31-52. *MLA International Bibliography.* Web. 12 Jan. 2014.

Bone, Martyn. "The Postsouthern 'Sense of Place' in Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer* and Richard Ford's *The Sportswriter*." *Critical Survey* 12.1 (2000): 64-81. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 27 Nov. 2013.

Buell, Lawrence. *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*. Malden: Blackwell, 2005. Print.

---. *The Environmental Imagination.* Cambridge: Harvard University, 1995. Print.

Clark, Timothy. *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Cokinos, Christopher. asle.org. Association for the Study of Literature and Environment. Web. 11 Jan. 2014.

Devall, Bill, and George Sessions. *Deep Ecology.* Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith, 1985. Print.

Glotfelty, Cheryll. Introduction. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Eds. Glotfelty, Cheryll, and Harold Fromm. Athens: University of Georgia, 1996. xv-xxxvii. Print.

Love, Glen A. *Practical Ecocriticism; Literature, Biology, and the Environment.* Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 2003. Print.

Mander, Jerry. "Leaving the Earth: Space Colonies, Disney, and EPCOT." *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century.* Ed. George Sessions. Boston: Shambhala, 1995. 47-49. Print.

Naess, Arne. “Interview with Arne Naess.” *Deep Ecology.* Eds. Devall, Bill and George Sessions. Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith, 1985. 74-76. Print.

O’Gorman, Farrell. “Languages of Mystery: Walker Percy’s Legacy in Contemporary Southern Fiction.” *The Southern Literary Journal* 34.2 (2002): 97-119. *JSTOR,* Web. 13 Nov. 2013.

Percy, Walker. *The Message in the Bottle*. New York: Picador, 2000. Print.

---. *The Moviegoer.* New York: Random House, 1998. Print.

---. *Signposts in a Strange Land*. New York: Picador, 1991. Print.

Phillips, Dana. “Ecocriticism’s Hard Problems (Its Ironies, Too).” *American Literary History* 25.2 (2013): 455-467. *Project MUSE*. Web. 11 Jan. 2014.

Snyder, Gary. “Cultured or Crabbed.” *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century.* Ed. George Sessions. Boston: Shambhala, 1995. 47-49. Print.