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REALIZATION OF SELF THROUGH SUFFERING: A STUDY OF
WALKER PERCY'S *THE LAST GENTLEMAN*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the realization of the self through death in the light of Walker Percy's *The Last Gentleman*. Will Barrett, the protagonist of the novel, is constantly haunted by the past incident in the life of his father who attempted to kill him and then committed suicide. He feels guilty for not being faithful to his father in fulfilling his wish. As his father did, he also tries to be the last gentleman of the Barrett family by sticking to the old ideals and traditions of the family. But by living in the present he finds it very difficult to be faithful to the past. As a matter of fact he appears as a man neither of the past nor of the present--a noman nowhere. Will is so much absorbed by the past that whatever he sees, hears, or smells becomes the symbol of the past. His suffering due to his obsession with the past is so severe that an idea to shoot himself, as his father did, enters his mind. Will, throughout the novel, is haunted by the death dealing incident in his own life and in the life of his father. He suffers to be the last gentleman of the Barrett family. In spite of his failed attempt to commit suicide he chooses to marry Kitty for she also loves him at the end of *The Last Gentleman*.

A highly respected American author, Walker Percy was renowned for fiction that at once reflected his thoughtful, intellectual position coupled with a deep moral sense. Percy explored such conditions of modern life as alienation, rootlessness, malaise, and conformity. A vast range of interpretations of Percy's novels by his critics in America, all over Europe and other continents, is a sign of his wide popularity as a novelist. His success as a novelist lies in his lucid style of writing and selection of characters from the common folk. He is also popular among the philosophical and religious readers, for his novels are artistically stuffed with the philosophy of life and Christian ideologies.

The protagonists of Percy's novels are the sufferers and they all undergo mental suffering though they belong to well to do middle class

families and are educated persons. Suffering, for Percy, is the reality of life. No living person, rich or poor, white or black, can escape suffering; and to escape it means to submit to death. As a matter of fact the growth of Percy's protagonists is seen in the realization of their selves through suffering. In fact his protagonists suffer, because they are obsessed by material pursuits. In this age of science and technology, they are easily tempted by material life as it provides them leisure and luxury. Accumulation of wealth and luxurious items for aesthetic pleasures is the main aim of their lives in the beginning. In "The Education of Walker Percy," Jay Tolson rightly remarks:

The development of protagonists often follows the Kierkegaardian progression from the aesthetic stage to the ethical stage and then on to the religious stage - or at least to the brink of this last stage. We see such characters as Binx Bolling, Will Barrett, Tom More all beginning as pleasure seekers, dabblers, spectators, men who live for the moment and believe in nothing. (165)

Percy's protagonists get easily moved by false family pride. They fall in trouble by imitating their forefathers irrespective of the time in which they live. They are proud of their intellectual capacities in solving their problems. But at the end of every novel, his protagonists realize the reality of their lives. Thus, in this sense the development of his protagonists is from abstraction to reality. In "Walker Percy and the Novel of Ultimate Concern," Joe Holley says:

Abstraction is but one way to lose one's self. Money, sex, alcohol, Reader's Digest platitudes, status - seeking, pomposity, everydayness - all are symptoms pointing to the failure of the individual. All lead to despair of the most virulent sort that which is so successfully covered up one is hardly aware of it. (231)

The development of the character of Williston Bibb Barrett, the protagonist of Percy's more ambitious novel *The Last Gentleman*, also takes place on mental and spiritual levels. But, Will is given more space to move. He takes an extensive journey from New York through the Deep South to the Southwest. Percy symbolizes Will's journey as a journey back to home. His journey in space is paralleled with his involvement in the past. The nearer he travels back to home, the more he gets involved in the past. It is but ironical that by going backward in space and time, he moves forward spiritually. His spiritual progress becomes obvious to the readers with the narration of the catastrophes that Will faces: the suicide of his father, his chance seeing of Kitty in the Central Park and his love-making with her, his visit to Vaught's family and his attendance at the deathbed baptism of Jamie Vaught. Each and every catastrophic incident that Will comes across brings him closer to the reality of his self. In *Walker Percy: Books of Revelation*, Gary M. Ciuba is right in making a statement that "these various episodes show how Will continuously becomes aware of himself and others through the grace of catastrophe..." (100).

In *The Last Gentleman*, Percy presents Will as a handsome but physically and mentally handicapped person. He is deaf in the right ear; he suffers from amnesia, has the spells of *deja vu*, and lapses into fugue states. Unlike romantic heroes, ironically enough, the qualities of his being a handicapped person adds to his stature as a protagonist of the novel.

Physical suffering and more important than that, the psychological suffering is the peculiar quality of Percy's heroes. Will is an ordinary person who cannot gain a specific identity in the American society for he suffers from "nervous condition" and "spells of amnesia."

Will goes to Princeton University where his father and grandfather and all other male forebears were sent to complete their college education. He lives in the same room where his father and grandfather had lived. But one afternoon he suffers from a severe attack of *deja vu* and regrets sharing the same room his father and grandfather had shared. In that room he feels himself "lying in ditch in Wyoming or sitting in a downtown park in Toledo" (14). He feels so much pressed down by the memories of his family past that for him "walking around in old New Jersey was like walking on Saturn, where the force of gravity is eight times that of earth" (15). Will develops an earnest desire to be free from the bonds of his family past and enjoy the life like other students at Princeton. But he being the last gentleman in the line of the Barrett family cannot do that. As a result he falls in a dilemma and suffers. He wants to be a man true to his conscience and at the same time he longs to follow the old family traditions. He falls a victim to the false pride of his family traditions. He gets suffocated by the memories of his family past. This nasty experience compels him to give up his education and leave the Princeton University.

Will's act of leaving Princeton University and going to New York is an indication of his preliminary attempt to do away with the family past and try to come to his real self. In real sense it is a revolt against his father, "who hoped to arouse in him a desire to complete his education and particularly to awaken a fondness for the law." Instead of becoming a lawyer like his father, he chooses to be "a clerk in the family law firm" (15). After the death of his father, he tries to be free from the haunting past memories of his family. He gives up the old traditional family affairs and plans to begin with something new. He sells the law library to the members of the firm, redistributes the rooms in the house among the family members to avoid quarrels within the family, joins the United States Army, and takes a number of electronic courses; but just after two years, he is discharged from the Army for his being a patient of amnesia.

A major part of his life is wasted in managing his psychological and financial affairs. He consults a psychiatrist "for fifty five minutes a day, five days a week, for the following five years, at an appropriate cost of \$ 18,000" (17). The living costs are too high and the resources too are meagre; so he goes in search of a job and succeeds in getting it as maintenance engineer, "a kind of janitor." He improves his qualification necessary for the job by completing a short course in "Temperature and Humidification Control" at Long Island University, joins his duties as "a humidification engineer at Macy's" and earns \$ 172 per week. But he falls short of funds after the amount of inheritance is totally exhausted. So he has to find out a new source of income by getting an extra work of a companion to precocious Jewish lads. Thus, in the first part of the novel Percy depicts how Will is lost in the material world. In *The Sovereign Wayfarer*, Martin Luschei rightly states: "Percy's starting point in the novel is the consumer's paradise of contemporary America, which more than satisfies the officially defined "needs" of most people but produces a menacing fallout of malaise

as well” (115). Will’s problem becomes acute for his being an inheritor of an aristocratic family in the South. He is repeatedly told that he has been brought up according to the aristocratic code of the Old South. In consequence of that, he develops faith in the traditional view of life that upholds personal honour and integrity of the family when the outside world is full of pain and sorrow.

In the beginning of *The Last Gentleman*, Will is so much blinded by his family traditions that he does not know how to live in the present. In spite of a lengthy psychic treatment, he fails to adjust fully with any single group of persons. It is only during the moments of catastrophes, he comes to his senses. The first catastrophe that occurs in Will’s life is his relationship with an Ohioan brunette named Carol Schwarz whom he meets “at a ski lodge near Bear Mountain” (20). He attracts the girl by imitating the behaviour of Ohioans and their utterances of certain words. He comes so close to her that “he lay with his head on her thigh and she leaned over him and said: I’m people liker and I think you’re my kind of people” (21). As soon as Will comes to his self, memories of glorious past interfere in his physical relations with an ordinary Ohioan girl:

He muttered to himself: ‘Barrett you poor fellow, you must be very bad off, worse than you imagined, to have gotten things so mixed up. Here you are lying in a brier- patch when you could be lounging with young people like yourself, people against whom no objection can be raised, your head pillowed in the lap of some handsome girl. What is wrong with that? What is the matter with you, you poor fellow?’ (21).

This incidence is a remarkable stage in the development of Will. “Though science taught that good environments were better than bad environments, it appeared to him that the opposite was the case” (22). Now he believes that during bad environments one turns inward; and only by turning inward one can come to one’s real self. Gary M Ciuba points out that “Will thrives on misfortune. His imagination of disaster makes him wonder, do I not also live by catastrophe?” (99). In Walker Percy and the Post Modern World, Mary K. Sweeny mentions: “Will’s growth progresses as a result of catastrophes and his ensuing concern with the plight of others” (33). His visit to the Metropolitan Museum of Art is a catastrophic incident in Will’s life. The objective minded Will who has lost his own identity in this world cannot understand the painting until a workman repairing a skylight overhead comes crashing down and is buried in debris. He comes to himself and understands the paintings only through the painful suffering of the workman whom he gives a helping hand to come out of the accident: “It was at this moment that the engineer happened to look under his arm and catch sight of the Velazquez. It was glowing like a jewel” (27).

Will’s behaviour clearly indicates the Cartesian split. He poses to be the last gentleman, a last link in the chain of the Southern aristocratic family of Barretts. But at the same time, he experiences how torturing it is to follow the past family traditions in the present condition because very often he is tempted by the natural instincts, the material world and science. The family traditions necessitate him to be chaste in an age when chastity seems to be a dead issue. Will falls in a dilemma like Hamlet: Whether to be a gentleman or a fromcator. Being a victim of this dilemma his condition becomes more ironical than that of his father who was “killed by his own

irony and sadness and by the strain of living out an ordinary day in perfect dance of honour” (9-10).

Will like Percy's other protagonists tries to be in touch with the real world in which he lives. He feels that to be unchaste is the only way to regain the reality of life and to be a gentleman is necessary to maintain his family prestige. So Will is in the double-blind, for to him *gentleman* and *fornicator* are mutually exclusive terms. In *Three Catholic Writers Of The Modern South*, Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr. interrogates the intensity of suffering of a modern man who has fallen a victim to such dilemma: “How does Southern man who carries the knowledge of the old Stoic tradition, while also seeing its insufficiencies live in the modern world, which seems so empty and lacking in values?” (136). In order to overcome this dilemma Will goes in search of the truth of life and while on search he comes in contact with several persons whose lives provide him clues for understanding the truth of his own life.

Will encounters different people while on his quest and the lifestyles of these different people present him the different ways to come out of the dilemma. As Will telescopes outside himself, he is drawn into the problems of others allowing these currents to carry him into fresh discoveries for himself along the way. Kitty, Sutter, and Jamie, the members of the Vaught family are the major figures whose company moulds Will's view of life. One day when Will wakes up after twenty hours long sleep, he catches the sight of his own name in Sutter's notebook. He reads that his trouble lies in his being a psychologically disordered person in search of an expert psychiatrist which characterizes him as a “self-defeating” person. Further he learns that his trouble is not due to any physical disorder but due to the condition in which he lives. After going through the information about himself he realizes that his “problem is how to live from one ordinary minute to the next on a Wednesday afternoon,” (340) whether to be a transcendent or an imminent. Now he realizes what sort of man he is.

Sutter advises him to be with Jamie during the last moments of his life. Sutter knows that Will will be bold and wise enough to make a proper decision in selecting the way he wants to live after witnessing the last moments in the life of Jamie. Sutter makes his decision for himself to come out of the dilemma that he was facing like Will. His carrying a pistol with him is a clear indication to Will that he is going to follow the same path laid down by Will's father, Ed Barrett. Will gets startled at the sight of the pistol because it reminds him of his father's suicide, an incident that revives his consciousness of the past.

Will rejects to join Sutter in his last journey because he accepts the present condition in which he lives rather than to commit suicide. From this moment onward Will shows the signs of further improvement. Now he develops a hope for future which prolongs his life as Marcel states that the soul lives by hope alone; hope is perhaps the very stuff of which our souls are made. He feels that to live life with other people among the named objects can be an alternative to death. On this ground he decides how his father was wrong in taking the decision of suicide. Thus, he feels completely liberated from the burdens of the past. It is in his relationship with Sutter that Will succeeds in crossing the “zone of nought,” his despair, by establishing what Marcel calls intersubjective relationship with Sutter.

At the end of the novel, Will appears to be a Christian who is not carried away by Christianity but is ready to bear the burden of his existence in this world. At the end of the novel Will decides to love and be loved by others.

In this sense Percy's novels generally end where his protagonists achieve a true self-realization. Though Percy's protagonists do not commit suicide, all of them actually live a life in death. The shadows of death loom large in the lives and fiction of Percy. Though the actual span of action in Percy's novels is short, his protagonists mentally move far back in their past and far ahead in their future to give meaning to the short span of present life which is more real. Thus, Percy extends the limits of time in the minds of his protagonists to portray their mental growth. It seems that Percy is not interested in the length of life of his protagonists; he is rather interested in the quality of life they live in this century of death.

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