Politics and Theology of Flannery O’Connor:

How They Coincide in “Everything That Rises Must Converge”

In his critical essay “Desegregation and the Silent Character in O’Connor’s ‘Everything That Rises Must Converge’” Michael L. Schroeder argues “that while ‘Everything that Rises Must Converge’ does not become polemical, it certainly goes beyond a mere ‘topical reference’ to reflect her deep concerns with the issues of desegregation and civil rights, and it indicates, subtly, her take on how to best deal with those issues” (Disintegration, Schroeder 75). While I agree with Schroeder that O’Connor was anything but silent in her stance about the civil rights movement and that in her own way she indicates her own opinion about how the issues of the civil rights movement should be handled, I must argue against Schroeder’s, as well as other critic’s strong adherence to a secular reading of the piece. I assert that the blend of a secular reading with a religious reading of this story brings the greatest understanding of O’Connor’s opinion of the civil rights movement.

It is no secret that O’Connor’s writings deal chiefly with the religious. O’Connor stated about herself, “I write the way I do, because (not though) I am a Catholic (HB 275). While taking into account the secular and historical context is essential to glean some meaning from this particular story, we must also take into account O’Connor’s faith and how that factors into O’Connor’s viewpoint and her writing of this “topical” text.

She was “born of the marriage of two of Georgia’s oldest Catholic families” (Gordon). As a child, she attended St. Vincent’s Grammar School through fifth grade, and while attending, her teachers recognized how tightly and passionately she clung to the Catholic faith; her third grade teacher, Sister Consolata, commented in Jean W. Cash’s biography of O’Connor that she was “raised very religious” and that the entire Catholic community of Savannah, Georgia had an
impact on O’Connor’s religious education (Cash 5). As she grew up and through her adulthood she continued to research her religion and its many aspects of doctrine. She voraciously read the works of Karl Adam, Jacques Maritain, Romano Guardini, and Reilhard de Chardin in order to understand the evolution of her religion or to “enhance her own understanding of contemporary trends in Roman Catholicism” (Cash xv).

Because she is so well versed in her religion, O’Connor has been able to purposely inset subtle Catholic themes into her work without being overly obvious. Even when the religious themes are conspicuous to the alert reader, they do not distract from the story itself, but buoy up the richness of O’Connor’s overall art. Despite the fact that O’Connor herself called “Everything That Rises” a “topical” story (HB 446), O’Connor’s language drips of theological symbolism. Sacrifice, faith, the overarching religious themes, and the mention of Saints are a clear indication of O’Connor’s deliberate Catholicism. Her wording is subtle, but it is evident that this story is not just “topical”. Before we look into what O’Connor said concerning the civil rights movement we must first analyze the piece itself to find how the secular and religious coincide within this story.

The overarching religious theme—this essay will look at other themes as well—in this story is that of Grace. Grace is defined as “a supernatural gift from God to intellectual creatures for their eternal salvation” (Catholic.org). Consistent with O’Connor’s other stories, there is a moment of grace that is presented to the characters through some sort of grotesque or violent act. Whether or not these characters accept their moment of grace and what happens afterward is usually left up to the interpretation of the reader. Julian is politically and religiously damned, while his mother is the one who is saved, despite her obvious racism. Her saving Grace being is her innocent lack of understanding.
Grace likewise applies as O’Connor usually infuses her characters with attributes that exemplify a negative connotation in the human psyche and juxtaposes them with characters that possess complete or more godly attributes or insights. When analyzing the characters in “Everything That Rises”, Julian and his mother are contrasted not only in reference to their opposing ideals, but ultimately how they will be judged by other characters and by readers.

For example, in 1975, John V. McDermott labeled Julian as the “personification of pride, dooming himself because of the graduate and insidious inversion of his living soul; for rather than reaching out to others, he turns more and more toward the center of himself” (McDermott 146). Schroeder quotes Ralph Wood: Julian is “another white liberal who turns a rightful demand for racial justice into a wrongful demand for moral congratulations” (Wood 116). The irony of Julian’s pride is his hypocrisy: he believes that he is much more racially tolerant and educated than not only his mother but also those around him and therefore, not only are their prejudices outdated but all process of thinking is irrelevant despite the similarity found in his own thoughts. He carries the same kind of prejudices, but they are just from a different perspective.

For example, his mother is of the mindset that the African-American community should rise, but “on their own side of the fence” (O’Connor 408), however she is consistent in associating with those of her own race despite their social status (O’Connor 411). She believes that she should associate with those of color and those of her own color on her own terms. He does as well, but he does not admit it. Julian’s opinion of any color is based upon what he deems to be worthy of his approval; he’s attempted to relate to African-Americans, but only on his own terms. He reports a few conciliatory attempts at conversation with African-Americans, which is followed by his disdain when they did not meet his standard of acceptable company. When a well-dressed African-American boards the bus, he “would have liked to talk with him about art
or politics or any subject that would be above the comprehension of those around them, but the man remained entrenched behind his paper” (O’Connor 412). When he does make verbal contact with the man, he is unable to truly relate because he is not genuine. It seems as though the man can sense Julian’s true intent and chooses not to give him the satisfaction that he craves. Both Julian and his mother find their parallels in the Pharisees in Luke 15. When the Pharisees came across Christ eating with those whom they believed to be sinners, they condemned Christ to be a sinner as well. However, Christ taught that all men were precious to God in spite of their real or perceived flaws. Both Julian and his mother ignore Christ’s teaching to love all men.

In addition to Julian’s portrait of pride and hypocrisy, after his failed, feeble attempt at verbal communication, he carries on an inner meditation, entertaining the thought of inviting upper crust black colleagues for supper or potentially marrying a black woman. But these desires are not to make legitimate relationships with people but are to use them as trophies to his altar of his self-importance (O’Connor 414). This biased view of himself is enhanced through religious language of the limited third-person view of Julian’s mind. He spends the time that we observe him completely miserable and suffering through his mother’s company. The language he uses to describe himself is similar to that of describing prophets or other characters of merit. He even goes so far as to raise himself to the level of sainthood “his hands behind him, appeared pinnned to the door frame, waiting like Saint Sebastian for the arrows to begin piercing him” (O’Connor 405).

O’Connor’s analogy to a Saint is the starkest display of political and religious hypocrisy within Julian. The analogy is also one of the most obvious and perhaps deliberate tool O’Connor uses to express her combined religious and political commentary. St. Sebastian was known to energetically spread and defend the Faith even after being shot with arrows and left for dead
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(Catholic.org). In contrast, Julian is “sacrificed to [his mother’s] pleasure” (O’Connor 406), and “[he walks] along, saturated in depression, as if in the midst of his martyrdom he had lost his faith” (O’Connor 407). In the political sense, to be truly likened to St. Sebastian, Julian should have been spreading the “Faith” or the news of integration with energy and joy, instead of with a sullen outlook and with ends to self-satisfaction.

Even Julian’s career choice can be tied to O’Connor’s religious exegesis or interpretation of scripture. Julian believes himself to be a Saint or a martyr, when reality is actually a typewriter salesman who fancies himself a writer. He is a mere scribe. Scribes in the New Testament were usually lawyers, who were often known to embellish written law with current traditions, thereby, diluting the true nature of the laws or scripture. Just as the scribes diluted the truth in scripture, Julian is a diluted version of his profession and dilutes the truth in his viewpoints upon race and prejudice. Julian’s need of approval in the eyes of man further feeds into the observation of his ungodliness and therefore his hypocrisy and pride. This is emphasized in the New Testament, a book that O’Connor no doubt referred to in her daily life. The scripture in question quotes Christ, “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Because ye build the tombs of the prophets and garnish the sepulchers of the righteous” (Matthew 2:9) and again “this people honoureth me with their lips but their heart is far from me” (Mark 7:6).

The contrast to Julian is the character of his mother. Her seemingly modest presence in the story, combined with her subtle moral personality (despite her obvious misguided flaws) depict how she has made significant sacrifices for her son and furthermore does not make mention of them throughout the story. Her silence as pertains to her personal sacrifices in the face of Julian’s distaste proves her sincere humility contrasted to Julian’s self-righteousness. She also shows him great mercy as he berates her and makes attempts to bring her blood to a boil.
Julian, for instance, bemoans his “third-rate” (O’Connor 412) education, although he has recently graduated and extols himself to be “intelligent in spite [of it]” (Everything That Rises Must Converge by Flannery O’Connor, Schroeder 45). What he fails to appreciate is his mother’s sacrifice for his education. Instead, he resents it. She was a “widow who had struggled fiercely to feed and clothe and put him through school” (O’Connor 406). Julian’s mother has shown her love for her son by giving him the best that she could despite her being alone and both of them probably very poor because of her marital situation.

In addition to her sacrifice, O’Connor employs effective imagery, likening Julian’s mother to a child: “her eyes, sky-blue, were as innocent and untouched by experience as they must have been when she was ten [. . .] she might have been a little girl that he had to take to town” (O’Connor 406). Even she reflects upon her childhood as a child would: with innocence and a desire for the simple things (O’Connor 408). This observation becomes especially important when we look again to the New Testament. Matthew 18:3 of the King James Version of the Bible Jesus Christ states that “except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not inherit the kingdom of heaven.” This is one of, if not the most, important distinction between Julian and his mother: she possesses attributes outlined by Christ to enter the kingdom of heaven and he does not. Just like a child, she is confused with what is happening to the world that she once knew. It is true that she holds old prejudices—for example, she refers to her old nanny, Caroline, as an “old darky” (O’Connor 409)—and is uncomfortable with African Americans intruding into her own idea of property society, but to her credit, O’Connor requires the reader to take into account the kind of political climate in which she grew up.

The mother’s childhood was set in a society where she was taught that people of color were treated far differently than the world we see in the story. Because of this, she carries some
nurtured opinions and insights to her changing environment, “they should rise, yes, but on their own side of the fence” (O’Connor 408). However, we see that she does carry her own positive opinions about those of color with whom she has come into personal contact. Usually when speaking with prejudice, she is just repeating the beliefs and thoughts of her parent society. But she claims that “there was no better person in the world [than her nanny Caroline]” and that she’s “always had a great respect for [her] colored friends [. . .] [She’d] do anything in the world for them” (O’Connor 409). Who is to say that she could have been naturally displayed a much more tolerant demeanor if she had been raised in a more exemplary society? But in order to stay in the present, we shall look at her current state, which is that of an older woman who is reluctant to let go of her dying world; as Schroeder states, “she is racist and segregationist, but she is not malicious” (Everything That Rises Must Converge by Flannery O’Connor, Schroeder 45). She reflects upon her childhood with fondness and tries to convince her surly son of his potential status: “Rome wasn’t built in a day” (O’Connor 411). Even though there is evidence of the mother’s childlike status, she is still far too proud and stubborn. However, pursuant to common tropes in O’Connor’s novels, a harsh act of violence shocks her enough to revert back to the humble child she needs to be in order to be truly saved. Thus, enter characters that will shock her into a theological and political state of Grace.

The large black woman who enters the bus is “sullen” and “her face was set not only to meet opposition but to seek it out” (O’Connor 415). It seems as though she is prepared to defend against any racial backlash as she goes about her day, but also to perhaps enforce her rights on her own terms. When her son, Carver, begins to associate in a friendly manner with Julian’s mother, the woman becomes extremely perturbed. This woman seems to be asserting her right to sit next to a white man on a bus, but does not recognize that same right of association towards
Julian’s mother. Julian is uncomfortable when she sits next to him—as stated before, he is selective with what “kind” of African American he will associate—but then is delighted by the fact that this situation will cause his mother more disgust. He is disappointed when she sees that she is occupied fondly observing Carver. The African American woman stands juxtaposed to Julian’s mother not only in attitude and size, but how they represent the convergence of their two societies. The African American woman is described as a large intimidating woman while the grandmother is described as small and petite with an unhealthy pallor (O’Connor 416, 405).

From these comparisons we can see the mother, or the old Southern society slowly withering away and the African American community or integration in general as a rising and powerful force. The mother’s later kindhearted but misguided gesture of the gift of a penny is seen as racial condescension and is struck down by the African American woman, or the African American community, in righteous anger. The mother’s reaching out is seen as an outdated and prejudiced action and is—just like the mother’s past—violently stuck down. The mother is then completely shocked into her true reality, not just her imagined reality of her supposed superiority. She is humbled and vulnerable, therefore a child.

Her childlike nature is the key element in her salvation at the moment of her demise, as elucidated by the scripture from the New Testament. Throughout the story, Julian’s mother has childlike qualities, but does not become a child until that shock. She is then able to pass through Grace. Julian, in contrast, resents all of her childlike qualities from her youthful eyes, small stature, dependency, and playfulness with the child Carter. Because of his pride, ingratitude, and distaste for the innocence of childlike qualities, Julian finds himself damned. Even when he realizes how cruel he has been to his mother, he stumbles and is numbed to his reality (O’Connor 420). The indication that he is in hell is strongly indicated because he has been thrust “into the
world of guilt and sorrow” (O’Connor 420). O’Connor’s wording can be tied back to the Psalm 116:3 “the sorrows of death compassed me, and the pains of hell got hold upon me: I found trouble and sorrow”. Hell is where sorrow is and his guilt is his catalyst into hell.

Julian turns himself away from his mother to find help, and yet is directionless; he does not know where to go. He turns his back to his mother and refuses to look back at the Grace that he could have attained had he accepted her. McDermott’s initial interpretation regarding Julian running is that he is fleeing from his “pride, now dethroned” (McDermott 146). McDermott is in no way optimistic to Julian’s ultimate destination. Politically and religiously there seems to be no redemption or Grace for Julian.

From the above political and theological analysis, we can see that this story is not simply a “topical” story nor is it simply another story about Grace. O’Connor complained in a letter from 1 Sept. 1963 “the topical is poison. I got away with it in ‘Everything That Rises’ but only because I said a plague on everybody’s house as far as the race business goes” (HB 537). Schroeder interprets her letter and says:

Those houses presumably include those of the paternalistic but racist establishment that wants to perpetuate segregation, represented by Julian’s mother; misguided liberals who want to flaunt their integrationist virtues; and African Americans so fed up with segregation that they are ready to lash out violently even at well-intended condescension.

O’Connor appears to be showing all sides to be at fault (Desegregation, Schroeder 75). O’Connor was no doubt aware of the racial tensions in her home state of Georgia and was “certainly disturbed by what she saw as oversimplification of the situation by northern liberals”. She wanted to “illustrate some of the immense complexities of the racial situation in the South, psychological as well as political, affecting blacks as well as whites” (Desegregation, Schroeder
I agree with Schroeder’s assertion that “[. . .] O’Connor depicts the views and attitudes of all three characters negatively because she wants her story to reflect the complexities of desegregation in the South as viewed by a relatively progressive white southerner at the beginning of the 1960s” (Schroeder 75), but I would add that, as Schroeder himself stated, she “indicates, subtly, her opinion on how to best deal with those issues” (Desegregation, Schroeder 75). This statement is important because Schroeder introduces an interesting take on a “silent” character in “Everything That Rises”: the well-dressed African American man that Julian makes an attempt to make conversation with is the example of how the participants in the Civil Rights Movement should have reacted. The way the man is dressed and his possession of a brief case depicts a man who has obtained either an education or at least a well-paying professional job, something that was rare for African Americans in that era, and when he sits close to the front of the bus, shows his assertive but quiet claim on his rights to sit where he pleases. His refusal to “come out from behind the paper” (O’Connor 493) shows that the man doesn’t care about the racist happenings around him. He doesn’t notice or at least doesn’t take offense when a woman moves away from him and doesn’t acknowledge Julian when he moves to sit with him. He is simply trying to live his life within his rights. Schroeder believes that O’Connor was displaying her stance that people should “[pursue] change quietly and persistently” with this character (Desegregation, Schroeder 81). Looking religiously upon this man, he is persistently and quietly pursuing greater enlightenment; he is educated or at least well employed, taking no offense at the actions of others, and tolerating those around him. Yes, he does become annoyed with Julian when he asks for a light since Julian has no cigarettes, but he is only human. By Schroeder’s interpretation of “Everything That Rises”—to which I agree—integration should be moved forward by good Christians living their lives and making room for their black or white
counterparts with tolerance and love, not “by the likes of Julian, with his misguided motives [. . .] or his mother’s African-American counterpart, with her anger and resentfulness”.

O’Connor may delve into the violent and grotesque, but she did these things for the greater purpose of helping people discover their spirituality and their own moments of grace. In his critical essay “The Domestic Dynamics of Flannery O’Connor: Everything that Rises Must Converge” Bryan N. Wyatt makes the observation that:

Related to this [Catholic] orientation, in its effect of moderating the religious theme in her works, is the very catholicity, the encompassing embrace of her outlook. Her protagonists may not be able to support the grace that befalls them, but she loves them nonetheless. [. . .] she loves the antagonists too and loves them just as much (Wyatt 67).

This “encompassing embrace” refers to “her opinion on how to best deal with those issues”: to tolerate and love as Christ loved. Christ is the One who bestows grace upon all people. The well dressed African-American man and Julian’s mother may not be overt Christ figures, but each of them possess a few attributes such as mercy, humility, and tolerance which brings Christ into the piece. Bringing Christ and His Grace is a key element to O’Connor’s true reason for writing.

In comparing “Everything That Rises” to some of her other works such as The Violent Shall Bear It Away and “A Good Man is Hard to Find”, we can feel her mercy for her almost unsavable characters. The stubborn and rebellious Tarwater, and the murderous prophet-embryo character of the Misfit are shown to have the potential to become something great if they would partake of their own moments of Grace. Therefore, in keeping with his pattern, if we look at Julian in his fallen state: running from his mother in fear of the realization of his true demonic nature, if he would just turn around and face his pride by staying by his mother’s side in her last moments, he could then find his own salvation. If he would adopt some of the tolerance and love
that his mother had for other people and combined it with his tolerance of other races, he could become the true advocate of racial equality that he wants to be.

While the critics addressed in this essay may display some astute and incontrovertible observations about the different aspects of O’Connor’s “Everything That Rises Must Converge”, their purely secular or religious interpretations robs the piece the true impact that it can have on its audience. There is no question that O’Connor blended the “topical” and secular with the religious and holy in this piece, therefore we should blend our analysis of it.

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