

# Process of Becoming The ‘Self’ In Walker Percy’s *The Last Gentleman*

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## Abstract

Existentialism is a philosophical movement which arose during the war periods of the twentieth century that addressed the issues of human existence including anxiety, alienation, life, death, and free will. The nineteenth century Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard who is considered as the father of existentialism has contributed significantly to this philosophy even before it could germinate. This paper is an attempt to analyse the protagonist of Walker Percy’s second novel *The Last Gentleman* in the light of Kierkegaard’s theory of three stages of existence. The current study aims to show how the protagonist Williston Barrette explores his existential quest by passing through the aesthetic, ethical and religious stages of life to construct his identity. The novel revolves around a twenty-five-year-old Southern gentleman Williston Barrette who is on a search for meaning in life and how his association with the Vaught family helps him to find his real ‘Self’.

**Keywords:** Existentialism- Soren Kierkegaard - Three Stages of Existence- Walker Percy- Aesthetic stage- Ethical Stage- Religious Stage- Construction of the ‘Self’.

Existentialism is a twentieth century philosophical movement which was born amidst the chaos of the World Wars. It gained momentum during the post war periods, when the people were caught between uncertainty and poverty, struggling to find the purpose of their birth and living. During the twentieth century, people could associate their confusions and sufferings with the ideologies of the existential movement, leading to a large following in a short span of time. It emphasized the subjective reality of individual existence, freedom and choices which were some of the dilemmas people had in mind. Followers of this movement felt that humans possessed free will in this meaningless world, and were constantly on a mission to find answers for their purpose of existence through the choices they make in life.

The history of the Existential philosophy can be traced from the times of Socrates and St. Augustine, who stressed on the importance of ‘Self and Existence’. Then again during the nineteenth century, the philosophical ideas of the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard strongly reflected the existential ideologies even before the movement could originate. Later during the twentieth century many philosophers became contributors to this movement; among them, there existed two divisions namely the ‘Atheist’ and the ‘Theist’. Philosophers like Soren Kierkegaard, Karl Jasper, Gabriel Marcel, Karl Rahner, Martin Buber, and Paul Tillich, Fyodor Dostoevsky, who believed in God are categorised as the ‘religious existentialists’, whereas people like Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean Paul Sartre, Martin Heidegger, Albert Camus belong to ‘Atheist’ group.

The inadvertent contributions made by Soren Kierkegaard during the nineteenth century laid the foundation for the evolution of the existential movement later in the twentieth century, fetching him recognition as the ‘Father of Existentialism’. The current study attempts to trace the process of becoming the ‘Self’ of Williston Bibb Barrett, the protagonist of Walker Percy’s second novel, *The Last Gentleman* using Kierkegaard’s ‘the theory of three stages of life’ as the researching tool.

In his pseudonymous works, Kierkegaard has expounded the ‘Three Spheres of Existence’ - the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious. According to this theory, man will experience any one of these stages during his lifetime. The first stage is an embodiment of the pleasures. The arts and the erotic are the two main preoccupations employed in this stage. A man at this stage of life would employ all his might to satisfy his

sensuous pleasures to keep 'boredom' at bay. The impact of this 'Boredom' or the 'Everydayness' is so intense in the modern world, that man tends to keep himself engaged in some sort of sensual pleasures to make his life interesting and gay. Failing to break the 'everydayness' of his life, leads him to commit suicide at the end.

The next stage of life is the 'Ethical' stage, where a man who is tired of the aesthetic living, tries to become more conscious of his living; he tries to take up responsibilities and abides by the moral law. He tries to be of some help to the people around him, and do what is ethically right. Even though man tries to harbour contentment out of his actions at this stage, Kierkegaard does not approve this level to be the highest, Man must elevate himself to the next-'the Religious'.

The third and the final is the religious stage—man has to comply with the divine command by keeping everything else aside. To reach this stage man must take a 'leap of faith' where he must keep away all his rational and logical ponderings about God and trust the divine blindly. Abraham did it without questioning, he was ready to sacrifice his only son, blindly placing his faith on the supreme power, not taking into consideration the moral/ethical laws which a father should follow. Kierkegaard declares this as the ultimate purpose of a man's life—reaching God through the 'leap of faith'.

The text taken for the study is Walker Percy's novel *The Last Gentleman* published in 1966. This book falls second in line of his publications; after a massive appreciation received for his debut novel *The Moviegoer* (1961). Percy is an American writer who wrote philosophical novels that were based on Catholic faith that focused on the dislocation of man in the chaotic world. Through his novels he tried to give possible solutions to the existential crisis man undergoes. Being a trained professional of medicine, he chose writing as his career after a bout of illness caused due to tuberculosis. During his convalescing period he got to read many philosophical books, especially that of Soren Kierkegaard, which inspired him to become a writer.

*The Last Gentleman* is a book on the life of Williston Bibb Barrett, a twenty five year old Southern gentleman, residing in New York and working as a maintenance engineer. Just like any of Percy's protagonists, he is on a search—a search for meaning in life. He works at night in Macy's and during the day he spends time searching for something with his 17,500 dollars worth telescope, which he buys from his inheritance. A strange thing about him is that he suffers from the spells of amnesia, déjà vu and fugues quite often; his attempts of spending his savings on psychiatric treatments to outgrow these conditions turn out to be a failure. Not knowing the purpose of his existence, adrift in the world, he leads a meaningless life in a state of sheer possibility.

At the start of the novel, the twenty five year old Will Barrette can be said to be in the aesthetic stage, young and immersed in the materialistic world. He keeps himself away from the 'everydayness' of life by setting on a mission, to search for meaning. Due to his purposelessness in life, he did "not know what to do" (Percy 6). To make both the ends meet and to live a life of his choice, he picks up a night shift job as a maintenance engineer at Macy's, specialising in temperature and humidification control, apart from serving as a "companion to lonely and unhappy adolescent, precocious Jewish lads who played band instruments and lived in the towers along Central Park West. (Percy 19). He buys a costly Wetzlar telescope with his inheritance and starts to explore things around him; he spys using the telescope at Central Park, looking for signs. He is also well aware of his disturbed mental health and spends a huge sum on an unsuccessful psychoanalysis treatment. He seems to be an engaging lad but something is not right with him as he "made the highest possible scores on psychological aptitude tests, especially in the area of problem-solving and goal seeking. The trouble was he couldn't think what to do between tests" (Percy 9). Living an unproductive and solitary life "in a state of pure possibility, not knowing what sort of man he was or what he must do," (Percy 4) Will suffers from depression "It was not the prospect of the Last Day which depressed him but rather the prospect of living through an ordinary Wednesday morning" (Percy 22).

Will has been living purely on the aesthetic level, void of any meaning, self indulging and working tirelessly day and night to meet the expenses of his worldly desires. Every human on earth has to undergo this stage in his/her life. It can be considered as a preparative period, which launches a person to the next stage of existence—the Ethical. If a person does not glide to the next stage at a certain point of time, then there are strong chances for him/her to commit suicide due to the 'malaise' caused by the everydayness of life. Barrett exists in the aesthetic stage until he sees 'something' through the telescope in the Central Park, which changes his life forever.

Barrette sees Kitty Vaught, the daughter of a rich Southern gentleman Chandler Vaught through his telescope at the Central Park; he instantly falls in love with her "at a distance of two thousand feet" (Percy 7). In his

attempt to stalk her, he gets to meet the Vaught family who are in New York for the treatment of their youngest son Jamie Vaught who is dying of leukaemia. When given an opportunity to serve as a caretaker of Jamie, Barrett readily accepts the offer and travels South with the Vaughts as he can be in close quarters with lady love Kitty. His attempt to woo Kitty turns successful when she accepts his proposal. From then onwards his journey in the 'Ethical' stage begins; he readily accepts to play the role of a sincere partner to Kitty and a responsible companion to Jamie.

Barrett, who is a seeker after meaning, has been living a life of pure possibility until he meets Kitty who is equally disoriented like him. The beginning of a true commitment starts when he believes that he is in love with Kitty and furthermore becomes strong when Jamie becomes his responsibility. He starts to live a life in what Kierkegaard calls the ethical stage. He is more cautious of his role as a caretaker and the responsibilities he is shouldering. He accompanies Jamie to college classes and also goes on trips with him. He becomes so attached to Jamie that they develop an excellent rapport; they understand each other's intentions even without conversing. Role of Barrette as a companion caretaker becomes prominent when Sutter Vaught, eldest son of the Vaught family takes the dying Jamie to New Mexico without the consent of their parents. Barrette goes on a mission to find them and eventually tracks them in a hospital where Jamie is in his deathbed. He manages to fulfil the promise he made to Sr. Val, the nun sister of Jamie, is not letting Jamie die before baptising. He arranges for an instant baptism for Jamie by bringing Fr. Boomer to the hospital. Barrette who is a seeker and a non believer is compelled to translate the wobbling words of Jamie to the priest and vice versa. Fr. Boomer asks several questions to Jamie which serves as an eyeopener for not only Jamie and Barrette but also to the people of the world who know not the worth of God. The priest asks,

Do you accept the truth that God exists and that He made you and loves you and that He made the world so that you might enjoy its beauty and that He himself is your final end and happiness, that He loved you so much that He sent His only Son to die for you and to found His Holy Catholic Church so that you may enter heaven and there see God face to face and be happy with Him forever. (Percy 403-404)

for which Jamies interrogates why he should believe? Father Boomer gives a convincing reply—"If it were not true," ... "then I would not be here. That is why I am here, to tell you." (404) The conversations between Jamie and the priest through the intervention and interpretation of Barrette creates whirl in his mind and makes him think. Jamie eventually dies in the presence of Barrett and Sutter, leaving them to decide their fate. Percy concludes the novel with an ambiguous ending, leaving it for the readers to decide what could be the decision of Barrette. In talking about the heros of Percy, Jay Tolson opines that,

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).

which goes true in the case of Barrette, who starts from the state of mere seeker to a man of responsibility and then again stands at the threshold of the ethical stage waiting to take the 'leap of faith' to move on to the religious. Thus the last gentleman from the South—Williston Barrette constructs his true self by experiencing all the three stages of existence laid by Kierkegaard. Mahadevan S. in his essay "*Realization of Self Through Suffering: A Study of Walker Percy's The Last Gentleman*" also rightly stresses the aforesaid point that "Percy's novels generally end where his protagonists achieve a true self-realization."

## Works Cited

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