

## Existential Theodicy in Walker Percy's *Love in the Ruins*

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### Abstract

*Walker Percy's novel Love in the Ruins opens a discourse on serious societal issues that ruin morality. In the world after the World Wars, the role of morality and social systems became ambiguous, and Walker Percy articulates the importance of falling back on the old belief systems, God and Religion through his fiction and non-fiction. The researcher explores the novel's perspective on faith, spirituality, and moral integrity amidst societal chaos and existential ambiguities. This research article focuses on the problems of evil, Walker Percy's preoccupation with religion, and the context of moral integrity in the past and present. Religious writings can use symbolism and imagery to represent the ambiguity in morals that haunted the twentieth century. This article focuses on the nuanced insights of theodicy and existentialism, along with their converging points.*

**Keywords:** Vindication, Conscience, Theology, Existentialism, Incredulity, World War

### Introduction:

*Love in the Ruins* is a novel written by Walker Percy in 1971, three decades after the World Wars. This work of Walker Percy was significant because it opened dialogues about God, religion, and the belief system in general at a time that was harrowing. Walker Percy had given a subtitle to the novel, *The Adventures of a Bad*

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*Catholic at a Time Near the End of the World*. This novel, from its title, establishes that it is a work about religion and God. Walker Percy's life and the novel itself converge significantly. Walker Percy has experienced a tumultuous life. His grandfather committed suicide; this was followed by the death of his father, and then his mother.

From a young age, Walker Percy grew up in the house of his relatives. He was brought up as an agnostic by his parents, but when he moved to his relative's house, he practised Protestantism like others in the house. He studied medicine, contracted Tuberculosis and was admitted in the hospital for a long time. He had to quit his studies and since he was infected, he could not participate in war either. He spent all his living moments hearing, talking and reading about war. He became depressed by his ailment, for this stopped him from participating in the war for the nation. This as well as his childhood trauma led him to become an existentialist. Several years after he was discharged from hospital, he took up writing. He got married and converted to Catholicism. From then on, he became an ardent Catholic and wrote numerous treatises about the religion. He found Catholicism as a way out of his existential crises. The book *Love in the Ruins* is influenced by his life particularly in its discourses on the religion.

### **Aim and Objective**

Through this research article, the researcher reads the discourses related to God and Religion in an existential setting from the perspective of Walker Percy in the novel *Love in the Ruins*. The researcher understands how the novel addresses faith, belief, morality and spirituality in general. The researcher also explores the diversities and point of unification between existentialism and the faith system that Walker Percy derives from his work of fiction.

The objective of this research is to analyse the novel's contribution in understanding religion, God, faith and reason. The researcher will focus particularly on its relevance in the past, after the World War and at the present. Walker Percy is a postmodern writer, who associates himself with themes of existentialism, angst and alienation. His take on religion and particularly Catholicism is written out in the form of essays, novels, and other non fictional work. The researcher would read *Love in the Ruins* to understand the traditional theological perspectives of Walker Percy in the novel chosen for analysis.

### **Theodicy and the Problem of Evil**

The word theodicy draws attention as it forms one half of the title of this study and it is the threat that ties the whole paper together. This term was coined by the philosopher Gottfried Leibniz in the early eighteenth century, and it joins two Greek words, *theos*, meaning God, and *dike*, meaning justice. A theodicy, then, is an attempt to defend the justice of God in a world that is full of suffering. The central problem it tries to answer is simple to state but very hard to solve. If God is all powerful, omnipotent, all knowing and perfectly well, then why does evil exist at all?

A being with such power could remove suffering, a being with such knowledge would be aware of it, and a being with such goodness would surely wish to do so. Yet pain, cruelty, and disorder remain. This contradiction is known as the problem of evil, and it has troubled believers and thinkers for centuries. Walker Percy writes from within this difficulty rather than outside it. He does not pretend that the world is gentle or that faith is easy. Instead, he places his protagonist in a society that seems to be falling apart and asks whether belief in God can survive in such a place. The phrase existential theodicy, then, sheds light on the coherent points between two questions. The first is the religious question of how a good God can permit evil. The second is the existential question of how a person can find meaning when life appears absurd. Percy treats these two questions as one, for in his fiction the search for God and the search for purpose cannot be separated.

The twentieth century gave this ancient problem of evil a new and terrible urgency. The two World Wars, the use of the atomic bomb, and the horrors of the concentration camps showed that human beings were capable of destruction on a scale that earlier ages could hardly have imagined. Many thinkers asked whether it was still possible to believe in a good and powerful God after such events. Some abandoned faith altogether, concluding that a world containing so much cruelty could not be watched over by a loving creator. Some criticized that the very depth of the suffering made the question of God more pressing rather than less, for if there is no God then there is also no final ground for calling the cruelty wrong. Walker Percy writes in the shadow of these debates. Albeit, the novel appeared in 1971, its imagination is shaped by the wars that came before it, and its picture of a society waiting for catastrophe reflects the fear of total destruction that marked the age. Percy does not respond to this fear by ignoring it or by offering cheap reassurance. He responds by insisting that the loss of faith is itself part of the catastrophe, and that the recovery of faith may be part of any genuine renewal. For him, the question of evil and the question of God cannot be set aside as old-fashioned, because the events of his century had made them matters of life and death.

### **The Writer as Prophet**

In his non-fiction titled *The Message in the Bottle*, Walker Percy exhaustively writes about all his opinions. He has also written an essay about *Love in the Ruins*. He titled it *A Novel about the End of the World*. Walker Percy clearly explains the role of an author in the times after the World Wars. He opens the book itself with the question “Why do men feel so sad in the twentieth century?” (1). In this way, for this eternal question of happiness and sadness, Walker Percy firmly believes that only religion can be a bridge, and that any author who does not converse about God is not a great author. He goes ahead and shares that even existential writers are good writers who usher in the discussion of God, primarily because they begin a conversation. He says the role of an author is to stimulate the conversation of faith and belief in the minds of people so their existential angst reduces and they find solace and purpose in life.

Since true prophets, i.e., men called by God to communicate something urgent to other men, are currently in short supply, the novelist may perform a quasi-prophetic function. Like the prophet, he may find himself in radical disagreement with his fellow countrymen. Unlike the prophet, he does not generally get killed. More often he is ignored. Or, if he writes a sufficiently dirty book, he might become a best seller or even be bought by the movies. (Walker, *The Message in the Bottle* 24). Walker Percy makes his stance about existential writers very clear. He says that existentialism, among its numerous preoccupations, is more concerned about the mind and purpose of human life. In a way, the quality that one seeks in living a morally charged life in a normal circumstance is what existentialism believes in and it is mandatory that existential characters have to be viewed from the perspective of the prophets themselves. Their struggle and the struggle of prophets are one and the same and the themes of existentialism and religion are interconnected. All this said, Walker Percy does not vouch for other religions, his ideas would apply only for new religions especially Christianity and to be specific Catholicism. "Despite the complex challenges of the 19th century, various secularist measures, and the impact of global integration, Catholicism remained the majority religion in Latin America in the following century" (Armas Asin 1). He himself agrees to that as well, he believes that life of a human being has to be based on the teachings of religion, that would make one constantly enquire about humanity, good and evil in the lens of everyday normalcy, making living and praying a common denominator. "Catholicism and its Church renewed their influence among rural and urban popular sectors, as well as among political parties and leaders, to name a few examples" (Armas Asin 1).

Since novels deal with people and people live in time and get into predicaments, it is probably an advantage to subscribe to a world view which is incarnation, historical, and predicament. What with the present dislocation of man, it is probably an advantage to see man as by his very nature an exile and wanderer rather than as a behaviorist sees him: as an organism in an environment (Walker, *The Message in the Bottle* 111).

The perception of the human being as a wayfarer or castaway, in his non-fiction, Percy argues that modern science can describe a person as an organism that responds to its environment, but that this description leaves out the most important thing about being human. A human being is not simply at home in the world like an animal. He is, in Percy's view, an exile who senses that he does not quite belong and who is always searching for news from beyond his immediate surroundings. Percy was also deeply interested in language, and much of his thinking concerns the way human beings use words and signs. He believed that the act of naming things is a uniquely human gift and that it reveals a creature who is seeking meaning rather than merely surviving. This concern with language matters for the novel, because Dr. Thomas More is a man who cannot stop interpreting the signs around him. He reads the decay of his society as a warning, he treats his own restlessness as a symptom, and he longs for a message that will explain his condition. In Percy's view, the religious life begins precisely here, in the recognition that the human person is a

searcher who has not yet found his true home. *The wanderer* of Saint Thomas Aquinas and *The stranger* of Camus are the two versions of the same restless figure, Percy, each aware that something is missing even when they cannot name what it is.

### **Existentialism, Doubt and Faith**

It is with these opinions laid by the author himself; the researcher analyses the book *Love in the Ruins*. Walker Percy says that a good novel should have few features including the fundamental fact it has to start the conversation about religion; then it has to be about morality and it has to move towards optimism and hope. It also has to guide the lost man towards a quest. Walker Percy interestingly uses men who are borderline insane to preach his religious values when it comes to his fiction. As has been already pointed out earlier in the paper, existential writers and prophets are one and the same. In this context, as an extension, since most of his characters assume the stand of moral policing and undergo existential angst, it makes one wonder, if they also consider themselves as prophets? This leads the characters to sound like megalomaniacs who always provide impossible propositions in the world by predicting a catastrophe that may or may not happen. This self-righteous tone that the characters take seems inappropriate when the author creates them with the swirl of errors, false images and mistakes.

Most importantly can the existential angst of every person be judged on the same weighing scale? Can a prophet and a person who is simply struck in the modernised world be equated as one and the same? Walker Percy compares, Meursault to Thomas Aquinas; both are replete with doubts in life. Both have suffered the consequences of being misunderstood, but are they one and the same is the question that the researcher focuses on. If they are one, then Meursault and Dr. Thomas More are one and the same with Thomas Aquinas as well. It needs to be exhaustively analysed whether Walker Percy aims to create this through his narratives. Given the context in which the novel is set, vis a vis the present time, a lot has changed including the aspects of sexuality, race and culture in general. For Dr. Thomas More, America is the greatest place, sexuality is singular and most importantly he is a racist who is blind towards other cultures. He is not the universal figure that Modern Age needed or worked towards. Many of the timeless texts of the Modern Age, blended the cultures of world and represented everything equally; most importantly, the Age respected the notions of other religions. *The Wasteland*, ending with “Shantih! Shantih! Shantih”, which can be translated as peace is an example to prove how religion, culture and philosophical doctrines combine together into a concept of universal peace. “Existentialism that emerged in the midst of the nineteenth century in North America, and which is consubstantial to the cultural history of the US” (Harma 1).

Despite Camus’s explicit disavowal of Christianity, his Stranger has blood ties with the wayfarer of Saint Thomas Aquinas and Gabriel Marcel. And if it is true that we are living in eschatological times, times of enormous danger and commensurate hope, of possible end and possible renewal, the prophetic-eschatological character

of Christianity is no doubt peculiarly apposite. (Walker, *The Message in the Bottle* 111).

Existentialism is a movement in modern philosophy that places the individual person, rather than abstract systems, at the centre of thought. It begins from the experience of being alive in a confusing world and asks how one should live when no obvious answer is given. Scholars often divide the movement into two streams. The first is atheistic existentialism, represented by Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, who argue that life has no built in meaning and that human beings must create their own values without the help of God. The second is religious or Christian existentialism, represented above all by Soren Kierkegaard and later by Gabriel Marcel, who agree that life can feel absurd but conclude that faith in God is the proper response to that absurdity. Walker Percy clearly belongs to the second stream. He admired Kierkegaard, who argued that despair is a sickness of the self and that the cure is what he famously called the leap of faith, a free and personal decision to trust in God even when reason cannot prove that God exists. Dr. Thomas More suffers exactly the kind of despair that Kierkegaard described, a deep unease that he cannot explain by any single event in his life. For Percy, this unease is not a fault to be removed by medicine or science. It is a sign that the human being is made for something more than the material world can supply, and it points, however faintly, toward God.

### **A Divided Novel and Its Sequel**

But *Love in the Ruins* sounds like a divisive novel from the onset. The sequel to *Love in the Ruins* was published a decade later, and was titled *The Thanatos Syndrome*. In this novel, the protagonist, Dr. Thomas More and his wife Ellen have serious discussions on the importance of religion, and in particular about which church to go to, and how to raise their children. Ellen is a Pentecostal and Dr. Thomas More is an ardent Catholic, when there is a conversation as to the church, Dr. Thomas More avoids having it with his wife, but finds this behaviour of his wife against the righteous religion disrespectful. This is a progress in comparison with that of the Dr. Thomas More in the *Love in the Ruins* because in there, he censors even the books that his girlfriend is reading, for he finds them immoral.

### **The Modern Age and the Spread of Violence**

Modern Age is an age of innovation, high spirit, at the same time, it was the age of cruelty, lawlessness, inhumanity and that perspective aids in understanding authors like Walker Percy better. The novel, *Love in the Ruins* begins with a rant, a grumble and a message to the people. Walker Percy, through Dr. Thomas More quotes the obvious state of affairs. This rings a bell with the prophesy of fellow writers like W. B. Yeats, when he says that Centre cannot hold or T. S. Eliot when he says, "April is the cruellest of the month/ breeding Lilacs out of dead land" (Eliot 1-2). This voice of forewarning and brooding reality seeping into the minds of readers is what Walker Percy states as the inherent responsibility of the authors itself.

NOW IN THESE DREAD LATTER DAYS of the old violent beloved U.S.A. and of the Christ-forgetting Christ-haunted death-dealing Western world I came to myself in a grove of young pines and the question came to me: has it happened at last? (Walker, *Love in the Ruins* 17)

Violence, Walker Percy feels, propagates more Violence, particularly when the times are tumultuous. He believes that despite the increasing number of philosophers and schools of thought, the Twentieth Century is more violent and the repercussion of that leads to two inhuman World Wars followed by periods of several other wars around the globe. America in particular has been home for numerous soldiers who fought to establish their country in a superior position. This is the reason why Dr. Thomas More calls America the “Christ-haunted death-dealing Western World” (17).

The disorder that Dr. Thomas More observes is not only spiritual but also social and political, and the novel presents this disorder through sharp satire. Percy sets the story in a near future America that has split into hostile camps. Citizens have sorted themselves into rival groups that no longer share a common language or a common good, and the country teeters on the edge of collapse. Public institutions have decayed, vines grow over abandoned buildings, and ordinary courtesy has given way to suspicion and anger. By exaggerating the divisions of his own time, Percy holds up a mirror to a society that has lost its centre. This satirical setting supports the larger argument of the book. A community that has abandoned any shared sense of the sacred, Percy suggests, will slowly come apart, because there is nothing left to bind its members together except self-interest. The chaos that surrounds Dr. More is therefore not an accident of plot but a careful picture of what happens when a culture forgets the moral and religious foundations on which it once stood. At the same time, the satire is gentle as well as severe. Percy laughs at the foolishness of every faction, including the one closest to his own sympathies, and this humour keeps the novel from becoming a simple sermon. The reader is invited to recognise the absurdity of the divided world and, through that laughter, to feel the loss of the unity that has disappeared.

The plight of humanity is again a recurring theme in arts and literature of the Modern Age. There is an archetypal comparison of human condition during the Twentieth Century itself to that of dead soul rotting and burning in hell for the sake of purgation. In a way, the love for classical literature and classical thought process overtakes Modern writing despite the age itself being the age of modernity and scientific epistemology. Hence, hell becomes the metaphor for numerous things, including concentration camps, nuclear bombs and other confined torture chambers. Hell is always associated with fire, burning, rotting, reek; and the America of the Modern Age was nothing different. Walker Percy as well captures the same, by reminding that the American South, though semi urban in nature, was not any different from America as whole, because war deteriorated the whole country

irrespective of the geography.

The effects of the evil particles are psychic rather than physical. They do not burn the skin and rot the marrow; rather do they inflame and worsen the secret ills of the spirit and rive the very self from itself. If a man is already prone to anger, he'll go mad with rage. If he lives affrighted, he will quake with terror. If he's already abstracted from himself, he'll be sundered from himself and roam the world like Ishmael (Walker, *Love in the Ruins* 18).

The strange image of evil particles, the device that Dr. Thomas More calls his lapsometer. Within the story, More is not only a physician but also a would-be scientist who has designed an instrument that he believes can measure the health of the human soul. He hopes that by placing the device against a person's skull he can detect the hidden wounds of the spirit, such as anxiety, pride or despair, and then heal them. The ambition is enormous, for he wishes to cure with a machine the very sickness that religion has always claimed as its own concern. The plan goes wrong when a mysterious figure named Art Immelmann offers to help More improve and spread the device. Immelmann behaves like a tempter, a modern version of the devil who flatters the scientist's pride and promises him fame and power. Under Immelmann's influence the lapsometer no longer heals but harms, releasing the very particles that inflame the secret ills of the spirit described in the passage above. The episode carries a clear meaning within the theodicy of the novel. Percy suggests that evil enters the world not through God but through human pride, through the desire to play God by technical means. The lapsometer becomes a symbol of a science that has cut itself off from faith and humility, and that therefore worsens the very disorder it set out to repair. In this way the invention dramatises the difference between true healing, which Percy associates with grace, and false healing, which he associates with the worship of human power.

### **The Legacy of Sir Thomas More**

The choice of name is interesting for the protagonist of this novel. He is named after Sir Thomas More and he claims to be his descendant as well. He loves the name so much that he uses the same in every conversation that he has with someone important. He even names his son after his ancestor as Thomas More. Thomas More was always more than a statesman. He was a well-read man who believed that education can change the superstitions of the society. He was also a man of science like the protagonist, Dr. Thomas More. He was intelligent and well read. King Henry the Eighth, chose to take a new wife, when his wife was alive. He wanted an annulment or divorce from his earlier wedding. But it was not possible in Catholic marriage, that was one of the reasons that he chose to become a Protestant and protest against the rigorous practices of Catholicism.

They were primarily representatives of Protestant and Catholic religious organizations. Local Protestant communities (Baptists, evangelical Christians, Pentecostals, and Seventh-day Adventists) with the assistance and support from foreign missionaries and missionary organizations were able to commence mass

evangelization of the population of the Far East in the 1990s. They had significant success in the evangelization process, outnumbering religious communities of the Russian Orthodox Church. On the one hand, cross-border migration of missionaries of various Christian denominations contributed to the growth of Protestant and Catholic communities and groups and helped the Far Eastern believers in the establishment of charitable activities. On the other hand, it sometimes led to conflicts. The positions of Baptism, Evangelical Christianity, Pentecostalism and Seventh-day Adventism in the Russian Far East were strong in Soviet times (Dudarenok and Fedirko 172).

There are records that state that Sir Thomas More followed every aspect of Catholicism including self-flagellation. As a matter of fact, he wanted to become a monk and be in close quarters with the Church by his service to mankind. As fate would have it, he did not become a monk, rather he became an important statesman in King Henry's court. When King Henry chose Protestantism over Catholicism, Sir Thomas More was one of the few who went against the King. To paraphrase his last words, he was in service of the King, but only next to God. He always chose God over family, friends and even his own life and for this belief, he lost his head. Several decades later, Sir Thomas More was martyred for his services. He was canonised as a saint. Dr. Thomas More is so inspired by this history that every time he is in trouble, he first calls his ancestors in prayer and only then does he follow with the action plan.

When the congregation rises for the creed, I see my chance and slip out. Christ have mercy on me. Sir Thomas More, pray for me. God bless Moon Mullins, a good fellow, a better man than I. Lord have mercy on your poor church. Goodbye, Pius XII (Walker, *Love in the Ruins* 147).

### **Faith, Science and the Divided Church**

That is one major reason that Dr. Thomas More fails to understand the agnostic, atheist and anarchist time that he is living in. He wonders what can a scientist invent without faith in God. He firmly believes that reverence is the only way ahead. He also condemns normal people for revering scientists as he feels that they are not worthy of it and they are just doing their job. In the passage below from the novel, *Love in the Ruins*, Dr. Thomas More ridicules the shortcomings and biased perception that scientists have about God and Religion.

The prayer of the scientist if he prayed, which is not likely: Lord, grant that my discovery may increase knowledge and help other men. Failing that, Lord, grant that it will not lead to man's destruction. Failing that, Lord, grant that my article in Brain be published before the destruction takes place. (Walker, *Love in the Ruins* 19)

Most of the ideas that Dr. Thomas More puts forth in this book are in contrast to the Existential school of philosophy that was proposed by Atheist philosophers such as Nietzsche, Camus and Sartre. He rather believed in Soren Kierkegaard and other existential philosophers who did not negate the existential crises or the existence of

God. According to Dr. Thomas More, God is essential in the existential world that one inhabits and he even feels that only religion can solve the problem of providing man with a purpose. After Sir Thomas More was beheaded the issue between

Catholics and Protestants still was far from over. People who were against her father and Protestantism were found and charged for treason by Queen Elizabeth. Dr. Thomas More mentions how much his family suffered in this war, and yet how they remained proud Catholics who would not sway away from their belief system.

Our family's only claim to singularity, if not distinction, is that we are one of that rare breed, Anglo-Saxon Catholics who were Catholic from the beginning and stayed Catholic. My forebears remained steadfast in the old faith both in Hertfordshire, where Elizabeth got after them, and in Maryland, where the Episcopalians finally kicked them out. (Love in the Ruins 30)

### **Religion, Tolerance and Other Faiths**

In his essay, *A Novel about the End of the World*, Walker Percy, creates a fictional situation where two scientists walk on a Sunday during mass, specifically during the sermon near the church and how would the sermon affect them. He goes on to suggest that the priests had to change their moralistic route and focus it towards giving more creative, empathetic sermons that will be relatable to the people who are listening to it. He suggests a scenario, where someone like the Whisky Priest will walk up from the shambles of Church and aid the scientist to find solace, not through sermon, but by a drug that is religion itself. Walker Percy says, that it is important for every Christian author to write those creative sermons with the assumption that literature is meant to preach. Interestingly, Sir Thomas More wrote a book in his time in prison called *Utopia*. It is a book on how an ideal society has to be. Thomas More firmly believed that people from different religions who practise monotheism can be friends and converse among each other. They are also asked to have strict moral code, and this code though ceases them from having an unrestricted life in the present will aid them in the heaven. "The point is, above all, that faith must be an act of human freedom, that it is God's grace and that it is closely related to reason" (Zyzak 5).

Some worship such men as have been eminent in former times for virtue or glory, not only as ordinary deities, but as the supreme god. Yet the greater and wiser sort of them worship none of these, but adore one eternal, invisible, infinite, and incomprehensible Deity; as a Being that is far above all our apprehensions, that is spread over the whole universe, not by His bulk, but by His power and virtue; Him they call the Father of All, and acknowledge that the beginnings, the increase, the progress, the vicissitudes, and the end of all things come only from Him; nor do they offer divine honours to any but to Him alone (Utopia 155).

*Utopia*, reveals a side of the historical Thomas More that stands in contrast to his fictional descendant. In the imagined island of Utopia, More allows many forms of worship to exist side by side, asking only that each citizen acknowledge a single supreme power who governs all things. The vision is one of broad tolerance held

together by a shared belief in one God. Dr. Thomas More in Percy's novel, by comparison, struggles to extend such tolerance to the faiths around him, and this gap between the ancestor and the descendant is part of what makes the protagonist a flawed and human figure rather than a saint. The reference to Utopia therefore deepens the moral argument of the novel, for it sets an ideal of patient and humble faith against the narrower attitude of a man who still has far to travel on his own pilgrimage.

In the novel *Love in the Ruins* there are numerous discussions on religion and God. The author mentions of Hinduism, Jewish and even the Pagan religions. Dr. Thomas More has a disdain for other religions not just because he is a Catholic, but also because he has a troubled past caused by a Christian Englishman, who became a fakir. His wife chose to go with him around the world, to learn more about Hinduism and live life of her own. Dr. Thomas More believes that every human needs to have a purpose, but when his wife chooses emancipation over family relationship, he is offended. Dr. Thomas More is controlling not only with his wife, but also with his girlfriends. When Moira chooses to read the *Cosmopolitan* magazine, he warns her not to read immoral books, rather to read the books with high moral values. The books that he suggests.

"A very tragic person. But he's a searcher like me, a pilgrim."

"Pilgrim my ass."

"Did you know that for two years he took up a begging bowl and wandered the byways with a disciple of Ramakrishna, the greatest fakir of our time?"

"He's a fakir all right. What he is is a fake Hindoo English fag son of a bitch." Why did I say the very thing that would send her away? (Walker, *Love in the Ruins* 64)

### **A Broken World and the Search for Order**

Dr. Thomas More sees this world as a chaotic mess that has no orderliness, morality or ethical sense. The version of Dr. More's world is fragmented, distorted and a ticking time bomb waiting for an impending doom, a catastrophe at any given moment. On the other hand, it is completely different when it comes to some people around him. Through Dr. Thomas More, Walker Percy does bring in the conversation about how existential angst impacts one to be a believer and forgive past deeds. Dr. Thomas More feels that religion is the only way to find stability and morality in the world.

Dr. Thomas More perceives the world as a chaotic and disordered place, a veritable mess devoid of inherent orderliness, morality, or ethical sense. In his view, society is fragmented, broken into pieces by greed, corruption, ignorance, and moral decay. The world around him functions like a ticking time bomb, precariously balanced on the edge of catastrophe, with the inevitable explosion looming just over the horizon. This sense of impending doom is palpable in his outlook, as he sees human civilization drifting further away from the principles of genuine morality and

spiritual stability. The chaos reflects not only external societal failures but also an internal moral crisis an erosion of values that once held communities together. To Dr. More, this world is fundamentally broken, and the only hope lies in a return to divine guidance and spiritual discipline. His perspective is rooted in a sense of despair about modernity's inability to uphold the moral and ethical frameworks that once provided society with stability. For him, the erosion of these moral anchors signifies a loss of meaning and purpose, making human life fragile and perilous.

However, it's interesting to contrast Dr. More's bleak perception of the world with the outlook of some individuals around him who, despite the chaos, maintain a different outlook on life and morality. While he views the world as a ticking time bomb, others may see opportunities for hope, change, or even resilience amid the disorder. This divergence highlights a fundamental philosophical debate: whether the chaos signifies inevitable decline or if there exists a possibility for renewal and moral awakening. All the same, Dr. More's worldview is deeply influenced by his existential angst - the profound sense of anxiety and disorientation that arises from grappling with the apparent meaninglessness of life in a fallen world. His internal struggle is emblematic of a broader human condition - one where uncertainty and despair threaten to overwhelm the individual's capacity to find peace or purpose. When Dr. More cuts himself and Dr. Max comes to his aid and sutures him, Dr. More realises that despite his belief he lives in chaotic world while Dr. Max has a life which is more structured.

Here's an oddity. Max the unbeliever, a lapsed Jew, believes in the orderliness of relation, acts on it with energy and charity. "I the believer, having swallowed the whole Thing, God Jews Christ Church, find the world a madhouse and a madhouse home. Max the atheist sees things like Saint Thomas Aquinas, ranged, orderly, connected up" (Walker, *Love in the Ruins* 91).

The contrast between the orderly unbeliever and the disordered believer raises a question that lies at the centre of any theodicy. If faith is meant to bring peace, why does the faithful Dr. More feel that the world is a madhouse, while the atheist Max lives calmly and acts with charity? Percy does not avoid this question, and his answer draws on a long tradition of Christian thought. According to the free will defence, which reaches back to Saint Augustine, evil is not created by God but enters the world through the misuse of human freedom. God gives human beings the power to choose, and this freedom is a genuine good, yet the same freedom makes it possible for people to turn away from goodness and to bring suffering upon themselves and others. On this view, the disorder that More perceives is real, but it is the result of human choices rather than a flaw in God's design. The believer feels the chaos more sharply than the unbeliever precisely because he measures the world against a higher standard. Max, who expects nothing beyond the natural order, is satisfied when that order works smoothly. More, who believes that the world was made for something greater, cannot help but notice how far it has fallen. His unrest is therefore not a sign that faith has failed him. It is a sign that he sees clearly. Percy turns the apparent weakness of the believer into a kind of strength, for the very pain

of the faithful person becomes evidence of a longing that the secular world cannot satisfy.

Within this context, Walker Percy uses Dr. More as a conduit to explore the complex relationship between existential angst and faith. For Dr. More, faith is not merely a religious doctrine but a vital necessity, an anchor that provides stability amid chaos. He believes that religion offers a moral compass, a set of eternal truths that can guide individuals through the tumultuous waters of life. To him, without this spiritual foundation, human life becomes a series of disconnected moments, devoid of coherence or moral direction. This conviction underscores his belief that faith is the only reliable means of restoring order and morality to a fractured world. The act of forgiving past deeds, for him, is intertwined with faith, a process of divine grace that enables individuals to transcend their past mistakes and moral failings. Forgiveness, in his view, is a divine gift that restores moral balance and offers hope for redemption.

Walker Percy gives this spiritual disorder a precise name through the diagnoses that Dr. More makes with his lapsometer. "Existential and spiritual issues may influence the symptoms and outcome of major depressive disorder (MDD)" (Keri 1). More speaks of two opposite illnesses of the modern self, which he calls angelism and bestialism. Angelism is the condition of a person who lives entirely in abstraction, in ideas and theories, and who has lost any real contact with his own body and with the world around him. Bestialism is the opposite condition, in which a person sinks into mere physical appetite and lives only for immediate sensation. Percy believed that modern men and women swing helplessly between these two extremes. They float away into abstraction during the working day and then plunge into bodily pleasure in their private hours, never managing to live as whole persons who are both spirit and flesh at once. For Percy, this split is one of the deepest marks of a culture that has lost its religious centre. The Christian view of the human being, by contrast, holds the two together, for it teaches that the person is a unity of soul and body and that grace heals the whole person rather than one part of him. Dr. More himself suffers from both illnesses, drifting into scientific abstraction and then collapsing into drink and desire, and his longing for wholeness is really a longing for the integration that he believes only faith can provide. In this way Percy translates an old theological truth into the language of modern medicine and satire, allowing his troubled physician to diagnose the sickness of an entire age.

### **Conclusion**

Walker Percy, through Dr. More, invites readers to reflect on how existential angst impacts the human capacity for belief and forgiveness. The tension between despair and hope, chaos and order, is central to understanding the spiritual crisis faced by many individuals in a modern, fragmented society. Dr. More's insistence that religion is the only way to find stability underscores his conviction that divine truth provides moral clarity and a sense of purpose that the secular world cannot offer. His perspective serves as a critique of modern nihilism and a call to return to

spiritual principles that can ground human morality. Ultimately, Walker Percy's portrayal of Dr. More establishes that in a world teetering on the brink of collapse, faith becomes not only a refuge but also a moral imperative, a necessary response to the chaos that threatens to engulf humanity.

It is worth drawing together the two strands that the title of this study has kept in view, namely theodicy and existentialism. "The revised compensation theodicy holds that the primary good of evils, in addition to the compensation of the afterlife, is to justify the existence evil. It holds that this primary good does not necessarily outweigh the evils present in the world, nor is it necessary that the primary good returns to the one who suffered" (Mousavirad 59). At first sight these belong to different worlds. Theodicy is a question for theologians who wish to defend the justice of God, while existentialism is a question for philosophers who wish to describe the lonely freedom of the individual. Walker Percy's achievement is to show that, in the modern age, the two questions have become one. The person who asks why a good God allows suffering is also the person who asks how to live in a world that seems empty of meaning, and Percy answers both questions with the same word, which is faith. He does not offer faith as an easy comfort or as a final proof. He offers it instead as a leap, a free decision to trust that the disorder of the world is not the last word. The relevance of this argument has not faded with time. Readers in the present century still live among the ruins that Percy described, still feel the unease that he gave to Dr. More, and still search for a centre that will hold. By placing an ordinary, flawed and often comic figure at the heart of so serious a question, Percy reminds his readers that the search for God is not reserved for saints and prophets but belongs to every wandering and uncertain human being. The novel therefore ends not in despair but in a fragile and hard-won hope, which is perhaps the only honest form that hope can take in a broken world.

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