The Moviegoer

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF WALKER PERCY

Walker Percy was born into a well-off Alabama family, the eldest of three sons. His life was marked by tragedy: when Percy was 13, his father committed suicide (as Percy's grandfather had also done), and three years later, his mother was killed in a car accident. He and his brothers then lived in Mississippi with their uncle William Alexander Percy (to whom *The Moviegoer* is dedicated). William Alexander Percy was an educated, cultured Southern gentleman who had a profound influence on his nephew. Walker Percy attended the University of North Carolina followed by medical school at Columbia University, where he became interested in disease pathology. While working as an intern at Bellevue Hospital, Percy caught tuberculosis, and it was while recovering that he began to write in earnest. Around the same time, he had become interested in philosophers Thomas Mann, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Soren Kierkegaard, and he came to believe that the philosophical novel could diagnose the modern world's diseases, much as a doctor diagnoses medical conditions. He ended up walking away from a medical career. Following in his Uncle Will's footsteps, Percy (along with his wife, Mary Bernice "Bunt" Townsend) converted to Catholicism, which he believed truthfully addressed the modern world's problems. While his young daughter attended a nearby school for the deaf, Percy spent his days alone in a New Orleans house and worked on *The Moviegoer*, which, to his surprise, won the National Book Award. Percy ultimately wrote six novels and published a variety of essays touching on topics such as race, ethics, Christian thought, and language. Percy also taught at New Orleans's Loyola University, where he mentored younger writers.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Binx is a veteran of the Korean War, which was fought between 1950 and 1953. The United States fought on the side of South Korea against the Communist North. Both North and South claimed to be Korea's only legitimate government, and neither side accepted the border established at the peninsula's 38th line of latitude. Under President Truman, the United States intervened following North Korea's invasion of the South in 1950, concerned to contain Communism in East Asia and deter the aggression of Communist governments elsewhere. Despite several years of catastrophic fighting, including Korean cities destroyed and many civilians killed, the border at the 38th parallel remained in place, and an armistice agreement was signed in July 1953, although North and South Korea are still technically at war. The Korean War occurred while the United States was enjoying an economic boom following the previous decade's Second World War. In the novel, this growing affluence is evident—Binx sometimes refers to the ubiquity of advertising and the images it puts forward of the desirable life as in, for instance, a Dodge car ad—images that don't always line up with reality.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Percy's other novels include *Love in the Ruins* (1971), *The Second Coming* (1980), and *The Thanatos Syndrome* (1987). Percy was strongly influenced by the existential philosophy of Soren Kierkegaard, whose Christian philosophical essay *Fear and Trembling* (1843) became available in English in 1919; Kierkegaard's essay *The Sickness Unto Death* may have influenced Binx's concept of malaise, or despair, in the novel. Flannery O'Connor, a fellow Southern Catholic writer, is known like Percy for a recurrent anti-modernist theme in her fiction, as seen in novels such as *Wise Blood* and stories like *Everything That Rises Must Converge*. Percy helped get John Kennedy Toole's prizewinning *A Confederacy of Dunces* published in 1980 after Toole's death. Finally, though protagonist Holden Caulfield is twice Binx's age, J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, with its themes of alienation and coming of age, has some resonances with *The Moviegoer*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Moviegoer*
- **Where Written:** New Orleans, Louisiana
- **When Published:** 1961
- **Literary Period:** Modernism
- **Genre:** Fiction; Southern Gothic; Philosophical Fiction
- **Setting:** New Orleans, Louisiana
- **Climax:** Binx abandons his search and commits to marrying Kate.
- **Antagonist:** Despair or "malaise"; alienation from everyday life
- **Point of View:** First-Person Limited

EXTRA CREDIT

Pointed Questions. Walker Percy's uncle William Alexander Percy, who had a tremendous influence on Walker, frequently questioned his nephew, "What do you love? What do you live by?" Aunt Emily asks these very questions near the end of *The Moviegoer*.

Critical Acclaim. *The Moviegoer* appears on lists of the top 100 English-language novels published during the 20th century, including those put out by the Modern Library (which ranks it 60th) and *Time* magazine.

PLOT SUMMARY

During the last Wednesday of Mardi Gras, Binx Bolling, a 29-year-old stocks and bonds salesman in New Orleans, receives an invitation to lunch from his Aunt Emily. Binx feels a prickle of foreboding, remembering when Aunt Emily broke the news of his brother Scott's death when Binx was a child.

Binx lives a peaceful life in an undistinctive suburb called Gentilly. He takes pride in being a good tenant and an upstanding citizen. His main hobby is going to the **movies**, sometimes accompanied by a girlfriend (usually his current secretary). Today, however, Binx's quiet life is interrupted by the memory of the "search." This idea first came to him several years ago, while he was injured in a ditch during the Korean conflict. The search is an attempt to get beyond the "everydayness" of life. Once a person becomes aware of the possibility of the search, they can't help pursuing it, but someone who remains oblivious to the search remains in despair.

At Aunt Emily's, Binx learns that Emily's stepdaughter, Kate, who struggles with her mental health, has been stashing sedatives in her room. Aunt Emily thinks that Kate is nervous about her upcoming marriage to Walter and wants Binx, who's always been a good friend to his step-cousin, to keep her distracted with Mardi Gras events. Aunt Emily also grills Binx about his future, asking him what he wants out of life and encouraging him to enroll in medical school so he doesn't waste his potential. Binx doesn't know how to respond, but promises he'll give her an answer in one week's time, on his 30th birthday. Later, when Binx talks with Kate, she admits that she's planning to break her engagement with Walter, but it's not because of the trauma in her past (her first fiancé, Lyell, was killed in a car crash which left Kate unscathed). In fact, although Lyell was a good man, his death felt liberating to Kate.

Binx works for Aunt Emily's husband, Jules Cutrer. On Friday, Uncle Jules gives Binx last-minute tickets for a stocks and bonds conference in Chicago next week, promising Binx will be rewarded for going. Binx dreads the prospect of traveling to a nondescript, anonymous city and worries that Jules will give him a promotion, which will disrupt his tidy, quiet life. Meanwhile, at the branch office he runs, Binx has become obsessed with his secretary, Sharon Kincaid, and starts asking her to work late as part of a scheme to win her love.

On Friday night, after falling asleep to thoughts of Sharon, Binx is awakened by a call from Aunt Emily—Kate's missing. Not long after, Kate arrives by taxi at Binx's house, excited about a discovery she made at therapy today—she doesn't have to live up to her therapist's expectations or anyone else's but can simply be "free" instead. Watching Kate's euphoria starting to collapse into depression, Binx gently offers for Kate to come and live with him. She takes this as a marriage proposal, and Binx doesn't deny it, but she's too distraught to give an answer right now.

The next day, Saturday, Binx invites Sharon to go to the beach with him, and she agrees. As they set out in Binx's **car**, Binx feels a twinge of malaise, or despair over life's meaninglessness, but a hit-and-run accident soon disrupts the feeling. After the collision, Binx lies in a ditch with a sore shoulder, much like in Korea. Sharon tends him, and they continue to the beach, where they spend the day swimming, flirting, and kissing, and Binx feels content. As they drive home, Binx reflects that settling for the "Little Way" of everyday happiness might be better than continuously searching for a transcendent happiness.

Binx and Sharon stop at Binx's mother's fishing camp for the night, where Sharon meets Binx's six young half-siblings, including Binx's favorite, Lonnie, who is disabled and uses a wheelchair. That night, Binx and Sharon take Lonnie to the movies which, due to the film, the Southern atmosphere, and the cheerful company, is a singularly enjoyable experience for Binx. However, he wakes up that night feeling despair; he questions both the devout Catholicism of his mother's family and the principled skepticism of his father's family. He can only conclude that, even if God exists, God doesn't make any clear difference to Binx's search. However, the next day, Binx and Lonnie enjoy one of their customary religious discussions, during which Lonnie expresses his desire to die and be with God, and Binx discourages Lonnie from fasting during Lent. During the drive home, Binx feels despair again, having lost enthusiasm for Sharon—who's engaged anyway, it turns out.

The next day at Aunt Emily's, Binx learns that Kate overdosed on sedatives, though Kate, now revived, tells Binx that she hadn't meant to attempt suicide. She wants to escape New Orleans for a little while, so Binx lets her book tickets for both of them to Chicago—he's leaving for the conference tomorrow. They slip off that night, without telling anyone. During the train journey, Binx and Kate discuss marriage, and Kate concludes that their marriage will only work if Binx always tells her what to do and reassures her. Binx agrees that he can do this. After a whirlwind visit to Chicago, the pair is summoned home to New Orleans by Aunt Emily, who's furious that Binx never told her they were leaving; everyone panicked over Kate's disappearance. Kate and Binx arrive home just after the last Mardi Gras parade.

The next morning, a disillusioned Aunt Emily gives Binx a stern lecture. Because Binx betrayed her trust, she now knows that her hopes for him were misplaced; he's no hero, but ordinary. Furthermore, she is weary of a world in which mediocre people

feel free to shirk their obligations. Binx can't think of anything to say in his own defense, but he assures Aunt Emily that her attempts to instill nobility, duty, and culture in him were not unappreciated.

Today is Binx's 30th birthday, and he believes his search has been a failure. Just as he's feeling despair, however, Kate shows up at his house. They discuss marriage again and agree that if Binx can guide and comfort Kate through her daily struggles, then things might work out. Binx is also willing to go to medical school as Aunt Emily wishes. As they sit in Kate's car, Binx watches a man emerging from an Ash Wednesday service and wonders if God's grace can be present alongside the most ordinary business of life.

That June, Binx and Kate marry, and Binx starts medical school. The "search" isn't part of his life anymore, and he doesn't have any authoritative conclusions to offer anyway. The following year, Lonnie gets a fatal viral infection just before his 15th birthday. While Binx stays with Lonnie and his other half-siblings at the hospital, he asks Kate to run an important errand for him downtown. With Binx's patient encouragement, Kate faces her fear and does as he tells her.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Binx Bolling (John "Jack" Bickerson Bolling) – Binx Bolling, the protagonist, is a New Orleans stocks and bonds broker who is approaching his 30th birthday. Many of his family and friends call Binx "Jack." Binx is a Korean War veteran who survived getting shot in the shoulder. Starting around that time, Binx became driven by a desire to understand the universe and his place in it—a process he calls "the search." Binx is serious, thoughtful, and spends a lot of time wandering neighborhoods, talking to and observing people in an attempt to understand the meaning of the world beyond its "everydayness." Binx is skilled at making money at the branch office he runs for his Uncle Jules and takes great pleasure in the work. Besides that, Binx enjoys going to the **movies** (where, besides watching films, he gets to know theater employees) and taking his secretaries, like Marcia and Linda, on dates to the Gulf Coast. Throughout most of the novel, he systematically woos his current secretary Sharon Kincaid, with whom he's obsessed. Binx is also close friends with his step-cousin Kate, stepdaughter of his great-aunt Emily, who helped raise Binx after his father died and his mother remarried. Aunt Emily tried to educate Binx as a cultured Southern gentleman and frets about his apparent lack of direction. For her part, Kate trusts Binx more than anyone, and he's the only person who can make her laugh and talk her through her anxious spells. Binx casually proposes to Kate during one of these. Later, after a whirlwind trip to Chicago with a seemingly suicidal Kate, Binx gives up unserious flings and commits to marrying and caring for her. On his 30th birthday, Binx abandons the idea of the search and enrolls in medical school on Aunt Emily's recommendation. At the end of the book, his care for his dying half-brother, Lonnie, suggests that Binx's longstanding ambivalence about God is developing into belief, and his patient love for Kate shows that he now finds meaning within everyday life.

Aunt Emily Cutrer – Emily is Binx's formidable, wealthy great-aunt, who is 65. After Binx's father's death, she oversaw Binx's upbringing and education. In her youth, Emily was a rebel, entering social work and serving overseas with the Red Cross. She is an Episcopalian by heritage and temperament, but she considers herself to be a "Buddhist by choice." Aunt Emily is Jules Cutrer's wife and Kate's stepmother. Aunt Emily tends to put people into neat categories (heroic or cowardly), and she sees the world simply—people must do their duty no matter the circumstances (for example, when Binx was a child grieving over his brother's death, she told him that he must "act like a soldier"). Nowadays, she is frustrated by a modern world, which appears to be settling for mediocrity instead of culture and noble sentiments, and she thinks Binx is wasting his abilities. Emily has a contentious relationship with Kate but worries constantly about her stepdaughter's mental health and tries to provide the best care for her. At the end of the book, she angrily lectures Binx for absconding to Chicago with Kate, but later, Binx's willingness to marry Kate and begin the medical career that she's long envisioned for him appears to restore her faith in him.

Kate Cutrer – Kate is Aunt Emily's stepdaughter, Jules's daughter, and Binx's step-cousin. She is five years younger than Binx, making her about 25 in the story. She has been shy and sensitive since childhood, and it's implied that she has often had difficulty making friends and feeling comfortable around other people. Binx is one of the only people who really understands her and can make her laugh. Kate also appears to suffer from mental illness of some kind, though the novel does not make its nature clear—the symptoms seem consistent with anxiety or what is now known as PTSD (the term didn't come about till about 20 years after the novel is set). She sees a therapist named Merle Mink. Every once in a while, Kate comes up with a grand vision for changing her life but inevitably becomes depressed soon after. Kate and Aunt Emily have a contentious relationship; though Emily once took an older sister role in her life, Kate now feels she has surpassed her stepmother and resents her. Kate was once engaged to a good man named Lyell Lovell, but Lyell was killed in a car crash on the eve of their wedding, when Kate was 19. Kate calls the accident's aftermath the happiest time in her life because she felt so free from people's expectations of her, though the trauma of this event causes her ongoing distress. After that, she is briefly engaged to Walter Wade but breaks the engagement. Binx casually proposes to her during one of her painful episodes. After Kate

recovers from a sedative overdose, she and Binx take a train to Chicago and discuss their future. Eventually, they agree that if Binx gives her lots of guidance and reassurance in daily life, her anxiety will improve, and they can have a good marriage. A year later, Kate's anxiety appears to be more manageable—she can venture into public alone for small errands—and she and Binx are contentedly married.

Uncle Jules Cutrer – Uncle Jules is married to Aunt Emily and is Kate's father. He and Emily met when he was a widower and she was serving in Europe with the Red Cross. He is pleasant, wealthy, well-liked, and a good Catholic. Binx works for him, selling the stocks and bonds that Jules underwrites. He is cheerfully oblivious to Kate's severe struggles with her mental health, believing that nothing can go wrong in the family on Emily's watch. He dies of a heart attack at the end of the book.

Anna Castagne Bolling Smith (Binx's mother) – Anna is Binx's mother. After Binx's father died, she returned to work as a nurse. She then married Roy Smith and had six more children with him. Binx visits her at the family fishing camp on the bayou. She is unpretentious and content with the ordinary things of life. Anna is an observant Catholic and worries about Binx's seeming lack of faith. For his part, Binx feels that his mother's faith isn't necessarily an expression of her theological beliefs but is instead a means of shielding herself from life's ups and downs, especially after the loss of her eldest son, Duval. Anna doesn't understand the nature of Binx's search, but she loves him and tolerates his eccentric interests.

Lonnie Smith – Lonnie is Binx's 14-year-old brother, the eldest of his younger half-siblings and Binx's favorite. Lonnie is disabled and uses a wheelchair; he and Binx get along well because Binx doesn't pity Lonnie. A devout Catholic, Lonnie believes that his sufferings can be offered to God in reparation for other sinners. He is strict in his religious observances and tends to fast excessively despite his already poor health. Lonnie enjoys going to the **movies** and overall leads a peaceful, contented life, though he envies his older brother, Duval, who died last year and is therefore with God. While suffering from a viral infection at the end of the book, Lonnie tells Binx that he has conquered his envy, and he's at peace with his approaching death.

Sharon Kincaid – Sharon is Binx's current secretary, originally from rural Alabama. Binx quickly falls in love with her, as he does with all of his secretaries. She is a fast learner, competent in her work, and firmly draws the line whenever Binx flirts with her. However, she goes along on a Gulf Coast getaway with Binx and doesn't mind kissing and teasing him on the beach, even though it later turns out that she's engaged to someone else. She ends up taking over Binx's branch office when he leaves for medical school.

Mercer – Mercer is Aunt Emily's Black butler. He has worked for the family since Binx's grandfather's days in Feliciana Parish. Since moving to New Orleans with Aunt Emily, Mercer has changed his speech to suit his higher position. Binx finds Mercer puzzling and isn't sure how to feel around him. At times he seems like a faithful old family servant, and at other times he seems knowing and ambitious (Binx knows that Mercer gets kickbacks from other employees).

Walter Wade – Walter Wade, an attorney and former Tulane football manager, is Kate's second fiancé (the first being Lyell Lovell). He is originally from West Virginia and attended a New Hampshire prep school and then Tulane along with Binx. Now 33, he is already a senior partner in a law firm. Kate ends up breaking their engagement.

Lyell Lovell – Lyell, Eddie Lovell's brother, was killed in a car accident a few years ago. At the time, he was engaged to Kate Cutrer. Kate describes him as a good man, but she was reluctant to marry him; she claims the aftermath of his death was the happiest time in her life.

Mrs. Schexnaydre – Mrs. Schexnaydre, a widow, is Binx's landlord. She sometimes lends Binx her copy of *Reader's Digest*, and they sometimes watch TV or attend a **movie** together. Mrs. Schexnaydre has lived in New Orleans all her life but doesn't really know anyone there. She is fearful of her few Black neighbors and keeps three fierce dogs on the property for that reason.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Eddie Lovell – Eddie Lovell is an acquaintance of Binx's. Eddie is married to Nell, and his brother, Lyell, was killed in a car accident a few years ago. Eddie is a jovial, self-confident businessman.

Scott Bolling – Scott Bolling is Binx's older brother, who died of pneumonia when Binx was 8 years old.

Linda – Linda is Binx's former secretary, whom he dated for a while.

Marcia – Marcia is Binx's former secretary, whom he dated for a while.

Vince Sartalamaccia – Vince is a real estate developer who purchases Binx's inheritance, a parcel of swampland that used to be worthless but has surged in value.

Roy Smith – Roy Smith is Binx's stepfather, Anna Castagne Bolling Smith's husband, and the father of their six children. He is a car salesman who enjoys bayou fishing.

Harold Graebner – Harold Graebner was Binx's old war buddy who lives in Chicago; Binx and Kate visit him during Binx's Chicago conference. Binx credits Harold with saving his life in Korea. Harold is a simple, good-natured man who enjoys making money. He invites Binx to be his new baby's godfather.

Nell Lovell – Nell is the wife of Binx's friend Eddie Lovell. She is an energetic empty-nester who takes philosophy courses and

renovates houses as a hobby. Binx finds her uncomfortable to talk to because she's so earnest and animated.

Sam Yerger – Sam is an old Bolling family friend from Feliciana Parish. Sam is a cultured man and an acclaimed writer who occasionally passes through New Orleans on lecture tours. Kate likes and trusts him, but she turns him down when he proposes during one of her crises.

Dr. Merle Mink – Dr. Merle Mink is Kate's doctor.

Harry Stern – Harry Stern is Binx's college chemistry lab partner. Together they worked on a project involving kidney stones in pigs. Harry did most of the work because he was able to focus on the project at hand, while Binx would get distracted by his environment.

Duval Smith – Duval Smith is Lonnie's younger brother (and Binx's half-brother) who drowned the year before the book is set. After Duval's death, Lonnie became the eldest of the Smith children.

Uncle Oscar Bolling – Uncle Oscar is Binx's uncle. A country storekeeper, he isn't as sophisticated and cultured as the other Bollings, and this especially shows in his awkward opinions and inappropriate humor.

Aunt Edna Bolling – Edna Bolling is Uncle Oscar's wife and Binx's aunt. She is sympathetic and emotional.

Joyce – Joyce is Sharon's attractive roommate.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

VALUE SYSTEMS

Part of Binx's personal search for meaning includes assessing the moral codes others live by, and the ways other people find meaning in their lives. Two of the most prominent codes that Binx encounters are religion (specifically his mother Anna Smith's Catholicism) and the Southern American commitment to honor and duty (exemplified by his Aunt Emily). But for Binx, neither honor nor religion are, by themselves, fitting solutions to the problem of his search for meaning. Both, in their own way, sidestep the question of meaning altogether. For that reason, he rejects both—at the novel's end, he seems to be lacking a moral code altogether. In the Epilogue, however, Binx's daily life has become oriented more around his care for other people than around his individualistic search for meaning. Though his views remain ambiguous, he seems to have adopted elements of both his aunt's and his mother's outlooks. Through Binx's exploration of different avenues of morality and meaning, Percy suggests that while people should be skeptical of wholesale approaches to life, one must ultimately figure out a value system to live by.

Binx's Aunt Emily represents a characteristically Southern insistence on heroism (fulfillment of honor and duty). Aunt Emily sees people as fitting into distinct categories: "All the stray bits and pieces [...] she pulls together into an unmistakable visage of the heroic or the craven [...] sometimes the person and the past are in fact transfigured by her. They become what she sees them to be." Aunt Emily gathers the details about a person into a tidy narrative, and in Binx's case, she sees an exceptional person who just needs the right encouragement in order to fulfill his heroic potential. Aunt Emily further contends that while she doesn't understand the world's seeming decline, she does believe that people are called to resist evil no matter what: "In this world goodness is destined to be defeated. But a man must go down fighting. [...] To do anything less is to be less than a man." Heroism lies in action; standing apart from the action is cowardice. However, understanding the underlying *meaning* of his experiences is deeply important to Binx. Because Aunt Emily's philosophy insists on action for its own sake, it repels Binx.

Religious faith offers another way of looking at the world, but it's no more helpful to Binx than his aunt's insistence on action. Binx sees his mother's Catholic faith as simply a tool for getting through life: "it strikes me that my mother uses [God] as but one of the devices that come to hand in an outrageous man's world [...] the canny management of the shocks of life [...] she settled for a general belittlement of everything, the good and the bad." In Binx's mind, faith takes the edge off of life's events—and, in that way, reduces their significance. It allows people to avoid wrestling with life's good and bad, instead settling for a measure of detachment from those events. (For instance, "the shocks of life" are somehow God's will, so one doesn't need to seek out their meaning too deeply.) Binx's mother thinks that Binx has lost his Catholic faith, but Binx maintains that he's never had faith to begin with: "The proofs of God's existence may have been true for all I know, but it didn't make the slightest difference. If God himself had appeared to me, it would have changed nothing." For Binx, lack of faith isn't primarily a matter of theological argument. Rather, his concern is that faith—even if it *were* factually provable—doesn't resolve the mystery of existence. Faith can be a means of avoiding deeper questions, and for Binx, God's very existence feels irrelevant to the mystery of life.

By the end of the novel, Binx does not appear to embrace either his aunt's or his mother's philosophies for dealing with life. Binx fails to fulfill Aunt Emily's code of action: he takes his suicidal cousin, Kate, to Chicago without telling anyone where they've gone. Furious, Aunt Emily scolds her nephew at length: "in all of past history people who found themselves in difficult situations behaved in certain familiar ways, well or badly, courageously or

cowardly [...] Your discovery, as best as I can determine, is that there is an alternative which no one has hit upon. [...] One may simply default. [...] Do as one pleases, shrug, turn on one's heel and leave." After the Chicago trip, Aunt Emily finds that Binx isn't the heroic figure she had imagined him to be—he hasn't even succeeded in acting cowardly. According to Aunt Emily's value system, Binx has failed to fulfill his obligations to others.

In fact, Binx doesn't seem to live by *any* clear moral code. Aunt Emily presses, "I wanted to pass on to you [...] a sense of duty, a nobility worn lightly [...] the only things that really matter in this life." When she asks if their long talks about "goodness and truth and beauty and nobility" have meant anything to Binx, he doesn't know what to say. Aunt Emily demands, "What do you love? What do you live by?" Binx is again "silent," suggesting that he doesn't love or live by anything that he can define in words.

However, in the Epilogue, Aunt Emily's disillusionment seems to free Binx to act. He doesn't accept either religion or a Southern code of manners and duty. In the end, Binx marries (itself an act that's both religious and dutiful) and seems to accept elements of both Catholicism and heroism: he devotedly cares for his wife, Kate, and for his grieving half-siblings. He assures his siblings that, in accordance with Catholic teaching, their dying brother Lonnie will someday be resurrected, free of paralysis and chronic illness. Even though it's not clear that Binx himself embraces belief in God or traditional Southern values, his actions suggest that he has, after all, found meaning in his life and a moral code to live by.

WOMEN, LOVE, AND SEX

Through much of *The Moviegoer*, Binx appears to be, at best, a superficial philanderer who shows little consideration for women as individuals. In particular, Binx serially dates his secretaries, seeming not to regard them as distinct individuals but as almost interchangeable exemplars of feminine beauty. Through the (mainly physical) delight of such relationships, Binx hopes he will somehow find a shortcut to lasting happiness. However, his attempts inevitably founder because he doesn't really know or care anything about these women as individuals; he's only seeking his own pleasure, and as a result, he's not assuming the risk of mutual commitment. Simultaneously, Binx's care for his step-cousin Kate deepens, until they eventually agree to a loving yet unsentimental marriage, prompting Binx to drop his philandering ways. Through the progression of Binx's attitudes toward women and dating, Percy argues that real love is deeper than superficial attraction, requiring self-sacrificial commitment to individuals, embracing their weaknesses as much as their beauty.

Binx mostly seems to use women for pleasure. He has dated most of his office secretaries, though none of these relationships lasts long or seems to have much substance. Reflecting on his serial relationships with his employees, such as his secretary Linda, Binx recalls, "The air in the office would begin to grow thick with silent reproaches. [...] Telephone conversations would take place at all hours of the night, conversations made up mostly of long silences [...] For in the end my Lindas and I were so sick of each other that we were delighted to say good-by." Binx's relationships are characterized by "silence," whether the silence of unspoken rejection or of desire—but these initial silences eventually give way to the silence of indifference. Furthermore, Binx regards these women as interchangeable, categorizing them simply as "Lindas," not as individuals with distinct traits.

When Binx goes on a spontaneous beach trip with his current secretary, Sharon, he describes the brief hope that he derives from their flirtation: "For an hour we swim and drink beer. Once when she gets up, I come up on my knees and embrace her golden thighs, such a fine strapping armful they are. 'What do you think you're doing, boy?'" Sharon demands. "'Honey, I've been waiting three weeks to grab you like this,'" Binx tells her. Sharon goes along with Binx's amorous attentions for now, though she also makes it clear that she's strong enough to put a stop to them when she chooses. Meanwhile, Binx takes it for granted that he will be able to fulfill his desires with the women who work for him and believes that Sharon will be the most satisfying of them all.

However, these serial, short-lived relationships never bring Binx what he's longing for. On the way home from the date with Sharon, he finds that his brief, transcendent delight has vanished: "Sorrowing, hoping against hope, I put my hand on [...] Sharon's thigh. She bats me away with a new vigor. 'Son, don't you mess with me," Sharon tells him this time. "'Very well, I won't,' I say gloomily, as willing not to mess with her as mess with her, to tell the truth." Shortly afterward, Sharon tells Binx that she needs to get home so that she can meet her fiancé. The short-lived relationship has been a dead end the whole time, and Binx's quickly fading desire (and Sharon's "new vigor" in stopping him) seems to forecast this truth before it's openly stated.

Binx only finds lasting love when he accepts that love demands commitment to another person's well-being—and involves risk and self-giving as a result. When Binx finally commits to a single, long-term relationship (with his step-cousin Kate), it looks much different from his earlier flings. Kate, who suffers from anxiety and depression, finds comfort in a definite structure in life, and she sees marriage to Binx as a means of ensuring such a structure: "I don't know whether I love you," she tells Binx, "but I believe in you and I will do what you tell me. Now if I marry you, will you tell me: Kate, this morning do such and such, and if we have to go to a party, will you tell me: Kate, stand right there and have three drinks and talk to so and so? Will you?" Binx agrees, and this unconventional engagement marks the end of Binx's serial, interchangeable relationships. In

fact, when the pair tries to conclude this discussion by having sex, it doesn't feel right, implying that their emotional intimacy outweighs all other attraction. This struggle symbolizes the ease of Binx's flings giving way to the concrete challenges of a truly intimate relationship. Binx and Kate's genuine love for each other means that they'll have to confront the real risks involved in such commitment (especially Kate's vulnerability and uncertainty).

As it turns out, Binx and Kate's marriage takes shape in just this way. In the Epilogue, Binx describes how he coaxes Kate, now his wife, to complete an errand by describing exactly where she should go, what she should do, and how: "I've got to be sure about one thing," Kate anxiously tells Binx. "What?" Binx asks. "I'm going to sit next to the window on the Lake side and put the cape jasmine in my lap?" Kate wants to know. "'That's right.' 'And you'll be thinking of me just that way?' 'That's right.'" For Binx, who knows his cousin's struggles intimately and savors beautiful images like streetcar rides with flowers in hand, caring for Kate's unique needs comes naturally. Their tender exchange also suggests that Binx has matured beyond looking for an abstract ideal of beauty and individual satisfaction, now dedicating himself to Kate's unique needs.

MODERN LIFE AND THE SEARCH FOR MEANING

Binx Bolling is an ordinary, even archetypal, 1950s American man. A New Orleans stock and bonds broker, Binx is "a model tenant and a model citizen [...] [who takes] pleasure in doing all that is expected." He also enjoys aspects of burgeoning consumerism, like regular moviegoing and trendy new cars, that characterize an increasingly mass-produced, generic American culture. However, deep down, Binx is dissatisfied with this shallow world and yearns to find transcendent meaning and happiness. To that end, Binx embarks on what he calls "the search" to overcome the "everydayness" of mundane existence—a frustrating process as he discovers that trying to get *beyond* everyday life leads to a feeling of disconnection as well. Through Binx's efforts to overcome the everydayness of modern life, Percy suggests that meaning is found neither by passively accepting nor by escaping mundanity, but by seeking to connect more deeply with one's everyday experiences.

Binx struggles to understand his place in the world and cope with "everydayness," or the mundanity of everyday life. Binx often experiences a condition called "malaise," or a sense of meaninglessness and disconnection from life, which Percy suggests is characteristic of life in the modern world. To overcome malaise, Binx goes on what he calls "the search": "what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life." In other words, Binx sees modern people as being absorbed in their daily lives and oblivious to anything beyond them; if they weren't oblivious, more people would embark on a search like his. Part of the malaise motivating Binx's search comes from the feeling that modern life is generic, that places and the people who inhabit them are losing their distinctiveness.

Binx feels adrift and cut off from a sense of place and identity, which is particularly evident when he visits big cities like Chicago. Arriving in Chicago's train station, he frets, "if only somebody could tell me who built the damn station [...] so that I would not fall victim to it[.] Every place of arrival should have a booth set up and manned by an ordinary person [...] in order to insure that the stranger shall not become an Anyone." Binx's discomfort speaks to the idea that in 1950s America, places (and the people in them) were becoming increasingly generic and thus devoid of meaning. Cities appear indistinguishable from one another, and an individual can become "an Anyone" unless he connects somehow with the specific facts of a place.

Moviegoing is another aspect of mass-production in 1950s America. A moviegoer could easily "be lost, cut loose metaphysically speaking." While at the movies, "It is possible to become a ghost and not know whether one is in downtown Loews in Denver or suburban Bijou in Jacksonville." When everyone—in Denver, Jacksonville, and everywhere else in the United States—is watching the same movies, a specific someone can become a kind of mass-produced "ghost," cut adrift from what's local and specific. Again, Binx feels despair in a world in which everywhere and everyone is seemingly the same—in which mundanity and conformity stifle transcendent meaning.

Binx discovers that meaning is found by engaging more deeply with everyday life, not by trying to escape from it. Unlike people who use moviegoing as a means of escapism, Binx uses it as a way to deepen his engagement with life. He individualizes the experience of moviegoing (by getting to know the theater workers, for instance) and finds meaning in the experience by connecting to the context *around* the movies: the atmosphere, place, and people. At a bayou drive-in with his half-brother and girlfriend, Binx exults, "this ghost of a theater, a warm Southern night, the Western Desert [...] My heart sings [...] and there is great happiness between me and Lonnie and this noble girl[.]") These everyday things, which could be considered mundane, become deeply meaningful to Binx—more meaningful than the mere escape of watching a movie.

The drive that Binx takes in his "fine new Dodge" with his secretary Marcia also exemplifies the modern world's emphasis on consumption (he and Marcia are "like the American couple in the Dodge ad," but as he drives, Binx finds that "the malaise quickly became suffocating"—emulating the anonymous couple in the ad seems to cut him off from real life, not to make life better as the ad promises). This contrasts with Binx's subsequent drive with a later girlfriend, Sharon, which he finds meaningful and beautiful because this time, Binx is content with the "little happiness of drinks and kisses, a good little car," and a

charming woman. Instead of aspiring to the anonymous happiness promised by advertising, he finds a simple, specific happiness with Sharon that feels more genuine and sustainable. This underscores the idea that any experience can be meaningful, even those that are seemingly mundane—and it's up to the individual to search for that meaning.

Reflecting on this car ride, Binx concludes, "It is not a bad thing to settle for the Little Way" instead of "the big search for the big happiness." In other words, even ordinary experiences can be meaningful, and the "Little Way" or the "little happiness" of everyday moments aren't less meaningful than the "big search" for an elusive happiness that transcends mundane experiences.

Binx's "[settling] for the Little Way" prepares him to eventually settle down with his wife, Kate, at the end of the book. Kate has many anxieties about everyday life, and Binx, because of his long-practiced attention to the mundane, is able to coach her through these anxieties one at a time. Thus married life, which a younger Binx might have scorned as being mired in "everydayness," actually becomes a way of continually seeking meaning in mundanity—through helping Kate navigate the little things of life—rather than drifting into a mass-produced lifestyle of "malaise."

LOSS, SUFFERING, AND DEATH

Many characters in *The Moviegoer* experience tragedy firsthand and spend their lives trying to come to terms with it. Binx's step-cousin, Kate, survives a car accident that kills her fiancé and spares her from a marriage she didn't want, but also plunges her into an ongoing struggle with anxiety and depression. Binx, meanwhile, loses his older brother in childhood and narrowly escapes death himself in the Korean conflict, struggling through each of these tragedies to mature in his attitude toward life. Finally, Binx's 14-year-old half-brother, Lonnie, struggles with disability and illness throughout his short life—yet his steadfast desire for death (to be with God) shapes his life and brings him eventual peace. By exploring characters' various interactions with suffering and death, Percy argues that while each person comes to terms with suffering in their own way, accepting death—even embracing death as the gateway to God—is the only thing that finally yields meaning and ultimate peace.

The trauma of her fiancé Lyell's death releases Kate from a life she doesn't want—but afterward, she feels stuck, unable to settle on a meaningful course in life. Kate slipped away from the accident scene and boarded a bus, describing the journey as idyllic: "I got on and we went sailing along [in] bright sunshine[.]" She then pampered herself in a hotel before going home. Kate's experience following Lyell's death sounds like a personal resurrection: she escapes an unwanted life and savors her free existence, as if for the first time.

However, Kate feels traumatized as the shock of the accident wears off; she keeps trying to relive her liberating experience but never fully succeeds. Kate describes a typical therapy appointment this way: "One minute I am straining every nerve to be the sort of person I was expected to be [...] and the next minute to know with the calmest certitude that even if I could succeed [...] that I had something better. I was free." Kate's experience of realization, calm, and freedom from expectation briefly recaptures her feeling of liberation after Lyell's death—but it doesn't permanently free her from the aftereffects of trauma. This suggests that until Kate fully confronts her grief—and her own near brush with death—she cannot fully enjoy her freedom.

Encounters with death similarly haunt Binx throughout the novel, and he doesn't face these encounters head-on. Because he tries to ignore the painful reality of death, he is haunted later in life by unresolved questions. One of Binx's most powerful childhood memories involves his older brother Scott's death when Binx was 8. When Aunt Emily broke the news, she told Binx, "Now it's all up to you. It's going to be difficult for you but I know you're going to act like a soldier." Binx seems to take Emily's words at face value, "acting" according to what is expected of him rather than facing the pain he feels. Essentially, Scott's death leads to Binx living a superficial life.

Binx's own brush with death spurs him to reconsider this superficial life. After going through most of life fulfilling a role, Binx survives a war wound and then begins his "search" for what's really meaningful. This search is characterized by Binx's overall attitude of watchfulness, starting with an inability to sleep soundly after the war. He often jolts awake in the middle of the night and lies awake pondering, or wanders the streets seeking, clues to his "search," "wakeful and watchful as a sentry." Binx doesn't identify the specific cause of his wakefulness—just that it's a result of getting shot—or the precise goal of his search, only that his injury awakened him to its importance. Like Kate, Binx seems to be stuck in the aftermath of a traumatic experience, unable to move on because he hasn't fully faced the fear of the event and the fact that he so nearly died.

Binx's half-brother Lonnie, who's disabled and often ill, genuinely embraces suffering and death. As a result, he is the only character who appears to find peace with the reality of death. Lonnie envies his deceased older brother, Duval, because Duval is dead: he "sees God face to face," while Lonnie can't. Lonnie explains to Binx that he is fasting during Lent in order to conquer the sin of envy. When Binx suggests that Lonnie focus instead on devotion to the Eucharist, because fasting would weaken him, Lonnie points out that "Eucharist is a sacrament of the living," suggesting that his deeper desire is to die and be with God.

Later, Lonnie seems to find true peace in dying. When he dies of hepatitis just after his 15th birthday, he whispers to Binx on his deathbed that he has finally achieved his desire to conquer the

sin of envy. Lonnie implies that his religious devotions, like fasting, have achieved their goal of helping him conquer envy. The novel implies that, in the process, Lonnie's excessive practices have finally weakened him to the point of fatal illness. Yet Lonnie accepts his death; in fact, ironically, he's now being rewarded with what he'd envied in the first place—the chance to die and be with God. This suggests that Lonnie, though he suffers the most physically and actually dies, enjoys greater peace in his short life than either Kate or Binx. Unlike Lonnie, Kate and Binx dodge death, yet they suffer mentally and emotionally because of their failure to fully accept the pain of grief and the inevitability of their own deaths.

The novel begins and ends with Binx's confrontations with death. Whereas his childhood experience of Scott's death forced him to behave as if death weren't real and could be ignored (simply "act like a soldier"), Binx now greets Lonnie's death with acceptance, even able to comfort Lonnie's younger siblings and reassure them that now, Lonnie is free from suffering. This suggests that Lonnie's death helps Binx move further along in his own understanding of life, bringing him closer to peace himself.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

MOVIES

For Binx Bolling, movies symbolize the search to understand one's place in the universe. Binx frequently goes to the movies not to escape from everyday life, but to try to understand life better. He feels that filmmakers always fall short of portraying "the search" adequately—movie characters always end up settling for mundane resolutions to their problems—but he keeps going to movies, just as he continues searching in the rest of his life. That's because moviegoing involves more than simply watching a film; it's about having a specific experience in a specific place. Binx prefers to get acquainted with the theater owners and ticket sellers in order to create this experience of being "Somewhere" specific instead of being anonymously "Anywhere." So while movies are an aspect of American culture that can promote conformity, Binx's approach to moviegoing—prioritizing the search for individual meaning—subverts that culture.

CARS, BUSES, STREETCARS, AND TRAINS

Vehicles symbolize the journey through life, particularly a person's journey alongside others. More than being a passive transport from one place to another, vehicles provide an opportunity for a person to interact with the world around them and arrive at a clearer understanding of their place in the world. Sometimes this backfires; for example, Binx's car trip with his girlfriend Marcia becomes an obstacle to the journey when Binx becomes preoccupied with his car as a paragon of American culture and fears that his life (including his romance with Marcia) doesn't match the cultural ideal. For that reason, Binx often prefers bus and streetcar travel to the more isolated, anonymizing experience of driving a car. On public transportation, like New Orleans's buses and streetcars, Binx can observe a variety of people, wonder about what makes them tick, and ponder his own place in the world. Also, his train journey with Kate between New Orleans and Chicago—besides being a literal journey—provides a kind of intermission from daily life during which he and Kate are forced to figure out the nature of their relationship and their future together.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Farrar, Straus and Giroux edition of *The Moviegoer* published in 2019.

Chapter 1, Section 1 Quotes

Life in Gentilly is very peaceful. I manage a small branch office of my uncle's brokerage firm. My home is the basement apartment of a raised bungalow belonging to Mrs. Schexnaydre, the widow of a fireman. I am a model tenant and a model citizen and take pleasure in doing all that is expected of me. My wallet is full of identity cards, library cards, credit cards. [...] It is a pleasure to carry out the duties of a citizen and to receive in return a receipt or a neat styrene card with one's name on it certifying, so to speak, one's right to exist.

Related Characters: Binx Bolling (John "Jack" Bickerson Bolling) (speaker), Uncle Jules Cutrer, Mrs. Schexnaydre

Related Themes:

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

This quote describes protagonist Binx Bolling's life before he undertakes his "search." By all appearances, Binx lives a conventional postwar American life. He lives in a quiet suburb called Gentilly, where his daily existence revolves around his job and his duties to society—a life he idealizes so much that, through fulfilling these duties, he derives a deep sense of personal validation ("certifying [...] one's right to exist"). At this point, Binx doesn't question the meaning of

his life—it is self-evident, as "doing all that is expected" is its own reward for Binx. His outlook in this quote contrasts with the attitude of the "search" which he will assume throughout the rest of the novel. Though Binx does not reject his earlier lifestyle altogether, he does question its meaning instead of taking for granted that it is meaningful. He begins to distinguish between those who are immersed in "everydayness" and therefore sadly oblivious to the mystery of life, and those who seek something above and beyond "everydayness." By doing so, Binx critiques the self-satisfaction of modern life, raising the question of whether such a life stifles a person's awareness of what it means to be human.

❝ The fact is I am quite happy in a movie, even a bad movie. Other people, so I have read, treasure memorable moments in their lives: the time one climbed the Parthenon at sunrise, the summer night one met a lonely girl in Central Park and achieved with her a sweet and natural relationship, as they say in books. I too once met a girl in Central Park, but it is not much to remember. What I remember is the time John Wayne killed three men with a carbine as he was falling to the dusty street in *Stagecoach*, and the time the kitten found Orson Welles in the doorway in *The Third Man*.

Related Characters: Binx Bolling (John "Jack" Bickerson Bolling) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

This quote introduces the significance that movies hold in the novel and in Binx's life. Binx observes that many people cherish noteworthy events in their lives, but his life's most memorable moments are scenes he recalls from movies. This suggests that Binx mostly takes the role of an observer in his own life—instead of climbing the Parthenon or meeting new people, he'd rather consume narratives of characters having such experiences. Unlike chance meetings, which are "not much to remember," the thrilling climaxes of movies won't disillusion him about life. But there's another layer to Binx's movie consumption, too. Whereas people often see moviegoing as a form of escapism (and a way to conform to a shared culture), Binx actually sees movies as a way of experiencing concrete reality more deeply. Watching movies is part of a larger context in which he gets to know neighborhoods and theater workers, rooting himself in a specific place in defiance of modernity's tendency to become flat, generic, and anonymous.

❝ The air in the office would begin to grow thick with silent reproaches. It would become impossible to exchange a single word or glance that was not freighted with a thousand hidden meanings. Telephone conversations would take place at all hours of the night, conversations made up mostly of long silences during which I would rack my brain for something to say while on the other end you could hear little else but breathing and sighs. When these long telephone silences come, it is a sure sign that love is over. No, they were not conquests. For in the end my Lindas and I were so sick of each other that we were delighted to say good-by.

Related Characters: Binx Bolling (John "Jack" Bickerson Bolling) (speaker), Linda

Related Themes:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

Binx has a history of failure with women. Since he began running his own branch as a stocks and bonds broker, he has dated each of his secretaries in quick succession. In a way, Binx fails to see women as individuals (for example, he categorizes the women he's dated as "my Lindas," as if they're indistinguishable). Instead, he sees them as means to an end—sexual pleasure, for one thing, but beyond that, he keeps hoping one of these women will provide the key to the greater happiness that's eluded him. This obsession prevents him from actually seeing the individual women he dates (and thereby missing the happiness that could be possible). This explains why Binx's relationships inevitably grow stagnant and silent—he hasn't made any effort to get to know his partners, so they inevitably run out of things to say to each other.

It's only much later, when Binx finally gets together with his step-cousin Kate, whom he's known intimately for many years, that this pattern is broken. In the everyday details of supporting and caring for Kate, Binx finally finds love. In this way, Binx's pattern with women is an example of his tendency to overlook "everydayness" in the course of his "search." While seeking something more exalted, Binx tends to shortchange the love that can be found in everyday

bonds of commitment and obligation—something he could never find in his serial flings.

What is the nature of the search? you ask. Really it is very simple, at least for a fellow like me; so simple that it is easily overlooked. The search is what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life. This morning, for example, I felt as if I had come to myself on a strange island. And what does such a castaway do? Why, he pokes around the neighborhood and he doesn't miss a trick. To become aware of the possibility of the search is to be onto something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair.

Related Characters: Binx Bolling (John "Jack" Bickerson Bolling) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Binx describes the problem at the heart of the book—his "search." The essence of the search is to look for the meaning beyond the ordinary, or what Binx calls "everydayness." If someone were marooned on an island, the castaway would explore his surroundings in detail in order to get his bearings. It's noteworthy that Binx doesn't specify an end goal for the search—he doesn't say, for example, that the castaway looks for a means of rescue from the strange island. The mystery is in finding oneself there at all. But most people, in Binx's opinion, never notice any strangeness about their existence; they take it for granted. Binx believes that someone who's aware of the possibility of a search is "onto something," open to the mystery of life. (Binx's own eyes were opened only after being shot in the war.) But someone who isn't aware of the search is already leading a life of despair, because they're not awake to anything mysterious about existence. Such a person, blinded by ordinary life, doesn't realize that each individual is a castaway on a strange island that must be explored.

Chapter 1, Section 5 Quotes

All the stray bits and pieces of the past, all that is feckless and gray about people, she pulls together into an unmistakable visage of the heroic or the craven, the noble or the ignoble. So strong is she that sometimes the person and the past are in fact transfigured by her. They become what she sees them to be.

Related Characters: Binx Bolling (John "Jack" Bickerson Bolling) (speaker), Aunt Emily Cutrer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

This quote describes Aunt Emily's basic outlook on the world and how this impacts her relationships with others, especially Binx. Binx explains that Aunt Emily tends to see people as she wishes them to be rather than as they are. She gathers all the random, ambiguous details about a person into a rigid, black-and-white category—one of either heroism or cowardice. This accords with Aunt Emily's value system, which is characteristically Southern and stoic. In her view, a person simply must act, even if they don't fully understand their role, and even if they know they're doomed to failure.

Aunt Emily sees Binx as a potential hero who can blossom into nobility with the right encouragement. For some people, like Emily's husband Uncles Jules, Emily's perception actually becomes reality. For others, like Binx, it backfires. By the end of the novel, Emily realizes that Binx doesn't fit her definition of heroism because he is dissatisfied with action apart from a clear understanding of the significance of his life. Aunt Emily's attitude also reinforces Percy's argument that each person is responsible for finding meaning in the world, though Emily's and Binx's approaches to what is meaningful differ widely.

I would not change places with him if he discovered the cause and cure of cancer. For he is no more aware of the mystery which surrounds him than a fish is aware of the water it swims in. He could do research for a thousand years and never have an inkling of it. By the middle of August I could not see what difference it made whether the pigs got kidney stones or not (they didn't, incidentally), compared to the mystery of those summer afternoons.

Related Characters: Binx Bolling (John "Jack" Bickerson Bolling) (speaker), Harry Stern

Related Themes:

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

One summer, Binx works on a chemistry experiment with a

college classmate, but what he learns from this experience ends up very different from what he set out to learn. As Binx recalls the experience, his classmate Harry spent the summer intently working on the science experiment, while Binx was constantly distracted by the wonder of dust motes drifting in the sunbeams that fell across the lab each afternoon. Eventually, Binx is totally caught up in this "mystery" to the neglect of the experiment. Though Binx couldn't care less about the experiment himself, he doesn't mean that such efforts are worthless. Unlike Harry, he is simply unable to focus single-mindedly on such things—even if the project were something more consequential, like a cure for cancer—because the surrounding mystery of existence feels far more urgent to him. In contrast, people like Harry (that is, most people in the world) are so immersed in their everyday existence that they are oblivious to its intrinsic mystery. Binx's distraction is the precursor to his later "search" and sums up the attitude about "everydayness" that drives the novel.

"I no longer pretend to understand the world." She is shaking her head yet still smiling her sweet menacing smile. "The world I knew has come crashing down around my ears." […] For her too the fabric is dissolving, but for her even the dissolving makes sense. She understands the chaos to come. It seems so plain when I see it through her eyes. My duty in life is simple. I go to medical school. I live a long useful life serving my fellowman. What's wrong with this? All I have to do is remember it.

Related Characters: Aunt Emily Cutrer (speaker), Binx Bolling (John "Jack" Bickerson Bolling)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is a clear example of the chasm between Aunt Emily's and Binx's personal value systems and worldviews. In this passage, Binx and Emily are having a mostly one-sided conversation about Binx's future. Aunt Emily acknowledges that the world as she knows it is passing away; she simply can't relate to the perspectives of the rising generation. Nevertheless, this doesn't change her beliefs about what's most important: doing one's duty to serve the world, even if one doesn't completely understand *why*, and even if one suspects that goodness won't prevail. Aunt Emily believes that Binx is failing to live up to her code—he is not "doing his duty" in any obvious way but appears to her to be drifting aimlessly. In Emily's eyes, Binx could solve everything by committing to medical school and embarking on a clear, defined path. Binx admires the clarity of his aunt's outlook, which can even make sense of the world's chaos. Yet he can't embrace his aunt's value system, because it's based on action for its own sake. Binx, in contrast to Aunt Emily, is driven by the need to understand the world. To him, action for its own sake is meaningless. That's why Aunt Emily's encouragement falls completely flat for Binx.

Chapter 2, Section 1 Quotes

There I lay in my hotel room with my search over yet still obliged to draw one breath and then the next. But now I have undertaken a different kind of search, a horizontal search. As a consequence, what takes place in my room is less important. What is important is what I shall find when I leave my room and wander in the neighborhood. Before, I wandered as a diversion. Now I wander seriously and sit and read as a diversion.

Related Characters: Binx Bolling (John "Jack" Bickerson Bolling) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 70

Explanation and Analysis

This quote summarizes Binx's idea of the "horizontal search." Binx has just described his long search to understand the universe—a "vertical" search. He used to spend his time reading major literary, scientific, and psychological texts, trying to understand the foundations of the world around him. But when he felt he'd arrived at this foundational understanding, Binx realized he didn't understand himself—he didn't understand how he fit into that wider world. This realization sparked "the search," which is the novel's main focus.

What distinguishes Binx's "horizontal" search and "vertical" search is that the vertical search could be grasped through study; Binx wandered the world in order to distract himself from his research. By contrast, the horizontal search can only be grasped by examining the surrounding world to try to discern one's specific role within it. Somewhat ironically, then, Binx's random wanderings are an attempt to situate himself in the larger world, and they constitute serious research, not idle distraction. This implies that one can't discover one's place in the world through abstractions, but only through intentional, firsthand immersion in the world.

Chapter 2, Section 2 Quotes

❝ If I did not talk to the theater owner or the ticket seller, I should be lost, cut loose metaphysically speaking. I should be seeing one copy of a film which might be shown anywhere and at any time. There is a danger of slipping clean out of space and time. It is possible to become a ghost and not know whether one is in downtown Loews in Denver or suburban Bijou in Jacksonville. So it was with me.

Related Characters: Binx Bolling (John "Jack" Bickerson Bolling) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 75

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Binx describes his philosophy of moviegoing. For Binx, going to the movies isn't just a matter of seeing a particular film. In fact, while he has opinions about the movies he sees, he spends remarkably little time discussing their finer points. Binx's bigger concern when it comes to moviegoing is having an experience that takes place within specific "space and time." That's why Binx takes time to chat with the theater staff and even befriend them—it's a way of rooting himself within a certain location, avoiding become a "ghost" who has no distinct identity and who doesn't belong in any particular place. In this sense, moviegoing isn't really about the movies at all; it's just that moviegoing is a booming business in 1950s America, so it becomes a convenient field for Binx's search. Binx's moviegoing is also a twist on the more typical consumer's—instead of watching movies to escape his everyday life and blend into his culture, Binx goes to the movies to understand everyday life better and to critique his culture (especially the ways it makes people and places feel anonymous).

Chapter 2, Section 3 Quotes

❝ "Have you noticed that only in time of illness or disaster or death are people real? I remember at the time of the wreck—people were so kind and helpful and *solid*. Everyone pretended that our lives until that moment had been every bit as real as the moment itself and that the future must be real too, when the truth was that our reality had been purchased only by Lyell's death. In another hour or so we had all faded out again and gone our dim ways."

Related Characters: Kate Cutrer (speaker), Lyell Lovell, Binx Bolling (John "Jack" Bickerson Bolling)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 81

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Kate describes to Binx the aftermath of the car accident that took the life of her then-fiancé, Lyell. Both Binx and Kate feel that everyday life is characterized by a kind of blindness. Binx believes that people are so consumed with "everydayness" that they're oblivious to life's greater meaning. In a similar way, Kate believes that people coast through life until a great shock—like their fiancé's tragic death—opens their eyes to the people right in front of them. In such moments, she finds, people are much more "solid," or responsive to each other's needs, and they even act as if life always feels this real. Yet Kate felt that it was only because of Lyell's accident that people behaved so kindly; as soon as the crisis had passed, they drifted back into a vaguer, less personally connected way of life. Both Kate and Binx find that crises heighten their sense of life's reality. For Kate, suffering is a big part of that sense of reality—meaning that life's fleeting moments of clarity are among its most tragic, too.

Chapter 2, Section 12 Quotes

❝ One minute I am straining every nerve to be the sort of person I was expected to be and shaking in my boots for fear I would fail—and the next minute to know with the calmest certitude that even if I could succeed and become your joyous and creative person, that it was not good enough for me and that I had something better. I was free. Now I am saying good-by, Merle. And I walked out, as free as a bird for the first time in my life [...] I know I am right or I would not feel so wonderful.

Related Characters: Kate Cutrer (speaker), Dr. Merle Mink

Related Themes:

Page Number: 115

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Kate tells Binx about her most recent therapy appointment. Kate suffers from mental illness that is not clearly identified in the novel, but she recently started seeing a therapist, Merle, to help her work through some symptoms that modern readers might recognize as being consistent with anxiety and depression. Today, she walked out of her appointment after having a revelation—that she

doesn't have to conform to the expectations of society or her therapist (a "joyous and creative person") in order to live the way she wants to live. In her own way, Kate is similar to Binx in that she fears being consumed by conventional expectations and thereby missing out on greater happiness. Unlike Binx, though, she is not engaged in a search for happiness so much as she is caught in a cycle of reliving old traumas and trying to escape them—specifically the car accident that killed her fiancé and left Kate feeling briefly liberated from others' expectations of her. As Binx suspects, Kate will not feel "wonderful" for long, because her euphoria will soon subside into fear once again. And as Percy suggests, fear can't liberate a person; only squarely facing suffering can do that.

Chapter 3, Section 1 Quotes

❝ [O]n my first trip to the Gulf Coast with Marcia, I discovered to my dismay that my fine new Dodge was a regular incubator of malaise. Though it was comfortable enough, though it ran like a clock, though we went spinning along in perfect comfort and with a perfect view of the scenery like the American couple in the Dodge ad, the malaise quickly became suffocating. We sat frozen in a gelid amiability. Our cheeks ached from smiling. […] I longed to stop the car and bang my head against the curb.

Related Characters: Binx Bolling (John "Jack" Bickerson Bolling) (speaker), Marcia

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 121

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Binx describes an experience of "malaise," or a feeling of disconnection from the world. Such a feeling is especially depressing for Binx because it's proof that he hasn't discovered the answer to his search for meaning. What's worse, malaise sneaks up on a person even in the midst of what seems like happiness. For instance, when Binx and his former secretary Marcia set out for the Gulf Coast in Binx's new car, the conditions for happiness seemed ideal. Yet Binx's euphoria soon turns to despair. The implication is that certain aspects of modern American culture—especially consumerism—not only aren't sufficient to overcome malaise, but actively create it by promoting a sense of anonymity. In this case, looking like the idealized couple in the Dodge ad causes malaise because it doesn't help Binx understand his place in the world; rather, it just means he's acting like everyone else. In other words, he could be an "Anyone" located "Anywhere" instead of a "Someone" who is "Somewhere."

❝ Joy and sadness come by turns, I know now. Beauty and bravery make you sad […] and victory breaks your heart. But life goes on and on we go, spinning along the coast in a violet light […] We pull into a bay and have a drink under the stars. It is not a bad thing to settle for the Little Way, not the big search for the big happiness but the sad little happiness of drinks and kisses, a good little car and a warm deep thigh.

Related Characters: Binx Bolling (John "Jack" Bickerson Bolling) (speaker), Sharon Kincaid

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 135

Explanation and Analysis

As Binx and Sharon drive home from their outing to the Gulf Coast, Binx rethinks his attitude toward his search. Previously, he'd lamented the tendency of "malaise," or despair, to interrupt the exultant, meaningful moments of life. His day with Sharon, however, suggests to him that happiness and despair can't be neatly divided from each other—it's impossible to have joy without sadness, in other words. In fact, it's the triumphant moments that sometimes provoke sadness because they're so fleeting. At such times, there's nothing to do but continue on one's journey, savoring the ephemeral moments as best one can. These realizations mark a progression in Binx's understanding—that a transcendent happiness may not be attainable, but that a "little way" of ordinary moments can be embraced, even if it doesn't live up to his most exalted expectations. Binx doesn't yet "settle" for this little way once and for all—he's still confused about where to find happiness, as his shallow relationship with Sharon suggests—but it anticipates the more settled life Binx will embrace at the end of the novel.

Chapter 3, Section 2 Quotes

Sometimes when she mentions God, it strikes me that my mother uses him as but one of the devices that come to hand in an outrageous man's world, to be put to work like all the rest in the one enterprise she has any use for: the canny management of the shocks of life. It is a bargain struck at the very beginning in which she settled for a general belittlement of everything, the good and the bad. [...] Losing Duval, her favorite, confirmed her in her election of the ordinary. No more heart's desire for her, thank you. After Duval's death she has wanted everything colloquial and easy, even God.

Related Characters: Binx Bolling (John "Jack" Bickerson Bolling) (speaker), Duval Smith, Anna Castagne Bolling Smith (Binx's mother)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 142

Explanation and Analysis

As Binx has earlier considered his Aunt Emily's value system, here he considers his mother's. Binx's objection to his mother's Catholic beliefs isn't primarily theological. In other words, he isn't concerned about arguments for or against God's existence, and nor does he seem to care about her specific doctrine. Rather, he thinks his mother uses religion in a manner that both cheapens it and cuts her off from deeper meaning in life. He believes she uses God as a tool to help her absorb the pain of life, like her son Duval's death. In this way, she "settles for [...] belittlement" of both the good and bad—shields herself from highs and lows, in other words, and refuses to aspire to anything beyond the ordinary. For Binx, who feels compelled to search for meaning in life beyond the ordinary, his mother's value system looks like selling out. Like Aunt Emily's belief in the nobility of action for its own sake, Binx's mother's value system stops short of questioning life in the way Binx considers to be most critical.

A good night: Lonnie happy (he looks around at me with the liveliest sense of the secret between us; the secret is that Sharon is not and never will be onto the little touches we see in the movie and, in the seeing, know that the other sees [...]), this ghost of a theater, a warm Southern night, the Western Desert and this fine big sweet piece Sharon.

Related Characters: Binx Bolling (John "Jack" Bickerson Bolling) (speaker), Sharon Kincaid, Lonnie Smith

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 143

Explanation and Analysis

When he goes to visit his mother and half-siblings, Binx has a memorable experience that exemplifies the role that moviegoing plays in his life. He takes his younger half-brother, Lonnie, and his current girlfriend, Sharon, to a drive-in theater, where the combination of the environment, the company, and the film itself bring him deep delight.

It's noteworthy that the movie itself (a Western) plays a relatively small role in the experience. Instead, Lonnie's happiness, the secret connection between Lonnie and Binx in their common enjoyment of the movie, the particular Southern setting, and Binx's desire for Sharon create a memorable context *around* the movie, enhancing it in turn. This passage is a clear example of Binx's ability to resist being an "Anyone" who is "Anywhere" by embedding the moviegoing experience within a more specific experience. It's also an example of Binx's developing ability to embrace meaning and happiness within "everydayness" instead of beyond it.

Chapter 3, Section 6 Quotes

"Moreover, I do not think you should fast," I tell him.
"Why not?"
"You've had pneumonia twice in the past year. It would not be good for you. I doubt if your confessor would allow it. Ask him."
"He is allowing it."
"On what grounds?"
"To conquer an habitual disposition [...] to envy."

[...]

"Duval is dead."
"Yes. But envy is not merely sorrow at another's good fortune: it is also joy at another's misfortune."

Related Characters: Lonnie Smith, Binx Bolling (John "Jack" Bickerson Bolling) (speaker), Duval Smith

Related Themes:

Page Number: 162

Explanation and Analysis

This conversation between Binx and his teenage half-

brother, Lonnie, is significant in a few ways. First, it is an interesting aspect of Binx's search in that, even though Binx does not pretend to hold Catholic beliefs himself, he is willing to entertain religious ideas for the sake of argument, even as a hypothetical possibility in his search (i.e., Binx respects Lonnie's religious aspirations enough to encourage him to try a different method that wouldn't endanger his health, like fasting might).

Second, Lonnie's "envy" of his dead brother, Duval, shows how his attitude about suffering and death differs from Binx's. More than anything, even more than he wants to be well (Lonnie is disabled and chronically ill), Lonnie wants to die so that he can be with God. Binx, in contrast, talks about his own encounters with death (his brother Scott's and his own near death in Korea during the war) in a more halting, indirect way, suggesting he fears the way the idea of death complicates his philosophical search. Finally, this conversation foreshadows Lonnie's actual death a year later; he dies at peace, claiming to have overcome his "habitual disposition" and also implying that, in doing so, he indeed weakened his health to the point of fatal illness.

Chapter 4, Section 2 Quotes

❝ It was ten years ago that I last rode a train, from San Francisco to New Orleans, and so ten years since I last enjoyed the peculiar gnosis of trains, stood on the eminence from which there is revealed both the sorry litter of the past and the future bright and simple as can be, and the going itself, one's privileged progress through the world. But trains have changed. […] Our roomettes turn out to be little coffins for a single person. From time to time, I notice, people in roomettes stick their heads out into the corridor for some sight of human kind.

Related Characters: Binx Bolling (John "Jack" Bickerson Bolling) (speaker), Kate Cutrer

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 184

Explanation and Analysis

The word "gnosis" refers to special knowledge of spiritual mysteries; as Binx uses the word, he means that train travel offers unique insights into human life. People who travel on trains enjoy a sort of intermission from everyday life, as they travel from the "sorry" past into a future imagined to be "bright and simple." In other words, trains give people a feeling, even if it's an illusion, that they're free to change their lives and that better things are ahead. Binx enjoys this unique form of travel, which symbolizes for him the ability to step aside from ordinary life and observe both others and oneself in isolation from everyday cares. He soon finds that modern trains have changed, though, and are now little better than the cars he avoids—they isolate people from one another, making Binx's search more difficult. In the progression of the story, however, this forces Binx to look inward and also to confront the nature of his relationship with Kate once and for all.

❝ She takes the bottle. "Will you tell me what to do?"
"Sure."
"You can do it because you are not religious. God is not religious. You are the unmoved mover. You don't need God or anyone else—no credit to you, unless it is a credit to be the most self-centered person alive. I don't know whether I love you, but I believe in you and I will do what you tell me. Now if I marry you, will you tell me: Kate, this morning do such and such, and if we have to go to a party, will you tell me: Kate, stand right there and have three drinks and talk to so and so? Will you?'"

Related Characters: Kate Cutrer, Binx Bolling (John "Jack" Bickerson Bolling) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 197

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is Kate's somewhat confused attempt to justify the idea of marriage to Binx. For Kate, whose anxiety makes everyday activities challenging, marriage is primarily a means of security against doubt and uncertainty. If she married Binx, he could tell her exactly what to do in various ordinary scenarios, helping her manage her fears of other people. God is a self-sufficient being; in a parallel way, Kate sees Binx as a fundamentally self-involved person who doesn't need anything from anyone else and can therefore be trusted not to order Kate around for his own interests. While this isn't exactly flattering, it does show the unsentimental familiarity and fondness between the two—which, in the end, proves to be a stronger foundation for marriage than either Binx's lustful, shallow flings or Kate's two socially advantageous engagements. Interestingly, Kate's view of marriage is similar to Binx's mother's view of religion—it's a way to withstand the pressures of daily life. Though Binx has criticized his mother, he comes to accept Kate's view of marriage and even to find

satisfaction in his role in their relationship.

Chapter 4, Section 3 Quotes

❝ […] [I]f only somebody could tell me who built the damn station, the circumstances of the building, details of the wrangling between city officials and the railroad, so that I would not fall victim to it, the station, the very first crack off the bat. Every place of arrival should have a booth set up and manned by an ordinary person whose task it is to greet strangers and give them a little trophy of local space-time stuff—tell them of his difficulties in high school and put a pinch of soil in their pockets—in order to insure that the stranger shall not become an Anyone[.]

Related Characters: Binx Bolling (John "Jack" Bickerson Bolling) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 201

Explanation and Analysis

This quote describes Binx's arrival in Chicago for a stocks and bonds conference. The train journey from New Orleans had provided a kind of in-between space that sheltered Binx from his constant need to understand his environment. When he enters the station, however, he's overwhelmed by the mystery of Chicago because it's such a big city filled with anonymous people and unfamiliar history. For that reason, he wishes it were somebody's job to greet new arrivals with mundane facts about the train station, so that people like him wouldn't feel so disoriented. "Local space-time stuff" helps people like Binx feel grounded in the environment instead of overwhelmed by anonymity—even something like stories of a resident's school days can "put a pinch of soil" in a visitor's "pocket," overcoming the shock of the unfamiliar. For Binx, this disorienting anonymity is one of the most troubling features of modern life, making people feel like "Anyones" located "Anywhere" instead of individuals located "Somewhere."

Chapter 4, Section 4 Quotes

❝ It pleases [the salesman] to speak of his cutter and of his family down in Murfreesboro and speak all the way to Union City and not once to inquire of me and this pleases me since I would not know what to say. Businessmen are our only metaphysicians, but the trouble is, they are one-track metaphysicians. By the time the salesman gets off in Union City, my head is spinning with facts about the thirty five cent cutter. It is as if I had lived in Murfreesboro all my life.

Related Characters: Binx Bolling (John "Jack" Bickerson Bolling) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 217

Explanation and Analysis

On the way home from Chicago, Binx enjoys chatting with fellow bus passengers and thinking about their lives. His favorite is a salesman of farming tools, who talks at length about his product and his family, making Binx feel as if knows the man's hometown personally. While many people would be annoyed by the salesman's self-centered chatter, Binx is charmed by the specifics of the man's small-town identity because they contrast so sharply with Chicago's overwhelming anonymity. Binx is even prompted to call the man a "metaphysician," or someone who understands the nature of human existence, because he's so secure in his identity and his place in the universe. Though salesmen are notoriously "one-track" in their interests, Binx thinks this kind of security in one's self is the human ideal. The bus journey provides a kind of intermission between the bustling anonymity of Chicago and the slower-paced familiarity of New Orleans. While the train journey had been fraught with anxiety over Binx and Kate's future, the bus journey reacquaints Binx with what's important to him and prepares him to settle down in life himself.

Chapter 5, Section 1 Quotes

"Would you verify my hypothesis? [...] First, is it not true that in all of past history people who found themselves in difficult situations behaved in certain familiar ways, well or badly, courageously or cowardly, with distinction or mediocrity, with honor or dishonor. They are recognizable. [...] Such anyhow has been the funded experience of the race for two or three thousand years, has it not? Your discovery, as best as I can determine, is that there is an alternative which no one has hit upon. It is that one finding oneself in one of life's critical situations need not after all respond in one of the traditional ways. [...] Do as one pleases, shrug, turn on one's heel and leave. Exit. Why after all need one act humanly?

Related Characters: Aunt Emily Cutrer (speaker), Binx Bolling (John "Jack" Bickerson Bolling)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 220

Explanation and Analysis

When Binx gets home from Chicago, he faces a quietly irate Aunt Emily. In a lengthy monologue, Aunt Emily tells Binx that he's not who she thought he was. He's fallen short of the heroism she believed him capable of, but that's not all—Binx hasn't even succeeded in being "cowardly," mediocre, or dishonorable. He's departed altogether from commonly recognized forms of social behavior. According to Emily, Binx has done this by completely failing to recognize what was called for in a critical moment—when Kate came along with him to Chicago, sick and unstable, he didn't even think to let her worried family know where she'd gone. Emily believes that in behaving this way, Binx has simply forfeited an opportunity to "act humanly," and she can no longer delude herself that he is capable of fulfilling his duties in life. What Emily doesn't yet know is that Binx has agreed to marry Kate—so even if he doesn't fully align with her value system, he has made an important step toward "[acting] humanly" in a way that she can indeed recognize.

"I did my best for you, son. I gave you all I had. More than anything I wanted to pass on to you the one heritage of the men of our family, a certain quality of spirit, a gaiety, a sense of duty, a nobility worn lightly, a sweetness, a gentleness with women—the only good things the South ever had and the only things that really matter in this life. Ah well."

Related Characters: Aunt Emily Cutrer (speaker), Binx Bolling (John "Jack" Bickerson Bolling)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 224

Explanation and Analysis

As Aunt Emily's tirade against Binx continues, she laments that she has dedicated her life to helping Binx become a cultured Southern gentleman, embodying the best of his heritage, but that she now believes that she has failed. In Emily's view, the essence of that heritage is fulfilling one's duty and treating women well, but these lessons seem to have been wasted on Binx. However, Binx is on the brink of committing to some of these values for the first time by marrying Kate, suggesting that while he has resisted embracing his aunt's value system in its entirety, his own search has led him back to certain core values in the end.

It's also interesting to note that, in her own way, Aunt Emily shares Binx's frustration with the modern world—she thinks people are abandoning the "good things [...] that really matter" in favor of bland mediocrity and conformity. Binx shares this rejection of a generic modernity; it's just that his search for the "good things" has been roundabout and piecemeal, instead of accepting Emily's cultural assumptions without question.

"What has been going on in your mind during all the years when we listened to music together, read the *Crito*, and spoke together—or was it only I who spoke—good Lord, I can't remember—of goodness and truth and beauty and nobility?" [...] Don't you love these things? Don't you live by them?"
"No."
"What do you love? What do you live by?"
I am silent.

Related Characters: Binx Bolling (John "Jack" Bickerson Bolling), Aunt Emily Cutrer (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 226

Explanation and Analysis

As Aunt Emily's interrogation of Binx comes to an end, she asks him if he was oblivious to her attempts to instill beauty, ideas, and values in him throughout his life. Binx denies that he loves and lives by the things Emily cherishes, confirming Emily's disillusionment about who Binx is and what he

believes. In fact, he's unable, for now, to tell her what he *does* love and live by. Emily's inability to recall how the conversations really went confirms that she tends to see people the way she wants to see them, and to try to create people in her desired image rather than accepting what she finds. After her tirade, her illusions are cleared away, and she is actually able to "see" Binx clearly for the first time, eventually leading to a happier relationship between the two. And now that Binx is gaining independence from Emily's influence, he is more free to see what his own values are and to act on them accordingly. This quote supports Percy's argument that people must find and adopt value systems not because others do, but because such systems respond adequately to the challenges of the day.

Chapter 5, Section 2 Quotes

❝ I watch him closely in the rear-view mirror. It is impossible to say why he is here. Is it part and parcel of the complex business of coming up in the world? Or is it because he believes that God himself is present here at the corner of Elysian Fields and Bons Enfants? Or is he here for both reasons: through some dim dazzling trick of grace, coming for the one and receiving the other as God's own importunate bonus? It is impossible to say.

Related Characters: Binx Bolling (John "Jack" Bickerson Bolling) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 235

Explanation and Analysis

After Kate and Binx agree once and for all to get married, they sit outside a Catholic Church and watch a man emerge from the Ash Wednesday service. Binx's observations and questions about the man reveal a lot about his own development over the course of the novel. Because Ash Wednesday is a day emphasizing repentance from sin, the timing of Binx's engagement suggests that he is turning from one way of life and embracing another—that is, he is shifting from wandering to settling down. Binx's uncertainty about the man's motivations sounds a lot like his earlier search, except that he entertains the possibility of God and God's "grace" more openly than he has ever done before. He continues wandering, in other words, but the possible scope of answers has widened significantly: it's possible that someone can partake of the "business of coming up in the world" while also "receiving [God's presence] as God's own [...] bonus." One can live an ordinary life while transcending the ordinary at the same time. Though Binx can't say for sure that this is the case, he now believes it's possible.

Epilogue Quotes

❝ "I've got to be sure about one thing [...] I'm going to sit next to the window on the Lake side and put the cape jasmine in my lap?"
"That's right."
"And you'll be thinking of me just that way?"
"That's right."
"Good by."
"Good by." [...] I watch her walk toward St Charles, cape jasmine held against her cheek, until my brothers and sisters call out behind me.

Related Characters: Binx Bolling (John "Jack" Bickerson Bolling) (speaker), Kate Cutrer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 242

Explanation and Analysis

These closing lines of *The Moviegoer*'s Epilogue give an insight into Binx's and Kate's relationship one year after the close of the main story. Binx is caring for his younger siblings while the eldest, Lonnie, is hospitalized, and he needs Kate to take the streetcar downtown to run an errand for him. Kate's anxiety used to be so crippling that such tasks were beyond her strength, so when Binx proposed, Kate made him promise that he would tell her exactly what to do at all times and encourage her that she'd be all right. Here, Binx does just that, down to telling Kate where to sit and how to hold the flowers he's picked for her. In the context of their relationship, it's a tender, reassuring gesture and exactly what Kate wants and needs from him, showing that Binx is following through on his promise to Kate—fulfilling his duty as Aunt Emily always hoped he would do. He loves Kate as an individual, not an idealization of feminine beauty. Finally, he's no longer just observing life, but taking an active part in it—finding meaning in everyday details, instead of looking beyond them.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1, SECTION 1

One Wednesday morning, Binx Bolling receives an invitation from his aunt to have lunch together. He knows this means she wants to discuss something serious, probably Binx's future, or her stepdaughter Kate. Binx is reminded of his brother Scott's death; Binx was eight at the time. As Binx walked behind the hospital with Aunt Emily, his neck prickled with anticipation. Finally, Aunt Emily told Binx that Scotty had died, and that now "it's all up to you." She tells Binx he'll have to "act like a soldier."

Two details about Binx are immediately evident. The first is his tendency to be reminded of stories from his past and to wander off on tangents about them, which often give insight into Binx's present. The second, as shown by this particular tangent, is that his brother's death has overshadowed Binx's life. What's more, Aunt Emily placed a heavy burden on Binx's shoulders to act strong and to carry Scott's potential as well as his own—an example of her duty-driven values.


This memory reminds Binx of going to see a **movie** with Linda last month at Lake Pontchartrain. The suburb where the theater is located has stopped growing, and the theater sits in the middle of an empty field. In the movie, a man had lost his memory and his connection to everything he knew, having to make a fresh start in a strange city. To Binx, this didn't seem like a complete tragedy.

Though the connection between the moviegoing experience and Binx's memory isn't made completely clear, the movie's plot—having to start over with a clean slate in an unfamiliar world—seems to remind him of his feelings after Scott's death. A clean slate still appeals to him, suggesting that he's struggling with the meaning of his life.


After the **movie**, Binx had enjoyed chatting with the theater manager in the dark night, with the lake's waves splashing over the seawall. Linda, however, was unhappy because Binx didn't have a **car** in which to drive them home (he prefers buses and streetcars). She would rather have been taken out for dinner and dancing at a city hotel. At any rate, however, Binx and Linda are no longer dating—he has a new secretary, named Sharon Kincaid.

For Binx, storylines aren't the only memorable thing about moviegoing—the place and the people around him are a significant part of the moviegoing experience. Modes of transportation serve a similar purpose. Later he'll explain the significance of these things in his search for meaning. It's hinted that Binx isn't very romantically successful and that he dates his employees.


For the past few years, Binx has lived in a New Orleans suburb called Gentilly. It is not very distinctive-looking; most of its houses are built in a California or Florida style. Binx hasn't minded this, however. He has tried living with his aunt and uncle in their beautiful house in the historic French Quarter, but somehow the environment alternately enrages and depresses him.

With its nondistinctive architecture, Gentilly feels like it could be anywhere—a bland suburb where people can quietly blend in. By contrast, the French Quarter is uniquely New Orleans, and this detail also reveals where the story is set. The uniqueness of the French Quarter unsettles Binx in ways he can't yet explain—suggesting an uncertainty about what Binx wants from life.

Gentilly, by contrast, is peaceful. There, Binx manages a branch of his uncle's brokerage firm. He lives in a basement apartment belonging to Mrs. Schexnaydre, a widow. Binx takes pride in being a good tenant and citizen. He stores his important documents in a strongbox. He follows the advice he reads in *Consumer Reports* and carefully heeds public service announcements on the radio.

Binx prefers a stable, quiet, unvarying lifestyle that largely conforms to his neighbors'. He doesn't have lofty ambitions in life and doesn't question his ordinary and predictable environment or his society's expectations of him. This attitude toward modern life will be directly challenged as the story develops.

One of Binx's favorite evening activities is going to the **movies**. While other people treasure the memories of special events in their lives, Binx remembers key moments in movies. His secretary usually accompanies him to the movies. He has dated his last three secretaries—Marcia, Linda, and now Sharon. These relationships usually start off as love affairs, complete with romantic weekends on the Gulf Coast, but Marcia and Linda both broke up with him right when Binx believed they were truly happy. Marcia or Linda would grow more and more silent, and soon Binx and his girlfriend would be tired of each other.

It's not clear whether Binx lacks meaningful memories in his life or simply prefers not to dwell on what memories he has—either way, he has a pattern of marking significant moments through the movies he's seen. He also has a pattern of dating his secretaries, seemingly with genuine feelings for them, but also with obliviousness to their feelings—suggesting Binx's immaturity in relationships in general.

Binx's job is selling stocks and bonds. Once, he had thought about going into law, medicine, or science, even achieving something great; but he now thinks it's best to give up big dreams and live an ordinary life, perhaps getting married and having kids. For now, he lives on the main street of Gentilly, called Elysian Fields. Elysian Fields was supposed to be a grand boulevard, but it's lined by shopping centers and ordinary homes. Next door to Mrs. Schexnaydre's is a new school building. Binx enjoys strolling on the playground after work.

Binx's livelihood focuses on the accumulation of wealth (his and his clients'). Though he once aspired to greater personal achievement, he appears to be satisfied, even complacent, about where he has landed in life—not too concerned about its meaning. Like Binx himself, his suburb has not lived up to its initial potential. His everyday life and his environment are marked by affluence, conformity, and complacence.

Suddenly, however, Binx's quiet life in Gentilly has changed. This morning, for the first time in years, Binx woke up thinking about "a search." He had dreamed of the war, which was the first time he thought of the search—it came to him while he was injured in a ditch. His shoulder was pressed to the ground, and he couldn't get up. For Binx, his best times are also his worst times, and this particular "worst" was one of his very best. As he watched a dung beetle scratching in the dirt, Binx realized he was "onto something," and he promised himself that if he ever got out of this ditch, he would pursue a search. But after the war, Binx forgot about his search.

Binx hasn't always been this way. A veteran of the Korean conflict in the early 1950s, Binx has survived a traumatic experience that, at the time, made him believe that there's something more to life than what's apparent. This suggests a pattern in Binx's life whereby the "worst" times—like personal suffering—open up possibilities for growth. However, when things return to normal, it's easy to forget the insights gained during exceptional moments.

This morning, however, as Binx got dressed and filled his pockets with the usual things (like a notebook, pencil, and slide rule), it's as if he saw these objects for the first time. At that moment, his search became possible. He thinks about the search again as he travels to his Aunt Emily's house on the bus. (Binx doesn't enjoy **cars** because he feels invisible in them.) He takes a route through the French Quarter because he read in the newspaper that William Holden is in town, shooting scenes for a movie.

The "search" is characterized by an awareness of possibilities beyond the ordinary—that's why things like the contents of one's pockets can cease to be mundane and start to look like clues. Even before remembering his search, Binx already seems to have had an instinctive resistance to conformity—finding that cars tend to isolate a person from humanity, for example. William Holden was a popular 1950s movie star, which orients the reader as to when the story is set.

It's a gray, gloomy day in March. Binx sits on a **bus** that's mostly crowded with women shoppers; five Black women sit together in the back. Next to Binx sits an especially beautiful woman who appears to be smiling flirtatiously at him. Binx imagines that if this were a **movie**, it would be so easy for them to meet. But then he gets distracted again by the idea of the search.

The novel doesn't directly engage with racism, but it's present in the background—for example, the acknowledgment of Jim Crow laws that consigned Black passengers to the rear of buses. As for romance, Binx tends to look for shortcuts to a meaningful relationship, preferring a simplistic movie plot to the challenges of real life.

The search is what anyone would pursue if they weren't absorbed by the "everydayness" of life. This morning, Binx awoke feeling like a "castaway" on a strange island. Any castaway explores the environment carefully for clues. If someone becomes aware of the idea of a search, that person is "onto something." But if someone fails to be "onto something," then that person is inevitably "in despair."

Binx, distracted on the bus, goes on a slight tangent to describe the nature of his "search." It's simply an awareness of meaning beyond the ordinary, and a determination to keep searching for that meaning—like a castaway desperate to discover how they got there and why. Someone who doesn't even know they're a castaway is "in despair" because they don't even think it's necessary to look beyond their hopeless, stuck situation.

The **movies** are aware of the search, but they never get it right—they always end with despair. The main character always starts out as a castaway, but he ends up falling in love and settling down, eventually sinking into everydayness until "he might just as well be dead."

Binx sees moviegoing as an element of his search—even though, in his opinion, movies never reach a satisfying conclusion. That's because movie characters catch on to the search but inevitably settle for the ordinary, which Binx sees as selling out, a reflection of what the average moviegoer wants to see.

Binx isn't sure about the object of his search. He's heard, for example, that 98% of Americans believe in God. Have those people already found what Binx is seeking—or has the idea of a search never even occurred to them? Binx sincerely doesn't know.

Binx doesn't even know what he's searching for. He doesn't discount the possibility that his search is basically religious in nature; after all, most people are satisfied that God is the answer and build their lives around that belief. In Binx's view, they might be right, or else they might be deluded, oblivious to the "search," and therefore in despair.


Lost in thought, Binx has been staring at the beautiful passenger's calf, sometimes frowning. Before she gets off the bus, Binx tries smiling at the woman, but he gets no response. A little later, he gets off the bus at the French Quarter and walks through neighborhoods of old ironwork and overgrown gardens. It turns out he's having a lucky day—he spots William Holden. Binx follows, watching as a young couple gets between him and the movie star. Binx quickly surmises that the young couple are Northerners on their honeymoon. The couple looks unhappy. But when William Holden asks the young man for a match and then chats with him in a friendly way, the young man's whole demeanor changes; Binx thinks the fellow now feels validated in his existence.

Ironically, Binx's preoccupation with the search sometimes makes him oblivious to beauty around him. Binx's observation of the young couple is another example of Binx's habit of seeing the people around him as evidence in his search. He's just making assumptions about the young couple and their interaction with the movie star—none of this is necessarily true—but the story he invents validates Binx's ideas (i.e., that people tend to drift unhappily in anonymous, conformist lives until something jolts them out of their oblivion). This suggests that Binx's assumptions about his search could be misguided, too.

It's lunchtime, and a parade, put on by a women's krewe, is going down the street. Binx thinks the current krewe includes Linda; he had promised to come and watch her in the parade. However, because of the women's masks, he isn't sure if she's among them. Binx senses a despair in the atmosphere that he cannot explain.

Krewes are groups of people who organize to put on parades and balls during New Orleans's famous Mardi Gras celebration. Binx's inability to identify Linda suggests a tendency to view the women he dates as interchangeable.

Binx spends 10 minutes talking with a friend, Eddie Lovell, and then cannot remember what they discussed. As Binx listens to Eddie talk about his marriage and business and admires the man's self-confident stance, he wonders if his own life in Gentilly is a joke and if Eddie is *really* living. A few years ago, Kate was engaged to Eddie's brother Lyell. The night before their wedding, Lyell was killed in a car accident, which Kate survived. When Eddie asks how Kate is doing nowadays, Binx assures him that Kate seems well and happy.

Again, Binx is so preoccupied by the implications of an interaction (like if Eddie's life is better than his) that he misses what's in front of him. There is a self-absorption in his search for meaning that makes his narration of events questionable, if not outright unreliable. The conversation reveals Kate's background, which, like Binx's, includes loss and grief. Eddie implies that Kate hasn't always handled her loss well.

CHAPTER 1, SECTION 2

At Aunt Emily's house, Binx is greeted by a Black servant, Mercer. Mercer originally worked for Binx's grandfather. Binx always feels a little uneasy around Mercer and interprets Mercer's attitude towards him as both submissive and somewhat condescending. As Emily's butler, Mercer has changed a lot from his country days in Feliciana Parish, changing his speech to suit his higher position.

Binx's discomfort around Mercer reflects an ambivalence about racial relations in his 1950s Southern context. Mercer's long and changing history with the Bolling family shows how such matters could be deeply embedded in a family's lifestyle and assumptions.

Binx admires his aunt's beautiful living room, which is covered with old portraits and piles of periodicals and books, including *The Life of the Buddha*. (Aunt Emily says that she is "an Episcopalian by emotion, a Greek by nature, and a Buddhist by choice.") Binx half-listens to Mercer's chatting about current events while reflecting that, in recent years, Mercer has become blurry in his eyes. He sees Mercer as both devoted (as Aunt Emily believes) and underhanded (Binx knows Mercer gets kickbacks from other household employees). When Mercer doesn't fit neatly into either of these categories, Binx isn't sure what to make of him.

Binx's family is well-off and cultured. Aunt Emily is well-read and has, in contrast to Binx, carefully chosen ideas about herself and her approach to life—all of which suggest a certain detachment from emotion. Binx feels most comfortable around people like Emily who are easily categorized. When, like Mercer, people seem to blur categories, Binx feels somewhat threatened—perhaps because they unsettle Binx's self-perception, too.

While Mercer talks, Binx studies a photo on the mantel. It's a picture of two elder Bolling brothers—Dr. Wills and Judge Anse—with Binx's father standing in front. They are in Germany, a few years after the First World War. His father's younger brother, Alex Bolling, is missing from the picture—he'd been killed in the Argonne. Binx's own father had enlisted in the Royal Canadian Air Force in 1940 and gotten killed even before the United States joined the Second World War, in Crete.

Binx has a formidable family legacy to live up to. Notably, most of his forebears are already dead, so Binx also has to live up to an idealized *legacy, not one he can observe and interpret for himself. In particular, the men in Binx's family value war service and professional achievement. Though Binx has followed in their military footsteps, he doesn't seem to share their initiative or distinction.*

When Aunt Emily walks in, Binx welcomes the interruption. His aunt has been a significant force in Binx's life. After his father's death, Binx's mother went back to work as a nurse, and Aunt Emily (who is really his great-aunt) offered to oversee Binx's education. Aunt Emily had been a bit of a rebel—after working in a Chicago settlement house, she adopted more progressive political ideas and volunteered overseas as a Red Cross nurse. During that time, she met Jules Cutrer, a widower, and after getting married they settled down together in New Orleans. Even now, at 65, Aunt Emily remains formidable; her keenness of expression reminds Binx of a soldier's look.

Aunt Emily has been a mother figure to Binx, which accounts for her more active role in Binx's life than a great-aunt might usually play and the importance he places on her opinion. Aunt Emily is the kind of person who seems to have always known who she is and what she wanted—unlike Binx. (Her "soldier's look" recalls her command to little Binx at the beginning of the book to just "act like a soldier" to cope with grief.) In this way, she is a foil to Binx, whose wandering and uncertainty suggest that he hasn't yet found his place in this prominent family or in the world at large.

Just as Binx had suspected, Aunt Emily calls him into her office for a talk. It soon becomes clear that the talk is about Kate. Aunt Emily shows him a carton of empty bottles which were found in Kate's room. One of them reads "sodium pentobarbital." Aunt Emily says she is sure that Kate will be fine, but that as Kate's marriage to Walter gets closer, Kate is "nervous" and fearful of disaster. For the time being, Aunt Emily wants Binx to keep Kate from moping around the house and avoiding people. She tells Binx to take Kate to watch the parade, as a low-key way of being in public. Aunt Emily knows that Binx can make Kate laugh like nobody else can.

Sodium pentobarbital is a type of sedative, and the stockpile hints that Kate's mental health struggles are more severe than anyone has suspected—or than anyone has been willing to admit. Aunt Emily seems unable to believe that Kate's case is that urgent, or that it can't be solved simply by keeping Kate occupied with laughter and parades. Aunt Emily's attitude suggests a blind spot in the family's ability to acknowledge suffering, as they place such value on achievement, devotion to duty, and fulfilling one's role.

CHAPTER 1, SECTION 3

Uncle Jules is at lunch, along with Kate and her fiancé, Walter, and everyone is smiling. Binx and Uncle Jules get along well because Binx has become a successful moneymaker: he has a knack for selling the stocks that Jules underwrites. Uncle Jules and Walter get along well because Walter was once the manager of Jules's beloved Tulane football team. Binx sees him as the only person he knows "whose victory in the world is total and unqualified." Jules is wealthy, well-liked, generous, and a good Catholic.

Uncle Jules is everything that Binx isn't—successful, secure in what he believes, and comfortable in his place in the world. Though Binx has discovered a knack for Jules's business, he doesn't fit in with the men of the family otherwise. In fact, the family atmosphere seems to offer little space for those whose "victory in the world" is less complete, which also describes Kate.


Kate has a "brown-eyed look." It's not unprecedented for Aunt Emily to ask Binx to help Kate. When Kate was a friendless 10-year-old, Emily asked 15-year-old Binx to try to help Kate overcome her shyness, but Kate had only given Binx that same, brown-eyed look. Binx studies Walter, who is only 33 but is already a senior partner at a new firm. Amid the banter, Kate abruptly sighs and leaves the room. Walter follows her, but Uncle Jules continues eating as if nothing has happened.

Kate's struggles date back to childhood, implying that they didn't originate with the car accident and that Binx, too, is intimately familiar with them. The family leans on Binx to help Kate as her parents are unable or unwilling to do. Her wide-eyed look appears when she's having an especially difficult time. Walter's eminence in his field contrasts with Binx's relative lack of success, despite being only a few years older.

After lunch, Walter tries to talk Binx into rejoining his Carnival krewe, which includes men from New Orleans' 10 wealthiest families. Walter's ease and grace remind Binx how, in college, Walter was the campus's trendsetter. In their fraternity, young pledges strained to win Walter's approval. When Binx was a freshman, joining a fraternity had been very important to him. When Binx was a new candidate, he offered to pledge Delta on the spot, and Walter warmly welcomed him and introduced him to the other men.

Binx and Walter spent their youth together, and Binx used to admire men like Walter and desire their approval much more than his present attitudes would suggest. He even aspired to such conventional things as fraternity membership. Now, joining a krewe—a sort of rough equivalence to a fraternity—no longer appeals to Binx, suggesting that his values and his desire for approval have shifted significantly.


In the end, however, Binx wasn't much of an asset to the fraternity. His college years were undistinguished; he didn't win a single honor, and he spent most of his time daydreaming on the fraternity house porch. Back in the present, Binx resists Walter's prodding to rejoin the krewe and go hunting with his group of friends. Making conversation, Walter asks him what's wrong with the world these days. Binx starts to tell him about his search, but Walter changes the subject. This is what usually happens when somebody asks Binx "what's wrong with the world."

Though Binx aspired to conventional things like fraternity membership, he didn't actually seem to be a good match for them, suggesting a disconnect between conformist culture (like that found in a college fraternity) and his actual temperament. This suggests that while Binx's "search" was slow to take shape, he's always felt social pressure to fit in and to act like something he isn't.

After the Korean War, a group of friends, including Walter and Binx, bought a houseboat. But Binx quickly found all the hunting, fishing, card-playing, and drinking to be dull. In fact, Binx hasn't really had friends since he first returned from the war. Around the same time, he started hanging around with two men, a poet and an eccentric musician, and they decided to hike the Appalachian Trail together. Although he was happy at first, Binx quickly grew depressed. He wished his friends well and moved to Gentilly.

Binx has always felt somewhat alienated from his peers, even from those he's considered friends. The activities that feel meaningful to them don't feel worthwhile to Binx. By extension, his alienation suggests that for Binx, neither conventional nor more eccentric pursuits have proven sufficient to help him cope with the suffering he faced in the war, which goes unresolved.

Binx has lived in Gentilly ever since, constantly lost in wonder. Occasionally his eccentric old friends stop by whenever they're in New Orleans, and Binx continues wishing them well. But Binx just stays home and watches TV. At least television doesn't distract him from wonder.

Binx's life now is a paradox. On one hand, it's a much more conventional life than others', yet he implies that he "wonders" more than his vagabond friends do, even while engaging in activities that seem like escapism. This suggests that Binx's search for meaning has to do with one's attitude toward life more than one's position in life.

CHAPTER 1, SECTION 4

Fulfilling his promise to Aunt Emily, Binx looks for Kate. He finds her cleaning an old fireplace in the basement, seeming more cheerful. Kate tells Binx that he doesn't fool her—Aunt Emily thinks he's a "go-getter" like the Bollings, but she knows he's more like her. Kate takes the opportunity to criticize Aunt Emily, and Binx doesn't object; Kate's affections often swing between her father and stepmother. When Jules married Emily, Emily became a kind of older sister to Kate, opening up the world of art and ideas, and even tolerating Kate's radical politics. But these days Kate seems to have surpassed Aunt Emily and has begun to resent her.

Kate understands Binx better than anyone else in his life, and this seems to be because Kate feels out of place in the family, too. While Emily opened up new possibilities to the younger Kate, she now sees what she wants to see in Kate, much as she does with Binx. Neither Kate nor Binx upholds the same values or is satisfied with the same kind of life as the rest of the family.

CHAPTER 1, SECTION 5

Binx chats with Aunt Emily while she plays Chopin on the piano. They talk about Binx's mother, whom Emily has never really liked, thinking her beneath Binx's father. When Binx's father began practicing medicine in Feliciana Parish, he married the first nurse who walked through the door. His mother remarried after his father died and now lives on the Gulf Coast with her husband, a car dealer; they have six children, and Binx occasionally visits their bayou fishing camp.

Aunt Emily thinks she knows what's best for everyone in the family; her antipathy for Binx's mother accounts for her swiftness to take over Binx's education. (His father's quick marriage to an employee also suggests where Binx's dating habits come from.) The divide in Binx's family symbolizes the pull he feels between different value systems—the Bollings' upper-class one and the Smith's working-class religiosity—as will become clear.

As Binx studies the mantel photographs again, Aunt Emily observes that there are no longer any "Catos" in the world, only Jules, and family friend Sam Yerger. Binx doesn't believe that either of these men is a "Cato." The truth is that Aunt Emily sees what she wants to see in people, which even changes the way they see themselves.

Here, Emily refers to Cato, a Roman senator and Stoic philosopher of the first century B.C.E. Cato's Stoicism appeals to Emily because of her belief in duty. Emily's belief that her husband and friend are "Catos" shows that she sees people the way she chooses to see them. Binx is skeptical of Emily's stoicism and her tendency to manipulative others' views of themselves.

When a thunderstorm breaks, Aunt Emily and Binx stroll up and down on the promenade. Binx's neck prickles when Aunt Emily says she's had a brainstorm. Binx, she claims, has always had a mind for scientific research. Binx knows this isn't actually true. His mind is average, but Aunt Emily thinks he's smart because he is quiet and because his father was smart. Binx even attempted a summer research project in college, working on an experiment involving kidney stones in pigs.

Binx's neck prickles when Aunt Emily is about to say something consequential for his future, such as when Scott died. (Though this conversation seems to reach an impasse, it will be consequential for Binx later.) Aunt Emily sees Binx as a copy of his father, but there's little real evidence for this claim—Emily just selects details that align with her values and that reinforce her assumptions about Binx.

But over that summer, Binx constantly became distracted by the dust motes in the bright sunshine spilling across the lab. His lab mate, Harry, was unaffected by this wonder. As a scientist, Harry was content to focus on the problem at hand, not caring about his surroundings. Binx, on the other hand, couldn't be like Harry, even if the project were a cure for cancer. He was much more interested in the greater mystery surrounding him.

Even before he embarked on his search, Binx was alert to details that other people miss. Harry could shut out the external world in order to focus on a specific problem. For Binx, however, the biggest "experiment" is the mystery of existence—something he's incapable of shutting out, no matter what else is at stake.

Contrary to Binx's expectation, though, Aunt Emily doesn't suggest that he go back into scientific research. Instead, she encourages him to go to medical school in the fall. He can even live in a cottage she's fixed up on her property. Binx replies noncommittally. Aunt Emily asks Binx what he wants out of life—doesn't he feel obligated to contribute something to the world? Binx doesn't know what to say.

Aunt Emily is so confident in her vision of Binx that she has a plan worked out in order to ensure he doesn't squander the potential she sees in him. But Binx doesn't share Emily's straightforward belief in duty and can't commit to this plan. He has too many questions about the world to think of contributing something to it.

As they continue walking, Aunt Emily says that she no longer understands the world; the things her generation cherishes are no longer respected. Binx reflects that even though Aunt Emily's world is falling apart, at least she understands its collapse. To her, the world is basically simple. The way she sees it, Binx just has to do his duty—go to medical school and spend his life serving others. Binx simply must remember his duty.

This scene recalls Binx's boyhood walk with Aunt Emily after his brother Scott died. At the time, Aunt Emily told him he must simply act like a soldier. Similarly, she now reminds him that life is simply a matter of following his duty—that he needs to soldier on, so to speak. Binx feels that Aunt Emily sees the world in black and white, and he feels alienated by her expectations and worldview. For him, the world is more complicated.

Aunt Emily goes on, saying that she doesn't understand the purpose of human existence, yet she believes with all her heart that a person must "do what little he can and do it as best he can." Goodness doesn't prevail in this life, yet a person must go down fighting anyway; to do anything else is less than human. Binx doesn't understand what Aunt Emily is talking about.

Aunt Emily's value system—her belief in duty above all—doesn't require an understanding of why *human life exists. In her view, people can't know this, and they know that their efforts to do good will likely fail, but they must try anyway. Binx finds these beliefs unintelligible; "why" is all-important to him.*

When Binx starts explaining his "search" in vague terms, Aunt Emily brightens. She thinks he means he's embarking on a *Wanderjahr*, "something every man used to do." Binx's own father wandered Europe after college. When Binx finished college, he went straight to war. Aunt Emily thinks this is why Binx seems to have lost his love of science, books, and music. She reminds him how they used to spend all night talking about literature. Binx feels deflated by Aunt Emily's reaction. He starts to remind her that *she* was the driver of those literary conversations, not him, but suddenly he's too tired to continue. They sit down, and Aunt Emily makes Binx promise that, in one week's time, on his 30th birthday, he will give her an answer about medical school. As Binx leaves, Aunt Emily hugs him and tells him he reminds her of his father.

Aunt Emily thinks Binx's search is just a youthful escapade, wandering around before taking up life's more serious duties. Because Binx spent his youth at war, she thinks, he's never had the opportunity for a Wanderjahr. *While this interpretation reconciles Emily to Binx's apparent aimlessness, it further alienates Binx. The whole conversation underscores Emily's habit of seeing what she wants to see in people rather than seeing them as they really are—and when she looks at Binx, she sees a version of his late father, not Binx himself. With the medical school idea, Emily continues trying to build the version of Binx she hopes to see.*

CHAPTER 1, SECTION 6

Binx is still at his aunt's house; the rain has stopped. Kate calls him. She is working on renovating a section of the house and is in good spirits. Binx understands—it seems that if only Kate could find the right *place*, then she could live her life. But when Binx brings up the parade again, Kate grows nervous and picks at her thumb, her breathing shallow. But when Binx asks, she says it isn't that bad this time.

Places and external environments are important to both Binx and Kate. Because of his own search, Binx grasps that Kate's anxiety stems, at least partly, from not knowing where she belongs in the world. Though the precise nature of Kate's mental illness isn't explained, she appears to suffer symptoms consistent with panic attacks. The prospect of being around people triggers them.

They chat about Walter. Kate says she isn't sure if she's going to marry him—even though he's already going around the Cutrers' house measuring the walls. Kate tells Binx that although she lets Aunt Emily believe that the car accident is what bothers her, the truth is that the accident "gave [her] life." It's her secret, sort of like the war is Binx's secret: after someone endures an experience like that, everyone says they're impressed by how well you survived and how well you're doing now.

Even though they're not married yet, Walter already shows an attitude of ownership about Kate's family home, suggesting that he takes a similarly domineering attitude toward Kate herself, which she finds oppressive. Kate also implies that she felt stifled by her previous engagement—that's why its abrupt ending via a tragic car accident felt liberating to her. She has discovered that surviving a tragedy earns people's respect, yet this admiration blinds people to a survivor's ongoing suffering.

Kate tells Binx about the happiest moment of her life. It happened in the fall of 1955. She was 19 and about to marry Lyell, who was a good man. While they were driving home from a football game in the fog, Lyell passed a car and collided head-on with a truck of Black cotton-pickers. Kate doesn't remember what happened to her during the crash, but she later woke up on the front porch of a shack, uninjured. She heard someone say that the white man had been killed. All Kate could think about was that she didn't want to face Lyell's family, so she refused offers of a ride. Instead she got on a passing **bus**, rode to Natchez, checked into a hotel, and enjoyed a bath and a big breakfast. When her bloodstained clothes came back from the cleaner's, she caught a train back to New Orleans and walked home in the early evening.

Kate describes the accident that killed Lyell, derailed her intended marriage, and changed the course of her life. Because Kate seems to have genuinely liked Lyell, her overwhelming relief at his sudden death is all the more startling. This suggests that Kate never really wanted to get married and that when she was given an unexpected way out, relief overwhelmed all other emotions, giving her a chance to experience freedom and independence for the first time (the luxurious breakfast, the solo trip home without telling anyone). However, this implies that Kate has never fully dealt with her other emotions—like grief and fear—resulting in depression and anxiety.

Kate's happiest moment came during the **bus** ride. She remembers the bus traveling through the bright morning and cool valleys. But after telling the story, Kate's mood darkens. Binx asks if Kate is going to marry Walter now. She says she probably won't. She also declines Binx's offer to go out tonight.

In the novel, vehicle travel symbolizes various stages of a person's journey through life. Kate's bus ride was her happiest moment because she experienced freedom for the first time. Being reminded of her engagement to Walter pulls her out of that happy memory. This passage also recalls how Binx prefers traveling by bus.

CHAPTER 1, SECTION 7

Kate and Binx end up going out that evening after all. They're sitting in an oyster bar. Kate tells Binx she can't marry Walter. She also admits that she wasn't being truthful earlier; she's feeling very bad today. When Binx offers to call Merle (Kate's doctor), she says they should try "the other" instead. "The other" refers to a coping strategy wherein Kate acts like a small child, withdrawn and shy, and Binx mostly ignores her. Kate gazes around the restaurant open-mouthed.

Binx has a natural way with Kate, sensing how to help her through her difficult moments without (as Aunt Emily does) making a big deal of it. She also appears to be more honest with him about how she's really feeling, establishing that the two of them have a more realistic connection than either of them does with other partners. Kate's past trauma seems to have stunted her emotionally.

After dark, Binx and Kate catch part of the parade downtown. Soon a vanguard of robed, flame-bearing figures come down the street, followed by rumbling floats. Children climb ladders to watch. Maskers toss treats to them. When the krewe captain appears on horseback, Binx asks Kate if she wants to see Walter, and she says no, so they leave. They head to the **movies**.

Seeing Walter, even costumed for the iconic Mardi Gras parade, is upsetting to Kate; the festive atmosphere seems to mock her struggle. Though going to the movies is often a form of escapism, for Binx and Kate it feels more realistic than the gaiety of Carnival.

They watch a **movie** called *Panic in the Streets*, which was filmed in New Orleans. In her own way, Kate understands Binx's moviegoing. When a scene shows the very neighborhood which contains the theater, Kate gives Binx a knowing look. After the movie, she says the neighborhood is now "certified." "Certification" is Binx's concept for what happens when a place becomes "Somewhere" and not just "Anywhere." If a person lived in this neighborhood forever, it would appear empty to him, but if he saw it in the movie, he could feel, at least briefly, that he lived Somewhere.

For Binx, movies are a way of connecting with the significance of people and places. They help turn anonymous "Anywheres" into meaningful "Somewheres." This is what Binx means by "certification," which is an aspect of his search. In this way, moviegoing is Binx's way of seeking deeper meaning in life, not escaping from it. Such an intentional search can be more genuine than the forced gaiety of watching a parade.

Though Kate sounds a little better, Binx knows she isn't—she's just playing a role, this time being his "buddy." In Kate's suffering, even their friendship gets transformed, like everything else in Kate's life, to horror.

Like Binx after his brother's death, Kate sometimes assumes a particular role to help her cope with grief. Because she hasn't grieved freely, Kate's grief consumes everything else in her life.

CHAPTER 2, SECTION 1

It's the last weekend of Carnival before Mardi Gras, and that means business is slow for Binx. Again Binx dreamed vaguely of the war last night, and the fear from the dream clings to everything in his office—except for Sharon. Sharon is from Alabama and has worked for Binx for two weeks. Though Binx has hardly said anything to her, he can't stop thinking of her. Binx finds her to be a sturdy, conventional Southern beauty, and her looks bring tears to his eyes.

Like Kate, whose grief spills over into everything else in her life, Binx finds that his fear from the war lingers in his life. Women provide a diversion from his feelings. So far, Binx's attraction to Sharon appears no more substantive than his attraction to other women who've worked for him; she's mostly a convenient distraction.

Binx talks to both Aunt Emily and Kate on the phone. Aunt Emily says that Kate has agreed to see Dr. Mink (Merle), and she gives Binx credit for Kate's improved mood. To Binx, though, Kate sounds strained, as if she's trying too hard to be ironically detached. Binx worries about her; he thinks Kate keeps trapping herself just when it seems she's found a way forward. She has broken her engagement with Walter. She tells Binx it would be so much easier if her family just kicked her out, but when Binx asks her why she doesn't just look for a job, she abruptly hangs up.

Binx understands Kate's moods better than Aunt Emily does; indeed, he interprets her struggle more accurately than anyone. He sees that Kate is self-sabotaging, getting stuck in problems of her own making. For example, she seems to be trying to relive the freedom of her first broken engagement by dumping Walter, but she hasn't found a sustainable path forward in life.

After that, Binx stares at Sharon, with whom he is in love. She is a good secretary, quick to learn. She comes from the country and lives in a rooming house; Binx drove past it one night. But Binx remains aloof, even though he feels dazed with desire when Sharon so much as brushes past him.

The superficiality of Binx's attraction to Sharon contrasts with his deep familiarity with Kate. Sharon is someone to admire from afar, not to be known and cared for.

Sometimes Binx reads books at work, concealed behind a binder; today it's *Arabia Deserta*. He used to avoid such books; until recently, he preferred "fundamental" books like *War and Peace*, *A Study of History*, and Einstein's *The Universe as I See It*. Reading such books was an attempt to understand the universe from the outside. He felt like an Anyone living Anywhere, occasionally distracting himself from his reading by taking walks or seeing **movies**. He called this his "vertical search." One night, after finishing a chemistry book, Binx felt that his search had basically concluded. He went out and saw *It Happened One Night* and enjoyed himself.

Binx is probably reading Doughty's Travels in Arabia Deserta, *an 1888 narrative of the author's travels among the Bedouins. Binx used to prefer hefty classics and foundational historical and scientific textbooks—these were a way of making sense of the wider world, a huge task that sometimes required frivolous breaks. But now that Binx is satisfied with his understanding of how the wider world works, he's left trying to understand his own place within it. In other words, he no longer wants to be an "Anyone"—hence reading more focused books about specific people, for insight into the search.*

Afterward, though, Binx realized that though he now understood the universe, he did not understand himself. For that reason he began his horizontal search. In this search, wandering became essential rather than a distraction. Nowadays he "[wanders] seriously" and reads for distraction.

In the horizontal search, wandering is no longer a distraction, but a form of research—the reverse of the process of the vertical search. Wandering is a way of looking for clues to where he fits in the universe.

Binx gets a call from a Mr. Sartalamaccia who's interested in buying Binx's inheritance, a worthless parcel of swampland, for $8,000. Instead of accepting the offer on the spot, Binx has an idea. He invites Sharon to accompany him to St. Bernard Parish in order to copy the land title for him. Sharon agrees, as long as she's back by 7:30 that night. Binx grows sullen, disappointed that Sharon apparently has a date.

Binx's dealings with women are self-involved as well as superficial—he assumes that Sharon is free for him to pursue (and will be receptive to the pursuit) and not dating anybody else.

CHAPTER 2, SECTION 2

Binx enjoys the evening in Gentilly. The sky is huge and bright, with ibises flying toward the marshes; on the streets, vehicle taillights trail in the direction of the Gulf Coast. Binx decides to stop by the movie theater, but the **movie** that's playing looks depressing, so he declines. He also chats with the ticket seller, Mrs. DeMarco, about her son in the Air Force. Binx always gets to know the operators of movie theaters. This isn't a kind gesture on his part; it's a selfish one—if he doesn't get to know the theater owner or ticket seller, he feels disconnected from space and time. He could be watching the movie anywhere in the world.

Binx's chat with Mrs. DeMarco is an example of how moviegoing fits into his search. He doesn't just go to the theater in order to get lost in a film, but to find a way of connecting himself more strongly to his environment. By talking to the ticket seller, he gains specific points of context—he's not just having an anonymous experience. This approach subverts the idea of moviegoing as a form of generic consumption.

Binx first became aware of his place-time problem while watching *Red River* in the Tivoli. As he watched a fight scene between Montgomery Clift and John Wayne, he wondered where the wood of his theater seat would be centuries from now. Once, in Cincinnati, he watched *Holiday* in a neighborhood theater and befriended the ticket seller, Mrs. Clara James, with whom he still exchanges Christmas cards.

The specific details of movies aren't all that important to Binx, except in connection with real places, people, and thoughts he had while watching the film—specifically thoughts related to the passage of time and the meaning of life. Again, moviegoing is more about his context than about escapism.

When he gets home, Binx finds a memo from his aunt, but before he can read it, Mrs. Schexnaydre drops by to lend Binx her *Reader's Digest*. Mrs. Schexnaydre is a tidy landlord and a very lonely woman; she doesn't know anyone in New Orleans. Occasionally Binx watches TV with her or brings her along to the **movies**. Mrs. Schexnaydre is fearful of Black people, even though few of Gentilly's residents are Black, and she keeps three fierce dogs for protection. The dogs also hate Binx.

Racism isn't dealt with directly in the book but is occasionally touched on, as here; Binx's landlord doesn't really know any of her Black neighbors but makes the worst assumptions about them regardless. She is disconnected from her environment in general, which actually makes her a fitting companion for Binx's search for connection.

Mrs. Schexnaydre habitually marks heartwarming articles for Binx to read, often featuring strangers who discover unlikely things in common. Binx enjoys these articles, but right now he has to read his aunt's memo. It contains a quote from Marcus Aurelius urging Binx to "think steadily as a Roman and […] do what thou hast in hand with perfect and simple dignity."

Marcus Aurelius was a Stoic philosopher of the second century C.E. His straightforward focus on duty and dignity appeals to Aunt Emily's values; with this quote, she encourages Binx to follow her advice and start medical school.

Binx maintains a plain apartment, with a small television and some generic prints. He sits directly in front of the television, watching a play about a cynical man who tries to take over a small town newspaper, only to be thwarted by the kindly townsfolk and eventually becoming one of them. He watches this until it's time to pick up Kate.

Binx watches a television play that showcases the way that such productions always get the "search" wrong, in his view—an outsider gets swept up in typical "everydayness" until he can no longer be distinguished from everyone else. American culture seems to be pressing this narrative on Binx, and he resists it.

CHAPTER 2, SECTION 3

That night, Binx successfully achieves what he calls a "repetition." One day, 14 years ago, Binx watched a Western called *The Oxbow Incident* at a campus **movie** house. He remembers the smell of privet shrubs outside. (Binx always notices the smell of a movie theater's neighborhood and season.) Yesterday, he noticed that the same theater was running *Picayune*, another Western. He and Kate watch the movie and emerge from the theater to the same smell of privet. It's a successful repetition.

Binx's attention to specific details—such as the smell of hedges blossoming near the theater—lets him experience movies on a level beyond what most people experience. The moviegoing experience is something beyond just escaping into a film; it's a way of looking for meaning beyond ordinary life.

A "repetition" is a reenactment of past experience, so that the time segment that's elapsed can be isolated and savored apart from intervening events. For example, Binx recently experienced a repetition by accident when he spotted a newspaper advertisement which he previously spotted 20 years ago in a magazine. The repetition made him feel as if everything that had happened during the intervening 20 years never happened; only time itself remained. The **movie** theater repetition is not as satisfying. However, Binx thinks about the movie theater seats which have quietly endured for 14 years' worth of silent nights. He feels that such enduring must somehow be accounted for.

For Binx, a "repetition" is an aspect of the search which attempts to grasp the mystery of time. It is sort of like déjà vu, except that its value is not simply in the repeat act itself, but in recognizing the passage of intervening time—like 14 years' worth of nights that have gone (as far as he knows) unrecognized by anyone else. In this way, Binx seeks to understand the significance of specific time as well as specific place.

After the movie, Binx and Kate walk around campus and talk about Kate's doctor's appointment. She feels better after having talked with Merle Mink. But Kate worries that she puts on her best face with doctors. Being sick doesn't bother her—being well does. She suddenly clutches Binx's arm and says that it's only in times of disaster or death that people seem "real." But after such a moment passes, people once again drift into unreality.

In her own way, Kate is searching, too. She is trying to understand how to live life apart from suffering, given that the most significant moments of her life have involved death and loss. In the absence of suffering, people seem indistinct and unreal. Binx also struggles with the seeming unreality of the world in light of "everydayness."

Binx and Kate stop by the laboratory where Binx once worked. Kate asks if this is part of Binx's search, but Binx doesn't answer. Kate sees the search as a form of eccentricity. Binx can't stand to be a mere eccentric and is annoyed by Kate's vaguely mocking tone. Kate muses that perhaps Binx is overlooking something obvious in his search, but she won't tell him what. On the **streetcar**, she kisses him affectionately, her eyes darkened to discs.

Vehicles often feature prominently in the progression of Binx's relationships—like this streetcar ride with Kate. Binx feels that Kate isn't taking his search seriously, but in the midst of her anxiety (signaled by her darkened eyes), Kate has an insight that neither of them fully appreciates yet—hinting that she is a key to his search.

CHAPTER 2, SECTION 4

That night, Binx sleeps fitfully as usual. He has not slept soundly since he was injured in the war. Whenever he's about to fall into a deep sleep, he is always jolted by the fear that something will happen and he'll miss it—though he isn't sure what "it" is. At dawn he walks through the silent suburbs toward the lake, thinking of his father. His father also suffered from insomnia and often prowled around at night. Binx's mother was no help, further discouraging his father by making a glib joke of the situation.

Binx's experience in the war was more traumatic than he readily admits—it alerted him to the necessity of a search, but it also causes physical wakefulness, which seems to overlap with the search in some way (the trauma of his experience is entwined with his fear of missing life's meaning). Binx has such wakefulness in common with his father, and both of them feel misunderstood in their wanderings.

Unlike his father, Binx does not try to sleep, obsess over his health, or try to cultivate so-called stimulating hobbies. He thinks that such things make people complacent in their despair. He would rather fathom mystery. He thinks about the haunted-looking suburban houses and his father's hopeless face. When he gets home, he falls asleep in the cul-de-sac next to the house.

Binx doesn't try to find a solution for his insomnia or do anything that might distract him from his search. He fears ending up like his father—unsatisfied in life and thus not truly living, like a house in which nobody is at home. He has to keep looking.

CHAPTER 2, SECTION 5

Binx is awakened by the noise of the mailman, who brings a letter from Binx's old war buddy Harold Graebner. It's a birth announcement, and Harold asks Binx to be his new baby's godfather. Binx seldom sends or receives letters. When he was in the army, he initially wrote Aunt Emily long, thoughtful letters about his experiences. Binx now scorns the romanticism of his old letters, thinking it no better than his father's pointless health obsession. He wonders how to reply to Harold. He begins to write that since he's not a practicing Catholic, he doesn't believe he could be a godfather. But he ends up destroying his reply.

Harold's letter makes him sound like someone who has figured out where he belongs in life—a family man with definite beliefs, in contrast to Binx, who is alone and adrift. This contrast makes Binx think cynically of his idealistic younger self and his father's attempts to improve his health—neither of which did them any good, he thinks. In the midst of his search, Binx feels unable to relate honestly to someone as self-assured as Harold.

CHAPTER 2, SECTION 6

Over the past few days, Binx has become more aware of Jewish people. He feels a certain vibration when he passes a Jewish person and isn't sure why. Back in the days when he had friends, most of his friends were Jewish. He believes he is "Jewish by instinct," since he shares the same sense of exile. In fact, he believes he accepts his exile more than a Jewish person accepts theirs.

Binx's characterization of Jewish people reflects the thinking of the day's majority culture, which sometimes described Jewish people in terms of a history of perpetual wandering and rejection by other peoples. Binx believes he can identify with this sense of "exile" even though he isn't Jewish.

Binx believes that his thoughts about Jews are a real clue. A person who isn't aware of the search, he believes, would never notice a Jewish person on the street. When a scientist or artist passes a Jewish person, he may pick up on something, but he probably assumes the person is just another object to be thought about or studied. But when a person who's aware of the search passes a Jewish person, he is like "Robinson Crusoe" noticing a footprint on the beach.

The reference to Robinson Crusoe (Daniel Defoe's 18th-century adventure novel) hearkens back to Binx's earlier language about being a castaway on a strange island. He thinks the Jewish "exile" experience is akin to his search and contains clues that only a seeker would pick up on.

CHAPTER 2, SECTION 7

On Friday, Binx goes to St. Bernard Parish with Sharon. When they squeeze into Binx's little **car**, Sharon is politely detached, clearly killing any hope of flirtation. When they meet Mr. Sartalamaccia, Binx learns that his worthless inheritance has changed. It's now surrounded by a housing development and a shooting range. Binx points out the features of the property to Sharon, recalling camping there with his father and uncle before the duck club was built.

Binx hopes that when outside of the office environment, Sharon might be more receptive to his advances, but she quashes his dreams. The buildup of the swampland surrounding Binx's property shows how modern development is encroaching even in rural areas, obscuring specific family histories in favor of generic sprawl.

Mr. Sartalamaccia interrupts Binx's account, declaring that *he* built the duck hunting lodge, not Binx's family. Binx's uncle had walked into Sartalamaccia's store and offered him $1,000 to build the lodge on the spot. Sartalamaccia now owns the adjoining development and has done well for himself; he wants to add the Bolling property. He points out the canal that's being built to the Gulf; it will steeply increase the value of the land. Later, Sharon tells Binx that he was clever to get Sartalamaccia talking and learn the increased value of the property. But Binx had genuinely enjoyed hearing the man's story, and he takes pleasure in the money they will both earn from the transaction.

It turns out that Binx's childhood memory isn't quite accurate. But even though his family property is going to be swallowed up by a housing development, Binx is unsentimental, taking pleasure in the specific details of the story as well as the financial gain. Binx's lack of sentimentality and appetite for money both reaffirm that he isn't a romantic.

As they drive home, Binx can't stifle a groan at the sight of Sharon's beauty. He pretends it was just a stitch in his side, then offers Sharon 10% of the money he's made, crediting her with getting him to see Sartalamaccia in person. She is skeptical, especially since it turns out that Binx didn't need a copy of the deed, and refuses the money. Binx is filled with desire for Sharon, who remains as aloof as ever.

Binx is still more obsessed with Sharon than with anything else. For her part, Sharon continues making it clear that nothing, including money, is going to win her over.

CHAPTER 2, SECTION 8

On Fridays, there's always a staff lunch for Jules Cutrer's salesmen. When Binx stops by his uncle's office to say hello, Jules gives Binx last-minute tickets to a conference in Chicago next week. He needs someone to attend, and he knows Binx doesn't care about Carnival anyway. Binx hates the thought of Chicago. Uncle Jules could think the same thoughts in New Orleans or San Francisco. Binx can't—the spirit of a place torments him. Jules tells Binx that in exchange for this favor, there will be something waiting for him downtown. Binx anticipates the end of his quiet life in Gentilly.

Uncle Jules's offer bothers Binx on several fronts. Getting acquainted with a new place is a formidable challenge for him—unlike Jules, for whom all cities are the same, Binx feels compelled to master a place's "spirit" before he can understand and inhabit the place. Also, Jules implies that doing this favor will bring Binx a promotion. While this would be good news to most, for Binx it signals the disruption of his search and the routines that shape it.

CHAPTER 2, SECTION 9

Lately Binx has been wondering if everyone is actually dead. People sound like automatons who are just repeating stock phrases without any choice in the matter. Binx finds it cheering to go to the library to read political periodicals. He doesn't know whether he's liberal or conservative, but he finds the groups' mutual hatred inspiring. In Binx's eyes, only "haters" seem to be truly living.

Because Binx ponders everything so carefully, other people's speech sounds lifeless to him. At least political vitriol shows an awareness that there are things worth fighting over, instead of dull complacency.

Today, as Binx emerges onto the library steps, he finds Nell Lovell. She tells Binx that now that she's an empty-nester, she's taking philosophy courses in the mornings, and she and Eddie have been confirmed in their values. She adds that they've agreed on a common life-goal: to make a contribution that "[leaves] the world just a little better off." Binx just nods and listens, discomfited by Nell's youthful earnestness, which seems merely "dead" to him.

For Binx, the lively Nell Lovell is a case in point, not an exception. That's because she's gone to the trouble of studying philosophy without altering her existing value system at all—the opposite of a search. Her goal to change the world for the better also sounds like Aunt Emily's summons to "duty," and to Binx, it's just as meaningless.

CHAPTER 2, SECTION 10

Later that day, Binx decides to begin a new scheme connecting his two current loves: money and Sharon. He sets Sharon to work writing letters to customers about their income taxes. She agrees to work late, but around five, her boyfriend walks in. Binx thinks him ugly and is encouraged by this, deciding that the boyfriend serves as a handy foil. As the evening wears on, Binx suspects that Sharon senses his interest in her. At 7:30 p.m., Binx finds it "natural" to offer Sharon a ride home. Despite his longing to invite her for a drink, he remains a gentleman the whole time.

Binx steps up his plans to woo Sharon and isn't even deterred by the existence of her boyfriend—all this suggesting that Binx is pursuing a fantasy version of their relationship, not something authentic. It also suggests that Binx is so consumed by his search that sometimes he doesn't look closely enough at what's right in front of him.

CHAPTER 2, SECTION 11

That night, Binx finds it hard to stop thinking of Sharon. When a thunderstorm hits, breaking through his malaise, Binx is able to relax and watch television, a Western. He then listens to a radio program called "This I Believe," in which intellectuals share their personal credos. Binx admires the guests' invariable niceness and broad-mindedness. He listens to a playwright's declaration of his belief in tolerance, understanding, and individual dignity. Binx also notices that everyone on the program professes more or less the same ideas. They also seem to like humanity in general, while hating particular individuals.

Binx finds the radio guests' value systems to be essentially hypocritical. They claim to have kind, openminded, and even praiseworthy beliefs in the abstract, while showing less tolerance in specific scenarios. This suggests that their value systems aren't actually worth much. What's more, the radio program is basically an expression of conformity—it's an opportunity for people to broadcast their open-mindedness without actually having to think for themselves.

Binx once tried submitting a tape to "This I Believe." He concluded his tape, "I believe in a good kick in the ass." He was relieved when the tape was returned without being aired. Tonight, the playwright concludes that he believes "in believing." Binx turns off the radio program and goes to sleep thinking of Sharon.

Binx's tape doesn't conform to the usual expressions on "This I Believe," to say the least, but in a way, it shows more substance than a claim to "believe in believing." This statement suggests that, unlike Binx's search, "This I Believe" isn't an authentic search for truth after all.

CHAPTER 2, SECTION 12

In the middle of the night, during a thunderstorm, Binx is startled out of bed by the phone ringing. It's Aunt Emily; she can't find Kate. She was supposed to be at a Carnival ball, but she never came home. Emily tells Binx that Kate's diary mentioned her "tight rope"—her expression for the feeling, even on ordinary occasions, that one is walking over a chasm. In her diary, she writes that she can no longer cope with tight ropes and is trying a "new freedom." In case Kate wanders in Binx's direction, Aunt Emily asks him to drive her home.

Binx's more abstract reflections are often interrupted by a crisis involving Kate, hinting that Kate's practical needs are key to his search for meaning, though he doesn't realize it yet. Like Binx, Kate sometimes feels trapped in the world when things are "ordinary" and longs for something more.

At 3:00 a.m., Binx goes outside in the windy, dripping night and sits in the bus shelter across from the neighborhood school. There is a vacant lot for sale on the corner, and Binx is considering buying it and building a gas station there. Just then a taxi pulls up, and Kate gets out. She is unsurprised to see Binx, and she looks as if she's just had a great new idea. Kate grabs Binx's arm and asks him if he thinks it's possible for a person to derail his life by a single mistake.

Binx is a taken-for-granted figure in Kate's life; she seems to know instinctively that she can rely on him and that he'll be a sympathetic sounding board for her ideas for improving her life, no matter the place or hour. Again, their friendship has a much stronger foundation than the romantic relationships they've each pursued.

Binx waits unhappily for Kate to finish telling him her idea. Every once in a while, Kate has an "exalted" moment when she knows exactly what she wants from life but then plunges into a dark depression soon thereafter. Today, at Merle's office, she suddenly realized that a person does not have to "be" this or that, but can simply be free. She does not, in other words, have to strive to be the kind of person she is expected to be. At that, she strode out of Merle's office feeling wonderful.

Binx knows Kate well enough to anticipate that her newfound "freedom" is really just a self-sabotaging pattern she's once again gotten stuck in. When Kate was freed from her undesired marriage to Lyell, that liberation was a high point in her life; she keeps revisiting that "exaltation" under different guises without ever getting beyond it.

Binx sees that Kate is already feeling strained, and that by morning, her joy will fade. He distracts her with his gas station idea, suggesting that Kate come and stay with him at Mrs. Schexnaydre's. Kate says that Binx's "proposal" is sweet, but her exalted mood is disintegrating. She hugs herself and groans. She asks Binx to tell her that everything is going to be all right, and he does.

Sure enough, Kate's euphoria crumples like Binx anticipates. Though it's not clear that Binx intended his "proposal" to refer to marriage, his words—really just intended to soften Kate's collapse—will be of great consequence for their relationship.

CHAPTER 3, SECTION 1

Binx and Sharon are working overtime on a dull, warm Saturday morning. Binx has a plan, and at 11 a.m., he tells Sharon he's closing the office—he's driving to the Gulf Coast and invites her to come along. In a scolding tone, Sharon insists on finishing her work, but then she agrees. Binx tells her to go home and get her swimsuit first. When they set out in Binx's **car**, it's as if Sharon's only desire is to go swimming, and Binx is her generous boss who's offered to drive her to the ocean.

Showing that he didn't mean anything serious by "proposing" to Kate last night, Binx continues his plan to woo Sharon the next morning. In keeping with her restraint the other day, Sharon remains detached as they set out, suggesting—for now—that nothing romantic will come of the trip.

Not long after Binx and Sharon have gotten underway, they're in a **car** accident. Binx considers this to be good luck—it overcomes the "malaise." Binx explains that "malaise" is simply "the pain of loss," specifically the loss of the world and an inability to feel at home in it. Even when someone is on the verge of great happiness, there's a risk of malaise.

Malaise is something that inevitably accompanies Binx's search. The antithesis of the search, it's the feeling of despair that comes with the failure to discover the meaning of the world and one's place in it.

Binx believes that the **car** one drives is critical. Once, not long after he moved to Gentilly, Binx bought a new car, a sensible Dodge sedan. Driving it, he felt like a respectable citizen and veteran whose life made sense. But when he drove his previous secretary Marcia to the Gulf Coast, his security collapsed. Despite driving along like a couple in an advertisement, Binx felt choked by malaise no matter what he did; the trip was a disaster.

Cars, like movies, were a big part of the booming American consumer culture in the 1950s. At first, Binx's car seems to deliver the feelings of security and status promised by advertising, but this was short-lived. With Marcia, he discovers that such feelings are an illusion, or at least aren't sustainable for very long.

That's why Binx prefers **buses**, streetcars, and walking. But his little red sportscar is an exception; it seems to be unaffected by malaise. Nevertheless, Binx is worried as he and Sharon start out. With Sharon, the stakes seem higher than with Marcia or Linda. When Binx picked up Sharon from her rooming house, things shifted, and he realized that Sharon considered herself Binx's date. She told him to wave to Joyce, and Binx does a double-take at the brunette in the leather jacket looking out the window. But as they start out in the car, Sharon bumps against him freely, and Binx feels good.

After the experience of malaise in his car, Binx comes to prefer modes of transportation that keep him more connected to the people and places around him. In his current car, though, he can't help hoping for a different outcome—suggesting that the attractions of consumerism remain seductive. In fact, at first, Sharon's new flirtatiousness makes it look as if Binx's hopes will be realized.

Suddenly, however, a Ford doing a U-turn collides with Binx's **car**, sending them careening off the road and into a ditch. The older couple in the Ford, unhurt but scared, speed off. Sharon touches Binx, whose bad shoulder is hurting. When Sharon cuts Binx's T-shirt off, she's startled by the sight of his war wound. Binx, however, is happy as they drink whiskey together. Sharon supports him to the car, which still runs, and drives them to Ship Island.

Like in Korea, Binx has a traumatic experience in a ditch which disrupts the fog of malaise in his life. In this way, Binx finds the accident fortunate—as well as a good omen for his relationship with Sharon.

The ferry to Ship Island is filled with Mississippi country folk. Binx and Sharon pass a dreary Civil War fort and cross a salt marsh to the beach, which is bright, clean, and inviting. Sharon immediately sheds her outer clothes and dives into the ocean, and Binx is moved by her beauty. They alternately drink beer and swim, and finally they kiss. At one point, Binx embraces Sharon's thighs, telling her he's been waiting three weeks to do this. They end up tussling playfully in the sand, Sharon wanting to show Binx how strong she is. Binx tells her how much he loves her and has planned for this moment.

Binx finally begins to realize his hopes for a romance with Sharon. Notably, though, they're in an unusual setting, they've been drinking, and they've just survived a car accident—it's not a normal day in the office. And though Binx believes this is just what he's been waiting for, Sharon makes it clear to Binx that she is comfortable stopping things at any time.

As they drive homewards in the evening, Binx is relieved to feel no malaise. He realizes that joy and sadness take turns, and that beauty can be heartbreaking. He decides it isn't a bad thing to settle for the "Little Way," not the search for a big happiness but the search for a sadder, smaller happiness. As night falls, they agree to stop at Binx's mother's fishing camp in the bayou, Sharon nestling against Binx.

At this midpoint of the novel, Binx comes to a realization about his search. Not only is sadness part of happiness, but one should accept both rather than constantly striving for a transcendent happiness. This "Little Way" suggests contentment with the ordinary things of life rather than dissatisfaction.

CHAPTER 3, SECTION 2

Binx finds his half-siblings eating crabs on the screened porch. The children call for their mother. Binx's eldest brother, Lonnie, is overwhelmed with excitement. He is 14 but small for his age, the oldest since his brother Duval was drowned last summer. Lonnie is Binx's favorite. He, too, is a moviegoer. Binx and Lonnie get along well because Lonnie knows that Binx will never feel sorry for him. Binx admires Lonnie's devout acceptance of his sufferings (Lonnie believes that he can offer his pain as a sacrifice to Christ) and the overall serenity of his life.

Lonnie represents a different approach to life's meaning—especially the meaning discovered through suffering—than other characters in the novel. Lonnie not only accepts but embraces his sufferings, finding purpose in them (offering them as a sacrifice for the benefit of other people's souls). Though his suffering is arguably harder than other characters', he also appears to be happier.

Binx's mother comes out and kisses him hello. Binx sometimes shows a special affection for his mother, but at such times she tends to look away and draw attention to one of Binx's younger siblings instead. Even though Binx has not visited for six months, his mother acts as though his sudden appearance unremarkable. Binx finds that his mother avoids anything unusual or mentally stimulating; she always regarded Binx's interests as an eccentricity. Binx introduces Sharon, who is good-humored and immediately comfortable around the children.

Though Binx's mother loves him, she's uncomfortable showing emotion; in fact, she withdraws from strong expressions in every part of life and isn't interested in challenging herself, unlike her son. Her reaction to Binx's arrival shows that she accepts life as it is.

Binx enjoys visiting the Smiths at their fishing camp; their Biloxi house is too worn and dreary for him. After dinner, the children run around showing Binx their treasures and telling him about their adventures. Binx's mother brings fresh crabs and beer for him and Sharon. Since Lonnie is disappointed about a trip to the **movies** that fell through, Binx offers to take him. Later, he asks his mother why Lonnie looks bad. She explains that Lonnie just recovered from a bad virus and even received the last rites; he wasn't dying but believed it would strengthen him physically and spiritually. Sure enough, he got out of bed within half an hour.

Lonnie is well acquainted with suffering and is even matter-of-fact about it. His quick recovery after receiving the last rites suggests that this embrace of suffering makes him more resilient in the face of it, especially compared to characters like Binx and Kate, who struggle to come to terms with suffering and are more haunted by it as a result.

When Binx's mother talks about God, he thinks she speaks as if God is mainly a device for managing life's shocks. He feels that her faith is more of a bargain she's struck with life, blunting both the good and the bad as a result. Duval's death only deepened this; she no longer aspires to anything, wanting life to be easy and ordinary. Darkly, Binx's mother tells him that Lonnie, who's already underweight, intends to fast during Lent.

Up to now, the main value system Binx has contended with is Aunt Emily's stoic outlook on life. While visiting his family, he encounters Catholicism. Binx doesn't take his mother's faith very seriously, but his objections aren't on theological grounds. Rather, she wields faith like a protective shield, sheltering herself from experiencing life directly.

Binx and Sharon take Lonnie and two other Smith siblings, Thèrése and Mathilde, to see *Fort Dobbs* at a drive-in theater, which is nearly empty. Lonnie is happy and gives Binx a knowing glance during scenes that he knows they both enjoy. Sharon is happy because she thinks Binx is unselfish for bringing Lonnie to the movies. For his part, Binx is enjoying the "rotation": an experience of something new that surpasses one's expectations. It's the difference between visiting a new place, on one hand, and getting lost and discovering a hidden valley en route, on the other. This is one of the finest "rotations" Binx has ever experienced. He, Lonnie, and Sharon overflow with shared, unspoken happiness.

Binx's trip to the movies with Sharon and the Smiths is a good example of the role that movies play in his life. For Binx, it's not just about watching the movie, but about the context surrounding it: Binx's and Lonnie's shared favorite scenes, Sharon's attractive presence, the atmosphere of the empty theater, and the movie itself. All these things create an experience that goes beyond the story on screen.

CHAPTER 3, SECTION 3

Binx wakes up abruptly at 3:00 a.m., feeling haunted by scattered dreams. He has been sleeping on a cot in a corner of the porch, but the pleasant spot feels "used up," and Binx is now overcome by his enemy, "everydayness." Everydayness makes his search feel impossible; only disaster disrupts it. Everydayness is something which began in cities and has now infiltrated everywhere, even the corners of swamps.

As often happens, Binx's happiness is later disrupted by malaise; his environment feels inescapably ordinary, and he can't break through it just because he wants to. Though Binx blames "everydayness" on the generic atmosphere of big cities, it spreads everywhere.

Nobody in Binx's family understands his search. His mother's family thinks he has lost his Catholic faith, but Binx never believed in God to begin with. Even if the arguments for God's existence are true, God doesn't make a difference in Binx's search. His father's family, on the other hand, thinks that God isn't necessary for a good life, but that only idiots and scoundrels fail to attain the good life. Binx can't understand either perspective. In his notebook, he jots some "starting points" for the search—essentially, that he can't rule out God's existence, yet he also doesn't believe that God can make any difference.

Binx's malaise makes him think about God again. For him, the problem is not necessarily God's existence; Binx just doesn't see how God's existence, if real, makes any difference in life. But the alternative presented by Aunt Emily is no better; it makes a meaningful life feel more accessible, yet shames those who don't achieve it. Binx feels as if he's at an impasse between those two value systems.

CHAPTER 3, SECTION 4

Binx awakens to the grating noise of two men starting an outboard motor on a boat. Below, in the foggy swamp, his stepfather, Roy Smith, curses as he wrestles with the motor. Soon it roars to life, and he and his companion disappear into the mist. Moments later, Binx's mother emerges yawning from the house with a fishing pole. Binx joins her on the dock. When Binx tells her he doesn't care for fishing, his mother says he's just like his father. She tells a story about when Binx's father tried to take up fishing but abandoned the new hobby after one successful outing, instead reverting to his customary walk along the levee, the same long miles day after day.

Binx's conversation with his mother yields insights into his character. She recalls Binx's father as having a restless personality, briefly enthusiastic about things yet always falling back on a familiar, plodding pattern, as though looking for something. This is somewhat like Binx's restless search, carried out against the backdrop of a predictable, tidy life.

Binx tries to ask more personal questions—like if his father was a good husband—but his mother avoids them with glib jokes. Her memories seem to be of an image of Binx's father, not the man himself. But then she remembers another story. Once, she tells Binx, his father was too sick to eat, and he lost 30 pounds. She got him to eat by spoon-feeding him while reading him a novel. She explains that Binx's father didn't eat because he didn't feel it was important enough. He had an overwrought nervous system, she explains. The next time his father got sick, the only thing that helped him was enlisting in the war.

Binx's mother communicates through roundabout stories, and she shares Aunt Emily's tendency to describe people the way she'd prefer to remember them; yet her answers reveal that Binx really is *like his father. Like Binx, his father seems to have been disturbed by a perceived lack of meaning in ordinary things—a tendency his wife didn't understand but could respond to in practical ways.*

Binx tells his mother what happened to him in the Korean War. He describes how he got injured during the war and, while in the ditch, he remembered that he was supposed to have warned a nearby Ranger company about the enemy position, but suddenly nothing seemed worth doing. In fact, if Binx had been told that he could find a cure for cancer within 40 minutes if he'd only put forth the effort, he would not have tried. At the time, nothing seemed good enough for him. His mother isn't really following the story. She remarks that Binx would be good at cancer research.

Binx tries to explain his search to his mother, but this is pointless; Binx's mother doesn't understand him any better than Aunt Emily does. Like his aunt, she thinks that Binx has unfulfilled potential, which could be realized if he just settled into the right work. Her own value system, like Emily's, is settled, which makes his search for meaning difficult for her to comprehend.

CHAPTER 3, SECTION 5

The Smiths never speak about religion directly (except for Lonnie); it seems to embarrass them. Yet the practicalities of attending Mass spark a heated debate after breakfast. They agree to go to a church in Biloxi, and Binx is brought along, packed into a pew along with Protestant Sharon, who is put at ease by the Smiths' unpretentious faith. When it's time for Communion, Roy wheels Lonnie to the rail and supports the boy's head while the priest serves him.

For the Smiths, religion is so taken for granted as part of life that it's not a topic for open discussion. Binx's presence in church feels incongruous and awkward, yet watching Lonnie receive Communion feels like a significant moment for him. Lonnie's simple, accepting faith challenges Binx, though for the time being, he accepts it like any other data in his search.

CHAPTER 3, SECTION 6

Later that morning, back at the camp, the women talk in the kitchen while Roy and the children waterski on the bayou. Lonnie, still dressed in his Sunday suit, chats with Binx on the porch. Binx enjoys Lonnie's plodding, laborious speech; every word seems to mean something, even "I love you." Binx tries to discourage Lonnie from fasting during Lent. Lonnie explains that he's fasting in order to overcome a habitual sin: he envies Duval for being dead. Binx understands—Lonnie believes that Duval gets to see God face to face, and Lonnie doesn't. Even though Lonnie knows that Binx doesn't really believe this, he's delighted that Binx is willing to discuss such things on his terms. Binx encourages Lonnie to meditate on the Eucharist instead of fasting.

Binx enjoys talking with Lonnie because there's no disparity between what Lonnie says and what he means; he's truly at peace with his life, so his life's meaning—living for God and eventually dying to be with God—is transparent, with no search required. In fact, Lonnie is so fervent in his goals that he envies his dead brother for already achieving it. Even though Binx doesn't share Lonnie's beliefs, he respects his brother's sincerity.

When Binx visits on Sundays, he and Lonnie always have a religious talk, then take a ride together, and then Binx playfully boxes with Lonnie. When Binx kisses Lonnie goodbye, Lonnie tells him that he's still offering his Communion for Binx's soul. Binx tells Lonnie he loves him.

Binx's shared rituals with Lonnie show that he's capable of deep caring and even finding joy in "everydayness," even if he doesn't think of it that way. Lonnie prays that Binx will come to believe in God, too.

CHAPTER 3, SECTION 7

On the way home, Binx feels malaise. This isn't unusual on a Sunday afternoon when crowds of people are driving home from the beach. Binx tries breaking through the malaise by touching Sharon's thigh, but she bats him away with a firm warning. He relents, no longer feeling enthusiasm for her anyway. Sharon fondly tells Binx that she's "got [his] number," but that she still likes him. Now she has to get home to meet somebody.

Binx interprets the letdown after the visit as malaise, going from individual connection with his family to being swallowed up in anonymous masses of people. In keeping with this mood, the brief spark between Binx and Sharon fades, too. Sharon has interpreted their weekend together as a superficial fling, showing once and for all that Binx's plans were for nothing.

CHAPTER 4, SECTION 1

At Aunt Emily's house, Sam Yerger is waiting for Binx. He gestures Binx into the basement to talk. Sam is a sturdy, rumpled, good-looking man whose mother was married to Binx's uncle's law partner. Sam has worked as a journalist and successful author, and Binx always enjoys Sam's visits when he's passing through New Orleans on a lecture tour. Now, Sam tells Binx that he needs Binx's help getting Kate out of here. He's hatched a scheme to move Kate to New York to see a famous doctor, and he wants Binx to take her there. He believes she will finally "find herself" there.

Binx's visit to the Smiths gives a respite from the differing pressures of Aunt Emily's world and Kate's suffering. As soon as he gets back, he's jarred by the urgency of her situation. Sam, a family friend, believes he can rescue Kate from herself if he can just get her into the right environment.

Binx is baffled, so Sam backtracks to explain what's happened to Kate. Last night, when he arrived, Kate was in an exalted mood, and they'd had hours of fascinating conversation. The next morning, Kate didn't come out of her bedroom. Eventually, Sam had to break Kate's door down, where they found her deeply asleep, and Aunt Emily was unable to wake her. When she finally woke up, she was angry and violent. Dr. Mink came and treated her for a pentobarbital overdose. Sam tells Binx to act like nothing unusual has happened. Meanwhile, Binx's relatives Uncle Oscar and Aunt Edna have made an ill-timed visit.

In Binx's absence, Kate has reached a crisis point, climbing to a high, falling into a depression, and, it's implied, becoming suicidal. The situation contrasts sharply with the relative peace of Binx's trip away from New Orleans. While someone like Lonnie Smith has tools to help him make sense of suffering, someone like Kate—situated more firmly within modern culture and values—is comparatively lacking in such tools.

When Binx comes into the house, Aunt Emily is cheerful, and he wonders if Sam has exaggerated the whole story. Uncle Oscar and Aunt Edna are visiting from Feliciana Parish for Carnival. Aunt Edna is 65, stout, and attractive; Uncle Oscar, the fourth of the Bolling brothers, is a country storekeeper. They've inherited the old family homestead. Binx finds Kate, nicely dressed, sitting in front of a fireplace within view of the dining room. When she asks, he immediately admits that he knows what happened last night.

Binx doesn't let himself be drawn into the others' plans for how to help Kate; he knows her struggles better than they do and is instinctively honest with her. He's also unfazed by the expectation to maintain a cheerful face in front of visiting family, able instead to focus on the problem in front of him.

Sam has begun a monologue at the dining room table, occasionally interrupted by Oscar's less enlightened remarks and Edna's scolding. Kate observes to Binx that Sam is gentle and kind. After their conversation last night, she felt elevated. Hours later, however, she woke up and thought about Binx's suggestion of marriage and decided maybe it was possible, if only she didn't ruin everything. She recalls a time, while Binx was away in the war, that she stayed with an old classmate of Aunt Emily's in Memphis. The woman, opera singer and writer, treated Kate kindly, but Kate had nothing to say to her, and Kate finally fled back to New Orleans. Remembering this, Kate became anxious about what was coming next for her, so she mixed a drink and took some drugs. She claims she didn't want to kill herself, but only wanted a "lift," or to break out of things.

The cultured dinner conversation in the dining room takes place at the same time as, and within view of, Kate's and Binx's conversation, suggesting that their values, even their lives, are on a different track from the older generations of Bollings. Meanwhile, Kate is frightened of taking new steps in her life and, because of a track record of false starts, fears that if she does, they won't work out. That's why she panics in the face of opportunities to change her life, like Binx's proposal.

Binx and Kate don't join the others in the dining room. Kate asks Binx if she can come along with him to Chicago and if they can leave tonight. Maybe after that they can go out West for a while and live in a little town, she suggests. Binx is sleep-deprived and feeling tired, so he gives Kate some money and tells her to make the arrangements. She heads off with a sense of efficiency and purpose. Binx drowses in the porch hammock and later notices that Sam has handed him the bottle of Kate's pills for safekeeping.

Kate wants to flee her current situation, echoing her behavior after the car accident. When she is sufficiently motivated—like by the possibility of freedom—Kate is able to take initiative and handle errands in public, in contrast to her shy, fearful demeanor when she's anxious.

CHAPTER 4, SECTION 2

Three hours later, Binx and Kate are on a **train**. As he boards the train, Binx experiences a "repetition," remembering his last train ride 10 years ago, between San Francisco and New Orleans. He notices that trains have changed since then; nowadays, everyone is crammed into small, isolated roomettes. Kate, seemingly affected by the train ride, is playful and flirtatious, grabbing Binx and talking about moving to California. Binx feels uneasy about her bravado.

Like other modes of transportation (cars, buses, and streetcars), the train will be a significant location for the development of one of Binx's relationships. Like other aspects of modern life, trains nowadays seem to divide and isolate people from each other and their environment.

While sitting in the observation car, Binx and Kate encounter Binx's friend Sidney Gross and his wife, Margot, headed to the same convention. Sidney briefly chats with Binx before moving aside for a card game. Meanwhile, Kate, upset by the prospect of small talk, has been searching through her purse and is upset to learn that Sam has confiscated her pills. She goes to the bathroom and scrubs the makeup off her face. She and Binx quietly watch the swamp speed by. Binx watches the man next to him, bound for St. Louis, reading a newspaper. Binx drifts in and out of dreams based on tidbits from the paper. He senses "thousands of tiny thing-events" bombarding the train as it rushes through the world. Kate, meanwhile, longs to be "an anyone who is anywhere" and trembles because she can't.

Later, it's suggested that Kate does *have access to her pills and that Binx kept them for her, but for now, she's forced to endure the strains of the trip without them. Binx feels overwhelmed by "thing-events," or details of the world passing rapidly by without having any ability to capture or make sense of them. At the same time, Kate feels threatened by the vividness of details aboard the train and would prefer to be anonymous. Their struggles in the world are different but complementary.*

Binx dazedly admires his neighbor's orderly clipping of newspaper articles and reflects that the search has disordered his own, once-orderly life; he no longer eats or sleeps or writes observations in his notebook. Meanwhile, Kate, overwhelmed, retreats to their roomette. Binx joins her after a little while. Kate tells him that though he is less sympathetic than her mother or Merle, she nevertheless finds him comforting, because he is "nuttier" than she is. She wonders if that's "sufficient ground for marriage," and Binx figures it is better than love.

Binx's search is taking over his life, and Kate notices, even if nobody else sees it. When Binx says that their respective struggles are a stronger basis for marriage than love, he is thinking of the kind of infatuation he experiences toward other women. With Kate, he doesn't have to be calculating, and as a result, they're both free to see each other realistically—perhaps a stronger type of love after all.

Kate admits to Binx that Sam also proposed to her. He's lonely and likes Kate, but he also knows that someday she'll be rich. Kate doesn't mind because schemers are human. But Binx is different. She tells Binx that she knows the only way he could marry her is as an aspect of his "search." She doesn't want to get married for a prank; it's better to just be honest about her loss of hope. She isn't up to the façade of a conventional marriage, either. She also tells him that she has no intention of committing suicide, contrary to what everyone thinks. She disappears for a while.

Kate isn't offended by the complex motivations men sometimes have in proposing marriage, seeing these as "human," but she wants honesty with Binx—she'd be marrying him as a last resort in life, not to fulfill an expected social role, and not to give him fodder for his search, either. After Kate's two unhappy engagements, it's not surprising that she seeks clarity on this point

The train stops in Baton Rouge, and Binx and Kate overlook the Capitol from the train. Kate feels rapt with its beauty, but Binx thinks the pursuit of beauty is a gateway to malaise and despair. But Kate is moved, and she suddenly discovers how it is possible for her to live in a city. She says she now knows what she is: a religious person. She means that she wants to believe in someone completely and do whatever that person tells her to do.

The sight of the Capitol brings Kate to an exalted point again, from which she hatches another new plan for her life. She believes what her life is lacking is religion, although she doesn't mean this in a conventional way; she wants structure and sure guidance from an authority figure.

Kate asks Binx if he will tell her what to do. He is unreligious and self-centered, so she believes he could do this. She doesn't know whether she loves Binx, but she believes in him and will do what he says. He agrees to do this for her, and she passionately kisses him. Shortly thereafter, however, her mood collapses. They curl up in Binx's roomette, but Kate feels ambivalent about Binx's embrace. She'd spoken to Merle about her desire to have a fling, but now that she has the chance, she feels too scared. Binx, too, feels overcome by malaise, so he can't go through with it. He feels that doing something illicit with Kate would almost have been preferable than refraining, because it would have broken him out of the malaise. Kate falls asleep.

By calling Binx unreligious and self-centered, Kate means that she sees Binx as a sort of God-like figure: by virtue of his search, he stands apart from the world (he doesn't feel bound by conventional expectations of any kind). Because of that stance, Kate finds him to be an ideal husband for her—he can be trusted to tell her what to do in life, untainted by self-interest. Agreed on this, they try to become sexually intimate, but it proves too difficult for them both. This suggests, in part, that real emotional intimacy is a new experience for Binx, dampening his usual lust towards women.

CHAPTER 4, SECTION 3

As soon as they arrive in Chicago, Binx feels attacked by the city's "genie-soul." It feels as if "five million personal rays of Chicagoans" and the city's smell overwhelm him before he even ventures outside the **train** station. He wishes someone could tell him the history of the train station; it should be someone's job, so that a newcomer doesn't become an Anyone.

For Binx, places have perceptible spirits. The big city overwhelms him from the start with too much detail for him to take in; he can't get a grip on it, hence wishing there were someone appointed to help newcomers with this problem and prevent them from feeling anonymous.

No matter where one goes, one must "master [the genie-soul] first thing or be met and mastered." Binx believes that Southerners are especially susceptible to the sadness of Northern cities. They grow up living in haunted Civil War towns and confront ghosts wherever they go. Chicago's fierce wind and cold spaces make up its "genie-soul." He also remembers coming here with his father after Scott's death and feeling unable to embrace the father-son intimacy his father longed for.

Binx grew up sensing very specific "souls" of places and finds sprawling Northern cities lacking such obvious "ghosts" that can be quickly mastered. Chicago's "ghost" manifests on a less human scale, which is in keeping with the anonymous feeling of a big city. Binx's memories of Chicago are also associated with an inability to find intimacy.


Binx and Kate head to the conference hotel, where Binx is quickly swept into a welcome reception and is cheered by the spirit of brotherhood among businessmen. But he soon grows weary of this, and he and Kate wander across the city in search of Harold Graebner. He lives in a neighborhood called Wilmette which seems to be lacking a "soul." Binx is distracted all the time by Kate, musing about the "sickness" of being stuck between Christian and pagan views of sex.

Binx's feelings for Kate are complicated. He can't obsessively fantasize about her like he used to do about his secretaries, since he actually knows and cares for her intimately as an individual. By "sickness," Binx means that he feels stuck between value systems: he's neither Christian nor pagan, so he doesn't feel right about either indulging or denying his sexual desire for Kate.


Harold Graebner is wealthy and lives in a new suburb. Binx finds Harold to be a simple, good-natured fellow. Binx and Kate visit Harold for about 20 minutes. Binx admires Harold because he acted heroically in Korea, though Harold is matter-of-fact about his war experiences. Harold's wife is beautiful but stands holding the baby during the visit, never asking the guests to sit down. The visit is awkward and restless, and Harold seems uncomfortable when Binx talks about the war. Binx feels he brought bad memories with him and that it's better if he leaves.

The Graebners live in one of the new, sprawling suburbs that Binx finds to be lacking in any apparent "soul" or identity. The Graebers' life, or at least the brief glimpse Binx gets, seems to reflect this generic lifestyle, and old war memories have no obvious place here—meaning they struggle to connect. The visit to the Graebners also seems to confront Binx and Kate with a picture of married life they can't imagine fulfilling themselves.

Binx and Kate go to the movies and see a Paul Newman film about a cynical man who regains his youthful idealism. Kate clings to Binx the whole time and wails along with the Chicago wind as they walk home to the hotel. She feels like something is about to happen. When they get back to the hotel, they receive a message from Aunt Emily, who is furious—nobody knew where Kate had gone. She demands to know why didn't Binx tell them he was leaving, but Binx can't remember.

The Paul Newman film typifies the movies' approach to Binx's search—a person questioning the world and later accepting it. On this particular day, this theme of the search's abandonment has a prophetic feeling. Aunt Emily's call further signals that things in Binx's life are about to change significantly.

CHAPTER 4, SECTION 4

It's too late to get a plane or **train** to New Orleans right before Mardi Gras, so Binx makes his excuses to the conference, and they take the bus home to ease Aunt Emily's mind. Binx doesn't mind leaving, and Kate is calm, sleeping most of the time. Binx reads *Arabia Deserta* while watching the Mississippi River valley rush by. He also observes the other passengers and talks with two of them: a romantic from Wisconsin and a salesman from Murfreesboro.

Whereas the train journey to Chicago was consequential for Binx's and Kate's relationship, the bus journey back to New Orleans is, for Binx, a kind of final experiment in the search. Reading the book about the Arabian Desert symbolizes Binx's mindset—even a bus filled with Midwestern passengers can be explored like a foreign country.

Binx is curious about the romantic, a young man who sits gracefully reading a novel. The young man is shy and blushes terribly when Binx questions him about the book. Binx knows that a young romantic longs for just this kind of chance meeting on a bus, yet now that he's experiencing it, the intensity is beyond him. He is a college student who has decided to go to New Orleans for a while to work on a banana boat; he hopes to meet a nice girl there. Binx has his doubts about this.

The two men Binx meets on the bus represent approaches to the world which Binx can appreciate from afar but not fully embrace. To Binx, the young romantic has lofty expectations of the world that will probably go unmet.

The salesman is easier to talk to. Binx finds him to be a metaphysician, more so than the romantic. He sells steel farming implements. Binx enjoys hearing the man talk about his product's history and his sales techniques. The man also talks about his family in Murfreesboro, and Binx soon feels as if he's always lived there. He concludes that businessmen are the best metaphysicians, though they're unfortunately one-track metaphysicians. When Kate and Binx arrive in New Orleans, street cleaners are sweeping up the remains of the last Mardi Gras parade.

In contrast to the young romantic, the salesman is actually more grounded in the specifics of life and is therefore, according to Binx, more knowledgeable about the nature of existence. The only problem is that his knowledge is focused on one narrow slice of life and is therefore insufficient. Neither of these men represent an approach to modern life that Binx can embrace. It feels as though Binx's search has availed little.

CHAPTER 5, SECTION 1

The next morning, Wednesday, Binx and Aunt Emily have a talk. Aunt Emily tells Binx that she believes he's discovered something new. She is darkly civil and humorous, filled with restrained emotion; her smile is menacing. She asks Binx to verify her hypothesis. Isn't it true that, in the past, people have always behaved according to certain conventions—they may have behaved with courage or cowardice, but nevertheless behaved in ways that were recognizable to everyone? Binx, she says, seems to have found a new option—to simply pass on one's obligations and do as one likes.

This conversation brings the story full circle to Binx and Aunt Emily's chat one week ago. Aunt Emily's devastating lecture first accuses Binx of bypassing traditional norms of behavior. By disappearing to Chicago with Kate, he's not only failed to act with courage, he's even failed to display clear cowardice. It's as if he's dropped out of conventional society altogether, at least in a way that Emily can recognize.

Binx apologizes for not telling Aunt Emily about Kate's plans to come along to Chicago; it was simple thoughtlessness on his part. But Aunt Emily denies that she is angry with him. Rather, she has discovered that the hopes she'd placed in Binx were without foundation. Binx is a stranger to her. She should have noticed it sooner. Anyway, she now believes that Binx is incapable of caring for anyone, Kate included. If he had, he would never have taken such a sick young girl on such a trip, thereby betraying a sacred trust. Binx doesn't know how to reply.

Recall that after her fiancé Lyell was killed, Kate disappeared for a day, avoiding facing anyone in the aftermath of the accident. When Kate went to Chicago without explanation, Aunt Emily had to relive the fear from that event, too. By cruelly letting this happen, Binx has made his selfishness clear. He isn't the noble, dutiful person Aunt Emily has idealized him to be.

Aunt Emily asks Binx if he and Kate were intimate during the trip. Binx replies that "intimate" isn't really the word for it. Aunt Emily seems somewhat amused by this. She had also wrongly assumed, she says, that people of a certain class use words to mean roughly the same things. She doesn't mind saying this or even admitting that people of her class are superior to others. That superiority comes from their refusal to shirk their obligations.

Aunt Emily suspects that there is something going on between Binx and Kate romantically, but his guarded response ends up playing into her lecture—Binx's vague language is further proof that he can't commit to anything. Lacking commitment, he shows he's not living up to the genteel, duty-driven culture Aunt Emily tried to instill in him.

This contrasts with today's society, which elevates the "common," mediocre person. Today's society might not be filled with obvious, vile forms of corruption, but people are kinder, more sentimental, and more sincere than ever. Aunt Emily gestures to a man walking down the street and says that if such a person is today considered to be the pinnacle of humanity, then she's glad to be in her last years.

In contrast to Southern gentility, mass American culture celebrates mediocrity and sentiment, rather than genuine virtue. Aunt Emily finds this worse than if people behaved with obvious crudeness or cruelty.

Aunt Emily looks at Binx and tells him she did the best she could for him. Her goal was to pass on the very best of the Southern heritage and the Bolling heritage: a sense of duty, nobility, and gentleness. She can't understand how none of this meant anything to Binx. Binx considers for a while and replies that Emily is incorrect; he has always carefully pondered what she taught him. Binx doesn't have anything else to say in defense of his behavior regarding Kate.

Ironically, Aunt Emily's critique of modern life overlaps with Binx's in many ways. He also dislikes the generic mediocrity that he finds obstructing the search for real meaning in life. Yet that doesn't mean that Aunt Emily's value system answers his questions about life, either.

Aunt Emily asks a last question. She wants to know what was in Binx's mind over the years when they listened to music, read literature, and talked together about goodness, truth, and beauty. Doesn't Binx love and live by these things? When he says no, she presses him, "What do you love? What do you live by?" Binx is again silent, though he denies that Aunt Emily has failed him in any way. Aunt Emily gives him a dismissive smile, offers her hand, and ushers him out.

Aunt Emily's questions ("What do you love? What do you live by?") were things that Walker Percy's own uncle often asked him and had a formative influence on him. Binx appears to be unsure how to answer them, which makes him a stranger to his aunt. Therefore her farewell is a cold one. She's treating Binx like an average guest, no longer an intimate part of her circle.

As Binx is about to drive off, Kate flags him down and leans into his car. She overheard the whole conversation with Aunt Emily and thinks Binx handled himself stupidly. She tells him to wait for her at his house.

Though Binx completely failed to defend himself in Aunt Emily's interrogation of him, Kate's reaction suggests that hope isn't lost for him.

CHAPTER 5, SECTION 2

It's a windy, gloomy day in Gentilly. It's also Binx's 30th birthday. He sits on the school playground waiting for Kate. He feels he knows less than he's ever known before. The present could be described as "the great shithouse of [...] humanism" in which all needs are satisfied, "everyone becomes an anyone," and malaise is everywhere. He figures there is nothing left for him to do but to satisfy his desires. His search has been abandoned.

It's a significant day for Binx. He feels like a failure in his search. He knows what's wrong with the world—people have everything they want, their identities are flattened into anonymity, and therefore there's an underlying despair pervading everything. But he has no hope of discovering a solution anymore and figures he might as well give in to the prevailing culture.

Whenever he leaves one of his serious talks with his aunt, Binx always feels the need to find a woman. He's been waiting for Kate for almost an hour and growing anxious. He decides to call Sharon, figuring that Kate knows Aunt Emily is right and has given up on him. Sharon isn't home—she's out with her fiancé—but her roommate, Joyce, is. From the phone booth, Binx watches some children spinning crazily on the school's merry-go-round as Joyce invites him to a party and he accepts.

Binx's impulse confirms that he tends to look to random women to fulfill his sense of inadequacy when he disappoints women he actually respects. Either Sharon or Joyce would serve this purpose—it doesn't matter to Binx. He feels his life is unraveling meaninglessly like children on a merry-go-round.

Binx notices Kate's car pulling into the bus shelter across the street, and he wonders if it's not too late after all. He asks Joyce if he can bring his fiancée, Kate, along to the party to introduce her to Joyce and Sharon. Joyce sounds relieved.

However, Kate breaks Binx's pattern with women. When he sees her arrive, he immediately senses that their plans on the train will go forward after all, showing how well he knows Kate deep down.

The playground is now deserted, but every once in a while, small groups of people enter the church next door. It suddenly dawns on Binx that it's Ash Wednesday. He and Kate sit in her car. Kate thinks Binx is an idiot for not telling Aunt Emily about their plans to get married. She told Aunt Emily herself, and now Emily wants to see Binx again. Binx needs to see her anyway—he needs to tell her his decision about medical school. He's realized that there's only one thing for him to do: listen to people, try to understand their ways, and help them along as best he can (and vice versa). It's just a matter of how this vocation is best pursued.

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of the season of Lent for Catholics. It's a season of repentance, or reorienting oneself spiritually. This suggests a clear break in Binx's direction in life, too—marriage being the opposite of his drifting, uncommitted past. Binx realizes that some of the fundamentals of his search—especially listening to people and trying to understand the world—can be faithfully pursued in many different contexts instead of monopolizing his life.

Binx tells Kate that he's willing to go to medical school if Emily wants him to, and that he's still prepared to marry Kate. Then Kate says that they must understand each other. She doesn't know if she will be successful, and she is afraid, but not just of marriage—of simple things like drugstore errands. The only time she isn't scared is when she's with Binx. She'll need him to be with her all the time, and there's no guarantee that she'll change.

Kate's and Binx's marriage will be unconventional. Kate can't promise that she'll be a good partner, and she'll need a lot of help. It's different, in other words, both from Binx's past flings and even from a more romantic ideal of marriage. But it's based on honest knowledge of each other, something that more conventional models might lack.

Nevertheless, Kate thinks she sees a way forward. If Binx will tell her simple things to do, without laughing at her, then Kate will believe in him. Binx promises to do this and kisses Kate's bleeding hand where she has been relentlessly plucking at her skin. She promises to try not to hurt herself so much.

In keeping with the unconventional tone of their relationship, Binx accepts Kate's proposal. His dedication to helping Kate this way shows that Aunt Emily's belief in his selfishness was misplaced.

Binx watches as a man emerges from the Ash Wednesday service, ashes visible on his forehead, and sits in his car for a minute. Binx wonders why the man is here. Is it simply part of the business of life? Or does the man really believe that God is present right here in this church? Could it be both—coming for worldly reasons and finding God's grace anyway? Binx decides it's impossible to say.

Binx's questions about the man sum up the substance of his search and indicate how far he's come. He recognizes that the man's actions can reflect both "everydayness" and a belief in the transcendent. In fact, perhaps the nature of God's grace is that it's present in the midst of the everyday. Binx can't say this for sure, but he's open to the possibility.

EPILOGUE

Binx and Kate got married in June. Sharon got married, too, and took over Binx's office so that he could start medical school. Binx got his money from Mr. Sartalamaccia, and Kate moved into a house near Aunt Emily's, one of the little houses renovated by Nell Lovell. Aunt Emily, meanwhile, has accepted Binx's lack of heroism and begun liking him for his ordinariness. Both she and Kate laugh a lot at Binx's expense.

Over the coming year, the main characters' lives find new directions. Kate finally frees herself from her family's expectations. Like Kate, Binx is also liberated from his aunt's expectations now—she sees him for who he is rather than for who she'd like him to be, which gives them a basis for a better relationship.

The following Mardi Gras, Uncle Jules died of a heart attack. That May, just after turning 15, Lonnie Smith died of a viral infection. As for Binx's search, he has little to say on the matter. As the "great Danish philosopher" said, he doesn't have the authority to say much that's worth saying. Anyway, he takes after his mother's family in that he doesn't like to speak about religion.

Binx's attitude toward his search has changed, suggesting that his search deals with matters too big and serious to be grasped by an individual—and also implying that, whether or not he's become an observant Catholic, he now sees his search as fundamentally religious in nature. (The "Danish philosopher" he refers to is the Christian existentialist Soren Kierkegaard, who influenced Percy's writing.)

The day before Lonnie died, Kate went to visit him in the hospital. Binx had his doubts about this idea, and indeed, Kate is distraught by Lonnie's wasted, yellowed condition. Binx tells her what Lonnie had whispered to him—that he had "conquered a habitual disposition," and also that Kate was pretty. Binx kisses Kate and admires her; she has gained weight over the past year. However, she still plucks anxiously at her thumb, preoccupied with her grief.

Kate, as she had predicted, is still in the ongoing process of healing—her old wound-picking habit persists. But her willingness to face suffering and death more squarely than before suggests positive progress in her life. Meanwhile, Lonnie has overcome his habit of envy. The implication is that his religious observances have continued to weaken him, hastening a death he desires and accepts.

Binx looks for Lonnie's siblings, who are sitting in the family car. Thérèse asks if her brother is going to die, and Binx says yes, but that Lonnie doesn't want them to be sad. Binx sits with the children and answers their solemn questions, comforting them as he can. One of the children, Donice, wants to know if Lonnie will still have a wheelchair at the Resurrection. Binx says that Lonnie will be like the other children then. The little kids cheer, and Binx laughs with them. He offers to take them to the park.

The scene outside the hospital brings the novel full circle. When Binx was a little boy, Aunt Emily told him of Scott's death and exhorted him to be a "soldier." Now Binx breaks the news of Lonnie's impending death but lets his siblings grieve, even reassuring them that Lonnie will one day be made whole and well again. This indicates Binx's growth in facing death, as well as suggesting his growing openness to religion.

Kate admires Binx's sweetness with the children. Binx asks her if she will do him a favor. Since he has to stay with Lonnie and the children, will Kate take care of some business for him? Some of Aunt Emily's documents need to be picked up from Uncle Jules's old office downtown. Kate is nervous—she doesn't know how to get there or what to ask for. Binx tells her he'll make the arrangements—she won't even have to say a word when she gets to the office—and he tells her where to catch the **streetcar**.

Binx doesn't avoid Lonnie's death but is willing to stay near him at the end of his life, suggesting that he's grown closer to accepting death's reality. Kate, likewise, has grown in her willingness to face the things that scare her, even though everyday errands remain difficult for her. But Binx fulfills his promise of helping Kate face such things once step at a time.

Kate stares uneasily at a cape jasmine blossom along the fence, and Binx picks it and hands it to her. Kate asks him questions about the errand—will he think of her sitting on the **streetcar** with the flower in her lap? Binx promises. He watches Kate walk toward the streetcar, holding the cape jasmine against her face, until he hears his siblings calling out behind him.

Kate's brave streetcar journey, in contrast to the bus and train journeys by which she once fled tragedy in her life, show how much she is healing. Binx's patient attention to her needs, characterized by the sweet gesture of the flower, also show that Binx now finds meaning within the everyday details of life, especially in helping those he loves. Binx is now firmly rooted where he belongs—fulfilling his loving obligations toward his wife and family.

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