CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

“The time is coming when I will send famine on the land. People will be hungry, but not for bread; they will be thirsty, but not for water. They will hunger and thirst for a message from the LORD” (Amos 8: 11).

The title ‘Catholic existentialist’ writer is often appended to Walker Percy, the American novelist. None the less, he is a Southern writer having a close affinity with such grotesque writers as Flannery O’Connor and Carson McCullers, albeit Percy’s own denial of his Southernness at times. “Like O’Connor, Percy creates parables in which people come to an awareness of the intimacy of the ordinary and the extraordinary only through distortion, violence, and the grotesque” (Crowley and Crowley 127). Though Percy has climbed the ladder of success in his fictional career, not much critical attention has been paid to the grotesque aspect of his novels as a whole. Hence, this particular topic “The Artist Who Wrought in Grotesquerie: A Study of the Fictional World of Walker Percy” is convincingly relevant.

This chapter is an attempt to examine Percy’s life, the influences that led him to his career as a novelist, and his aesthetics. The second chapter makes a survey of the origin and development of the term ‘grotesque’ as an artistic genre and how it gets expression in the works of various writers. While the third chapter explores the grotesqueness of Percy’s characters, the fourth chapter probes into the grotesque actions of the characters.
The fifth chapter brings out the various images in the works which contribute to the grotesque nature of Percy's characters.

Walker Percy was born in the 'magic city' of Alabama, Birmingham on 28 May 1916 as the eldest of the three sons of LeRoy Pratt and Martha Susan Phinizy: his brothers are LeRoy Pratt Jr. and Billups Phinizy Percy. When their father committed suicide in 1929, the children were adopted by their father's first cousin, William Alexander Percy, whom they called Uncle Will. The death of their mother in a car accident in 1932 deepened the psychological wound of the children. Uncle Will, in keeping with the family splendour, was very eager to provide the boys with a very congenial atmosphere for education and literary pursuits. Consequently, Walker Percy became enamoured of literature at a small age. He graduated in Chemistry from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1937. Taking his M.D. degree from Columbia University's College of Physicians and Surgeons in 1941, he embarked upon the medical career. Pathology and psychoanalysis were his hobby horses in medicine. The death of his uncle in 1942 was a great shock to him.

Fate did not allow Percy to continue his medical profession. The contraction of tuberculosis in 1942, while performing autopsies during his internship in the pathology section of Bellevue Hospital, was a turning point in his life. Being an avid reader, after his convalescence of two years, he found himself acquainted with philosophers like Soren Kierkegaard, Jean Paul Sartre, Gabriel Marcel, Martin Heidegger, and novelists like Fyodor Dostoevsky, Albert Camus, and Franz Kafka. These philosophic perusals in a
mood of morbidity opened his eyes to the ineluctable reality that science was inadequate for answering all the problems of human beings.

After his recuperation, at the end of the Second World War, Percy visited New Mexico with his sparring friend Shelby Foote, and according to historian Lewis Baker, Percy returned with a strong determination to explore “the inner side of life through art” (qtd. in Hobson 5).

Percy married Bunt Townsend, a nurse, in 1946, and the following year, apostatizing their Presbyterian and Baptist beliefs, they embraced Catholicism taking the baptismal names John and Mary. The couple moved to New Orleans in 1947, and Percy made his first literary gambit by writing a novel called The Charterhouse which was an utter failure. His second attempt, a novel titled The Gramercy Winner, also ended in a fiasco.

In 1950 the Percys moved to Covington and adopted a child whom they named Mary Pratt. Later a child was born to them and they named her Ann Boyd. Percy started writing articles for various journals on diverse subjects which began to attract public attention. Again he attempted writing novels and finally came out with flying colours. He has six novels and two prose works to his credit. Percy who was always guided by principles began to underscore his belief as he became older. Percy who once raised the question, “What can I do for the Church?” to his religious instructor, Father McCarthy (Tolson 203), answered it through his novels which take a Catholic stance.

Percy died of cancer on 10 May 1990. He was buried at St. Joseph’s Abbey in New Orleans. It is noteworthy that Percy’s life—punctuated with
psychological, physical and spiritual predicaments—was the largest piece in the jigsaw of his fiction. At the time of his demise Percy had become a luminary not only among the Southern novelists but the mainstream of America also.

Percy’s first novel, *The Moviegoer*, which was published in 1961, won the National Book Award in 1962. It is a first person narrative with the protagonist Binx Bolling as a young “stock and bond broker” (M9) living in Gentilly. Binx’s elder brother Scott had died of pneumonia when he was eight years old and Aunt Emily exhorted Binx to “act like a soldier” (M4). After the death of his father, his mother resumed her job as a nurse and later got re-married and it was Aunt Emily who looked after him. Being a victim of ‘everydayness’. Binx seeks to liberate himself from its stranglehold by having recourse to such diversions as moviegoing and seducing his secretaries. He often serves as an oasis for Aunt Emily in mitigating the mental tensions of her stepdaughter, Kate. At times, there crops up in him a desire for quest, which he fails to accomplish. In the Epilogue the readers see Binx, who is now thirty, leading a happy married life with Kate. The strong faith and death of Lonnie Smith, his half-brother, offer Binx opportunities to ponder on eschatological matters, but he fails to stick to such a belief.

Through *The Moviegoer* Percy introduces his theme of modern man’s morose life, which he proceeds with in his later novels. Modern man, who is under the spell of alienation, tries to get rid of his despair through entertainments like films and fornication. The more he tries to free himself from the clutches of despair through these acts, the more frustrated he
Ideologies like stoicism and religions like Christianity have lost their hold on modern man. He is in the rat race to make himself financially fit. According to Percy, the sole way to ward off alienation is to be in rapport with others and to share love through marriage.

The Last Gentleman, Percy’s second novel, published in 1966 is a novel of experience with the third person point of view. The protagonist, Will Barrett, is a young 'humidification engineer' and is parentless; his father committed suicide when Will Barrett was a child. He is suffering from a series of mental snags like amnesia, déjà vu, fugues, racial memories, and atavistic recollection of incidents that might have occurred to one of his ancestors. He is in an attempt to ‘engineer’ his life by squeezing information from others through talk and his telescope. His falling in love with Kitty Vaught opens a vista of experiences to him. The sentient engineer thinks that Sutter Vaught will be able to tell him something; but Sutter asserts that he will not. Barrett becomes a companion to sick Jamie, brother of Kitty. Though a non-believer, willy-nilly he accomplishes the assigned task of getting Jamie baptized on his deathbed. The novel is open-ended with Sutter waiting for Barrett at his behest.

Continuing the theme of alienation and despair Percy reminds us that despair will lead a person to the verge of suicide. Through Barrett’s manifold travels Percy establishes his vision that man is a wayfarer here on the earth. Death is the terminal point of his travel, and in order to reach his eternal abode he has to get reconciled with God through sacraments. He also conveys the fact that childhood traumas catapult a person out of his mental equilibrium.
The year 1971 witnessed the publication of Percy’s third novel, *Love in the Ruins*. Dr. Thomas More, the protagonist of the novel, was leading a merry life, a paradigm of Christian faith, with his daughter and wife. His edifice of faith crumbles at the death of his daughter, Samantha. His family life disintegrates with the elopement of his wife, Doris, with a heathen English man. He turns to alcohol and women. Being a victim of angelism-bestialism, he invents a device called More’s Qualitative Quantitative Ontological Lapsometer with which he hopes to diagnose and heal the rift between man’s body and soul. Dreaming of a Nobel Peace Prize he makes a contract with Art Immelmann, the incarnation of devil. However, Immelmann produces a myriad of lapsometers and creates ridiculous situations in *The Pit*. Eventually, on fourth July, the American Independence Day, Tom More manages to exorcise the devil by praying to his namesake, Sir Thomas More. The Epilogue, after five years, portrays the happy wedded life of Dr. Tom More with Ellen and two children.

The death of a child often tempts a modern man to abandon his faith, driving him to deprivation and despair. Man’s denial of God deprives him of the grace to overcome temptations from which he can save himself only through prayer and sacraments. This novel is a satire in which Percy scoffs at modern scientific inventions which claim to serve as spiritual stethoscopes and anodynes.

Percy’s fourth attempt, *Lancelot* (1977), is a lugubrious novel in the form of a dramatic monologue. Lancelot Andrewes Lamar, the anti-hero, recounts the story of his murky life to his priest friend, Percival. After the
death of Lancelot's first wife, Lucy, he married an actress named Margot in which marriage they had two children. A fortuitous sight of his daughter Siobhan's blood group in an application for a horseyday camp makes Lancelot alert, and he undertakes a ‘search for evil.’ Accommodating the film company including Margot, in his plantation house, Belle Isle, he triumphs in taking video films with the help of a Negro servant called Elgin. Getting ample evidence of his wife's infidelity, at the height of a hurricane, Lancelot slays everyone by setting fire to Belle Isle, and by killing Margot's new lover Janos Jacoby with a bowie knife. Lancelot has no prick of conscience at his hideous act even after a one-year imprisonment in the 'Center for Aberrant Behavior'. Besides, Lancelot speculates on starting a new life with the girl in the next room called Anna, a gang-raped victim.

Through Lancelot Percy casts light on the moral degradation of modern society and its atrocities; man has lost his sense of guilt. He also highlights the fact that modern man's quest is neither for God nor for ultimate things but for diabolic and disastrous things.

*The Second Coming* (1980) is a sequel to Percy's second novel, *The Last Gentleman*, in which elder Will Barrett, a retired lawyer, is haunted by childhood memories of his father who committed suicide. Overwhelmed by death wish, he sets out to prove the existence of God by waiting for God's sign in Lost Cove cave. Nevertheless, he is dissuaded from his protracted waiting by a sudden assault of toothache. In his hasty attempt to get out of the cave, he falls into Allison Hugher's greenhouse and regains consciousness only after the loving care of Allie. Finally, he abandons the idea of suicide and gets united to Allie in wedlock.
This novel evinces how childhood traumas and absence of parental affection can mar the life of even a widowed middle-aged man, causing suicidal proclivities to sprout in him. According to Percy, the sole solution to this is through sharing of love in married life, in probity.

Percy’s last novel, *The Thanatos Syndrome*, published in 1987 is a ‘science fiction’ set in Feliciana, and is a sequel to his third novel, *Love in the Ruins*. On Dr. Tom More’s return from imprisonment he takes notice of some clinical changes in his old patients and friends including his wife. With the assistance of his cousin, Dr. Lucy Lipscomb, Tom More makes investigations and comprehends that it is because of the presence of heavy sodium in the water supply. He catches the culprits including Van Dorn, the founder of Belle Ame Academy and overdoses them with heavy sodium and regresses them to ‘pongid’ behaviour.

The novel is a burlesque unveiling the putrefied modern culture which is anxious to create ‘utopia’ with the aid of science; it will brook no compromise with genuine love or compassion. Percy’s novels are illustrations of modern man’s grotesque ambience on personal, social, religious, and political levels from which he can extricate himself only by clutching at the straws of faith.

In addition to his six novels, Percy has contributed two prose works to literature. *The Message in the Bottle*, published in 1975, is a collection of essays dealing with the nature of man’s existence and the mystery of language. His second work, *Lost in the Cosmos*, was published in 1983 and it is an explication of man’s self and a short history of the Cosmos.
Percy could win a niche for himself in American literature because of his artistic sensibility moulded from the myriad influences on him. William Alexander Percy, his uncle and the author of *Lanterns on the Levee: Reflections of a Planter’s Son* (1941), exerted the first and foremost influence on Percy. Alexander Percy introduced Walker Percy to the world of literature, in the role of a guardian. Thereupon young Percy became familiar with Romantic poems and Shakespearean plays at an early age. His uncle’s sonorous reading of the classics piqued Percy’s interest in literature and they imparted a tone of spoken language to his fiction. Tolson observes:

Percy’s attentiveness to the spoken word, to the spin that a voice gives to an utterance, to the ironies and other undertones that are detectable only in actual speech, has become a hallmark of his fiction, and it finds its philosophical analogue in Percy’s probing of the uniqueness of the act of speech and the mystery of verbal communication. (86)

Alexander Percy’s Stoicism had a strong hold on Percy till he yielded to ‘scientism’, as represented by Aunt Emily in *The Moviegoer*.

Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), the Danish philosopher, played a pivotal role in moulding Percy’s religious belief and existential theory. Kierkegaard’s essay “The Difference Between a Genius and an Apostle” paved the way for Percy’s conversion to Catholicism from “the traditions of Southern Stoicism and scientific atheistic humanism” (*CWP* 110). In the essay Kierkegaard maintains:
It is a natural qualification, genius is born. [...] A genius may be a century ahead of his time, and therefore appear to be a paradox. but ultimately the race will assimilate what was once a paradox in such a way that it is no longer paradoxical.

It is otherwise with an Apostle. [...] An Apostle is not born; an Apostle is a man called and appointed by God, receiving a mission from him. (106-07)

According to Kierkegaard, the difference between a genius and an Apostle lies in the fact that while a genius 'is born,' an Apostle is one who is appointed by God for a mission. This idea finds expression in Percy's different novels.

In The Last Gentleman at the time of Jamie's baptism, Father Boomer converses to Jamie in the role of an Apostle. He says that if God had not sent him he would not have come there to speak to him about Jesus and to administer him baptism. In The Thanatos Syndrome, there is Father Rinaldo Smith, a bit eccentric, who exhorts the faithful at the opening ceremony of St. Margaret's hospice not to give away their disabled children and old people for euthanasia, but to entrust them to him. The presence of priests in all the novels of Percy is an evidence of Kierkegaardian influence on him.

Kierkegaard's various works like Either/Or, Fear and Trembling, and Concluding Unscientific Postscript give an insight into his philosophy of life and it is the matrix in which Percy conceives his plots and characters. Kierkegaard divides life into three stages: aesthetic, ethical or moral and religious stage. The aesthetic individual is reigned by his senses and his
motto is “the pleasure of the moment” (Lescoe 34) which has an echo of Epicurean philosophy, i.e. eat, drink and make merry, for tomorrow you may die. He is always on the look out for slipping from moral standards; however, his ecstatic moments are followed by times of boredom and despair.

When the aesthetic man perceives the futility and emptiness of the aesthetic mode of existence, he chooses a world of permanent values and enters the ethical stage. Ordering of life in accordance with values grants him self-awareness, and he gains control over his actions.

The ethical man moves to the third stage, i.e. the religious stage, when he acknowledges God through confessing his sins in the hope of divine forgiveness. This personal commitment, in Lescoe’s words “involves a passionate, non-rational ‘leap of faith’ ” (39). Man attains selfhood only by entering through the portal of faith; faith in Kierkegaard’s view is a ‘paradox’ because “faith begins precisely there where thinking leaves off” (Fear and Trembling 64). In Concluding Unscientific Postscript Kierkegaard says, “Humor is the last stage of existential inwardness before faith” (259).

As Bradley R. Dewey comments, “Percy’s novels are inhabited by paradigms of each Kerkegaardian life-style as well as those en route from one stage to another” (CWP 126). Binx in The Moviegoer who luxuriates in movies and in his secretaries moves to the ethical stage of marriage. Similarly, Dr. Tom More in Love in the Ruins bids farewell to his ruined love of women and reaches the religious stage passing through the ethical stage of marriage. Some of Percy’s characters like Aunt Emily continue to be in the
ethical stage without yielding to the temptations of aesthetic sphere and without reaching the religious stage. Hobson writes, “One can tell when the hero is near the psychic borders of the religious because, just as the poster of irony separates the aesthetic from the ethical, so the posture of humor separates the ethical from the religious” (22). Percy proves to be adept at imparting a humorous tone to his novels.

Kierkegaard’s propositions on despair and self as promulgated in *The Sickness Unto Death* had a great impact on Percy’s fiction. Kierkegaard says:

Thus it is that despair, this sickness in the self, is the sickness unto death. The despairing man is mortally ill. [. . .] To be delivered from this sickness by death is an impossibility, for the sickness and its torment [. . .] and death consist in not being able to die. [. . .] And thus it is eternity must act, because to have a self, to be a self, is the greatest concession made to man, but at the same time it is eternity’s demand upon him. (154)

It is a conspicuous fact that almost all the major characters in Percy’s novels are sick people. Binx Bolling in *The Moviegoer* is a victim of everydayness, a kind of despair. Sutter Vaught in *The Last Gentleman* and Will Barrett in *The Second Coming* are teetering on the brink of suicide owing to despair. Will Barrett in *The Last Gentleman* is suffering from various illnesses. Female characters such as Kitty (*The Moviegoer*) and Allison Hugher (*The Second Coming*) are always sick. Children like Lonnie, Jamie, and Samantha die of different illness in the first, second and third novel respectively. Lancelot is a mentally deranged man.
In his interview with Bradley R. Dewey, Percy admitted his link to Kierkegaard: “For me the great thing about Kierkegaard was that he expressed my own feelings about the whole scientific synthesis” (CWP 109). Though Kierkegaard was a formative influence on Percy, he diverges from Kierkegaard in his idea of faith which is a ‘leap on to the absurd’. Percy concedes faith to Thomas Aquinas for whom it was ‘a form of knowledge’ that “God exists and that man is created in His image” (CWP 205).

Jean Paul Sartre (1905-1980), the French philosopher, impressed Percy by his first novel Nausea, especially by its technique. In his interview with Charles T. Bunting, Percy revealed the fact that the idea of communicating a belief through a novel, through a concrete situation, was very exciting to him. According to Percy, Sartre’s philosophy of ‘atheistic existentialism’ is self-contradictory. Sartre opines that as life and existence are meaningless, there is no need of communication; but he has chosen the vocation of a writer communicating with others, contradicting his philosophy.

Gabriel Marcel (1889-1973), the French Roman Catholic existentialist philosopher, elated Percy with his concept of “intersubjectivity” which means “bond between beings” (Marcel 34). He holds the view that the absurdity in the world and a certain alienation of man can be transcended by an I-to-you relationship. Tolson aptly encapsulates Marcel’s influence on Percy: “Marcel’s emphasis upon intersubjectivity, his critique of technological and consumer society, and his image of man as wayfarer all became central to Percy’s work” (238-39). Almost all the protagonists of Percy enter into an I-to-you relationship by the end of the novels. Even Lancelot, the murderer, plans to have such a relationship by marrying Anna, the rape victim.
Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), a German philosopher, contributed to Percy's vocabulary and ideas on fiction. Percy commandeers Heidegger's term 'everydayness' for his own purpose; it means the condition of being "lost in forgottenness". A special feature of everydayness is loss of visibility" (Luschie 23). As stated earlier, Binx in Percy's first novel makes a complaint about 'everydayness'. Heidegger's 'philosophical romanticism' based on the inseparability of being and nonbeing is consonant with Percy's views and experiences. "Percy could appreciate Heidegger's argument that only a full awareness of death makes one able to appreciate the mystery and fullness of being" (Tolson 239). It may be because of that influence that Percy depicts or refers to death in each of his novels.

Flannery O'Connor (1925-1964), a Southern Catholic writer, was an abiding influence on Percy, the novelist. According to her, modern man has lost his sense of evil and the only way to bring him back to that consciousness is through the device of the grotesque. In her essay "The Fiction Writer and His Country" she observes:

When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax a little and use more normal means of talking to it; when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock—to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures. (Mystery and Manners 34)

Percy supports O'Connor's view of the grotesque when he suggests its creation for the blind. According to him, the device of the grotesque enables
a Catholic novelist to achieve his objective indirectly. Recalling O'Connor's opinion about the grotesque Percy says:

*(F)*or people who can't see plainly or can't see clearly you have to draw in caricatures—something like that—so the so-called Catholic or Christian novelist nowadays has to be very indirect, if not downright deceitful, because all he has to do is say one word about salvation or redemption and the jig is up, you know. So he has to do what Joyce did: he has to practise his art in cunning and in secrecy and achieve his objective by indirect methods. *(CWP 41)*

Percy argues that the Catholic writer has the difficulty of language as ordinary terms of religion like ‘God’, ‘salvation’, ‘baptism’, and ‘sin’ have become stereotyped. O'Connor overcame the difficulty through grotesquerie. She remarks that in modern times there is an increasing tendency toward grotesque in fiction as the novelist is affected by the limitations and blind spots of the audience in his attempt to convey his vision. Like O'Connor, Percy’s gaze is on ultimate things. Lewis P. Simpson in his essay “Southern Fiction” comments: “To explore the nature of self’s being, O’Connor, Percy, and Corrington—largely rejecting myth and tradition, history and memory as modes of being—construct special, basically grotesque, versions of contemporary man in the setting of the American South” (Hoffman 179).

Both Percy and O’Connor are concerned with the demonic elements in the world and they ruminate on solution for the grotesqueness of man’s predicament. Francois Pitavy writes: “Like Flannery O’Connor, he looks forward, not backward, attempting to come up to the threshold of
transcendence: his ruthless indictment of the follies of men leads up to that point, but, as in O'Connor, it must stop there” (Gretlund and Westarp 178). Like O'Connor, Percy was able to add a tinge of intellectualism to contemporary American fiction, which is lacking in the classic modern writers like Hemingway and Fitzgerald.

Dostoevsky (1821-1881), the nineteenth-century Russian novelist and the greatest existentialist literary figure, was an inspiration to Percy in developing an idea, the idea of obsessed people in a certain situation. Hobson in her essay in Walker Percy: Novelist and Philosopher states that the characters and patterns of Dostoevsky’s novels have fashioned Percy’s speculation and she substantiates it by quoting from the Introduction he wrote for the book. Walker Percy: A Comprehensive Descriptive Bibliography:

A novelist is not used to thinking of his novel as an actual book in hand, but rather as ghost stuff coming out of his head. But after all that is what one reads, books in hand. [. . .] How can I not connect The Brothers Karamazov with the big fat Random House edition, fat as a bible, its pages slightly pulpy, crumbling at the corners and smelling like bread? Is this bad? And how can I disconnect Ivan and Mitya from reading about them sitting in a swing on my grandmother’s porch in Athens, Georgia, in the 1903’s? Should I? (119)

Hobson finds a close connection between Dostoevsky’s “The Grand Inquisitor” in The Brothers Karamazov (1879-80) and Percy’s Lancelot and
comes to the conclusion that both Dostoevsky's and Percy's stories are "spiritual dialogues in the form of a psychomachia of doubt and belief, restraint and freedom, hate and love" (Gretlund and Westarp 129).

As Joseph Schwartz declares, in the affirmative ending of Percy's novels, Percy is indebted to Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. For instance, in *The Moviegoer* the scene of Binx hemmed in by his half-brothers and sisters is reminiscent of Alyosha surrounded by the children after Ilyusha's funeral. The question raised by the children is identical in both cases: "When Our Lord raises us up on the last day, will Lonnie still be in a wheelchair or will he be like us?" (M240). The protagonists of both the novels say that he will be like them. Besides, in *The Brothers Karamazov* the children shout, 'Hurrah for Karamazov! [. . .] Hurrah for Karamazov!' like the children in *Love in the Ruins* who cry, " 'Hurrah for Jesus Christ!' [. . .] Hurrah for the United States! " (LR 400). Though profoundly affected by Dostoevsky, Percy does not wind up his novels in the style of *Crime and Punishment* with vivid reflections: he makes a sly and indirect ending.

Albert Camus (1913-1960), the French existentialist writer, and Gerard Manley Hopkins, the priest poet, played a decisive role in forging Percy's style. Camus' *The Stranger* provided Percy an insight into man's alienation and "the sparseness, the laconic brevity, and precision of his sentences" (*CWP* 275) opened Percy's senses to the beauty of such a style. For the pervasive presence of nature in his novels, Percy owes to Hopkins who visualized the 'inscape' of everything in nature with his religious and sacramental vision.
Percy acknowledges his indebtedness to Mark Twain, especially to *Huckleberry Finn*, in his interview with Charles T. Bunting: "So in a way *The Last Gentleman*, particularly, was a kind of *Huckleberry Finn* journey, not down the river, but from the Eastern seaboard all the way to the South to the West. The use of travel, moving" (*CWP* 53).

William Rodney Allen points out Hemingway’s influence on Percy. He observes that if Percy’s European literary reference is Kierkegaard, his American one is Hemingway “for the thread of structural allusion in his work to Hemingway is as unbroken as it is in Saul Bellow’s writing” (36).

Though Percy has repeatedly denied his debt to the Southern letters embodied by Faulkner, there is ample proof to refute this argument. In his interview with Jo Gulledge Percy said:

I don’t fit into the Southern pattern. [...] All my characters [...] find themselves in a here-and-now predicament. And the whole backdrop is this historical scene [...] It’s there all right, but my character is looking in the other direction; he’s not looking back. And that’s why I’ve always felt more akin to Faulkner’s Quentin Compson than to anybody else in his fiction because he’s trying to get away from it. He is sick of time, because time means the past and history. [...] So, I suppose, I would like to think of starting where Faulkner left off, of starting with the Quentin Compson who didn’t commit suicide. Suicide is easy. Keeping Quentin Compson alive is something else. In a way, Binx Bolling is Quentin Compson who didn’t commit suicide. (*CWP* 299-300)
As John F. Desmond notes, there are striking parallels between Quentin Compson and Lancelot Lamar. “Both are sensitive, half-mad narrators, the offspring of weak fathers and self-indulgent mothers. Both are obsessed with the past and the collapse of values, specified by sexual betrayal within the family; and both long to retrieve lost honor through Stoicism” (Gretlund and Westarp 134).

It will not be out of place to examine the various philosophies that influenced Percy: stoicism, scientism, existentialism and Catholicism. Stoicism is an ethical doctrine, 'the main southern ethos', that stresses such ideals as brotherhood of man, endurance, truthfulness, and fair dealing. Percy’s foster father, William Alexander Percy, was a Stoic and naturally Walker Percy’s ethical standard paralleled that of his Uncle’s. As Gretlund notes, Lancelot speaks in favour of stoic tradition to confront the problems of the modern world. But Percy does not stop with Stoicism; being a Christian, he is cognizant of its limitations. He tries to convey the fact that it is not enough to do the right thing to enjoy the bliss of eternity, but should believe in God and should live as a good Christian, receiving sacraments.

During his college days Percy believed in scientism. According to the Chambers Dictionary, it is “the belief that methods used in natural sciences should also be applied to the study of human behaviour and condition.” But with the attack of tuberculosis, Percy, the votary of science, comes to the realization that “science cannot utter one single sentence about what a man is himself as an individual” (CWP 60). Hence he turned to writing fiction and realized that the existential view of man could be handled very well in a novel.
Existentialism is the philosophic stance which foregrounds existence rather than essence. Most existentialist thinkers consider life futile and meaningless. According to them, life is tinged with anguish—the dread of the nothingness of human existence—and the thought of death creates anxiety. The dominant theme in existentialist writing is the freedom of choice which entails commitment and responsibility. Founded by Kierkegaard and popularized by Sartre, existentialism developed two standpoints: theistic and atheistic. While the theistic group, including Kierkegaard, Marcel and Martin Buber, advocates a 'leap of faith' through Christianity, the atheistic group, comprising Sartre, Nietzsche and Heidegger, proclaiming 'the death of God', favours the pagan ideal of physical or spiritual suicide or a Sisyphusian existence of rebellious, but optimistic assertion of the self. In his book *Existentialism and Humanism* Sartre remarks: “Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself” (28). Existentialism with its idea of ‘man in a situation’, especially the theistic existentialism exerted a great influence on Percy, as has been mentioned earlier.

For Percy, Catholicism is a source of spiritual strength as well as a source of literary inspiration. He agrees with Flannery O’Connor that his Catholicism is not only not a hindrance but a help in his work. For him it is a way of seeing the world. He says, “I don’t think my writings are meant to preach Catholicism, but the novel can’t help but be informed by a certain point of view—and this happens to be a Catholic point of view” (*CWP 88*).

Walker Percy is a novelist who has his own clear-cut views on novels and novelists. Percy believes that a novel can perform the function of music
expressing "the essence of existence, making man's feeling 'visible' and representing those that are impenetrable by intelligence" (Kern 77) and that it is as valuable as science, serving as an instrument of truth, exploring those areas of experience which are inaccessible to science.

In his essay, "The State of the Novel: Dying Art or New Science?", Percy argues that a great transformation has come on the vocation of modern novelist compared to the days of Tolstoy and Austen who pictured a balanced society. Percy's view of a writer is a little different from that of Cleanth Brooks who in his essay "The Current State of American Literature" remarks that the role of a writer is "that of a diagnostician; not of the physician who prescribes the medication required or the surgeon who saws off the diseased limb" (280).

During a lecture at Athens Percy said that the novelist's vocation from Dostoevsky to Faulkner is

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\ldots\text{to explore the darker recesses of the human heart, there to name and affirm the strange admixture of good and evil, the action of the demonic, the action of grace, of courage and cowardice, of courage coming out of cowardice and vice versa; in a word, the strange human creature himself—an admixture now that is perhaps stranger than ever.} \quad (SSL 36)
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Percy sees a novelist as a bemused psychiatrist looking at a patient who is suffering from dysphoria, even in the midst of affluence and appropriate ambience.
Comparing a novelist to the Old Testament prophet Hosea, Percy reminds the novelist that though he has a wretched home life, it is his bounden duty to point out to his fellow citizens that something is rotten in the culture and that they are on the wrong track. The novelist may not be a scholar, but his knack rests in detecting the topsy-turvy state of modern life and in naming and recording its loss. For instance, “there is something deranged about normal people and that crazy people may be trying to tell us something” (SSL 162).

According to Victor Shklovsky, “the essential purpose of art is to overcome the deadening effects of habit by representing familiar things in unfamiliar ways. This theory vindicates the distortions and dislocations of modernist writing” (Lodge 53). Percy conforms to the same view when he asserts that in this corrupted time the possible posture of a novelist is:

[T]hat of derision, mockery, subversion, and assault—to mock and subvert the words and symbols of the day in order that new words come into being or that old words be freshly minted—to assault the benumbed sensibility of the poor media consumer, because anything other than assault and satire can only be understood as a confirmation of the current corrupted meanings of such honorable old words as love, truth, beauty, brotherhood of man, life, and so on. (SSL 161)

Percy is not an upholder of the art for art’s sake theory. He conforms to the view that by depicting the commonplace, a novel should “reverse the devaluation” (CWP 160) and its purport should be to lift the human spirit, in
a fundamental way, to the realm of the transcendent. A novel should not preach but should please and its morality should not be something thrust upon it; instead, it should flow from within, like the fragrance of a flower, from its composition. He illustrates the difficulty of writing a novel through a startling image: it is like “trying to pick up a four-hundred-pound fat lady: you need a lot of hands to hold up a lot of places at once” (CWP 170).

The plethora of critical works which were published on Percy’s works bespeak the appreciation he enjoyed as a novelist and a review of some of the milestones is attempted here. *The Sovereign Wayfarer* (1972) by Martin Luschei is an elaborate study on Percy’s first three novels depicting him as an existentialist novelist. Luschei also dwells on Percy’s illness which played a pivotal role in shifting his career from the field of science to that of a novelist. He explicated some fundamental existentialist ideas such as Heidegger’s concept of ‘everydayness’, Marcel’s view of ‘intersubjectivity’, and Kierkegaard’s ideas of ‘rotation’ and ‘repetition’ which find expression in Percy’s works.

*Walker Percy: An American Search* (1978) by Robert Coles is an extensive study on Percy’s ‘philosophical roots’, his essays, and first four novels, and it is a great tribute to Percy. *The Art of Walker Percy: Stratagems for Being* (1979), edited by Panthea Reid Broughton, is a collection of critical essays on Percy’s first four novels focusing on the themes, the narrative modes and the language. The book throws light on Percy, the man and novelist.
Mary K. Sweeney's *Walker Percy and the Postmodern World* (1982) is a short but elegant study that tries to establish Percy as a Christian existentialist writer in the light of his first four novels. The author analyses the malaise of the characters, their journeys in quest of identity, their final state of belief, and their sharing of love with other individuals.

Jac Tharpe's *Walker Percy*, published in 1983, furnishes an account of Percy's biography, his artistic theories and techniques. He analyses all his novels except the last one, highlighting Percy as a Catholic novelist who is earnest in reconciling man with God through the sacrament of marriage. *Conversations with Walker Percy* (1985), edited by Lewis A. Lawson and Victor A. Kramer, is a collection of twenty-seven interviews that Percy made with various people at various times. Percy utilized his interviews "as a direct communication to parallel his indirect communications in fiction" (xi).

Probing Percy's essays, his theory of language, his philosophical views, and his novels in *Walker Percy and the Old Modem Age* (1985) Patricia Lewis Poteat affirms that Percy is a successful storyteller and his fiction champions his philosophy better than his essays. William Rodney Allen's *Walker Percy: A Southern Wayfarer* (1986) is a genuine attempt to substantiate Percy's fiction as a "response to the trauma of his Father's suicide" (xvii), thus emphasizing the psychological aspect of the novels. Allen views Percy's fiction as a dismissal of 'death-dealing philosophies' and as an endorsement of Christian existentialism.
Edward John Hardy's *The Fiction of Walker Percy* (1987) commands special attention, being the first full-length study covering all the novels of Walker Percy. He examines each of Percy's novels in terms of narrative technique, character, setting, genre and brings into limelight the elements of modernity in his novels.

*Understanding Walker Percy* (1988) by Linda Whitney Hobson is an unfailing guide to a neophyte of Percyan studies. Beginning with a biography, the author underscores the twin perspectives of existentialism and Catholicism as revealed in Percy's novels. She assigns to him an esteemed position in American literature remarking that he is a "persuasive moralist in troubled times" (173).


Gary M. Ciuba's *Walker Percy: Books of Revelations* (1991) is a penetrating study covering all the novels of Walker Percy including his first unpublished novel "The Gramercy Winner". It takes a peep into Percy's apocalyptic vision and into the milieu of his development as a writer. He establishes that Percy's novels are books of revelations and renovations influenced by the Apocalypse of St. John. He argues that "Percy's spiritual
expatriates need such revelation because they suffer from the particular
doom of the twentieth century” (3), the doom being temporal and spatial
dislocation. According to him, the Percyan apocalypse is intrinsically
eschatological and spiritual conversion is the focus of Percy’s fiction.

Walker Percy: Novelist and Philosopher (1991), a collaborative
edition of Nordby Gretlund and Karl-Heinz Westarp, is an anthology of
criticism, a comprehensive study of Percy’s works including his non-fiction
Lost in the Cosmos. Divided into four parts, the book looks at Percy from
divergent angles. The first part portrays Percy at his literary smithy, while the
second part traces Percy’s family history and the impact of traditions on him.
Percy’s ties with Kierkegaard and Sartre and the influence of novelists like
Dostoevsky and Faulkner are explored in the third part. The fourth part
discloses Percy’s moral stance.

Jay Tolson’s Pilgrim in the Ruins: A Life of Walker Percy (1992) is a
very illuminating biography charting minuscule matters of Percy’s life. Tolson
argues that Percy’s writing is his attempt “to find the glimmer of comic hope
behind the stern tragic mask” of inherited gloom (16). He shows an
exceptional interest in pointing out the autobiographical elements in Percy’s
novels.

Bertram Wyatt-Brown published his critical work The Literary Percys
in 1994. This small book traces the curious history of Percy clan and
describes how this “exceptional lineage” (3) including women contributed to
Southern letters. Casting light on Southern life he unfolds the reasons for
Percy's choice of the novelistic career. He declares that writing in 'mock-heroic' vein, Percy makes his novels 'desperate story telling'.

In addition to the aforesaid books, there have been a proliferation of critical essays on Percy, published in various journals and periodicals, exploring his novels from different perspectives. The pile of Percy criticism and Percy's own works enable the readers to view his fiction as narratives of personal, cultural, social, political, and religious desiderata for which he adopts the device of the grotesque.