Complacency and Convergence: “Everything That Rises Must Converge”

Critics, such as Patricia Maida, have described Flannery O’Connor’s “Everything That Rises Must Converge,” as a depiction of “the plight of mankind,” or the blindly imperfect nature of human beings (Maida 125). However, I find Maida’s explanation far too simplistic. Although her presumption of Julian’s imperfection is most certainly correct, Maida has neglected to ask an important question: what is the barrier that prevents Julian from facing his inadequacies and advancing beyond such a flawed state? “Everything That Rises Must Converge” does far more than merely comment on human imperfection in a fictional setting. Rather, it details the hindering effect of self-image as a roadblock to potential change as well as establishing the idea that man cannot achieve redemption save his inner self converges with his external world.

O’Connor is not lenient with her use of Julian’s viewpoint, and as she heedfully configures our perception of each character through his eyes, it is difficult to ignore the parallels between them. Through Julian’s viewpoint, we catch a biased glimpse of his mother, wherein she is depicted as intolerant, sentimental, and rooted in the past (Montgomery 129). In her self-confinement, however, Julian’s mother serves the very specific function of acting as a type, or duplicity of Julian, thus she reinforcing the theme of his complacency. Everything that Julian hates in his mother is imbedded in his own behavior. Before whining that his mother “[lives] according to the laws of her own fantasy world,” he praises his own subsistence within his “mental bubble” (O’Connor, “Everything” 411). Even as he mocks his mother’s belief that in “[knowing] who you are, you can go anywhere,” he retains his own erroneous belief that distancing himself from society will free him (O’Connor, “Everything” 407). Though the story focuses around Julian’s obsession with his mother’s immutability, her complacency is only an ironic symbol of Julian’s own stubbornness.
Symbols of false self-image run deeper as we envisage the matching hats worn by Julian’s mother and the Negro woman. Beneath the “preposterous hat,” Julian’s mother carries herself in a pompous posture as if it were a “banner of her imaginary dignity” (O’Connor, “Everything” 409). With these words, O’Connor’s text signifies almost directly the nature of the hat as symbolic of imaginary identity (Maida 126). More significant however, is the refusal to acknowledge the fabrication. Upon recognition that the two hats match, Julian’s mother feels compelled disprove it (Howe 115). In subconscious attempt to refute the existence of racial equality, she offers the Negro child a penny, displaying “the smile she used when she was being particularly gracious to an inferior” (O’Connor, “Everything” 418). This penny incident mirrors with astonishing exactness, Julian’s endeavor to substantiate intellectual dominance over his mother by shifting seats to join the Negro man. Despite claims to the affect of teaching his mother tolerance, his deliberate exhibition of racial tolerance is but a ploy to prove superiority over his mother (Maida 126). What he fails to recognize is that he has placed himself in the exact same position of intolerance as his mother, childishly essaying to corroborate a false identity.

At this point, skeptical readers typically begin to wonder whether Julian’s self-definition is actually as false as this underlying symbolism suggests, but considering the contradictions of Julian’s thought stream, the argument becomes clearer. In all his attempts to convince himself of his goodness, Julian crafts his viewpoint carefully —too carefully, such that throughout the story, he contradicts accounts of himself with increasing frequency. In his introspection, Julian’s thoughts resemble the rhetorically lacking retorts of his mother when she contends that “if you know who you are, you can go anywhere” (O’Connor, “Everything” 407). Throughout this sequence of dialogue, Julian mocks the illogic of his mother’s comments, but as soon as he retreats into his thoughts, similar contradictions weave their way into his interior monologue.
To view Julian’s true nature, we must not fall prey to his flawed opinion that it is possible to see the truth by neglecting the exterior world and considering only his interior. Julian’s assertion that “culture is in the mind,” holds little more truth than his mother’s insistence that Negros are “better off” slaves (O’Connor, “Everything” 408-9). In contrasting Julian’s thoughts and words with his actions, evidence runs contrary to Julian’s picture of himself. Julian regularly likens himself to a martyr, describing his mother as something of an irritating child that he is bound by familial obligation to care for (Montgomery 129). As he waits to take her to the bus, he equates himself to “Saint Sebastian, waiting for the arrows to begin piercing him” (O’Connor, “Everything” 405). Many readers might agree with Julian, preferring to see him as a victim, and indeed, a number of arguments have been made to suggest the latter. Walter Sullivan, for instance, attests that Julian, despite his hatred of his mother, “is charity itself in his view toward the world at large” (Sullivan 107). On the other hand, Julian himself chronicles his “satisfaction to see injustice in daily operation” (O’Connor, “Everything” 412). At the sight of his mother’s hat, there grows in him “an evil urge to break her spirit” (O’Connor, “Everything” 409). Even in the moment that he describes himself being “sacrificed to her pleasure,” he is detaching himself from loving his mother, pinning distaste upon her every move (O’Connor, “Everything” 406).

Here, it is relevant to note the subtle difference between the words childish and childlike. While the former bears primarily negative connotations of immaturity and selfishness, the latter embodies the positive qualities ascribed to Julian’s imaginary sainthood: innocence and purity. While a childish person is stubborn and unwilling to improve himself, a childlike person is humble, constantly learning and frankly, the opposite of Julian. For all his childishness, Julian has rationalized the non-existence of all his bad qualities, mentally replacing the real, childish version of himself with a false childlike identity. Only through a change from childishness to a
state of being childlike can we ever see a hope of improvement for Julian (Montgomery 132).

Upon the moment that Julian’s mother is struck down by the Negro woman, Julian’s flawed, childish characteristics are lost as he is jolted into a panic-induced state of innocence. In his frenzy, the word “mother” becomes insufficient, and Julian cries, “Mamma, Mamma!” (O’Connor, “Everything” 420). At the story’s close, all previously noted duplicities in his mother, her hat, and the Negro woman run collateral to what is happening to Julian. As the offended Negro woman strikes Julian’s mother, her hat—the symbol of false identity—falls away (Howe 115). More symbolic is the fact that Julian’s mother would never have willingly removed the hat herself. Even Julian’s attempts to show her the hat’s symbolic nature do nothing to inspire in her a desire to remove the hat. In fact, when faced with such blatant evidence against her false ideals—a Negro woman sharing her hat—the mother simply reverts to finding assurance of her superiority in Carver. In blunt terms, seeing evidence against her false identity only serves to reciprocally confirm what she already believes.

In a similar fashion, Julian is reluctant to throw aside his beliefs when confronted with evidence contrary to his false identity. Like his mother, he refuses to look external evidence in the eye, restricting his observation to evidence that he contrives in himself. Whiling away his bus-ride in despondency, Julian believes himself capable of perceiving the external world accurately without being a part of it. This is evident not only in his constant insistence in his superior intelligence, but in his introspective retreat, his temporary flight from reality:

Julian was withdrawing into the inner compartment of his mind where he spent most of his time. [. . .] From it he could see out and judge but in it he was safe from any kind of penetration from without. [. . .] His mother had never entered it but from it he could see her with absolute clarity. (O’Connor, “Everything” 411)
Nevertheless, it is impossible for man to accurately judge his nature purely based on his internal world. Without viewing the self from the outside, comparison to the external world becomes blurred by the filters of bias and pride. It is thus that Julian’s judgments of himself and others fall devastatingly awry. He has created a self-image that is not what he truthfully is, but rather, what he wants to be. Up until Julian’s moment of grace at the close of the story, complacency holds him captive. His egotistically false sense of self gives him the fallacious impression that he does not need to improve himself, and as a result, his pride detracts from his qualities.

The most frightening discovery of all is that Julian’s cage was not only crafted by himself, but that his willful blindness to reality necessitates that it be unlocked from the outside. In other words, Julian’s metamorphosis from childish to childlike cannot originate in his mind, but must unavoidably arise in consequence of external crisis. Religious in perspective, O’Connor goes so far to suggest that redemption—not just change—can only be attained through the aid of external forces. As Julian’s tragedy outlines, “belief in [one’s] own goodness is not enough for true grace” (Schmitt 101). Just as the mother’s hat must be forcefully removed, only an external crisis can prove great enough to awaken Julian to reality. In the critical instant of his mother’s death, Julian’s pride is shaken enough to force him to finally be candid with himself. It is only in these final moments, that Julian’s haughty pretense is abandoned, and in fear, he becomes the raw, naked embodiment of his true nature. When considering O’Connor’s use of violence, never an internal act, it is enigmatic to presume incongruously to the idea that these epiphanies—or “moments of grace,” as they have been called—are brought about by external forces.

Notwithstanding, I disagree with the subgroup of critics who insist that O’Connor’s intended message was that violence and the grotesque were of absolute necessity for a person to obtain grace. Although O’Connor’s work consistently bears with it a theme of violence as the
trigger point for redemption, her use of the grotesque is more a form of exaggeration intended to shock her readers into recognizing her messages (Fitzgerald 334). The author herself once explicated, “to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind you draw large and startling figures” (Fitzgerald 333). In another commentary, O’Connor stated that “[it] is the extreme situation that best reveals what we are essentially” (O’Connor, “Background” 59). Specifically, she uses this exaggeration to point towards a needed convergence between the internal and external worlds of the characters in question.

It is clear from the commentaries of O’Connor herself that her use of violence was indeed intended to point toward redemption. Throughout her works, O’Connor’s use of exaggeration invariably always points directly to the overarching theme of redemption in her story, and she manages this by inserting a climactic and fundamentally unique epiphany within her text. In clarifying her own authorial intent, O’Connor had this to say of her character’s epiphanies:

“I often ask myself what makes a story work [. . .] and I have decided that it is probably some action, some gesture of a character [. . .] which indicates where the real heart of the story lies. This would have to be an action or a gesture which was both totally right and totally unexpected [. . .] one that was both in character and beyond character [. . .] The action of gesture I’m talking about would have to be on the anagogical level, that is, the level which has to do with the Divine life and our participation in it. It would be a gesture that transcended any neat allegory that might have been intended or any past moral categories a reader could make.”

(O’Connor, “Background” 57-58)

In a number of O’Connor’s stories, this characteristic epiphany is obvious and physical, such as the grandmother’s stretch to touch the Misfit in “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” (O, Connor, “A Good” 132). Julian’s epiphany is less obvious, but reflects directly O’Connor’s explication as out
of character. In the moment that his mother dies, he becomes a frightened child, calling his
mother pet names, such as “darling sweetheart,” that contradict his prior dialogue (O’Connor,
“Everything” 420). He throws off childishness in order to embody the childlike qualities that will
ultimately humble him for the receipt of redemption.

Further hints towards understanding how Julian must attain redemption exist in the title,
“Everything That Rises Must Converge,” which alludes to The Phenomenon of Man, a work by
Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. This direct allusion points with sureness towards the two authors’
shared views on the concept of the self converging with the environment. Sir Julian Huxley said
of Chardin’s work:

A developed human being […] is not merely a more highly individualized
individual. He has crossed the threshold of self-consciousness to a new mode of
thought, and as a result has achieved some degree of conscious integration –
integration of the self with the outer world of men and nature, integration of the
separate elements of the self with each other. (Teilhard)

As is apparent in his inward retreats and his constant insistence that he is different than everyone
else, Julian believes himself capable of accurately perceiving the external world while remaining
exempt from it. Nevertheless, without active participation in both his internal world and the
external world, he cannot see truth within either.

At the same time, we are left to wonder whether Julian actually does attain redemption.
As with the majority of O’Connor’s protagonists, Julian’s opportunity for grace comes when he
is ill prepared, and thus, it is easy to see that he does not obtain the redemptive change that he
could have. The very fact of the story’s cliffhanger ending brings into question many of our
previously established beliefs about the story. “The tide of darkness seemed to sweep him back
to her, postponing from moment to moment his entry into the world of guilt and sorrow”
In this final line of the story, Julian is not running away from the complacency symbolized by his mother, but is instead, “[swept] back to her.” As he runs back towards his mother, his feet do not bear him swiftly toward change, they move “numbly as if they carried him nowhere” (O’Connor, “Everything” 420). These closing words of the story suggest what the entirety of the text already has: that Julian, despite his epiphany—his temporary change from pride to innocence—will continue to hold on to complacency despite. Once separated from the external event that triggers his epiphany, Julian’s pride will return and he will continue to resist change.

If Julian, in this moment of horror, can reject such a blinding truth, will he ever truly be capable of redemptive change for more than a temporary moment in time? What lessons will he retain following the death of his mother? Perhaps we’ll never know, but what is clear is this: the convergence between Julian’s internal world with the external world need not have been induced by violence at all. In a way, the ultimate barrier to redemptive change lies implicitly in Julian’s prideful attempts to isolate himself from the rest of the world through intellectualism. The fault lies not in the failure of external evidence to trigger Julian to realization, but in his own prideful refusal to accept it.
Works Cited


Montgomery, Marion. "On Flannery O'Connor's "Everything That Rises Must Converge”"


