

The Moviegoer Study Guide

The Moviegoer by Walker Percy

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Plot Summary

The main character of this novel is John Bolling, who also goes by a number of nicknames given to him by his friends, family and colleagues. Despite the familiarity with which his friends and family members communicate with him, John is essentially an outsider with few true friends and an unclear purpose in his life. He enjoys going to the movies and prefers his career as a financial investor, but these pastimes do not satisfy his family, in particular his Aunt Emily.

Aunt Emily is the mother figure in John's life, although his own mother is still alive. His mother has remarried and has a number of children now, however, and Aunt Emily is the family member that focuses on John, hoping to give him the heritage of the Bolling name. Aunt Emily often talks with John about the virtues of living a life of justice and nobility, giving back to society and making it a better life to live for all. John, however, is uninspired by the thought of contributing to society and rejects living a life that was preordained from him, although he never argues with Aunt Emily nor with anyone else around him. Instead, he avoids the topics politely. He instead sees a possibility to search for the meaning of life, although he never actively pursues this quest.

John's cousin Kate, on the other hand, also actively rejects the life of a Southern woman that has already been prescribed for her. However, Kate is more forthright about her rejection of these boundaries through her depression. Although she is not suicidal, the idea of being a stereotypical Southern wife with all of its constraints makes her take prescription drugs (and nearly overdoses on them) and attend therapy with various doctors. She says that she feels her best when she's around John because he is the same type of person that she is, although no one acknowledges it nor do Kate and John even discuss it. She eventually agrees to marry John solely on the promise that he will dictate her every action, down to the smallest detail, and not laugh at her. In this way, she can get rid of the responsibility of the prescribed life and put her life in the hands of a man she knows rejects the constraints of Southern culture as well.

Interestingly, after a failed business trip to Chicago with Kate, John lands in trouble with Aunt Emily. Kate is her stepdaughter and the night after Kate takes a few too many sleeping pills to numb herself, John whisks Kate away to Chicago at Kate's request. Unfortunately, however, neither one of them think to let Aunt Emily or the rest of the family know, causing them to worry and fret about her. They cut their trip in Chicago short, despite Kate's good mood, and return to New Orleans, where Kate immediately sinks into her depression again.

Aunt Emily is thoroughly disappointed in John and she lectures him severely on both his most recent actions with Kate and his life in general. John turns 30 on the day they return from Chicago and after Aunt Emily's lecture, gives up the possibility of searching for the meaning of life. Instead, he commits himself to going to medical school, despite having absolutely no passion for it. Kate and John get married and both regain Aunt Emily's favor. In the end, both John and Kate are forced into the lives that were

prescribed to them by their society and family members, unable to escape perhaps from a lack of motivation and feeling of apathy they both carry.



Chapter One

Chapter One Summary

John receives a letter from his aunt, asking him to lunch. Since he visits her every Sunday and it is only Wednesday, he knows that the discussion will be serious. He is reminded of a movie he watched recently at Lake Pontchartrain with Linda, his girlfriend and secretary at the time. John explains that he is now happily living in Gentilly, a middle class suburb of New Orleans. John lives in a bungalow with his neighbor, Mrs. Schexnaydre, and works quite successfully at his uncle's brokerage firm.

John frequently goes to the movies and watches television as an escape. Even when he travels on the weekends or on business trips, John enjoys going to the movies. He usually takes his secretaries with him, who are typically named Marcia or Linda and occasionally Sharon. The relationships never pan out, however, though it doesn't bother John much.

However, on the morning that John receives the letter from his aunt, his life turns complicated because he suddenly realizes the possibility of a search for life and existence in general. While riding the bus to Elysian Fields, the idea of searching in life comes to him. He defines this search as "what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life." He believes that if one is aware of the possibility of a search, one is onto something; but if that person does not see the possibility of a search, he or she is in despair. He thinks the movies are onto the idea, but they always mess it up.

It is a week until New Orleans and he runs into his cousin-by-marriage Ed Lovell. Ed asks about Jack's cousin Kate. Kate was once engaged to Ed's brother Lyell, who died in a car accident with her, although she survived. She is now engaged to Walter and John assures Ed that she is doing quite well.

Mercer opens the door for John at his aunt's house. After an awkward conversation, John's Aunt Emily enters and immediately tells him that she has found whiskey bottles in her stepdaughter Kate's room. She wants John and Sam to talk with Kate as her fiancée is too busy with Mardi Gras to deal with the issue.

At lunch, John sees Kate and Uncle Jules, whom he greatly admires. Her fiancée, Walter, is there who tries hard to impress the family with his knowledge of life. John and Walter went to college together and John wanted to be much like Walter as a child, but that feeling has since changed. After Walter offers to drive Uncle Jules back to town, Kate and John have a quick discussion. He invites her to go to the ball with him and she flatly refuses him.

John leaves Kate and goes to talk with his Aunt Emily. She urges him to do something serious with his life. She tells him that he will be thirty soon and she wants him to do



some good with his life. As John is leaving, Kate calls to him from under the steps. She has heard the entire talk between John and his aunt. She tells John she doubts she will marry Walter and recalls the moment she was happiest — right after Lyell had been killed in the car accident, freeing her from that life. She agrees to meet up with him later and they go to a movie together and she admits that her depression is quite bad.

Chapter One Analysis

John's letter from his aunt immediately indicates that the two have a close relationship. In fact, Aunt Emily is more of a mother to John than his own mother. She is the sister of his deceased father and keeps a close eye on him throughout the novel. She is the embodiment of what society hopes for him and what they see in him in general. Although he attempts to satisfy her, John ultimately comes up short.

Movies are a central theme of John's life. In his words, movies often attempt to engage in the possibility of the search for the meaning of life, but John believes they get it all wrong by the end. No matter where he travels, John attends a variety of movie theaters and his only friends are those associated with either the movie theaters or television.

Immediately in the beginning of the novel, it appears that Kate is an extraordinary figure among the Bollings family and that John has a connection to her. After they speak at Aunt Emily's — her stepmother — it becomes clear that John and Kate have a complicated, but honest relationship with one another. While she puts on a good face to every other member of her family, she is honest with John in an offhanded way, telling him that she is suffering from a serious bout of depression. When she recalls her happiest day — the day her fiancée was killed and she was "freed" from that life — the reader recognizes that Kate is not a typical, healthy woman. She is fighting an unforeseen enemy and suffers from a reluctance to be the "ideal" stereotypical woman of her society. It is for this reason that she and John connect together so well because they share a similar perspective on life, although neither admits it to the other.



Chapter Two

Chapter Two Summary

The weekend prior to Mardi Gras is slow at the office, but John goes to the office and makes a wise investment on American Motors. He becomes obsessed with his secretary, Sharon Kincaid, who is from a small town in Alabama called Eufala. John frequently calls his aunt to check on Kate and she seems to be doing much better. She is seeing a doctor, but Kate honestly tells John she does not believe he is truly helping her.

John boldly thinks to himself that he is completely in love with Sharon now. He vows to treat her with a Gregory Peckish sort of distance, admiring her from afar. He is reading a novel, *Arabica Deserta*, concealed in a Standard & Poor binder so as to look busy. Sharon, on the other hand, carries around *Peyton Place*, concealing it from him. John mentions that *Arabica Deserta* would have once been one of the last books he would have picked up, preferring the great novels like *War and Peace* or Albert Einstein's *The Universe as I See It*.

Mr. Sartalamaccia calls John, asking to purchase a piece of land. Although it would be easy to say yes right away and end the conversation, John uses the conversation to lure Sharon to go on a car ride with him. She agrees to go, so long as she can return that evening to go on a date with another man. On the way home, John stops by the movie theater and is convinced by the owner to see the movie. After seeing the movie, John walks back to his home and gets a letter from his aunt. His neighbor Mrs. Schexnaydre hands him a copy of *Reader's Digest* and disappears quickly again. Aunt Emily's letter is short, simply beseeching him to live with dignity and justice.

He goes to pick up Kate and they see a movie together again. After the movie, they have a serious conversation about her therapy with the doctor and its effects, as well as John's possibility for the search in life. She tells him that he might be overlooking the most obvious thing that could be the answer to his problems.

John suffers from insomnia just like his father did, but unlike his father, he accepts it and walks at dusk instead of fighting himself back to sleep like his father used to do. That morning, he receives a notice from Harold Graebner asking him to be the godfather to his new baby. John remarks that Harold saved his life while in the Orient and for this reason, Harold loves John. Later that day, Sharon and John meet Mr. Sartalamaccia, who tells them about his dream of a duck club. Working together, Sharon and John inadvertently raise his asking price. On the way home, Sharon tells Jack she had a wonderful time, but nothing happens between them. The next day, John goes to Uncle Jules' office and his Uncle tells him that he will be taking a business trip to Chicago. This news depresses John, although he tells his Uncle he is happy to go.



After lunch, John runs into his cousin Nell Lovell, wife of Eddie Lovell, on the steps of the library. John has gone to the library to read controversial periodicals. He does not know whether he is a conservative or a liberal, but he enjoys reading these extreme periodicals that display the hatred the one side has for the other. He and Nell make small-talk and at one point Nell says that all she and Eddie want to do in life is make a small contribution and leave the world a better place than how they entered it. In the end, like her husband, Nell asks after Kate and John, now physically ill, rushes away from her.

John returns to the office and at first wants to initiate a plan to make Sharon fall in love with him, but when she looks him in the eyes, he realizes that he is no longer in love with her. He asks her to take on a special project and when she realizes she will be late from work that evening, calls her boyfriend to let him know. He walks in shortly after and John realizes he is immediately a man that he could be friends with.

He returns home later that evening to spend the night by himself since Kate is at a dinner. He watches television and tucks himself into bed, listening to a popular radio show called *This I Believe*, which features different guests talking about their personal beliefs and values. Later that evening, John is suddenly awakened by a telephone call from Aunt Emily. She tells him that when Uncle Jules and Walter went to the dinner to pick up Kate, she was nowhere to be found. John falls back asleep, but wakes up suddenly at 3 a.m. He walks outside to sit on his porch and is not at all surprised when a taxi pulls up and lets Kate out. She walks towards him and immediately questions him whether a single misperception could destroy a person's entire life.

She tells him that while at her therapist this afternoon, she had a revelation and said goodbye to the doctor and walked out for good. John listens to her entire speech, takes her cold hands in his and asks her to marry him in a roundabout way. She avoids the question, instead asking him what she is going to do with her life. John assures her that everything will be fine.

Chapter Two Analysis

John's obsession with Sharon doesn't seem to be based on any real reason or foundation. Just like all of his other secretaries with generic first names, John lusts after a woman he hardly knows or communicates with. In fact, as soon as he does communicate with her, he loses all pleasure in her company. While at the office, Kate frequently calls John to update him on her overall status with therapy and depression.

It's interesting that both Sharon and John conceal novels from the other one. It's as though neither wishes to admit the personal data that is revealed when someone tells another what kind of book they are reading at the moment. The reader gets a rare look into John's life when he reveals that he used to only read the great novels that provided answers to life's problems. In this way, the reader can see that John had previously been searching for the meaning of life from society's established writers. It seems that



he has given up finding the answers, however, with his recent choice to read *Arabica Deserta*.

Whenever John is alone, he goes to see a movie, which is what he does after Sharon leaves the office with her boyfriend and Kate has a dinner to attend. He comes home that evening to find a letter from Aunt Emily telling him to strive for justice and dignity in his life. Just as she petitions with Kate, Aunt Emily is working to make sure that John leads a stereotypical life of a "good contributor" to his society. She urges him to take up research in the medical field after exploring other countries, disregarding any personal feelings John might have about research in general. Mrs. Schexnaydre and John are relatively good friends and she knows him well enough to give him an article that he might be interested in. However, she has lived in New Orleans her entire life and knows no one. Perhaps it is because John feels like an outsider and no one really knows him that he gets along so well with Mrs. Schexnaydre, who expects virtually nothing from him. She is the perfect antithesis to his Aunt Emily.

Sharon and John bond during the drive to the duck club, but it is clear that Sharon will not be like all of the other girls that John has had relationships with in the past. She is in a committed relationship. Instead, they work better together as a partnership in business dealings, as evidenced by their communications with Mr. Sartalamaccia. Although the trip to the duck club was meant to entice and excite Sharon to become more interested personally in John, the opposite happens as they work together in a business relationship.

Kate relays her therapy with the doctor, telling him that she is better, although to Kate "better" only means that she does not feel like she is on the brink of an abyss. She asks John if he realizes that the only time people are really "real" with one another is during illness, disaster or death. Perhaps this thought is why Kate is persistently ill, as an attempt to hold onto something "real" in a society that she also sees as repetitive and dead, as John does. Kate tells John a very telling piece of advice, when she warns him that he might be missing a very obvious thing right in front of him. This comment forecasts the future relationship between John and Kate. Of course, this relationship won't be cemented until later during their trip to Chicago. It is telling, however, that John is not at all surprised when he sees Kate arrive on his front step at 3 a.m. after disappearing earlier that evening and causing alarm among her family members. John seems to trust that Kate will not harm herself and will find him at some point in the future. Perhaps it is because of this relationship that the half-hearted attempt at a marriage proposal is made at this odd hour. Of course, Kate's odd response to the marriage proposal does not seem to faze John at all, who knows her well enough to let her worry only about herself and disregard any rejected feelings John might be suffering (although his reaction doesn't indicate he has this problem).

John's response to Harold is the reverse of what most people typically would attribute to someone who has saved their life. Most people seemingly would be eternally grateful that someone had saved their life, but for John, he says that Harold loves him because he got to save John's life. In this way, the reader can notice both that John is not particularly passionate that his life was saved — perhaps because he cannot determine



what to live for — and also the reader can imply that the salvation gave Harold a purpose and something significant in his life.

An interesting segment in this chapter talks about John's feelings of camaraderie with the Jewish race. He says that all of his friends growing up were Jewish and thus he can relate well with them. In particular, he understands their plight of persecution. He notes that a great number of solitary moviegoers are Jewish. In this way, John ties the Jewish attribute of exile and loneliness with being a moviegoer. Although he never analyzes why he has this extreme liking towards Jews, it can easily be deciphered that John relates to their feelings of being on the peripheral and being manipulated as a whole. John is an outsider within his Southern society and is markedly told what is expected from him and his life, manipulated by his family, particularly Aunt Emily.

John's remedy when he is feeling poor is to read about the hatred one political group feels for another. To John, he says this is another instance where the world is upside down because he feels like the people that are happy and friendly are dead and those that are haters seem most alive. Perhaps this "alive" quality comes from their knowing exactly what they are fighting for — and against. John runs into his cousin Nell, one of the happy and friendly people who he believes is dead-like. With this meeting, he is directly put against the type of person in society that he is trying to avoid becoming himself. Nell wants to contribute to society, however. She states that people and books and things are so endlessly fascinating to her, making John grow more and more physically ill. Interestingly, although her conversation with John is short, she repeats over and over again how "not gloomy" she constantly feels.

The radio program that John listens to before going to bed is a telling show called This I Believe. John notes that everyone on the show believes in the uniqueness and dignity of the individual, although John notes that the speakers themselves are more like peas in a pod than unique individuals themselves. John has sent in a tape to This I Believe before he was a true fan, naming himself as a moviegoer and stating that he believes in a good kick in the ass. When the tape is returned to him, he became a faithful listener.



Chapter Three

Chapter Three Summary

Sharon and John are at the office on a dreary Saturday morning. John is dictating letters to Sharon for their newest project together and John thinks of both Sharon and how well his new stock with American Motors is doing. John stops Sharon to ask her if she wants to go to the Gulf Coast with him. She claims to have work, but he convinces her to go with him. He drives her to her house, telling her to put her bathing suit on under her clothes. However, Sharon is quick to establish that he is her boss and she is an employee down for a trip to go swimming in the Gulf Coast and nothing more.

John is worried that malaise will overtake them both. Fortunately, he is driving an MG, which he has seen dispel malaise quite well in the past. As they pull away from her house, John sees her roommate Joyce watching them out the window. Once in the car on the way to the Gulf Coast, Sharon refers to John by his nickname "Jack," which she has heard some of the clients call him. Suddenly, an older gentleman runs into the MG, causing a huge accident. John and Sharon are fine, but John's war injured shoulder is in pain.

They decide to take a nearby boat to go swimming on a local beach after the accident. After swimming, they drink some beer that they have brought and playfully mess around with one another. John declares his unending love for her. As soon as he says it, however, he realizes he does not love her as much as he did yesterday. After the swim, they jump back into the MG and John asks her if she'd like to go visit his mother's fishing camp nearby. She agrees, but to his horror, the fishing camp is filled with his family as he drives towards the house.

His half-brothers and sisters are eating crabs when he arrives and Lonnie, his disabled half-brother, is especially happy to see him. He talks with his mother and siblings for a little while, but then takes Lonnie to see a movie. It is quickly evident that Lonnie and John are close. John's mother warns him that Lonnie is fasting now, despite his illness and disability. She is not happy about it.

John wakes up at 3 a.m. that evening and writes down some thoughts in his notebook that relate to his overall search for the meaning of life. He quickly returns to sleep after writing these thoughts down. That morning, he awakes to find his mother fishing off the end of their dock. They talk about how his father was before his parents divorced. She calls him overwrought.

The entire family goes to Catholic mass and the siblings spend the remainder of the afternoon water-skiing with their father Roy (John's stepfather) in the water behind the house. Lonnie cannot ski so he and John have a serious discussion about why Lonnie is fasting. John and Sharon jump in the MG to drive home, but malaise surrounds the



car on the ride home. She is not as playful as she once was and only gives him a small kiss. She tells him to hurry home with her because she needs to meet her boyfriend.

Chapter Three Analysis

John makes another attempt to have Sharon fall in love with him by taking her on a trip to the Gulf Coast. However, although Sharon allows him to fool around with her for a little while and seems honestly flattered by his comments, she does not take him too seriously. They spend the night with his family and still there does not seem to be any unique relationship building between John and Sharon.

John's relationship with Lonnie is an interesting dichotomy. John seems to best communicate and express himself with the outer members of his family. Lonnie is disabled and sickly, yet he and John communicate in a unique and distinct way. They watch the movie together, although they have a special bond that allows them to see things within the movie that Sharon, the average moviegoer, misses entirely. Lonnie explains to John that he is on a hunger strike to help rectify the feelings that he has about being happy that his older brother Duval is dead. John completely understands, remarking that why wouldn't he be jealous and happy — he's with God and heaven while Lonnie remains on the Earth. Lonnie offers his sacrament, which is a symbol of life and living, to John, which John blithely dismisses. Throughout the entire conversation, it seems that Lonnie and John communicate through much more than words and both see the other's perspective on life. Lonnie understands John's possibility for the search for the meaning of life.

It is interesting to note, however, that John only seems partially motivated to search for this meaning. He comments that the possibility of the search is there, but is not even motivated enough to take up that possibility. When John cannot sleep and awakes to write down comments in his notebook, the occasion is typical of his insomnia, but is atypical in his pensive and analytical approach towards the "search" that he will occasionally refer to.

When John talks with his mother, it becomes clear that they have an easygoing relationship with one another, but she does not know him either. She asks why he didn't go fishing with his stepfather and he remarks that he does not like to fish, a fact that his mother swiftly dismisses entirely. However, she reviews the relationship she had with John's father and why they fell apart. The reader can start to understand that John's lost feeling in life, depression and his quest for a search can be traced back at least partly to his father. She relays the story of when John's father went up to his bed and stayed there for no apparent reason, leaving only when the war arrived. Another time, his father had stopped eating simply because he didn't think it was important enough. John's mother helped him gain thirty pounds by presenting the food in a unique situation. However, these actions allow the reader to see that John's father might have been the influence behind John's current troubles, and possibly why his Aunt Emily has such a sharp eye on John and his future choices. As his mother says, "You are so like your

father and yet so different." John's difference might solely be in his attempt to hide his thoughts and fit in with the society he is fighting to be different from.



Chapter Four

Chapter Four Summary

Sam Yerger is waiting for John when he pulls up to his aunt's house after dropping Sharon off. He motions John to meet him under the stairs, telling him immediately that they need to get Kate out of the house. The night before, Kate had taken a number of sleeping pills and had had trouble waking up that morning. Aunt Emily was very upset and called Dr. Minx, who gave her a stomach stimulant. Rather than put her in the hospital, Dr. Minx says that he will talk to Kate on Monday and she will be fine until then.

They go upstairs to dinner and Aunt Emily has company that was planned before Kate's episode occurred. The family spends the meal attempting to be excessively normal to one another, as if nothing is wrong. John hears a slight noise in the house and looks to a room off the landing. Kate stands there in the shadows. She is dressed up and looks wonderful to John. They can see everyone sitting down to dinner from their viewpoint and Kate tells John to tell Aunt Emily that she will not be joining them for dinner that evening. Together, they watch Sam toast and tell stories to the rest of the family. Kate talks about what a remarkable man Sam is. She will later offhandedly mention to John that Sam asked her to marry her.

She says she was feeling quite well when she went to sleep last night. She awoke in the middle of the night and found a good book to read. She was fine until she finished the book. Once she was through reading, however, she felt herself coming to the end of her rope. She didn't want to kill herself, but she wanted to take enough of her pills so that she would be numb.

When she is finished speaking, John gets up to leave, but Kate grabs him by the hand and says she is going to go to Chicago with him. Instead of flying, she wants him to change the ticket to two train tickets. He agrees. He later falls asleep in a hammock and is awakened by Sam handing him Kate's medicines, but he is so sleepy that he is rather unaware throughout the conversation.

Just a few hours later, Kate and John are on a train to Chicago. Kate is in an excellent mood because she loves to travel. Unfortunately, however, they run into Sidney Gross and his wife, whose small-talk depresses Kate drastically. When she disappears after awhile, John finds her in their sleeper car. He asks how she is doing and she says that she is always relatively OK with John nearby. They again discuss the proposal of marrying and Kate says that they know one another too well for one of these schemes. She will only marry him with the promise that he will tell her exactly what to do for the rest of her life. She wants him to tell her how to do even the smallest things. After the discussion, they lay down together and become involved, although it isn't satisfying for either one.



When they arrive in Chicago, Kate looks very much at home because she is in a city where no one knows her. John is immediately whisked away to an initial meeting called the Hot Stove League for the convention he is attending, much to his chagrin. John leaves early and goes to find the only man he knows in the Midwest, Harold Graebner. They only stay for twenty minutes and during their time there, both he and Kate are quite awkward. Harold calls John "Rollo" for reasons that only he understands. Harold baptized his child yesterday, but John was godfather-by-proxy because he was not there since he had come by train instead of plane, which took an extra day. As they are leaving, Kate comments that Harold has a peculiar family — probably because the wife never asked them to sit down or performed any of the usual Southern woman's duties. As they leave, the wind picks up and Kate moans, saying that something bad is going to happen. She is correct as just a few minutes later, John receives a notice to call his aunt who immediately confronts him about taking off with Kate without telling the rest of the family. They are required to return immediately to New Orleans. When they arrive in New Orleans, Kate goes from acting free and happy to looking like she has entered a foreign town.

Chapter Four Analysis

Sam's presence at the beginning of the novel makes John think that someone has died. Of course, the reader immediately assumes Kate, but no one has truly died. Sam tells John that they have to get Kate out of the house immediately. Ironically, this is exactly what John will do in the following hours, but he will get in trouble as he gives Kate a freedom that she does not approve of. Instead, Sam has planned for Kate to go to a special trip to become the companion for a seventy-five-year-old woman who is an admirable character. No one, as usual, has asked Kate what she wants to do.

Kate's presumed suicide attempt is not suicidal at all, according to her. Kate does not want to die; she wants to be free. The prescription drugs give her a temporary relief from the regimented life that Aunt Emily and the rest of Southern society has written for her. In fact, her depression as a whole gives her an excuse to be seen as an outsider and not fully involved in the actions and goals of the stereotypical Southern woman of class and money. The depression makes her less attractive but more alive, although it does little to dissuade men since she is ultimately proposed to by four different men.

If there is a scene in the novel that perfectly depicts Aunt Emily and the rest of Elysian Fields strict adherence to the rules of Southern society, it is during the dinner immediately following Kate's presumed suicide. Although she is completely dressed up, she does not attend dinner. They have company and throughout the dinner, they all act as if everything is perfect and great. No one discusses Kate; no one asks her if she is OK. Instead, they operate within their prescribed guidelines to prove that they are perfect. It is appropriate that neither John nor Kate sit down to that dinner as they are not true members of that society.

Later, John is on the verge of exhaustion and lies down in the hammock to sleep. Sam comes to him and nearly makes him physically ill similar to what Nell had done just



hours earlier. At some point, Sam hands John Kate's medical bottle with some instructions, but John is too tired and out of it to compute the conversation any more than he does with one of Aunt Emily's conversations. It is this comment that lets the reader know how highly he holds his conversations with Aunt Emily and how much he believes in them.

Kate is at her finest hour in Chicago. Her dream is to be free, to be a Nobody in a city of Anybodies. In a big city, Kate can shed the prescribed behaviors and expected goals and actions she is forced to endure every day in New Orleans. She can enjoy not knowing anyone and no one knowing her. She is able to do what she wants, when she wants, without recourse. It is no coincidence that Kate is happy and free in Chicago, yet resumes a zombie-like trance as soon as she enters New Orleans again. Chicago was her temporary playground, while New Orleans confines her to a life where things are specifically expected from her. On the train, Kate's freedom from society is temporarily compromised by the presence of Sidney Gross and his wife. However, Kate handles their unexpected presence rather well, escaping to her roomette on a regular basis and keeping up the pretenses of how she should be acting. As John remarks, the presence of the Grosses has spoiled everything, replacing freedom only with the prospect of making small talk and of having a delightful time. Kate is most free throughout the novel when she finds herself in the big city of Chicago and free from Southern society.

While riding on the train, John has a reflective moment during which he realizes that his tentative search for meaning in his life has taken away the tidy and ingenious life that he had in Gentilly. He has not been sleeping or eating well, instead writing philosophical notes in a notebook. As far as the reader is aware, John has only done this once, but the instance was enough to threaten the life that John has always known in Gentilly and for this reason, it must be put under attack. Kate pegs him during one of their train conversations as she says that the only thing worse than her swallowing a number of pills to numb herself is to lose hope in life and hide it from yourself. John's search for life is the full embodiment of John's lost hope and his reluctance to admit that he has lost the hope.



Chapter Five

Chapter Five Summary

Aunt Emily address John about his recent actions, especially about how he took off with her right after her presumed suicide attempt. Most importantly, however, she conveys her utter disappointment in him. She holds herself and her family at a higher standard than the rest of the general population and she feels that John is not acting at that level. She says that she wanted to pass on the heritage of all the men in their family to John since his own father is not present in his life.

When she is through, she asks him simply what he lives for or what he loves. John is silent, which speaks volumes about his personality and character. When it is over, Kate finds him, telling him that she has once again overheard the entire conversation, calling him a poor, stupid bastard. It is John's thirtieth birthday.

After he walks away, John determines that everyone is dead and that malaise has settled everywhere like a fall-out. His aunt's disappointment is so profound for John that he gives up his search for the meaning of life permanently. Instead, he goes back to his house to wait for Kate. Interestingly, he calls Sharon instead, speaking with her roommate Joyce. While in the middle of flirting randomly with Joyce, however, he realizes that he wants the world to end as he knows it and have everyone in his life live happily together. With that thought, he stops flirting with Joyce and offers to introduce her to his fiancée Kate.

Kate eventually comes to John's house and demands to know why he was so weak to Aunt Emily. She tells him that she told Aunt Emily that they are to be married. They decide that John will go to medical school so as to appease his aunt and get married quickly. Kate says that she is scared and frightened to be alone, but she's better with him. She tells him that she's not sure whether she will really change, but John tells her she might, giving the situation hope.

Chapter Five Analysis

The lecture from Aunt Emily has a profound effect on John. He has since been acting and treating his life actions as though they are removed and indifferent actions, separate from the other actions. He has great respect and love for Aunt Emily, however, and after her lecture and expressed disappointment in him, he changes. She questions whether he believes his life should be spent watching movies versus getting thoroughly involved in life. John is silent and contrite throughout the lecture. Kate is angry after she sees John's response to Aunt Emily because she knows that this was his one opportunity to explain himself, explain his actions and his thoughts to her thoroughly, yet he was silent. In his silence, she knows that he is now willing to live the life that she wants to see from him, instead of embarking on his own personal desires. Kate



understands the despair that will come from abandoning the hope that he can have a unique life and engage in the possibility of a search.

When John walks out, he is despondent, although he does not show it to anyone. He feels that everyone is dead because everyone is living a prescribed life instead of branching out and leading a unique, driven life with their own personal goals. He sees everyone dead because they are all conforming to society just as he is about to do.

With this rejection and Aunt Emily's disappointment sharp in his mind, John is broken. He can no longer play the game of flirting with a girl that he hardly knows just to avoid becoming truly involved with someone. In the middle of his habitual game with Joyce, he stops and wonders if the world could end and everyone could actually be happy. It is this thought that finally has him introduce Kate as his fiancée and accept the world as he will now know it with the fiancée that does not love him, but knows him and his thoughts, although they do not discuss it.



Epilogue

Epilogue Summary

Kate and John are married. Sharon has stayed his secretary and married her boyfriend. Mr. Sartalamaccia purchases John's duck club land for a great deal of money and his Aunt Emily is now pleased with him. Uncles Jules dies a year later on Mardi Gras. Lonnie passes away shortly after just a few days after his fifteenth birthday. Right before Lonnie dies, Kate wants to visit him, which John is initially against. However, after they are finished visiting him, Kate passes on the message to John that Lonnie has conquered his "habitual disposition" of being jealous that Duval had died. John assures his siblings that Lonnie will be better in heaven and able to water ski.

John now explains that he has given up his search because he is a member of his mother's family, who are reluctant to talk about anything religious.

After Lonnie's death, John asks Kate to do him a favor and ride on a streetcar by herself to get some papers for him. Kate is agitated and worried, asking what she will do if she doesn't make it. John calmly tells her he will be thinking about her the entire time and she can get off the streetcar and walk if she has trouble. Kate confirms the name of the man she is to see and walks towards St. Charles to catch the streetcar.

Epilogue Analysis

As she agrees to marry him, Kate tells John she can never be sure if she will get better or if she will change at all. He says that she might, giving them both a bit of hope. At the end of the book, Kate's test to see whether or not she has gotten better is given to her by John. He keeps his promise of keeping her close and expressly telling her what to do down to the smallest detail. By giving her this task of retrieving documents — without him — he tells her how to achieve the task by explicitly telling her where to sit and where to go, but asks her to do it herself. In this way, she is staying within the confines of their agreement, but John is allowing her to go off on her own. The novel ends before she returns, causing the reader to speculate whether Kate can handle these tasks by herself or not.



Characters

John Bickerson Bolling aka Jack aka Binx

John is the main character in the novel. He has a number of nicknames, although as a character, he does not seem affable enough to deserve the nicknames. Instead, the nicknames seem to be more like representations of the type of person the other characters wish he was. For example, his clients and Sharon will both call him Jack as the relaxed, yet educated financial investor. On the other hand, his friends and college mates refer to him as Binx which is a much more playful name. Hardly anyone calls him by his real name, John.

Like the nicknames, John does not seem fazed by what society wants from him. Rather than establish his own strong personality, he allows others to give him suggestions on what he should do. He makes half-hearted attempts to make Sharon fall in love with him or marry Kate or even search for the meaning of life, but instead becomes easily distracted and dissuades himself from truly completing these tasks. Although he ends up marrying Kate, they both discuss that they are not in love — she refuses to let him talk about it at all — and only agrees to marry him so that she will have someone to tell her what to do for the rest of her life, down to the smallest details. He does not actively pursue her nor does he make any effort to have her love him.

In the end, John will disappoint everyone in the book except perhaps Lonnie and Kate, who know him best. He will not actively reject the hopes that these inner circle family and friends put on him; instead, he just acts exactly as he is, which causes them disappointment. The sharpest disappointment will come from his Aunt Emily, who is the mother figure in his life as his own mother is not overly involved in his daily activities.

Kate Cutrer

From the beginning of the novel, it is clear that Kate is an important figure in John's life. When he meets other family members and friends on the street, they ask about Kate. Kate is John's cousin, but she shares a unique and special bond with him. She suffers from serious depression, but feels her best when she is around John. She accuses of being "worse" than she is simply because while others know and acknowledge Kate's depression and fragile state, they only see the good and quiet aspects of John, ignoring that they are very similar people.

Although Kate is depressed, she is not truly suicidal. Her depression stems from being locked into a world and society that expects her to become the stereotypical "happy housewife." She rejects the idea of marriage for this reason, wanting to be anyone other than herself so long as it is someone unimportant. She is a Southern woman from money and class, and with these privileges come the expectation that she will marry



well and perform all of the stereotypical chores and responsibilities of a Southern housewife and mother.

It is for this reason that Kate is her happiest after her first fiancée is killed in a car accident. The typical reaction of a woman that has just lost her fiancée would seemingly be terror, extreme sadness and grief, but Kate instead walks over to his corpse and apathetically stares at it. From there, she jumps on a bus and returns home. However, she calls this her happiest day not because she had anything against her fiancée Lyell, but instead because she was freed from the restricted and planned life she had agreed to. Kate is also very comfortable and happy in a big city life Chicago where she can drop her shell of what society and Southern culture expects of her and instead morph into a Nobody, an Anybody with no history and no future, free to become and do whatever she would like. She eventually agrees to marry John not because she loves him, but only on the pretense that he will dictate her every move down to the smallest detail. In this way, she could conform to society without dealing with the stress of making the wrong move or making a mistake, freeing herself from the responsibility of having to live by a specific code. She does not want John to mention love to her in any way and when they have sex on the train together, they are miserable failures at it for this reason. Kate runs to John because he makes her feel better because he suffers from the same depression, but does not openly deal with it like she does.

Sharon Kincaid

John's most recent secretary, Sharon, sets herself above the rest of John's secretaries through her behavior. Although she is far from perfect or ideal, she is still a step above his previous employees. For John, Sharon will represent unattainable love. Since they never communicate on a personal level — he is shocked to learn she knows his first name of "Jack" — John cannot find fault with her. Instead, he idealizes her for her every trait, including the less-admirable ones.

Sharon works well with John, but he still forces her into a romantic role in his head since he has subjected all of his past secretaries to this role. However, through his interactions with Sharon, the reader can easily understand why his previous relationships with the secretaries never work out. He refers to them as a mass group, remarking that they all have similar names which indicates that to him, they are all the same girl. Sharon, however, is different because she has a boyfriend and defers his advances, for the most part.

On the beach while they are fooling around, John immediately notices that he loses interest in her as soon as he professes his love and admiration for her. Once he gets her, he is no longer satisfied with her. Flickers of the affection will return, but in essence, John gives up on her entirely. He will later make a half-hearted attempt at her roommate Joyce, but gives up at the last minute and acknowledges Kate to be his fiancée instead, much to Joyce's relief.



Aunt Emily Bolling

John's aunt on his father's side, Aunt Emily is John's mother figure in Gentilly. John has a mother, but Aunt Emily plays a very active role in John's life, directing his actions and trying to advise him on his career. She frequently asks John to talk with Kate because she feels that Kate listens to John, yet is furious when she finds out that they have started a relationship.

Aunt Emily is the very embodiment of Society and Southern Culture in her hopes for John. She wants him to live nobly and contribute to society, leaving it a better place than it was when he entered it — which is his cousin Nell's goal in life — but John doesn't have the motivation to do this. Aunt Emily wants him to be in the medical research field rather than in the dull field of investing because that career doesn't give anything back to society in her eyes. She ignores the fact that she is the only one speaking of justice and freedom, class and nobility until the end of the novel.

Aunt Emily's lecture has a profound effect on John, however. He cannot handle her disappointment in him and after her lecture, agrees to go to medical school and marry Kate. After he makes these decisions, he and Kate regain Aunt Emily's favor. In this way, Aunt Emily symbolizes the expectations and restrictions of Southern culture on the younger generation of Kate and John.

Lonnie Smith

John's half-brother is fourteen years old in the novel and John's favorite sibling. He is disabled and acutely jealous that his older brother Duval is dead. He and John hold philosophical conversations about life and religion together and both are avid moviegoers. Of course, Lonnie and John see the movie on a level that is much different than the average moviegoer and for this reason, they communicate on another level. Lonnie is very religious, while John quietly shuns going to church. For this reason, Lonnie offers him his sacrament and tries to explain why he is fasting. He will pass away a few days after his fifteenth birthday.

Uncle Jules Bolling

John's uncle and the brother to Aunt Emily, John works in the investment firm that belongs to Uncle Jules. Interestingly, although the financial world is sufficient for Uncle Jules, it is not good enough for John, according to Aunt Emily. Uncle Jules, however, is the only man that John know who is truly remarkable in all areas of his life. He is a devout Catholic, well-off and well-respected by his friends. He has also been king of Mardi Gras. Perhaps because of his achievements, he is permitted to be in the investing sector dealing with money instead of the medical research Aunt Emily wants John to do.



Sam Yerger

A friend of the Bolling family, Aunt Emily establishes Sam as one of the few people that Kate will listen to. Sam's discussions with Kate will leave her elated and happy one evening, but in her words, what goes up must come down and later that evening she will suffer a serious bout of depression. Sam eventually asks Kate to marry him, although it's not clear what her response to him is.

Walter

Kate's fiancée at the beginning of the novel, Walter is also a friend of the family. He was John's fraternity brother in college and the example that John looked up to, striving to mimic his demeanor and way of talking. He is the captain of a krewe during Mardi Gras and he and John are not close now, although he tries to convince John to join his krewe. After becoming engaged to Kate, he literally measures up the house and its articles inside since he believes he is about to inherit the entire property. Kate will soon break off the marriage.

Harold Graebner

Harold is the only friend that John knows in the entire Midwest. When he visits Chicago, he drives by and spends twenty minutes with Harold, his wife and new baby with Kate nearby. Harold and John were in the war together and he calls John "Rollo." John is godfather to Harold's son and misses the baptism when he chooses the train over the original plane flight to Chicago. Kate remarks that the Graebner family is odd after they leave most likely because the wife does not engage in any of the typical Southern women requirements of manners.

Mr. Sartalamaccia

Used as an unwitting pawn in John's effort to have Sharon fall in love with him, Mr. Sartalamaccia offers to buy a piece of land that he will turn into a duck club next to the neighborhood he currently owns. Although they do not plan it, John and Sharon get him to raise the price he is willing to pay — and eventually sell — to John.



Objects/Places

Elysian Fields

The home of Aunt Emily. It is no coincidence that her house is called Elysian Fields in the book since this area represented the final resting place of souls in Greek mythology. For John, it will be the place where his destiny is chosen and written for him by Aunt Emily, who ultimately is a god-like presence in his life with her pure unselfishness and commanding nature over his daily actions.

Gentilly

Where John currently lives and where he is most happy with its peaceful environment.

Chicago

The site of a business meeting that Uncle Jules asks John to attend. Kate will come with him to Chicago at the last moment and it is on the train there that they will consummate their relationship. Kate is happiest in Chicago, free from her constraints in New Orleans

Gulf Coast

Where John takes Sharon in an attempt to have her fall passionately in love with him. He takes her to meet his family while in the area, albeit unintentionally.

John's MG car

John's MG is a very serious and plotted attempt to dispel the presence of malaise that can be found in a car. He enjoys the close quarters of the MG as it puts him nearer to Sharon. Although the MG is involved in a serious car accident, neither Sharon nor John are very hurt and for that, John is very proud of his MG.

the movie theaters

John's favorite thing to do is see a movie and the theaters where he goes varies. He attends a movie in Lake Ponchartrain, one with Lonnie on the coast, one by himself and another with Kate. The movie theater gives him a place where he can relax, be himself and only be a passive participant in the lives of other people, which he vastly prefers instead of being an active participant.



Mardi Gras

Although Mardi Gras is a time of celebration, in this novel it is merely a backdrop for John and Kate to demonstrate how removed they are from New Orleans society. While other friends and family members are heavily involved in the celebrations, neither John nor Kate make much mention of it at all.

Aunt Emily's letter opener

During Aunt Emily's lecture to John at the end of the novel, she is opening up her letters with a letter opener. At one point during the lecture, she stops and notices for the first time that the letter opener has a dent in it. She does not know that John is responsible for that dent, having damaged the letter opener years ago. This dent becomes a symbol of how John has disappointed Aunt Emily and damaged their relationship as well.

John's office

John pines for Sharon each day as they work together in his office. He never shares his passion for her while they are in the office, but instead chooses to admire her from afar just as he would do at a movie theater.

Arabica Deserta

The only book that John seems to read is Arabica Deserta. He brings it out at various points in the novel and even quotes it at one point.



Social Sensitivity

Percy has one concern and one theme in all of his novels: people's alienation from themselves, from others, from society, and, foremost, from God. Percy shares this general concern with the European existentialists, and his concern with mankind's alienation from God is shared by Christian existentialists such as Kierkegaard and Marcel. But Percy has made clear in interviews and essays that he believes mankind's alienation (or "exile," as the Catholic prayer *Salve Regina* expresses it) is the ancient, central Christian doctrine of the Fall. To put it colloquially, as Percy does in his novels, people are in pretty bad shape these days (and always have been), and they need to "get right" with themselves, one another, society, and God.

Since Percy believes all forms of alienation stem from a central Fall from grace, it is not always possible to separate an individual's attempt to overcome his alienation from himself with his attempts to overcome his alienation from others, from society, and from God. All of Percy's novels present a central character (always an affluent, white southern male) attempting to overcome these alienations. The novels also include attacks on society, usually for its racism, a sign of society's alienation from itself (Percy has argued that no Southern writer can fail to address the racial problem), and for what he views as its sexual abuse (promiscuity and homosexuality), a sign of people's alienation from one another, as well as from their true selves. Percy also attacks "Christendom," as opposed to Christianity (following Kierkegaard's distinction), for allowing racism and sexual abuse to continue.

Techniques

The body of the novel is a monologue in which Binx narrates the events of the week of Ash Wednesday in New Orleans. Reviewers generally praised the novel's evocation of New Orleans, and in particular, Percy's descriptions of the white heron and the swimming snake that Binx sees while fishing with his mother. Although critics generally have been favorably impressed with Percy's ability to capture the physical sensations of a particular time and place, some have maintained that much of Binx's narration is intentionally flat, detached, and self-conscious. It is only in the epilogue, they point out, that Binx can speak directly and naturally.

There he addresses Kate, to whom he is now married, and comforts his brothers and sisters before Lonnie's impending death.

By the epilogue, according to Percy, Binx has made his Kierkegaardian "leap of faith" and returned to the religion of his mother's family. The epilogue is focused around Lonnie's death, but, as are all of Percy's novel, it is also focused around one of the sacraments of the Catholic church. Lonnie's sister accepts that her brother is dying, but she wants to make sure he has been anointed (received extreme unction).

Binx assures her that he has, and then professes an orthodox belief in the resurrection of the body on the last day. This explicitly Catholic element of the conclusion is much less dramatic than the baptism of the dying Jamie at the end of *The Last Gentleman*, and is much more easily passed over by critics; but, at least for a religious reader, it creates a ritual-like emotional power.



Themes

Going to the Movies

The title of the novel is *The Moviegoer*, which is interesting when you consider that the bulk of the action occurs to John while he is outside a movie theater — not within it. However, John sees himself and his role in society as a moviegoer. He uses this term to mean both a literal moviegoer and a type of individual that he understands in society.

One of John's favorite activities is to go to the movies. In fact, while imaging his participation on a radio show called *This I Believe*, he defines himself as a moviegoer. He travels to movie theaters in every city that he visits, making friends with the movie theater owners. At the end of the book, Aunt Emily asks whether or not John wants to go through life watching movies and John is silent because attending movies is one of his greatest joys. He does not watch it for any cinematic wonder or marvel at the reality of the characters on screen, however. John is not a movie buff. He enjoys going to the movies — not the specific movie, as evidenced by how easily he is able to be talked into seeing a movie he had not even considered watching previously.

Lonnie and John share a special connection and it could be said that Lonnie is also a moviegoer. Lonnie and John communicate on a different level, seeing the movie as a medium through which they can have their philosophical conversations and other tidbits that others watching the movie will miss.

John will later come across a stranger that he sees as a moviegoer. When John strikes up a random conversation with him, he is startled and nervous, making John feel immediately sorry for him because he knows that all of this stranger's life has been spent on the hope that a chance encounter and random conversation might lead to a lasting friendship. John gives him the opportunity and the stranger fails.

What joy does John get while watching movies? John is on the fringes of society, although the outsider would think that he was very much included in everyday society. When John goes to the movies, the film takes off on the search for the meaning of life for the main character, although John says the movie always messes it up in the end. However, John can be a passive participant in another person/character's search in life through a movie without risking anything on his own. Furthermore, John can partake in a number of other activities and searches that will have no impact on his current status or daily life responsibilities that have been thrust upon him in Southern culture.

Being Dead

At one point in the novel, John remarks that he has been feeling for some time that everyone is actually already dead. He is walking around a town where everyone is dead and they do not know it. As he says, "beyond a doubt, this is death." John, however,



feels the need to fight being dead and fight the components that would define him as being dead like the persons around him.

What does John mean when he says he feels like everyone is "dead" around him? Specifically, John fears falling into a pattern. He sees his fellow friends and family members falling into a pattern of doing the same things over and over again, being repetitive in nature. For John repetition is a negative component that he avoids passionately (if John has any passion). While talking with his cousin Nell, he feels himself grow physically sick as he listens to her talk about contributing back to society and forming a pattern in her daily life that she finds satisfying. For John, this is nothing short of a hellish lifestyle.

John is terrified of getting used to the everydayness of a situation, environment and other person. For him, the "everydayness" of an event causes the event to lose all of its significance. The everydayness of an event will also cause malaise to set in. John works hard against the possibility of malaise and for this reason, purchases a MG car, which is wholly unique and different to other cars in an effort to fight everydayness and being dead. The MG's uniqueness works for a time, but on his ride back with Sharon on a Sunday afternoon, the malaise sets in as John fears it inevitably will do.

At the end of the novel, after John has received his lecture from his outspoken Aunt Emily, he only thinks that everything and everyone is dead, dead, dead. Why does John suddenly react so violently in his mind about being dead after her lecture? In essence, John realizes that his opportunity to be unique and different, fighting against the everydayness of Life is now over. He knows that he is destined to convert to the expectations of his aunt and fall into a daily pattern that matches the day before as he walks away from her. He is defeated before his search for life has even begun. And it is with this knowledge that John calls himself and everything around him dead, dead, dead.

Society and Kate

Kate is John's cousin and one of the few people in the novel with whom John has a good relationship. Kate and John understand one another. Kate, however, suffers from extreme depression and is at odds with her world. Ironically, the source of her depression is her stepmother's vocal hope that she will improve. Aunt Emily — or Kate's stepmother — lives in Elysian Fields, which is a Greek reference to where all souls come to die. In order for Kate to accept the world that her stepmother is actively wishing she pursue, she would enter a form of Elysian Fields and kill her essence and soul within her to conform to the Southern New Orleans society.

Kate suffers from a depression and reaction against what society expects from her. In essence, her life has been prescribed to her by her stepmother (John's Aunt Emily) and the rest of New Orleans society. Her depression is well known and seemingly accepted. Although she attends therapy and is on medication, both the immediate and extended family acts as though she is struggling with a mere common cold. Kate encourages her



family to gloss over her depression by either hiding it or saying that she is doing much better. For her family, Kate's depression is a blemish they do not wish to talk about, forcing her instead to act as normal as possible. With John around, however, Kate can be more honest, admitting to him that her depression is bad at times. She says that she feels her most normal around John because he is like her, only worse. In her mind, John is worse because he feels the same alienation and depression that Kate has, but does a better job of fooling those around him and hiding his depression.

Kate suffers in a society that has already determined what her life choices should be. Her Southern society in New Orleans has high expectations from her and wants her to be a doting wife and loving mother that attends the right social functions and has dinner on the table every evening. They want her to be a contributing member of society, performing the same rote tasks day after day. For Kate — just as it is for John — this is Hell. She can think of nothing worse. It is this reason that Kate's happiest day is when her first fiancée died and she was freed from the prescribed life she saw ahead of her. Her therapy and medication do nothing to alleviate her suffering because her real struggle is with the New Orleans society.

Kate's entire demeanor changes when she is in Chicago. Here she is finally freed from the restrictions of New Orleans society and it is the ideal tonic after her pseudo-suicide attempt the night before. In New Orleans, Kate doesn't want to die — quite the opposite — but to live the life that has been given to her by Society is giving her a death sentence. She is more alive in Chicago where no one knows her and the possibility of a new experience enthralls her. Her perspective changes when she has to talk with some of John's associates from New Orleans, and she fully returns to her depressed state when she walks down Loyola street upon entering New Orleans again. Although they rarely discuss it, embracing the life expected from them in New Orleans is like embracing a death sentence that both are trying passionately to avoid.

Society and John

John is similar to Kate in that he suffers from an aversion towards the prescribed life that society — as characterized by Aunt Emily — is trying to force upon him. One of John's biggest fears is sinking into the everydayness of a situation, letting the malaise encompass him completely. Again, it is Aunt Emily's aggressive act to push him to a life more fit for Elysian Fields and New Orleans society that John actively fights — although unlike Kate he never lets on his true thoughts to his family or other society members.

For John, the prescribed life includes medical school, through which he can become a contributing, positive member of society in Aunt Emily's eyes. John detests medical research, however, and is more interested in the way the sunlight refracts around the room than in discovering the cure for cancer. For him, this quest in medical research is not enough and does nothing to satisfy his questions about the possibility of a search in life itself. John struggles with alienation, although he brilliantly hides his feelings of being an outside, not eschewing to the values and tenants of those around him.



One of the ways that John seems to satisfy his societal role without truly committing to the concept is by dating his secretaries. By having a string of girlfriends with good names like Marcia or Linda, he appears to be performing the male function of dating within his appropriate social strata and looking for a mate. In truth, John has nothing in common with his secretaries and holds no value to their person, as evidenced by the fact that he cannot even remember their last names or find unique qualities about them. To him, they are all essentially the same girl. However, before he initiates his fleeting relationship with Sharon, she holds promise mostly because he has yet to talk with her. He knows nothing about her and for this reason, he falls deeply in love with her possibility — not necessarily her personality or person because he knows nothing about her. In this way, John can fight his alienation while still maintaining the appearance of a well-connected, stable young man in New Orleans society.

When John accepts his fate and promises to enter medical school and marry Kate, he succumbs to the formulaic existence that will kill him. He will be welcomed back to Elysian Fields just like all the other souls who have gone there to die.

Significant Topics

The *Moviegoer* is Percy's most conscious and consistent attempt to express Kierkegaard's existentialism in concrete form: to depict an alienated individual struggling to find his way out. The epigram of the novel is from Kierkegaard's *The Sickness Unto Death*: ". . . the specific character of despair is precisely this: it is unaware of being despair." Binx Boiling, however, knows that he is in despair; he knows that his life is no longer working for him. He is on a search that "anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life." His search incorporates Kierkegaard's philosophical strategies to break-through everydayness — "rotation" and "repetition" — but, as a novelist, Percy gives the philosophical strategies concrete form.

Put colloquially, Binx likes to have sex with his secretaries and go to the movies.

True to his Christian existentialism, Percy carries his reader to the end of his search. In an interview Percy commented that, at the end of the novel, "Binx jumps from [Kierkegaard's] aesthetic [stage] clear across the ethical [stage] to the religious [stage]." However, the Christian — and explicitly Catholic — theme is much more subtly handled than the Kierkegaardian theme. Binx "returns to his mother's religion" at the end of the novel. *The Moviegoer* is perhaps the most accessible of Percy's novels for readers who share Percy's existentialism, but not his Catholicism.



Style

Point of View

The point of view throughout the entire novel is from John's perspective. This is an important aspect in the novel because it is the only way the reader would understand John's personality. He is misinterpreted by most of his family and friends, who attribute things to him that he does not like to do (such as medical research). Through his reflections, the reader gets a better understanding of what he thinks and feels, including the possibility of a search for the meaning of life. He does not tell anyone else about this possibility other than Kate and this is significant. By revealing the possibility only to Kate, it indicates to the reader that they have a close, albeit complicated, relationship.

In addition, since the novel moves with John the entire time and we see how different events transpire, it is easier to understand him. We never see the reaction of Aunt Emily when she learns that Kate is missing or what Sharon says to her roommate Joyce about John, her boss. Instead, we see that he is using Mr. Sartalamaccia as a ploy to get Sharon to come along on a business meeting with him and his innocence when he takes off to Chicago with Kate without thinking to tell Aunt Emily where they are going. The relationship between Kate and John is more difficult to understand because we never get to hear what Kate is truly thinking except when she relays her thoughts to John.

Setting

For most of the book, the novel takes place in Gentilly, which is a relaxed, happy place where John lives and works. Aunt Emily's home, named Elysian Fields, is another important location as this is where Kate lives and where Aunt Emily will talk with John. The Gulf Coast and John's mother's home are also important settings in the novel as this is where John takes Sharon to try to have her fall in love with him, despite her serious relationship. Finally, John takes Kate to Chicago on a business trip where they consummate their relationship and Kate feels free.

These different settings demonstrate the different sides to John. While in the office, he is wholly consumed with the stocks and his love for Sharon. Meanwhile, at his aunt's house, he becomes a lost member of the family, who is wasting his talents (in the eyes of his aunt) on the wrong things in life and needs guidance (according to her). At his home in Gentilly, he is relaxed, with a good relationship with his neighbor and a comfortable lifestyle watching television and enjoying his favorite radio shows.

Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is rather informal. Throughout the novel, John is the main narrator and takes a familiar tone with the reader. The language and his choice of words



helps to define him as a character, although he occasionally adds additional descriptions to characters to help to define them as well. For example, the reader learns what kind of mood Kate is in when John describes her irises as "gone to discs." The dialogue in the novel is sporadic, but always crucial to depict what the other characters are thinking and how their personality is defined. There are a number of shorter paragraphs that contain detail, while some pages have long passages with little dialogue, allowing the reader to become fully engrossed in what is going on in John's mind. These descriptions also capture important concepts like the "genie-soul" of Chicago or the particular details that help to define Southern life in Gentilly and New Orleans.

Structure

The book consists of five chapters. Since John is the overriding voice throughout the novel, there does not seem to be any real reason why one chapter ends and another begins. The plot of the book is very straightforward and all based in real-time with few flashbacks. What historical information the reader gathers is through a character telling a story about what happened in the past, versus John's full involvement with a description about the historical time and place. In this way, the novel is utterly linear.

The pace of the novel, not surprisingly, is steady and can be slower at times. It is as though John is reluctant to get his life started in New Orleans society and the pace of the book mirrors that reluctance.



Quotes

"But whenever I try to live there, I find myself first in a rage during which I develop strong opinion on a variety of subjects and write letters to editors, then in a depression during which I lie rigid as a stick for hours staring straight up at the plaster medallion in the ceiling of my bedroom." p.6

"I remembered the first time the search occurred to me. I came to myself under a chindolea bush. Everything is upside down for me, as I shall explain later. 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." p.10

"To be aware of the possibility of the search is to be onto something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair." p.13

"Truthfully, it is the fear of exposing my own ignorance which constrains me from mentioning the object of my search." p.14

"My aunt likes to say she is an Episcopalian by emotion, a Greek by nature and a Buddhist by choice." p.23

"Uncle Jules is the only man I know whose victory in the world is total and unqualified. He has made a great deal of money, he has a great many friends, he was Rex of Mardi Gras, he gives freely of himself and his money. He is an exemplary Catholic, but it is hard to know why he takes the trouble." p.31

"For a year after I joined the fraternity I lived in the hope of pleasing him by hitting upon just the right sour-senseless rejoinder, and so of gaining admission to his circle, the fraternity within the fraternity." p.35

"Squatting down on his heels, he runs an eye along the baseboard calculating the angle of settle." p.39

"For some reason, I sank into a deep melancholy. What good fellows they were, I thought, and how much they deserved to be happy. If only I could make them happy. But the beauty of the smoky blue valleys, instead of giving us joy, became heartbreaking." p.41

"My mother and my aunt think I am smart because I am quiet and absent-minded — and because my father and grandfather were smart. They think I was meant to do research because I am not fit to do anything else - I am a genius whom ordinary professions can't satisfy." p.51

"In this world goodness is destined to be defeated. But a man must go down fighting. That is the victory. To do anything less is to be less than a man." p.54



"She sounds better, but she is not. She is trapping herself, this time by being my buddy, best of all buddies and most privy to my little researches. In spite of everything she finds herself, even now, playing out the role. In her long nightmare, this our old friendship now itself falls victim to the grisly transmogrification by which she unfailingly turns everything she touches to horror." p.63

"During those years I stood outside the universe and sought to understand it. I lived in my room as an Anyone living Anywhere and read fundamental books and only for diversion took walks around the neighborhood and saw an occasional movie." p.69

"It is possible, you know, that you are overlooking something, the most obvious thing of all. And you would not know it if you fell over it." p.83

"Anyhow it is true that I am Jewish by instinct. We share the same exile. The fact is, however, I am more Jewish than the Jews I know. They are more at home than I am. I accept my exile." p.89

"For some time now the impression has been growing upon me that everyone is dead." p.99

"I do believe the South has produced more high-minded women, women of universal sentiments, than any other section of the country except possible New England in the last century." p.108

"My God, can a person live twenty-five years, a life of crucifixion, through a misunderstanding? Yes! I stood up. I had discovered that a person does not have to be this or be that or be anything, not even oneself. One is free." p.114

"What is malaise? you ask. The malaise is the pain of loss. The world is lost to you, the world and the people in it, and there remains only you and the world and you no more able to be in the world than Banquo's ghost." p.120

"If somebody had come up to me and said: if you will forget your preoccupation for forty minutes and get to work, I can assure you that you will find the cure of cancer and compose the greatest of all symphonies — I wouldn't have been interested. Do you know why? Because it wasn't good enough for me." p.158



Topics for Discussion

Discuss why John feels that everyone around him is dead, although they are obviously still living. What makes him feel this way?

What is the root of Kate's depression? What terrifies her the most in life?

Explain the significance of Aunt Emily's home, Elysian Fields?

Why does Kate feel her best while she is in Chicago? Why do you think New Orleans is a "foreign city" to her when she comes back from Chicago?

Discuss why you think movies are so attractive and important to John. Why is the title of the book called *The Moviegoer*?

Describe John's relationship to Sharon as both his secretary and his affection for her. Compare Sharon to the other secretaries that came before her in John's office.

Describe Kate's happiest time in her life and why this moment would be considered happy for Kate.

Literary Precedents

Although Percy's sensibility and much of his content are shaped by his southern heritage, the literary precedents for this novel are more clearly European. He commented that after the failure of two attempts to write novels, "It crossed my mind, what if I did something that American writers never do, which seems to be the custom in France: Namely, that when someone writes about ideas, they can translate the same ideas to fiction and plays . . .

So it just occurred to me, why not take these ideas I'd been trying to write about, in psychiatry and philosophy, and translate them into a fictional setting in New Orleans, where I was living." The French novelists and playwrights which Percy probably had most in mind are Camus and Sartre, although his philosophical ideas, expressed in the essay "The Man on the Train" (collected in *The Message in the Bottle*, 1975), are more in tune with Kierkegaard and Marcel. The novel's conclusion is clearly modeled on the conclusion of Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (1879).



Related Titles

All six of Percy's novels (and most of his essays) are closely linked by similar concerns and themes. In each, a central character finds himself confused, alienated from himself and society, and unsure what to do with his life. In each novel, this character begins a search, usually misguided at first: Binx's seductions and moviegoing; Will Barrett's search for answers from Sutter in *The Last Gentleman*, and his attempt to force God to prove his existence in *The Second Coming*; Lancelot's disastrous search for the un-Holy Grail in *Lancelot* (1977); and Tom More's scientific lapsometer in *Love in the Ruins* (1971) and *The Thanatos Syndrome* (1987). All these characters, however, are offered at least the opportunity for a more authentic search and the possibility of grace, symbolized by a religious sacrament at the end of each novel: the anointing of the dying in *The Moviegoer*; baptism at the end of *The Last Gentleman*; Eucharist at the end of *Love in the Ruins*; possible confession and absolution at the end of *Lancelot*; impending marriage at the end of *The Second Coming*; and Eucharist, again, at the end of *The Thanatos Syndrome*.

Along the way, each character pursues a romantic interest, and, in almost every case, the character is forced to choose between an "inauthentic" romantic interest and an "authentic" one.

Binx must give up his secretaries for his cousin Kate, Tom More must choose between three women in *Love in the Ruins*, and Lancelot must move from the adulterous Margot to the possibility of a new life with Anna.

Finally, in keeping with Percy's particular Christian linguistic concerns as expressed in the essay *The Message in the Bottle*, at the conclusion of almost every novel, the central character is poised to hear the "good news," the gospel, from someone who has the authority to proclaim it. In *Love in the Ruins*, Tom More goes to confession, is admonished by the priest, and returns to mass, as he does in *The Thanatos Syndrome*; in *Lancelot*, Lance is prepared to listen to his old friend Percival, who has become a priest; and at the end of *The Second Coming*, Will Barrett is prepared to receive religious instruction from Father Weatherbee. One exception to this pattern is Will Barrett at the end of *The Last Gentleman*. He is so intent on being told what to do by Sutter that he is not prepared to listen to the priest who baptizes the dying Lonnie.

The other exception is Binx Boiling, at the conclusion of *The Moviegoer*. Of all of Percy's main characters, he is the only one to give the instruction himself — to his brothers and sisters.



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