

## WALKER PERCY'S THE LAST GENTLEMAN: A THEMATIC STUDY

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Walker Percy was born on May 28th 1916 in Birmingham Alabama. He was only thirteen when his father committed suicide. A year afterward, the fatherless family accepted the invitation of a well off uncle to move in with his household, but even further misfortune lay in store and two years later Walker's mother died in a car crash. The uncle, who took the family under his wing, was prominent Southern lawyer, writer and landowner, William Alexander Percy and he spared nothing to ensure that Walker and his two younger brothers were cared for and well educated. After high school Walker enrolled at Columbia University's Medical College. He graduated in 1941 but a short time later while completing his internship in a New York Hospital he contracted tuberculosis. He returned to Columbia to teach, with a special interest in psychiatry, but a few years later the after effects of his illness caused Dr Percy to relinquish medicine altogether. He married a medical technician named Mary Bernice Townsend on November 7, 1946 and the couple later moved south, settling in Covington near New Orleans, where Walker commenced earning his living as a writer.

Walker Percy was an excellent literary artist and remarkable man. In his fiction he was keen and witty, and in his social criticism and satire he was brilliantly perceptive. As a man he was genial, gracious, a wonderful conversationalist, and apparently cheerfully comfortable in a world in which he was quite at home. Yet the great theme of his fiction was man's alienation from the familiar world of here and now in which we pass our daily lives.

The present article focuses on the thematic study of Walker Percy's second novel **The Last Gentleman** (1966). It is a picaresque novel, depicting the protagonist, Will Barrett's struggle to discover his true self. After witnessing a priest comfort a dying child, Will is raised from his abstracted state and attains self-knowledge. It is also revealed a man of fiction who clearly enjoyed the old-fashioned virtues of the trade- storytelling, the hilarity and elevation of readers through the novelist's ability to use his imagination, conjure up all sorts of people, events, and predicaments.

**The Last Gentleman** glories in the solidity of life. Because events both invite and resist value judgments, they become infinitely rich; everything now takes on potential importance, regardless of its limitations. The effect of this shining richness on the human spirit is equally creative. Percy finally describes this activity as freedom by shrinking from final judgments. It is an accident that Will Barrett acts most boldly during moments of crisis. So long as chance and danger are inescapable, each person has the privilege and the responsibility of imparting meaning to his life.

In this novel, Sutter's note book contains some key observations. If man is a wayfarer, he never stops anywhere long enough to hear that there is hope that conquers despair, salvation that overcomes death. Will's forgetfulness is not a symptom but the human condition: Man struggles

to make the world anew at every moment; because he is ill-fitted for this Godlike task, it is not ennobling but pitiable. Sutter's solution involves extremes of emotion and choice, as if they could somehow exalt a man to the stature necessary to reconstruct the world. For Will it is different; Sutter is wrong in his extremes: "God and not God, getting women's dresses and blowing your brains out. Whereas and in fact my problem is how to live from one ordinary minute to the next on Wednesday afternoon."

**The Last Gentleman** is also depicting Will's journey from pure possibility to actuality, from telescopic observer and wayfarer in a Trav-L-Aire named Ulysses, to comforter of a dying friend and agent of salvation for a living one. Will has in some sense become a preserver of continuity.

To sum up, Walker Percy takes plentiful opportunity to observe the passing scene. He ironically comments that though the north has never lost a war, Northerners have become solitary and withdrawn, as if ravaged by war. Will feels most homeless when he is among those who appear to be completely at home: "The happiness of the South drove him wild with despair." In addition, Percy presents no simple solution to the plague of homelessness. If Will is to reenter the South and Marry Kitty, he wants Sutter with him. Perhaps Will is still a wayfarer, yet in **The Last Gentleman**, he has stayed around just long enough to hear something of the honest truth.

### **Workcited**

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