CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

"With his five successive novels and his wide-ranging philosophical and occasional essays, Walker Percy shored up his reputation as one of America's greatest writers - an ironic moralist and perhaps the shrewdest chronicler of life in the New South."

A vast range of interpretations of Percy's novels by his critics in America, all over Europe and other continents is a sign of his wide popularity as a novelist. Apart from the National Book Award that Percy received for his first novel, *The Moviegoer*, in 1962 his success as a novelist lies in his lucid style of writing and selection of characters from the common folk. Percy is also popular among the philosophical and religious readers for his novels are artistically stuffed with the philosophy of life and the Christian ideologies. He has been variously described as a Catholic, an Existentialist or a Southern novelist.

Walker Percy is viewed by most of his critics as an existentialist as the traits of existentialism are quite abundant in his novels. "Certainly in Percy an existentialist sensibility has taken root in America, a fact that could signal a turning point in American fiction." He focuses on modern man's concrete life situations rather than his abstractions. Even the abstract things like fate, death, suffering, hypocrisy, and others are made concrete in the lives of his characters by using various narrative techniques. The traits of existentialism like suffering due to alienation, malaise, and everydayness; and desire for transcendence are incorporated in his protagonists. Percy's protagonist is all the time in the process of becoming. As a matter of fact he is not at the end of the novel what he is in
the beginning. He changes according to the change in his socio-economic and psychological conditions.

Percy does not treat himself as a Southern novelist but his roots being in the South the Southern influence is obvious in his works. The old family traditions with stern Stoic way of life, a typical feature of social life in the South, is carried out in all Percy's novels through characters like Emily Cutrer, Will Barrett, and Tom More. All these main characters are very much proud of their being heirs to the respectable families in the past and they strive to remain faithful to the old family traditions. They are engaged in sustaining good manners, the honour code, and chivalry towards women and then in passing the same qualities on to the next generation.

Though Percy's protagonists belong to a high class and civilized society, yet in the heart of their hearts they feel how uncivilized they are. Hence, the sense of defeat pervades in all novels of Percy. Binx knows how unkind he is to his female secretaries in exploiting them for his monetary gains. Will Barrett knows that though he pretends to be a gentleman but in reality he longs to be a fornicator. He feels guilty for his failure in prohibiting his father to commit suicide. Lancelot fails to be a good husband to Margot and a good father to Siobhan. Tom More fails to be a great scientist as his scientific invention does not fulfil his aim either at personal level to win Nobel Prize or at national level to cure all the ills of man. In short, Percy's protagonists fail to be true to their own selves.

In fact, the defeat of Percy's protagonists lies in the failure of their search and then at the end in accepting suffering as the reality of life. But ironically Percy seems to suggest that the success of his protagonists lies in their
defeat. Thus it is difficult to restrict Percy to any one category of novelists as the problems he deals with in his novels are universally true to the nature of man in the contemporary situation.

What Percy discloses through his novels is that in this age of science and technology man is living on the verge of disaster. Martin Luschei states that for Percy novel is "the instrument best suited for exploring what it is to be a man living in the world...." Percy is a good observer of the society. His observation is not superficial, rather it penetrates the minds of the people to unveil what is going on there. While explaining in one of his essays entitled "From Facts to Fiction" the shift in his interest from the study of science as a physician to the study of human nature as a writer psychiatrist he states:

"What began to interest me was not so much a different question, as a larger question, not the physiological and pathological processes within man's body but the problem of man himself, the nature and destiny of man, specifically and more immediately, the predicament of man in a modern technological society."

Thus it can be safely argued that the nucleus of all Percy's novels is 'man in an ironic predicament.'

The study of Percy's protagonists reveals that his main concern is not with the external affairs of his characters but with the internal upheavals that arouse in their minds, and their hearts. The formation of Percy's view of life as it filters into the lives of his characters is a synthesis of his medical education, the catastrophic events in his real life, the impact of Uncle Will, and the European philosophy. The synthesis is based on his belief that suffering is the reality of man's life. Inspite of caste, creed, education, and wealth man has to suffer if he
prefers to live in this world. Death is the only escape from suffering. All his protagonists, like Percy himself, ultimately choose to suffer and live a real life rather than to die and escape suffering.

Percy's protagonists suffer because they are put in a situation which they find impossible to come out of. He himself states:

"I am concerned with a certain quality of consciousness put down in a certain place and then seeing what kind of reaction takes place between a character and his environment and the people he meets."5

Binx Bolling of The Moviegoer, for instance, is placed in a world full of luxurious amenities like movies, TV, radio, car, wealth and women. He easily falls a prey to these and is abstracted from the reality of life. He loses his self amongst his own and the ancestral achievements. The material things create illusory images in his mind tempting him to act falsely to ascertain his place in this world. Lewis J. Taylor, Jr. rightly remarks:

"The essential human failing, then, is that ofallowing oneself to be reduced by the magical charms of externals, whether there come in the more obvious pleasure of sex, the anesthesia of 'miles and miles of TV or movie tape', or in more subtle ways. Why is this the human tendency? Because of the structure of our human nature, says Percy. Because of the way we are made. Man is not at home on his earth-island as the animals are."6

The images created in man's mind of movie and TV stars, and his attraction for sex and money deviate him from the traditional and natural way of living. As a result he falls in despair, ironically, without being aware of it.
Will Barrett, for example, lives in a society which is morally corrupt and lacking in values; and at such a place where standards are in flux. In such a situation Will longs to live a material life and at the same time pretends to be the last gentleman of the aristocratic Barrett family. He fails to hold the fort on both the sides and undergoes an enormous suffering in consequence of his failure. Lancelot, the other protagonist of Percy, is fascinated by sex and science but differs in treating the sexual act of his wife, Margot, on subjective and objective levels. He fails to treat Margot's adultery on impersonal level for he is unable to bifurcate his self from the self of Margot in his scientific study of adultery as sin. His suffering reaches its height when he turns violent and kills Jacoby and sets Belle Isle on fire.

Tom More, in the company of his wife Doris and daughter Samantha, is unaware of the condition in which he lives. But after his daughter's death and wife's running away from him with a heathen Englishman he realizes that he is living in a disastrous situation, and there is every possibility of utter catastrophe at any time. In this situation he aspires to be a messiah to rescue all Americans from the critical condition by treating their spiritual disease with the help of his scientific device 'lapsometer'. He falls a prey to pride and is totally abstracted from reality. He tries to be an angel but in reality he turns to be a beast as his 'lapsometer,' instead of curing ills of people, creates a great havoc when it falls in the wrong hands. He suffers as he comes out of the illusory world.

The other cause of suffering of Percy's protagonists is their tendency to live physically in the present and mentally in the past. By trying to be true to the past they live a life of abstraction and suffer. Their growing
attachment with the past results into persistent conflict with the present. The conflict takes hold of their minds because they can not easily do away with the past as it is deeply burried in their conscience. They cannot shirk from the present as it is the reality of their lives. They live a double life in trying to be faithful to both, the present and the past. "Such a dialectic provided the essence of the relationship between the protagonist and the representative of the past, the father figure....."7 Old members of the family, dead or alive, represent the past and pass on the past ideals to the younger members of the family.

Aunt Emily, in whose house Binx Bolling lives for fifteen years after the death of his father, as Percy lived in the house of Uncle Will after the death of his father and then of his mother, stands an epitome of past ideals. She tries at her best "to pass on to you the one heritage of the men of our family, a certain quality of spirit, a gaiety, a sense of duty, a nobility worn lightly, a sweetness, a gentleness with women - the only good things the South ever had and the only things that really matter in this life"(M. 224). In her company Binx pretends to be an honest, and hard worker, the obedient follower of the past ideals. But when he is away from her he attends to movies and dallies with girls that happen to meet him. He can not do away with Mrs. Emily yet he desires to be a man of the present. So what he accepts is to make faces and live a false life as, according him, people all over America live today.

Will Barrett is constantly haunted by the past incident in the life of his father who attempted to kill him and then committed suicide. He feels guilty for not being faithful to his father in fulfilling his wish. As his father did he also tries to be the last gentleman of the Barrett family by sticking up to the old ideals and traditions of the family. But by living in the present he finds it
very difficult to be faithful to the past. As a matter of fact he appears as a man neither of the past nor of the present - a noman nowhere. Will is so much absorbed by the past that whatever he sees, hears, or smells becomes the symbol of the past. His suffering due to his obsession with the past is so severe that an idea to shoot himself, as his father did, enters his mind.

Lancelot goes mad for his obsession with the past. He is unable to forget the sinful act of adultery by his wife Margot which gives an indication to him that he is not the father of his daughter Siobhan. He feels greatly deceived by his wife. Margot's adultery drags Lancelot further back into the distant past of his family. He recollects the crookedness of his father and disloyalty of his mother. Lancelot's narration of his life-history in prison to Percival, a priest psychiatrist and a boyhood friend of Lancelot, reveals his terrific obsession with the past and its consequences on his life. He realises how it is difficult to live life without getting involved in the past. The past plays such a mischief in his present life that he loses completely the peace of his mind and behaves almost like a lunatic. Lancelot feels humiliated for the past deeds not only of himself and his wife but also of his father and mother.

Walker Percy resembles Nathaniel Hawthorne in his vision of the past, his going home to face the demons of his own past. Like the past of Hawthorne's heroes the past of Percy's protagonists is loaded with evil deeds and stern ideas of life that overshadow their present lives. The dilapidated aristocratic life looms over the minds of the heroes of both the novelists. Hawthorne's Custom House in The Scarlet Letter, and House of Seven Gables in The House of the Seven Gables resemble Percy's Belle Isle, the aristocratic mansion in Lancelot. These old buildings for both the novelists symbolize the
encumbering past. The individual past deeds of Arthur Dimmesdale and Hester Prynne affect their present lives like the past deeds of Lancelot and Margot. As the past of the Pyke family rests on the lives of the present members of the family living in the House of Seven Gables, so the past of the Barrett family darkens the present life of Will Barrett. In fact, the two novelists bear resemblance in carrying their own past in their novels to bring their novels to the reality of life. The lives of both the authors are full of catastrophic events. However, both are cautious not to make their novels autobiographies.

The main difference between Hawthorne and Percy in portraying the effect of the past on the present lives of their characters is that Hawthorne's characters are extroverts whereas Percy's characters are introverts. The inner suffering of Percy's protagonists is so tremendous that they become mental patients. Their mental torture is somewhat reduced when the past is made open to others. The past of Hawthorne's heroes consists mostly of sinful acts in the eyes of the Puritan society; whereas the past of Percy's protagonists consists mostly of immoral deeds as they are seen by the moral code of Stoic philosophy.

As Percy's protagonists are abstracted by the material life and their lives in the past, so also their abstraction is due to the development of science and technology in this modern age. Walker Percy, in fact, is not against the development of science and technology but what he is worried about is layman's swaying away not by the scientific methods but by the magical qualities of scientific inventions. Percy's protagonists suffer from overconfidence in themselves and in their scientific inventions. Binx Bolling tries to understand the reality of the world in which he lives but ironically he fails to know his own self. Will Barrett purchases a German telescope "to see the truth once and for
all" (LG.36). He being an engineer decides to engineer the future of his own life according to the principles of science. But he fails in both his plans as by using the telescope instead of seeing the truth he sees a beautiful lady, Kitty, and gets totally involved in her leaving aside his search for truth. Lancelot's overconfidence in his knowledge about science causes him lot of suffering for he tries to find out the nature of evil through the scientific study of Margot's adultery. Tom's overconfidence in lapsometer to bridge human body and soul brings him nothing but unhappiness.

Walker Percy is firm on his belief that human life cannot be judged on the principles of science as the laws of science cannot be fully applicable to human life. In an interview he himself states: "I am sure that human experience cannot be reduced to any science, but you need a way of thinking about all these situations I write about and other novelists write about upside-down situations like enjoying a hurricane." Percy reckoned the futility of science in solving the spiritual problems of man when he came in touch with the European philosophy during his confinement to sanitarium at Lake Saranac for two years.

Percy, through his novels exposes to his protagonists the deadly life and the real deaths of nearest persons to make them realise that it is the only reality through which man can have his identity in this world. Binx Bolling, the hero of The Moviegoer, is told about the death of his brother Scott at the age of eight. His aunt Emily discloses to Binx the news of Scotty's death in such a manner that he should not get frightened. Percy's description of the New Orleans society also reveals that Binx is living in a "dead world". "Ashes have been a sign of last things from the first day of Binx's search when he noticed that the 'Swamps are still burning at Chef Menteur and the sky over Gentilly is the
color of ashes." Binx has still the repercussions of war lingering in his mind and so he is haunted by death during night times. As he grows up he gets the courage to face death. At the age of thirty when he faces the death of his half brother Lonnie he realises that it is the reality of life and one need not be worried much about death.

Percy's protagonists are obsessed with death. It is quite obvious in his second novel *The Last Gentleman*. Will Barrett is continuously haunted by the death of his father. Everything that he looks at reminds him of his father's suicide. But when he comes in contact with Vaught family and particularly Jamie Vaught, a patient in hospital, Will comes face to face with death. His constant visits to the hospital and his exposure to the real death of Jamie reduce, to some extent, his fear of death. He gradually turns into a man fit to live a life in death discarding the idea of committing suicide to have escape from this world.

Tom More is all the while obsessed by the death of his loving daughter Samantha who dies of neuroblastoma. He can not forget throughout his life the sweet memories of the golden days of his life that he lived in the company of Samantha.

"The best times were after mass on summer evenings when Samantha and I would walk home in the violet dusk, we having received communion and I rejoicing afterwards, caring nought for my fellow Catholics but only for myself and Samantha and Christ swallowed, remembering what he promised me for eating him, that I would have life in me, and I did, feeling so good that I'd sing and cut the fool the way home like King David before the Ark" (L.R. 12-13).
Tom loses the peace of his mind for "His sorrows, too, are real and heavy. He has lost a daughter that he loved...... to a dreadful and grotesquely disfiguring disease." He blames God for the death of Samantha as it has caused a great loss to him. After her death he loses control over himself and falls a prey to all kinds of vices and mental diseases.

The other common factor that is observed among all Percy's protagonists is that they are mentally and/or physically sick persons. It seems that through the mentally and physically sick characters Percy likes to create an impression that in this age of science and technology man can not live a sound, healthy and natural life. Thus, for Percy, sickness is the quality of man's life in this age. He reveals the mental and physical sickness of his characters through their manner of speech and behaviour.

Percy's first novel, *The Moviegoer*, consists of a number of physically and mentally sick persons. Stanley Edgar Hyman calls *The Moviegoer* as "a detailed pathology of modern neurosis.... it embodies its pathology in a realised fictional form." Binx himself is a psychic patient who suffers from "invincible apathy," and periodic severe depressions. During such periods, he says:

"Everything is upside down for me.... what are generally considered to be the best times are for me the worst times, and that worst of times was one of the best"(M.10).

The war incident arouses in him not only the fear of death but also the sense "that everyone is dead." The memory of the war incident creates so much anxiety in him that he can not sleep.
Lonnie, Binx's half-brother, is a physically and mentally handicapped boy whose "hand curls upon itself;" though fourteen years of age he behaves like a boy of ten years (M.137). Binx's father also suffers from insomnia and nervous breakdown. Uncle Jules, one of the happiest persons in the world, suffers from heart attack. Kate Cutrer, the heroine of the novel, is more desperately neurotic than Binx. She has suffered from nervous breakdown ever since a mobile accident in which she lost her fiancé.

Will Barrett, the engineer, is both physically and mentally a sick person. He is deaf in one year. He suffers from amnesia, attacks of deja-vu, and fugue states. His physical sickness is not a matter of serious concern compared to his mental sickness. Though Will travels in the North and lives in New York yet psychologically he feels that he is on some Civil War battlefield in the South. The main problem with him is that he is unable to forget his past as Joseph Schwartz remarks: "In The Last Gentleman Will has a history fixed in artistic cement."[12] Here Percy seems in agreement with the Kierkegaardian principle: "If a man can not forget he will never amount to much."[13] The opening of The Second Coming itself indicates that the protagonist of the novel is mentally and physically a sick person. While playing golf Will falls in a bunker and strikes ball out of bounds. He gets depressed so much by the memories of the past that he thinks of committing suicide. Allison, a major female character in The Second Coming is a neurotic patient and undergoes a series of electric shocks for Schizophrenia. She is kept in a mental institution for treatment.

Percy introduces Lancelot as a mad person in the very beginning of the novel. The novel opens with his stay in prison "for Aberrant Behaviour." He is depressed and does not "remember things very well" (M.3). Though he is a
lawyer he is put in prison for committing murder of a Hollywood actor Janos Jacoby and setting on fire the old mansion Belle Isle. The prison is like an asylum where he is under the treatment of a priest-psychiatrist, Mr. Percival. Like a mad person he goes on unveiling the minute details of his past life to Percival without giving him a chance to speak. Lancelot likes Percival because he "doesn't want to talk" or ask any question to him(M.5). But Percival is doubtful about his sanity. "You still look doubtful. About my sanity?"(M.9). A person deprived of communion with others is likely to suffer from severe mental disturbances. "Lance seems plainly to be suffering from severe insanity, perhaps paranoia, at the end."\(^{14}\) The priest just observes him while he is talking to him without stop. His response to Lancelot at the end of the novel just by the words "yes" and "No" is the response of a rational person to the talk of an irrational person as if he does not want to let his words go futile by talking much to a mad person.

Tom More appears a mad scientist because he aspires to be an angel crossing the boundaries of a human being who is neither a beast nor an angel but, according to Percy, a "Wayfarer," somewhere between these two. Tom More is an alcoholic habituated to gin fizzes who has no faith in God. Percy refers to a number of psychic patients in his last novel *The Thanatos Syndrome*. Tom More, the psychiatrist, is worried about his patients for he does not know the cause of their odd behaviour. Even his wife, Ellen, who nursed him in *The Second Coming*, has now become herself a psychic patient.

Though Percy's protagonists are mentally or physically sick persons they are learned persons of middle age belonging to middle class families and have certain aims in their lives to be fulfilled. The main aim of
Percy's protagonists is to find out the truth of life. They do not understand the mystery why man in this age of science and technology is unhappy. Binx Bolling, for example, a stock and bond broker, whose aim is to multiply money to the maximum extent and enjoy life, sets out to search the meaning and reality of existence. He goes on observing the film actors and actresses and imitates them as his models. His observation of the film world and the real world outside brings him to a conclusion that people move with masks over their faces; they do not live a real life and so they suffer. Binx does not understand the mystery why people accept to suffer rather than to live a real life. While on search Binx faces the dark side of life but even in the darkness of life he sees a beam of light, a hope for bright future.

In almost all his novels Percy intends to convey that good and evil are woven together, and one can not be separated from the other. As a matter of fact good is revealed in evil and evil in good. Both are the two sides of the same coin. Binx's search enables him to understand this fact. To him Sam Yerger "Looks Very good" but at the same time "Seeing him strikes a Pang to the marrow." (M.167). He has monstrous features yet he is married to Joel Craig a New Orleans beauty. Percy feels that one should not be afflicted by evil or exalted by good because good is not so good and evil is not so bad. Percy combines good and evil not only on the surface level, but also on the subsurface level of the lives of his characters. As a result his characters feel good in bad environments and bad in good environments.

Will Barrett, for instance, is confused. He can not decide whether to be a gentleman or to be a fornicator. He begins to realize that it is very difficult to be either a gentleman or a fornicator. The incidents in his own life
and in the lives of others assure him that life consists not only of happiness but also of sorrow. His own deteriorating condition, inspite of continuous medical and psychological treatment in the midst of plenty, provides him a proof to be firm on this belief. What strikes him most is the idea that the "noxious particles," if any, are "more likely to be found inside his head than in the sky" (LG.28). And so to be happy or unhappy depends upon the circumstances not outside man but within man himself. But ironically enough man goes on searching for the solutions of his miseries outside himself.

Will's search to find out the truth of life turns ironical because he tries to locate it outside with the help of German telescope, a sophisticated scientific instrument. He fails to understand that the remedy of his illness lies within himself, in his understanding of his own self and not in the selves of others. Ironically Dr. Sutter believes in the benefit of "putting well people in the hospital and sending the truly sick home." Dr. Sutter advises him to take charge of his own existence as no physician or psychiatrist can help a patient just by telling him how to live unless the patient himself is willing to know the way of living a happy life. He further advises him to be true to his own instincts and not to be a hypocrite.

"Fornicate if you want to and enjoy yourself but don't come looking to me for a merit badge certifying you as a Christian or a gentleman or whatever it is you cleave by" (LG.216).

Percy is well aware that in this age of science man easily falls a prey to the material attractions and loses his real self to be a hypocrite. Hypocrisy has become a characteristic of modern man's life and also the cause of his suffering in the modern age. Lancelot has to undergo tremendous inner
suffering for he pretends himself to be a man of progressive nature having faith in science and technology. He gives an objective interpretation of the biological fact of conceiving a child. But in his subjective interpretation of the same fact he turns to religion and treats the sexual act of his wife Margot as illicit. His pride in his knowledge of science and at the same time his attachment to the old traditions make Lancelot a double minded person.

Lancelot's hypocrisy is further unveiled by the way he goes in search of God, the ultimate truth of life. In this novel Percy follows a different approach to prove the united existence of 'good' and 'evil'. He proclaims a view that if God exists in this world then the existence of evil is unavoidable. Lancelot's search for God is his search for evil. And so Percy lets Lancelot find out God through evil, but ironically instead of approaching God or the truth of life Lancelot gets more and more involved in evil and stands on the brink of disaster of his own life. He totally loses control over himself and turns mad to live in asylum.

Percy exposes the rottenness of American society through Lancelot's search for evil. He tears open the surface level of the society to peep into the subsurface level and finds out the reality that exists there. The paradoxical nature of the society becomes obvious when looked from both the angles. What it is on the subsurface level is quite opposite to that of on surface level. The mystery of man lies in such paradoxical nature of man whose life is full of innumerable paradoxical acts. Percy sees the paradox of good and evil even in the sexual act of man and woman. The good in the sexual act is that it is a sound communion of a man and a woman on both physical and spiritual levels; a divine way of being one with other. The evil in it is its potentiality for the betrayal of most intimate companion; the betrayal of the divine reality. It is a
source of love as well as hate, good as well as bad. Lancelot was very much fascinated by Margot's physique and was happy by his physical relations with her but after his invention of Margot's adultery he treats her physical relations with a Hollywood film actor as an act of betrayal, a source of hatred.

Tom More's invention of 'lapsometer', scientific instrument, to cure the ills of human beings, is also not free from the combination of good and evil. Its potentiality is two-fold. It can be used for the welfare of the humanity as well for the destruction of humanity. Its use depends upon whose hands it falls in; the hands of Tom More, a good person, or the hands of Art Immelmann, the devil incarnated. Through his novels Percy indirectly warns that all scientific inventions have this two fold potentiality and in this age of science and technology when man lives with a broken self there is more possibility of abuse rather than of use of any scientific invention. In his last novel *The Thanatos Syndrome* Percy reveals how Tom's scientific invention is widely abused for selfish purpose under the pretense of welfare of humanity.

Percy's protagonists are physically grown up persons but Percy does not keep their mental growth in consistency with their physical growth. In his first novel Binx Bolling reaching the 30th of his age seems just a mature person entering the vast vistas of worldly experience. He observes others but misses his own life to be observed. In this sense he undertakes an objective search isolating himself from others. Will Barrett, though a young engineer in the first phase of his life and a middle aged lawyer in the second phase of his life, has no self identity and is reduced to zero. He does not know who he is and which place he belongs to. His search is reversed in identifying himself with his forefathers. He does not know whether he is wrong or the world is wrong. Lancelot appears as a mature person, a lawyer, but behaves and talks like a mad
man. His search for God through evil is a mad man’s search. He tries to find out evil in Margot’s act of adultery but forgets that evil is more the part of his own life. Tom More, a physician psychiatrist, is older than Percy’s other protagonists but appears as a mad scientist. His search goes waste because his invention instead of curing the ills of people puts them in trouble. Thus Percy’s all protagonists are, no doubt physically grown up persons but because of their mental sickness they appear to be confused to live a type of life in this world. Anyhow at the end they succeed in making proper choices and living a life like grown up persons.

The beginnings of Percy’s novels are in contrast to their endings. Percy’s novels generally begin with death, destruction, chaotic condition or the description of physical or mental illness of the protagonists. He creates an impression in the beginning that the final catastrophe is very close and everything is going to end very soon. But as his protagonists move ahead with the actions of the novels they become gradually aware that the existing situation is the reality of life in this world. Percy’s heroes are tired of living an isolated life, they are frustrated and alienated persons from their society. They stand on the verge of destruction of their lives. Some of them even attempt to end their lives by committing suicide. But Percy creates such a situation that they are either rescued from death or they themselves give up the idea of suicide. And by the ends of the novels they realise that death is not the proper way to escape physical and mental suffering in this world but to live and to endure suffering can only make their lives meaningful. Thus though death is very close to Percy’s protagonists in the beginnings of his novels, in the course of the time they learn how to face death courageously and live a real life.
Most of his novels end with the decisions of his protagonists to make a new start in their lives. This new start in their lives becomes possible for them because now they discard to live in isolation. They choose their suitable companions and share sufferings with them. Binx Bolling, an isolated person who suffers because of the excessive material desires, decides to marry Kate and live a romantic life with her by the end of the novel. Kate also realises that she can not live without Binx. After their marriage they start living a life of common man. Will Barrett, throughout both the novels, *The Last Gentleman* and *The Second Coming*, is haunted by the death dealing incident in his own life and in the life of his father. He suffers to be the last gentleman of the Barrett family. Inspite of his failed attempt to commit suicide he chooses to marry Kitty for she also loves him at the end of *The Last Gentleman*. By the end of *The Second Coming* he decides to continue his future life in the company of Allison Huger, the greenhouse owner, in whom he finds the treasure of life. *Lancelot* in the beginning, appears as a mad man, a murderer living a lonely life in asylum. But at the end Percy provides hope for the future life of Lancelot through his communion with Percival by just uttering the words 'Yes' or 'No'.

Tom More in the beginning of *Love in the Ruins* is unable to give up the sweet memories of his past life in the company of his loving daughter Samantha and his wife Doris. He suffers from utter loneliness after the sad demise of his daughter and desertion of his wife Doris. In the beginning of the last novel *The Thanatos Syndrome* Tom More is released on parole and he is much worried by the chaotic condition in Feliciana Parish and the misbehaviour of his patients and his wife Ellen. He broods over the programmes like euthanasia and the massacre of Jews by Nazis. But at the end of both the novels
he succeeds in forming good relations with his wife, Ellen, and avoiding the misuse of his scientific inventions.

Thus Percy's novels begin with the sense of death and chaotic situations but they end by offering new lives to the protagonists. It is but ironical that the beginnings of Percy's novels suggest the end of life, whereas their endings suggest the beginning of a new life. In this regard Joseph Schwartz shows Percy's indebtedness to the Russian novelists Dostoevsky and Tolstoy.

"Percy's endings are always special in the affirmation (and sometimes celebration) they give to the reader. I think he is indebted principally to Dostoevsky and Tolstoy for this." 

The happy endings and the satirical language of Percy's novels create an impression among the readers and critics that his novels are comedies. But a keen observation of Percy's novels brings to one's notice that the tragic life of his protagonists is concealed beneath the comic tone of his novels. Percy is a great artist. He is a man of language and knows very well how to present his ideas effectively. Instead of attacking the American society directly he chooses an indirect way to bring out its follies. He himself states that a novelist nowadays "has to practise his art in cunning and in secrecy and achieve his objective by indirect methods." In fact, Percy's novels are a harsh satire on American life; his satire is sarcastic in nature. To be true to this belief Garry M. Ciuba treats Percy's novel The Second Coming as a "Sorrowful Comedy."

Percy points out the absurdities in the lives of his protagonists and presents them sarcastically in his novels.

"The post-modern author relinquishes the dialectics of both guilt and innocence, meaning and
nonmeaning, and modifies the tragic into the absurd
or in effect dissolves both in counter humor.\textsuperscript{18}

According to Gerhard Hoffman in this age of science and technology it is no longer possible for a man of literature to write a genuine tragedy as in this age man has lost faith in the nobility and heroic qualities in man. The past tragic view is reduced to a sense of depression and mental tension.

\textquote{The tragic view as a traditional perspective of orientation and order was reduced in its focus and then cancelled through the fundamentally new social developments during the 19th and 20th centuries.}\textsuperscript{19}

Percy's novels sometimes make his readers laugh, but the laughter he creates is sarcastic.

\textquote{Man must recognize that he is of no importance in such a world; unless he realizes his insignificance, he will not adjust himself intelligently to the world.}\textsuperscript{20}

True to the spirit of time Percy's protagonist chooses to live a life as his fate has ordained it to him. Thus the journey of Percy's protagonist is from death to life. "The twentieth century has found its true voice in recognizing that it is an age of crisis, of decline, but a crisis which is like an apocalypse out of which another cycle of spiritual or cultural regeneration will issue."\textsuperscript{21} His novels begin with a dead end and they end with a new beginning. Percy being a Catholic believes in the Christian principle that end is the beginning of new life. J. Gerald Kennedy has very intelligently corresponded this "idea of cyclical movement" to "T.S. Eliot's discovery in `East Coker'":

\textquote{What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from.}\textsuperscript{22}
Notes:

Chapter V


3. Ibid., P. 239.


