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Placing Percy: Pathologist of Postsouthern Culture

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PLACING PERCY:
PATHOLOGIST OF POSTSOUTHERN CULTURE

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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This dissertation investigates how Walker Percy's protagonists in *The Moviegoer*, *Lancelot*, and *The Second Coming* negotiate "postsouthern" culture. In both his fiction and nonfiction, Percy, who was medically trained as a pathologist, sought to diagnose and treat what he termed the modern malaise. The emotionally anesthetic characteristic of this disorder, I argue, is peculiar not only to a particular historical time but also to the specific place and culture in which he positioned his characters.

Literary theorists and historians often locate postsouthern culture in commodified reproductions of culture that satisfy a desired, if not accurate, southern identity. Percy's novels support this theory, as evidenced in his characters' reflections on personal and cultural identities. This dissertation traces his portrayal of commodified culture as seen in the plantation tourist industry's recirculation of personal and cultural fictionalizations.

Each of Percy's protagonists also battles some form of amnesia. I believe that such personal forgetfulness is a reflection of the cultural amnesia that is necessarily the product of a commodified culture. While memory is inevitably subjective, history too often masquerades as quintessentially objective. Interrogating these dichotomies potentially unveils cultural falsehoods deployed in the name of objectivity and the consequent cost of such apparent impartiality—the erasure of personal and cultural histories and memories.

The protagonists in the selected novels undergo crises that lead them to evaluate their current circumstances, including their sense of place, their sense of purpose, and their lack of

intersubjective relationships. Each of these elements is complicated by the cultural reproduction that they inhabit and, in some cases, actively perpetuate. I argue that the first two novels are failed experiments in diagnosing and treating Percy's modern malaise. In the last of the three novels, however, place, purpose, and person converge to create a paradigm for negotiating the postsouthern landscape of cultural reproductions.