

Everything That Rises Must Converge



by Flannery O'Connor

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Everything That Rises Must Converge: Introduction

Just one year before her death in 1963, Flannery O'Connor won her second O. Henry Award for "Everything That Rises Must Converge," a powerful depiction of a troubled mother-son relationship. In 1965 the story was published in her well-regarded short fiction collection, *Everything That Rises Must Converge*.

Most critics view "Everything That Rises Must Converge" as a prime example of O'Connor's literary and moral genius. The story exemplifies her ability to expose human weakness and explore important moral questions through everyday situations. Considered a classic of the short story form, "Everything That Rises Must Converge" has been anthologized frequently.

The story describes the events surrounding a fateful bus trip that an arrogant young man takes with his bigoted mother. The mother insists on her son's company because she doesn't like to ride the bus alone, especially since the bus system was recently integrated. The tensions in their relationship come to a head when a black mother and son board the same bus.

O'Connor utilizes biting irony to expose the blindness and ignorance of her characters. The story's title refers to an underlying religious message that is central to her work: she aims to expose the sinful nature of humanity that often goes unrecognized in the modern, secular world.

Everything That Rises Must Converge: Flannery O'Connor Biography

Born on March 25, 1925, in Savannah, Georgia, Mary Flannery O'Connor was the only child of Edwin Francis and Regina Cline O'Connor. She was raised in a devout Roman Catholic family, which was an anomaly in the American South.

When O'Connor was thirteen, her father was diagnosed with disseminated lupus, a hereditary disease. The family moved to Milledgeville, Georgia, her mother's hometown, where they lived in her mother's ancestral home at the center of town. Edwin O'Connor died two years later.

O'Connor attended parochial school in Savannah but graduated from public high school in Milledgeville. She then attended the Georgia State College for Women, where she studied social sciences and had an avid interest in cartooning.

After graduation she was determined to write and eventually earned a master's degree at the prestigious University of Iowa Writer's Workshop. While still enrolled there she dropped "Mary" from her name and published her first short story, "The Geranium."

After college, she did a residency at the Yaddo writer's colony in Saratoga Springs, New York. In 1949 she moved to New York City. Later she lived for a time with the literary couple Robert and Sally Fitzgerald and worked on her first novel, *Wise Blood*, in their Connecticut home before falling ill with lupus in 1950.

After her diagnosis, she returned to Milledgeville for good. Accompanied by her mother, she moved to a dairy farm called Andalusia on the outskirts of town. Here O'Connor divided her time between convalescing, raising peacocks, and writing.

In 1952 *Wise Blood* was published, followed by her short story collection *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* in 1955 and her novel *The Violent Bear It Away* in 1960. She was the recipient of a number of fellowships and was a two-time winner of the prestigious O. Henry Award for short fiction.

O'Connor's devout Catholicism influenced her resilient attitude as she faced a debilitating disease. Her treatments had painful side effects and, in combination with the lupus, softened the bones in her hips so that she required crutches. When her health allowed, she gave readings and lectures and entertained. Despite constant discomfort, she continued to write fiction until her health failed.

In 1964 O'Connor died of kidney failure as a result of complications caused by lupus. Her final work, *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, was published posthumously the following year.

Everything That Rises Must Converge: Summary

Set in the South in the early 1960s, “Everything That Rises Must Converge” opens with the protagonist, a young writer named Julian, reflecting on the reasons that he must accompany his mother to her weekly weight-loss meeting. She goes to the meetings because she has high blood pressure, but considers them one of her “few pleasures.”

However, Julian’s mother has refused to ride the bus alone since the bus system became racially integrated. Julian dreads the trips, but feels obligated to do as she wishes.

On the evening when the story takes place, Julian’s mother is indecisive about whether to wear a garish new hat. She eventually decides to wear it, commenting that the hat was worth the extra money because others won’t have the same one.

As they walk to the bus stop, Julian’s mother reviews her family legacy, which has given her a strong self-identity. She implies that it does not matter that she is poor because she comes from a well-known and once prosperous family of the pre-Civil War South.

Mentioning her family’s former plantation, Julian’s mother talks about slavery. Julian remembers the mansion, which he regards with secret longing, while his mother continues to reminisce about her nurse, an “old darky” whom she considers “the best person in the world.” Julian finds his mother’s condescension and racism intolerable.

They get on the bus and his mother tells their fellow white passengers about her son’s ambitions as a writer. He deals with his embarrassment by detaching himself from the action; in this state, he considers his mother objectively. He thinks about the sacrifices she has made for him, yet feels superior to her racist and old-fashioned ideas, including her pride in the past.

A black man gets on the bus. Julian moves across the aisle in order to sit next to him, which he knows will bother his mother. Wishing to seem sympathetic, he attempts to strike up a conversation with the disinterested man. Nevertheless, he enjoys his mother’s discomfort; he begins to fantasize about bringing black friends home, or even a mixed-race girlfriend.

At the next stop a black woman and her young son board the bus. The woman is wearing the same flamboyant hat as Julian’s mother. Taking the only seats available, the woman sits next to Julian and the boy sits next to his mother.

Julian is amused by the identical hats and by the idea that, according to their seating, his mother and the black woman have “swapped sons.” Julian’s mother recovers her composure and strikes up a conversation with the little boy next to her. The black woman reprimands her son and, when a seat becomes available, moves him next to her. But Julian’s mother continues to joke with the boy.

The four of them get off the bus at the same stop. Julian tries to stop his mother from giving the little boy a penny, but she tries to do it anyway. Enraged by her condescension, the boy’s mother strikes her to the ground. Julian tells his mother that she got what she deserved. She appears confused and initially declines his offer to help her up.

She looks at him like she doesn’t know him and heads in the direction of home. He goads her, calling after her that the hat looked better on the black woman than on her and that “the old world is gone. The old manners and your graciousness is not worth a damn.” She is breathing hard but Julian doesn’t recognize

that she is in physical distress.

She asks for her Grandpa, then for her childhood nurse, Caroline. Julian looks at her face, finally realizing that she is having a stroke. He runs to her crying, calling her “darling,” and “sweetheart,” and “Mama,” as her face distorts and her eyes close. He goes for help but knows that it is too late.

Everything That Rises Must Converge: Characters

Caroline

Caroline was Julian’s mother’s nanny when she was a young child. Julian’s mother refers to her as an “old darky” but also claims that “there was no better person in the world.” Caroline is the last person Julian’s mother calls for before she dies, suggesting a return to childhood and also a genuine intimacy with the woman.

Carver

Carver is the little African-American boy who boards the bus with his mother. He sits next to Julian’s mother, who does not regard black children with the same suspicion that she does adults. She finds him cute and regains her composure by joking with him playfully. She offers him a penny in what she thinks of as a gesture of gentility.

Colored Woman

An African-American woman gets on the bus with her young son and is forced to take a seat next to Julian. She wears the same hat as Julian’s mother—a hat that Julian’s mother had considered too expensive—thus representing the Negro’s “rise” in Southern society. Julian finds bitter humor in the fact that the two women wear the same hats and that, according to their seating configuration, they have “swapped sons.”

The African-American woman is direct and aggressive, lacking the cutting condescension and the gentle manners of Julian’s mother. She resents Julian’s mother for ingratiating herself with her son and slaps her when she offers him a penny.

Julian

Julian is the protagonist of “Everything That Rises Must Converge.” A young white man in his early twenties who has recently graduated from college, he lives with his mother and contributes minimally to the household by selling typewriters.

The story focuses on his conflicted relationship with his mother and his rejection of her old-fashioned, racist ideology. Although grateful for her financial and emotional support, Julian is proud of himself for being able to see her objectively and not allowing himself to be dominated by her.

The issue of race relations triggers a major conflict between mother and son. Julian considers himself as liberal and progressive because he rejects his mother’s racist views; yet it becomes clear his views come from an attempt to antagonize his mother, not from a thoughtful worldview. He has “an evil urge to break her spirit” and he succeeds, only to regret it deeply.

Julian’s Mother

Julian’s mother is an older Southern lady. Descended from a respected, wealthy family, she is now virtually impoverished. Almost every dollar she has goes to her beloved son, Julian; this financial support has allowed him to complete college and attempt a life as a writer.

Julian's mother holds old-fashioned racist views: she strongly favors segregation, believes that blacks were better off as slaves, and blames civil rights legislation as the main cause of her deteriorated social and economic standing. Yet she holds on to her ideas of gentility and graciousness; after all, that is the way a Southern lady would act.

“Everything That Rises Must Converge” focuses on her complex, troubled relationship to Julian as he tries to confront her on these views. On an integrated bus, he forces her to address her prejudices, hoping to teach her a lesson about race relations, justice, and the modern world.

When the stress of bearing his antagonism is exacerbated by a physical attack, she has a stroke. As she dies, she looks at her son as if she doesn't know him and asks for her childhood nurse, who was a black woman.

Negro Man

Julian sits next to a well-dressed, African-American man in order to make a point about his own views on racial integration and to antagonize his mother. Julian asks the man for a light, wishing to strike up a conversation. The man has no interest in talking to him.

Everything That Rises Must Converge: Themes

Social Class

Julian's mother reminds him that they come from a “good” family—one that was once respected for its wealth and social standing. Her family name is central to her identity, reinforcing her belief in her value as a human being and her superiority to those around her.

Yet Julian and his mother now live in a rundown neighborhood that “had been fashionable forty years ago.” She has sacrificed everything for her son and continues to support him even though he has graduated from college. As a consequence, she has to worry about spending \$7.50 on a hat and must ride the bus along with African Americans, which she considers degrading.

Julian finds his mother's preoccupation about the family name ridiculous, but he secretly believes that he has the aristocratic qualities that she claims to value. He thinks of the family's lost mansion with longing, asserting that “it was he, not she, who would've appreciated it.”

Morals and Morality

Morality is a recurring theme in O'Connor's work, and “Everything That Rises Must Converge” is no exception. The story concerns questions of right and wrong, with the contrasting moral sensibilities of Julian and his mother forming the basis of the plot's conflict.

Julian's mother relies on custom and tradition for her moral sensibility, claiming that “how you do things is because of who you are” and “if you know who you are, you can go anywhere.” She believes in polite social conduct, and considers herself to be superior to most other people—especially African Americans.

She is fiercely loyal to those whom she identifies as part of her proud tradition, especially her son. In her eyes, upholding her duty to her family and her family name is the key to goodness.

Julian has great disdain for his mother's moral outlook. He dismisses her notions of proper conduct as part of an old social order that is not only immoral, but also irrelevant. Julian believes that by sitting next to the African-American man on the bus, he is teaching his mother a valuable moral lesson.

He considers his views on integration liberal and progressive, but they turn out to be merely an attempt to punish his mother. The events of the story reveal him to be blinded by self-centeredness, arrogance, and resentment. In the end, he is morally responsible for his mother's death; but his cries for help at the story's close suggest "his desperate awareness of the dark state of his own soul," as Robert D. Denham contends in the *The Flannery O'Connor Bulletin*.

Knowledge and Ignorance

Julian considers himself intellectually superior to those around him. He believes that he sees reality with detachment and objectivity, an "inner compartment of his mind" that is "the only place where he felt free of the general idiocy of his fellows."

However, the ironic narration reveals Julian to be the most self-deceiving character in the story. His seething resentment of his mother and "evil urge to break her spirit" are evidence of his lack of objectivity and his deep, emotional involvement with his mother.

His liberal views on race relations have more to do with a desire to lash out at her than they do with being open-minded or tolerant. In fact, he looks down on his mother for living "according to the laws of her own fantasy world, outside of which she never steps foot," but it is he who spends much of the bus trip deep in fantasy about punishing his mother by bringing home a black friend or a mixed-race girlfriend.

In the final scene, Julian is ignorant as to the reality of his mother's medical condition. When he realizes that she is dying he experiences the first moment of true understanding described in the story. At this point, he feels a sense of intimacy with his mother, calling her "darling," "sweetheart," and "Mamma." The closing line suggests that his mother's death—and the confrontation with his own cruelty and selfishness—will open up the possibility for self-knowledge for Julian, one based on "convergence" rather than detachment.

Everything That Rises Must Converge: Style

Ironic Narration

"Everything That Rises Must Converge" is narrated in the third-person, meaning that the events in the story are described from the position of an outside observer. The narrator has access to Julian's inner thoughts, private motivations, and fantasies.

While Julian believes himself to be perfectly objective, the events are described in terms of his emotionally charged relationship with his mother. Yet just because the narrator has access to Julian's innermost thoughts does not mean that readers are meant to empathize with him. As the story continues, the narrator's perspective becomes more distinct from Julian's; by the end, readers are in a position to criticize Julian as strongly as he has criticized his mother.

The narrative technique O'Connor uses to create this effect is called irony. Irony refers to the difference or imbalance between the surface meaning of the words and the effects that they create. Irony allows O'Connor to expose Julian's lack of self-knowledge and his distance from a state of grace.

O'Connor employs another form of irony at the story's conclusion: the difference between intentions and effects. Throughout the story Julian wishes evil on his mother and tries to punish her by pushing his liberal views on her. When the stress of the bus trip leads to a stroke, his wish comes true. Ironically, this leads him to recognize his own weakness rather than revealing hers. He wanted to teach her a lesson, but he ends up learning one himself. O'Connor's ideas about redemption rely on this kind of ironic reversal.

Satire

O'Connor is known for her biting satire, which is the use of ridicule, humor, and wit in order to criticize human nature and society. In "Everything That Rises Must Converge," her characters are all satiric extremes. Sometimes called "grotesques," each character expresses some distortion of human nature; these distortions are also emphasized through physical traits.

Julian's mother "holds[s] herself very erect under the preposterous hat, wearing it like a banner of her imaginary dignity." A self-pitying Julian "wait[s] like Saint Sebastian for the arrows to start piercing him." According to O'Connor's belief system, weakness and sin plague human nature. She wrote from an orthodox Catholic perspective about a secular and profane world and, thus, saw it as her calling to portray sin in no uncertain terms.

As Walter Sullivan asserted in the *Hollins Critic*,

It was Flannery O'Connor's contention that the strange characters who populate her world are essentially no different from you and me. They are drawn more extravagantly, she would admit, but she claimed that this was necessary because of our depravity: for the morally blind, the message of redemption must be writ large.

Some critics find O'Connor's satire heavy-handed, but others argue that her harsh portrayals must be understood in relationship to her more subtle use of irony and in contrast to the glimpses of redemption she offers her fallen characters at the violent conclusions of her stories.

Symbolism

O'Connor's first creative outlet was cartooning, and her stories are dominated by strong visual symbols. In "Everything That Rises Must Converge," the key symbol is the green and purple hat, which is described as "hideous" and "atrocious."

Despite her misgivings about its expensive price, she decides to keep the hat because, she says, "at least I won't meet myself coming and going." This means that Julian's mother believes that she will never meet anyone else wearing the same hat. Yet the turn of phrase "meet myself" suggests how strongly the hat reflects the wearer's identity—which compounds the irony when she encounters an African-American woman on the bus wearing the same hat.

In this way, she "meets herself" in the figure of an African-American woman. Their connection is further emphasized by the fact that "she and the woman had, in a sense, swapped sons." Julian sits next to the black woman and her young son sits next to Julian's mother, thus creating an additional layer of symbolic mirroring.

That the African-American woman wears the same hat—a hat that Julian's mother had to scrimp to pay for—is testament to how far Julian's mother has fallen economically and socially. It also illustrates how far African Americans have risen in American society. The African-American woman's social "rise" brings a kind of "convergence" between the two women, but not the transcendent sort referred to in the title.

Everything That Rises Must Converge: Historical Context

Southern Race Relations

The generation gap between Julian and his mother manifests itself through their disagreement over race relations, an issue that was a pressing part of public discourse in the early 1960s.

At the turn of the twentieth century, a series of “Jim Crow” laws had been instituted throughout the South; these laws enforced segregation of public places. In fact, for the first half of the twentieth century, blacks and whites used separate facilities: parks, restaurants, clubs, restrooms, and transportation.

In 1954 a landmark Supreme Court decision, *Brown vs. Board of Education*, deemed school segregation as inherently unequal. In the aftermath of this decision, African Americans won the right to share public transportation with whites in a number of Southern cities. In 1960 “sit-ins” at segregated lunch counters became a popular method of protesting against segregation. Such actions spurred the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement, which would lead to important social and legislative changes over the next decade.

In “Everything That Rises Must Converge,” Julian’s mother refuses to ride the bus alone; this implies that sharing the same vehicle with African Americans would compromise either her safety or her dignity.

Catholic Theology

A devout Roman Catholic, O’Connor differed from other writers in her generation in that she wrote from a deeply religious perspective. “I see from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy,” she asserts. “This means that for me the meaning of life is centered on Redemption by Christ and what I see in the world I see in its relationship to that.”

While religious issues are not explicit in “Everything That Rises Must Converge,” O’Connor’s vision of the sinful nature of the human race dominates the story. “The novelist with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural,” O’Connor contends.

“Everything That Rises Must Converge” refers to the ideas of a Jesuit theologian and scientist named Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955). In a book called *The Phenomenon of Man* (1955), which attempts to reconcile the science of evolution with a Christian vision, Teilhard theorizes that after the rise of *homo sapiens* evolution continues on a spiritual level toward a level of pure consciousness called Being. While species diversified biologically until humans came to dominate the earth, evolution began to take the form of rising consciousness and led back toward unification or convergence. At the end of time, all Beings will be as one in God.

Some critics maintain that O’Connor’s reference to Teilhard must be ironic, since in the story there is so little evidence of convergence; but others suggest that Julian’s revelation at the story’s close can be seen as a first step toward the higher consciousness that is God. Julian is negatively affected by his pride, arrogance, and anger. Yet when his mother dies, he recognizes the evil he has done.

The stories throughout the collection create situations where a flawed character comes to a “vision of himself as he really is, and makes possible a true rising toward Being,” asserts Dorothy Tuck McFarland in *Flannery O’Connor*:

That this rising is inevitably painful does not discredit its validity; rather, it emphasizes . . . the tension between the evolutionary thrust toward Being and the human warp that resists it—the warp which O’Connor would have called original sin.

Everything That Rises Must Converge: Critical Overview

O’Connor is widely considered one of the most significant writers ever produced by the United States. She was the subject of an unusual amount of critical attention as a young writer, and this fascination has continued over the decades since her death.

Less than a decade after O'Connor started writing, scholars began serious critical interpretation of her work. A special issue of the journal *Critique* was devoted entirely to her writing in 1958. Early approaches to her fiction tended to focus on the grotesque extremes of her characterization and the bleak violence of her plots.

As she responded to early interpretations with explicit explanations of her beliefs about art and faith in various lectures and essays (collected in 1969 under the title *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*), the critical focus shifted toward O'Connor's moral framework and her religious vision.

The posthumous publication of her last collection of stories, *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, further solidified O'Connor's reputation as one of the strongest and most original American voices of her generation.

Granville Hicks described the stories in the collection as "the best things she ever wrote. They are superb, and they are terrible. She took a cold, hard look at human beings, and set down with marvelous precision what she saw."

Even Walter Sullivan, writing one of the book's weaker reviews in the *Hollins Critic*, credited these "last fruits of Flannery O'Connor's particular genius" for "work[ing] their own small counter reformation in a faithless world."

The main criticism of the volume focused on O'Connor's singular purpose and the constant repetition of her main themes. "She had only a few ideas, but messianic feelings about them," contended the *Nation's* Webster Schott. He praised her for doing what she does superbly:

Myopic in her vision, Flannery O'Connor was among those few writers who raise questions worth thinking about after the lights are out and the children are safely in bed. What is reality? What are the possibilities for hope? How much can man endure?

Critical attention to her work continues. The way she expressed her Roman Catholic faith remained a subject of fascination and debate for scholars. Her literary influences have been discussed, as well as her place within the Southern Gothic regional tradition.

Dorothy Tuck McFarland maintained:

While [O'Connor] was an artist of the highest caliber, she thought of herself as a prophet, and her art was the medium for her prophetic message. It was her intention that her stories should shock, that they should bring the reader to encounter a vision he could face with difficulty or outright repugnance. And she wanted her vision not only to be seen for what it was but also to be taken seriously. She was confident enough of her artistic powers to believe this would happen, even if it took fifty or a hundred years. She did not need to wait so long.

Everything That Rises Must Converge: Essays and Criticism

O'Connor's Religious Vision

In many essays and public statements, O'Connor identifies herself as a Catholic writer and asserts that her aims as an artist are inextricably tied to her religious faith. She claims that it is her specific goal to offer a glimpse of God's mystery and, thus, to lead readers—whom she sees as, for the most part, spiritually lost in

the modern, secular world—back toward the path of redemption.

This information may be somewhat bewildering for those first approaching O'Connor's writing through her short story "Everything That Rises Must Converge." While some of her other fiction focuses on specifically religious themes, this story, involving the generational and ideological conflict between mother and son, seems to be thoroughly secular in nature.

Set in the South in the early 1960s, "Everything That Rises Must Converge" is firmly grounded in the social history of that time and place. Julian, the arrogant and alienated son, abhors his mother's racism and resents her attachment to outdated ideas of Southern aristocracy. Their differences come to a head during a ride they take together on a recently integrated city bus. The questions the story raises are obviously moral, but how they relate specifically to Christian theology is not immediately apparent.

The story contains a few passing mentions of heaven and sin, but these words are not used in a serious theological sense. (For example, exasperated with his mother's indecisiveness, "Julian raised his eyes to heaven.") There is a single reference comparing Julian to Saint Sebastian, a Christian martyr, but it is used ironically, in order to show Julian's exaggerated self-pity.

In another remote reference to religion, Julian's mother attends a weight reduction class at the 'Y'—the Young Women's Christian Association. But at the time O'Connor wrote, the YWCA, which was founded on Christian values, had become a secular institution. It seems that the few references to Christianity are largely emptied of meaning.

However, the first bit of research into "Everything That Rises Must Converge," reveals that the title of the story refers to the philosophy of an obscure Jesuit theologian, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Teilhard offers a Catholic version of the science of evolution, theorizing that lower life forms evolved toward greater diversity and complexity, rising to the level of man, who exists at the midpoint between animal life and God. At this point, evolution continues—yet only on a spiritual level.

Instead of diversifying biologically, humanity takes a path of convergence—that is, a path toward intersection or union—rising toward the unification of spirit in God. Referring to the Christian concept of revelation, Teilhard posits that at the end of time human spirit will have at last risen to the ultimate point of convergence, where all people are as one in Christ.

O'Connor states in her title that everything that rises must converge. This sounds optimistic and affirmative—which faith, by nature, is. What can this theory have to do with the bleak view of human nature that O'Connor presents in the story?

It is helpful to remember that Teilhard conceives of humankind as the midpoint between the ultimate unity offered by God and the chaotic savagery of animal life. O'Connor writes from this midpoint, grounding her fiction in the contemporary secular world, a world she sees as sinful and benighted.

"If the Catholic writer hopes to reveal mysteries, he will have to do it by describing truthfully what he sees from where he is," she writes in "The Church and the Fiction Writer." (This and the other writings by O'Connor cited in this essay are collected in *Mysteries and Manners*, edited by Sally and Robert Fitzgerald.)

What O'Connor sees when she looks at the world from her Catholic perspective is mostly dark, chaotic, and divisive. "An affirmative vision cannot be demanded of [the Catholic writer] without limiting his freedom to observe what man has done with the things of God," she maintains.

Staring into the weaknesses of the human heart, O'Connor finds that what man has done is not good. "[The Catholic writer] may find in the end that instead of reflecting the heart of things, he has only reflected our broken condition and, through it, the face of the devil we are possessed by," she writes in another essay on the topic, "Novelist and Believer."

Returning to the events of the story, it is possible to see them now in a theological light. In "The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South," O'Connor contends, "The Catholic novel can't be categorized by subject matter, but only by what it assumes about human and divine reality." She considers it her calling to write about her here and now, which is the South in the 1960s, not heaven.

O'Connor portrays the fallen nature of humankind in terms of what she sees from where she is: the arrogance and blindness that divides son from mother, as well as white from black. She portrays the pain and folly that are "our broken condition," the recognition of which is the only means for the human soul to rise toward grace.

The textual references to rising in "Everything That Rises Must Converge" refer literally to problems of race and social class that were reaching a boiling point when O'Connor wrote the story. These issues demonstrate clearly enough the failure of humans to achieve spiritual unity.

Julian's mother perceives the rise of African American people as related to her own family's fall from the social and economic heights it enjoyed before the Civil War. She thinks that she knows who she is—meaning she knows where her family belongs in a rigid racial and social hierarchy.

The fact that the family is no longer rich means to her that society is out of order—but this does not cause her to doubt her inherent superiority or the validity of the categories that divide people from one another. "I tell you," she says to Julian, meaning to comfort him about his failure to live up to his ambitions or to make any money, "the bottom rail is on the top."

She attributes their reduced circumstances to the improving rights of African Americans, evidence that "the world is in a mess everywhere." Referring to the social and economic progress of African Americans in the South, the result of the incipient Civil Rights Movement, she says, "They should rise, yes, but on their own side of the fence."

The conflict in the story originates in part because blacks don't rise "on their own side of the fence," but insist on equal rights by means of integration, which can be seen as a kind of social convergence. Like the rising in the story, the convergence that O'Connor portrays reflects the social strife of her times.

Julian's mother is uncomfortable with social convergence between blacks and whites on a most literal level. She won't ride the bus without her son, imagining some abstract danger or indignity in simply sharing space with people of a different race.

Moreover, she reserves a special condescending pity for people of mixed race, who can be understood as the fullest realization of black-white convergence. "The ones I feel sorry for . . . are the ones that are half white. They're tragic."

However, cultural and political changes have made this kind of convergence inevitable. O'Connor demonstrates this through the symbol of the hat, evidence that Julian's mother has "fallen" and the black woman has "risen" to a point where they "meet themselves" as they sit across from each other on a public bus in identical hats. This convergence has embarrassment as its main effect—a far cry from the transcendent convergence Teilhard envisions of the end of time.

Yet this is O'Connor's point: to show, at this point in human history, the unevolved state of the human soul through her characters' weaknesses.

If Julian's mother resists convergence by placing her faith in social separation and hierarchy, Julian takes an even more extreme position, attempting to cut himself off from identification with other people all together, leaving him arguably even further from grace than his mother.

Julian's mother doesn't mind living in an apartment in a declining neighborhood or going to the 'Y' with poor women, while Julian fantasizes about making enough money to move into a house where "the nearest neighbor would be three miles away." This represents not only Julian's longing for status, but also the distance at which he holds himself from fellow humans.

His feelings of superiority are not explicitly tied to race or class, but they take an even more acute form than those of his mother. While she is naive, believing that she treats people well through her misguided gentility, Julian openly wishes ill on others.

"It gave him a certain satisfaction to see injustice in daily operation," the narrator reports as Julian observes a white woman change seats after a black man sits near her on the bus, "It confirmed his view that with a few exceptions there was no one worth knowing within a radius of three hundred miles."

O'Connor again characterizes Julian in terms of his desire to resist any kind of human connection when she describes the "inner compartment of his mind" that is "the only place where he felt free of the general idiocy of his fellows." Julian attributes what he believes is his judgment and insight to his ability to sever bonds—especially that with his mother. "Most miraculous of all, instead of being blinded by love for her as she was for him, he had cut himself emotionally free of her and could see her with complete objectivity." He fiercely resists his mother's hold on him, despite her devoted love.

These are some of the ways that O'Connor shows the terribly compromised ways that people "rise" and "converge." Is she so different from Julian, though? For she takes such a dim view of the all-too-human characters she creates. Are they really redeemable?

O'Connor would answer with a resounding yes. "[The Catholic novelist] cannot see man as determined; it cannot see him as totally depraved. It will see him as incomplete in himself, as prone to evil, but as redeemable when his own efforts are assisted by grace," she asserts in "The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South."

At the end of the story, both Julian and his mother are offered some opportunity for the kind of true convergence that Teilhard envisions. As she dies, Julian's mother calls out for Caroline, her black nursemaid, showing that this early emotional bond ultimately transcends her self-justifying beliefs about racial superiority. Julian, who until the very end rails against his mother, finally breaks out of his distancing "inner compartment" and calls out for his her in child-like terms of affection, "Darling, sweetheart . . . Mamma, Mamma!"

These are changes not of the head but of the heart. The sky does not open to reveal God. These changes are earthbound and real.

In *The True Country*, his study of the place of Catholic theology in her writing, Carter W. Martin explains that O'Connor's fiction "gives dramatic, concrete form to the humble and often banal insight that enables the individual man to move toward grace by rising only slightly. It is this movement that she means when she speaks of our slow participation in redemption." O'Connor writes about the distance of her characters from a state of grace, but with an abiding faith in the humans ability to—someday, slowly—cross that distance.

Miss O'Connor and Mrs. Mitchell: The Example of Everything That Rises

Flannery O'Connor knew only too well that she could not assume her audience brought a solid background in Christianity to their readings of her fiction. It was part of the price she paid for being an insistently Roman Catholic writer in the increasingly secularized United States of the mid-twentieth century. One element which she could count on being familiar to any American reader from any socioeconomic or educational stratum was, however, Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936). That familiarity enabled O'Connor to incorporate into her fiction various echoes of Mitchell's novel, echoes sometimes transparent and sometimes subtle, sometimes parodic and sometimes serious. In "A Late Encounter with the Enemy," for example, the reference to the "preemy" of twelve years before indicates that "General" George Poker Sash had attended the world premiere of the novel's movie version in Atlanta in 1939. Sadly, Sash's finest hour had come not during the Civil War, but during the premiere of the movie which, seventy-five years later, had romanticized and popularized the conflict. Likewise, in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" the grandmother tells little John Wesley that the plantation is "*Gone with the Wind*. Ha. Ha," her pallid joke pointing, once again, to the pervasive acceptance of Mitchell's rendering of the most painful era in southern history. One O'Connor story which has a special kinship with Mitchell's classic story is "Everything That Rises Must Converge." Taken together, these echoes of *Gone with the Wind*—some blatant parallels, some ironic reversals—underscore the story's thesis that Julian's and his mother's responses to life in the South of the civil rights movement are unreasonable and, ultimately, self-destructive precisely because those responses are based upon actions and values popularized by Mitchell's book. Even worse, in several instances, actions and values are pathetic distortions of what Mitchell presents in *Gone with the Wind*.

A clear connection between "Everything That Rises Must Converge" and *Gone with the Wind* is the mother's hat. As Patricia Dinneen Maida points out, O'Connor is "highly selective" in her choice of details; John Ower confirms this by arguing the importance of the mother offering little Carver a new Lincoln penny in lieu of a Jefferson nickel. Of course, the ugly hat which the mother has purchased for an outrageous \$7.50, a hat identical to that of the large black woman, will help confirm that they are "doubles" and, thereby, will make a statement about racial equality. But there is more to the hat than this. Note O'Connor's careful description of it, presented twice: "It was a hideous hat. A purple velvet flap came down on one side of it and stood up on the other; the rest of it was green and looked like a cushion with the stuffing out. [Julian] decided it was less comical than jaunty and pathetic." The purple of the hat suggests bruising. Thus it is very appropriate for a woman whose eyes seem bruised and whose face looks purple as her son torments her, and who will literally be struck to the ground by an overstuffed purse. Less obvious is the irony that her black double has no doubt suffered the bruises of psychological and physical abuse during her life in the South, bruises which are less apparent to whites who, for generations, had been conditioned to believe that blacks have less sensitivity to blows than whites. In addition, various commentators have pointed out that the color purple has religious associations, most notably Easter redemption and penance. At the same time, the antipodal orientations conveyed by the purple flap—"down on one side . . . up on the other"—graphically depict the twin socioeconomic movements in the South: the downward movement of aristocratic families like the Godhighs and the Chestnys, and the upward movement of "upwardly mobile" blacks who, because of improved economic status, have "as much freedom to pursue absurdity as the whites." In part, then, the hat's purple flap renders semiotically the impact of the civil rights movement on southern society. Less clear, however, is why the rest of the hat is green and looks "like a cushion with the stuffing out"—less clear, that is, unless one remembers *Gone with the Wind*. Overwhelmed by the familial and regional crises engendered by the Civil War, the widowed Scarlett O'Hara is all the more personally dismayed by the attire of Emmie Slattery, a "poor white trash" neighbor who has suddenly stepped up economically by marrying the underhanded Jonas Wilkerson, and who is considering buying Tara: "And what a cunning hat! Bonnets must

be out of style, for this hat was only an absurd flat red velvet affair, perched on top of [Emmie's] head like a stiffened pancake." The velvet pancake, however "absurd," does not go unnoticed by Scarlett's creative self, for shortly thereafter the threadbare mistress of Tara, desperate for \$300 more for municipal taxes, resolves to construct a new outfit out of household goods and coerce the sum out of Rhett Butler. With the help of Mammy, Scarlett makes a dazzling dress out of the mansion's "moss-green velvet curtains" and a petticoat out of the satin linings of the parterres; her pantalets are trimmed with pieces of Tara's lace curtains. Even the plantation's rooster surrenders his "gorgeous bronze and green-black tail feathers" to decorate the green velvet hat. Ashley Wilkes is duly moved: "he had never known such gallantry as the gallantry of Scarlett O'Hara going forth to conquer the world in her mother's velvet curtains and the tail feathers of a rooster." As Dorothy Walters points out, the fact that Julian's mother's hat looks like a cushion without its stuffing makes her "instantaneously ridiculous. . . . Imagery deflates ego. What the character conveys is not what he intends," but if one remembers the Scarlett O'Hara connection, it is clear that the hat suggests the mother's desperate bid for dignity, for a Scarlett O'Hara-type "gallantry," as much as it does a deflation of her ego. True, Julian's mother did not actually make her hat out of a cushion, but it is entirely possible that, at some level, Julian's mother—herself a widow from a good southern family down on her luck—may have been identifying with the plucky Scarlett, using her as a role model of a lady who survives by making do with what she has. Indeed one could say of Scarlett just as readily as of Julian's mother that she "had struggled fiercely to feed and clothe and put [her child] through school," and Scarlett eventually does attain the economic and social prominence that Julian's mother can only dream of through her son, a would-be writer. Perhaps Scarlett's own makeshift outfit looked as "jaunty and pathetic" as the hat of Julian's mother; but it surely was unique (Scarlett would never "meet [her]self coming and going," and the encounter with Rhett ultimately led to her successful business career. The redoubtable Scarlett must have been a role model for many women in the same situation as Julian's mother, so the hat--hideous," "atrocious," "preposterous"—may be seen as her pathetic attempt to emulate not simply a southern belle in dire straits, but the most famous belle of them all. Whether Julian's mother consciously has Scarlett in mind is a moot point. What matters is that she is conducting herself like a romanticized fictional character from a book set a century before. Times, however, have changed.

Nothing illustrates these changing times more readily than the issue of ladyhood, an issue which permeates both "Everything That Rises Must Converge" and *Gone with the Wind*. Julian's mother insisted that "ladies did not tell their age or weight"; she was "one of the few members of the Y reducing class who arrived in hat and gloves"; and she entered the bus "with a little smile, as if she were going into a drawing room where everyone had been waiting for her." Julian's mother, in short, regards herself as the consummate lady. It is precisely here that she parts company most glaringly with Scarlett, who herself "found the road to ladyhood hard." Scarlett scorns those well-bred women, financially ruined by the Civil War, who cling desperately to the manners and trappings of the antebellum South. "She knew she should believe devoutly, as they did, that a born lady remained a lady, even if reduced to poverty, but she could not make herself believe it now." For all her self-imagined kinship with archetypal belles like Scarlett, Julian's mother is actually more akin to these pathetic women who cannot give up the past. True, Scarlett creates for herself a magnificent outfit, one befitting a lady; but she does it only because she needs the \$300 from Rhett. If not for this emergency, she would have continued wearing the slippers reinforced with carpeting and the "raggedy," much mended dress which her harsh postwar life on Tara demanded. She is practical and has no illusions about herself or about what she must do to survive. Julian's mother, however, is but a pale copy of Scarlett. She was practical enough to finance Julian's college education, and she realizes that the \$7.50 she paid for the hat should be put towards the gas bill; but she only sent him to a third-rate college, and she capitulates with notable ease to her son's suggestion that she forget the bill and keep the hat. Likewise, she lives in a poor neighborhood only because forty years before it was "fashionable," whereas Scarlett would never fool herself into thinking that past glory had any true bearing on one's current situation. She wants to retain Tara, after all, out of principle and as a matter of family pride, not because it is chic.

The situations of Scarlett and Julian's mother are, of course, superficially similar, and one can see why the example of *Gone with the Wind* would appeal to a middle-aged southern woman of "good" family in the early 1960s. Scarlett is trying to survive in a South undergoing social, economic and racial upheavals due to the Civil War, while Julian's mother is trying to survive in a South undergoing similar upheavals caused by the civil rights movement, World War II and the Korean conflict. Julian's mother states repeatedly that "the world is in such a mess," and that "the bottom rail is on the top." This is precisely how Scarlett perceives her own world: "Ellen's [Scarlett's mother's] ordered world was gone and a brutal world had taken its place, a world wherein every standard, every value had changed." Scarlett's immediate response to this realization is chillingly like Julian's: she blames her mother. Scarlett's Julian-like cynicism and rudeness:

helped her to forget her own bitterness that everything her mother had told her about life was wrong. Nothing her mother had taught her was of any value whatsoever now and Scarlett's heart was sore and puzzled. It did not occur to her that Ellen could not have foreseen the collapse of the civilization in which she raised her daughters, could not have anticipated the disappearing of the places in society for which she trained them so well. It did not occur to her that Ellen had looked down a vista of placid future years, all like the uneventful years of her own life, when she had taught her to be gentle and gracious, honorable and kind, modest and truthful. Life treated women well when they learned those lessons, said Ellen.

Scarlett's resentment towards Ellen O'Hara may help explain Julian's own palpable contempt for his mother. She represents a world, a lifestyle that Julian wants but can never attain, and he bullies her like Scarlett bullies her sisters, wishing he could slap his mother and hoping that some black would help him "to teach her a lesson." But where the resilient Scarlett eventually comes to forgive her mother for the loss of her world, Julian cannot forgive his. He literally torments her to death.

For Scarlett, Julian and his mother, the focal point of the world they have lost is the ancestral mansion. Julian's great-grandfather had a plantation and two hundred slaves, and Julian dreams of it "regularly. He would stand on the wide porch, listening to the rustle of oak leaves, then wander through the high-ceilinged hall into the parlor that opened onto it and gaze at the worn rugs and faded draperies." But Julian's memory of it is marred: "The double stairways had rotted and been torn down. Negroes were living in it." The prospect of the family mansion undergoing such a reversal is also what haunts Scarlett. Part of the reason she so fears the purchase of Tara by its former overseer for his wife Emmie (the local "dirty tow-headed slut") is that "these low common creatures [would be] living in this house, bragging to their low common friends how they had turned the proud O'Haras out. Perhaps they'd even bring negroes here to dine and sleep." But, once again, Scarlett differs significantly from Julian and his mother: she is truly adaptable. To save Tara, "she changed swiftly to meet this new world for which she was not prepared," even taking advantage of her status as a "lady"—a status which, as noted, she does not take too seriously—to cheat male customers in her lumber business. Julian and his mother utterly lack Scarlett's imagination and resourcefulness, although they have both deluded themselves into thinking they do possess these qualities. As Sister Kathleen Feeley notes [in *Flannery O'Connor: Voice of the Peacock*], Julian's mother, "secure in her private stronghold . . . can afford to be 'adaptable' to present conditions, such as associating at the YWCA with women who are not in her social class." However, this is hardly "adaptability" as the enterprising and non-sentimental Scarlett would understand it. Nothing illustrates this inability to adapt more graphically than the death of Julian's mother at the end of the story.

The death scene itself echoes *Gone with the Wind*. Ellen, Scarlett's mother, dying of typhoid, had regressed to her childhood: "she think she a lil gal back in Savannah," and called for her longdead sweetheart, Philippe. Likewise, Julian's mother regresses to her secure childhood and calls for her mammy Caroline, a request which indicates that, "for all its defects, the older generation had more genuine personal feeling for Negroes than [Julian's] with its heartless liberalism" [according to John R. May in his book *The Pruning*

Word: *The Parables of Flannery O'Connor*]. The death of Julian's mother results from her "loss of illusion" and, concomitantly, her awareness that she can never adapt to the newly-revealed reality: [as Leon V. Driskell and Joan T. Brittain wrote in *The Eternal Crossroads: The Art of Flannery O'Connor*] it is "more than she can bear, but mercifully her mind *breaks*" (emphasis added)—a perfect verb to use since, like a brittle stick, Julian's mother responds to the stress of her realization by "breaking" physically and psychologically. Her son, albeit physically alive, is psychically shattered, pathetically calling "Mamma!" as he enters "the world of guilt and sorrow." In sharp contrast, Scarlett is like a reed. She bends under duress, adjusts, survives.

What Julian's mother could not accept, and what Julian had only deluded himself into believing that he did accept, is not that everything rises, but that everything that rises must converge. Hence her insistence that it's fine if blacks rise as long as they stay on their side of the fence, and her dismay over mulattoes, those emblems of the process of racial convergence. The fact that the black woman wore an identical hat (O'Connor takes care to describe it twice) is another blatant emblem of convergence, which Julian's mother had tried to deny "by reducing the other woman to a subhuman level and seeing the implied relationship between them as a comic impossibility" [as Dorothy Tuck McFarland wrote in her book *Flannery O'Connor*—that is, by responding as if the black woman "were a monkey that had stolen her hat." It is reminiscent of Scarlett's shocked reaction to Emmie's dressing like a lady (which she is not). Scarlett's response to the convergence which she sees around her in postwar Georgia is more constructive: she accepts what she must and changes what she can. Scarlett must often swallow her pride, learning the lumber business from scratch and even, in effect, offering herself to Rhett in exchange for negotiable currency. But survive and thrive she does, and "ladylike" behavior be damned. And if it turned out that ladylike behavior could be damned so readily in 1865, what could be more pathetic than trying to retain it in 1960?

The superficial similarities in their situations may have led Julian's mother to emulate Scarlett, consciously or otherwise. But as Kathryn Lee Seidel argues [in *The Southern Belle in the American Novel*], Scarlett is "both conventional and unique," as is evident from her green eyes. Writes Seidel: "Of all the belles I have studied, she is the only one with green eyes. By assigning Scarlett this eye color, Mitchell both acknowledges and overturns this small detail of the belle stereotype. It is a technique Mitchell uses masterfully throughout the novel; with it, she *compliments her audience's knowledge of and affection for the stereotype, but uses it for her own purposes*" (emphasis added). O'Connor is using an identical technique in her presentation of Julian's blue-eyed mother, who evidently has extracted selectively for emulation only the most conventional, most romantic aspects of southern womanhood that were popularized by *Gone with the Wind*. Without the "unique" qualities that are so vital in the characterization of Scarlett (her personal toughness, imagination, adaptability), the emulation of those conventional aspects is pathetic—and especially so in a middle-aged woman living a century after the Civil War. No doubt Julian's mother would be flattered to see the connection between herself and Scarlett O'Hara signified by the cushion-like hat; and no doubt Scarlett herself would find that connection a grim commentary on the self-image of Julian's mother.

There is no copy of *Gone with the Wind* in Flannery O'Connor's personal library; but in view of her considerable knowledge of southern literature, it is difficult to believe that she had never read Mitchell's novel. And one can surmise readily which features of it would be of special interest to O'Connor: the Georgia setting; the lovely description of antebellum Tara surrounded by flocks of turkeys and geese, birds being, of course, a life-long love of O'Connor's; the startling scene wherein Scarlett's father—like O'Connor, an Irish Catholic living in Protestant Georgia—is given a Church of England funeral (the ignorant mourners "thought it the Catholic ceremony and immediately rearranged their first opinion that the Catholic services were cold and Popish"); even the references to Milledgeville, O'Connor's hometown (e.g., Scarlett admits to Mammy, "I know so few Milledgeville folks"). It is far more to the point, however, that O'Connor could readily assume that other American readers and movie-goers, of whatever faith or region, would be familiar with Mitchell's story and would respond to echoes of it in her writings. As is illustrated by the case of "Everything That Rises Must Converge," those echoes could be used, comically or otherwise, to help

guide our responses to the often enigmatic fiction of Flannery O'Connor.

Source: Alice Hall Petry, "Miss O'Connor and Mrs. Mitchell: The Example of 'Everything That Rises,'" in *The Southern Quarterly*, Vol. XXVII, No. 4, Summer 1989, pp. 5–15.

O'Connor's "Everything That Rises Must Converge"

As Patricia Dinneen Maida has pointed out, Flannery O'Connor "does not flood her work with details; she is highly selective—choosing only those aspects that are most revealing." The justice of this observation in regard to "Everything That Rises Must Converge" was confirmed recently by John Ower, who argues persuasively that Julian's mother's having to offer a penny to the little Black boy in lieu of a nickel illustrates the ascendancy of Lincolnesque racial tolerance over Jeffersonian segregation in the South of the Civil Rights Movement. O'Connor's capacity to utilize detail symbolically in "Everything That Rises" is evident even in the destination of Julian's mother: the local "Y." Mentioned no less than five times in this brief story, the Y serves as a gauge of the degeneration of the mother's Old South family and, concomitantly, of the breakdown of old, church-related values in the United States of the mid-twentieth century.

As Julian's mother is wont to point out, she is related to the Godhighs and the Chestnys, prominent families of the Old South whose former status is conveyed nicely by the high-ceilinged, double-staircased mansion which Julian had seen as a child, and of which he still dreams regularly. But with the end of the plantation system, the mother's glorious ancestry is meaningless: she has had to work to put her son through a third-rate college, she apparently does not own a car (hence the dreaded, fatal ride on the integrated bus), and she lives in a poor neighborhood which had been fashionable forty years earlier. One of the most telling indicators of her loss of socioeconomic status is, however, also one of the most subtle: she participates in a program at the YWCA.

As Maida notes, a reducing class at the Y is a "bourgeois event"; but more than this, it suggests how much Julian's mother, and the socioeconomic system she represents, has declined by the early 1960s. The Young Women's Christian Association has been functioning in some form in the United States since 1866; the national organization of the "Young Women's Christian Association of the United States of America" was effected in 1906. From the beginning, it was a group whose local chapters were organized and financed by the very wealthy, including Grace Hoadley Dodge (1856–1914), the daughter and great-granddaughter of prominent American philanthropists. The civic-minded Miss Dodge managed to supplement her own generous personal contributions by soliciting enormous gifts from captains of industry such as George W. Vanderbilt, and YWCA chapters spread throughout the United States, including the rapidly industrializing post-World War I South. In the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries, then, a woman with the family background of Julian's mother would have been an organizer and financial supporter of the YWCA; but to actually participate in the programs would have been unheard-of, since the Association was intended specifically to benefit "young women of the operative classes"—that is, young women who were either immigrants or poor native-born country girls seeking employment in large cities, and who were "dependent on their own exertion for support." That the reducing class Julian's mother attends is for "working girls over fifty" is thus not only a transparent joke on the self-image of a middle-aged woman (i.e., a fifty-plus "girl") but also a sad commentary on Julian's mother having become one of the desperate members of "the operative classes": with the loss of the Godhigh/Chestny plantation, she is simply another poor, naive country girl trying to survive in a hostile urban environment. And the hat and gloves she pathetically wears to the Y—those emblems of wealth and respectability of women such as Grace Dodge—serve only to underscore her socioeconomic decline.

At the same time that it sought to help working girls on a personal level, the YWCA of the United States was a surprisingly important force in national and international affairs. At the turn of the century the YWCA,

under the leadership of its “industrial secretary” Florence Simms, was actively involved in exposing the poor working conditions of women and children and campaigning for legislation to improve those conditions. Through the publication of books, pamphlets, and magazines (such as *Association Monthly*, begun in 1907) and a series of well-publicized national conventions and international conferences, the YWCA called for America’s participation in the World Court and the League of Nations; sought the modification of divorce laws, improved Sino-American relations, and world-wide disarmament; advocated sex education as early as 1913; and, through the platform known as the “Social Ideals of the Churches,” campaigned vigorously for labor unions—a bold move at a time (1920) when anything resembling Bolshevism was anathema. In short, in its early years, the YWCA never shrank from controversial social issues and often was a pioneer in facing and correcting social problems. That stance was perhaps best illustrated by the 1915 convention in Louisville, Kentucky, in which Black and white members of the YWCA met to discuss ways to improve race relations in the United States. In fine, had “Everything That Rises” been written in 1915, that YWCA to which she travels throughout the story might well have been the common meeting-ground of Julian’s mother and her “black double”; but only 45 years after the pioneering interracial convention in Louisville, the YWCA had declined to the point where, far from being a center of racial understanding and integration, it was essentially a free health club for poor white women. The Black woman, after all, gets off at the same bus stop as Julian’s mother, but there is nothing to suggest that she, too, is headed for the Y. And much as the YWCA had lost its earlier status as a force for racial understanding, it also had lost its status as a source of practical help: although the Y is only four blocks from where his mother collapses, Julian does not go there for help; and, unlike the early days when the YWCA would literally send its members to factories to conduct prayer meetings for the working women, no one from the Y comes to Julian’s mother’s aid. Where only a few years before the Y would have been the first source of aid for a desperate woman, by the early 1960s, it was as meaningless and impersonal as the gymnasium to which it had been reduced. The startling decline of the once powerful, liberal, and comforting YWCA parallels the decline of the Old South—and the old America—embodied in Julian’s mother. As [Leon V.] Driskell and [Joan T.] Brittain observe [in *The Eternal Crossroads: The Art of Flannery O’Connor*] “the world around her has changed drastically and no longer represents the values she endorses.”

The aspect of the YWCA’s decline which would most have disturbed a writer such as O’Connor, however, is its secularization, for she knew only too well that the average American of the twentieth century was out of touch with Christianity. From its inception, the YWCA was regarded as the “handmaid of the Church”; in the early years, “The Sunday afternoon ‘gospel meeting’ was the heart of the whole organization; always there were Bible classes, and mission study extended the interest beyond the local community and out into the world,” while the improved working conditions and wages of the working girls were seen not as ends in themselves, but as means of generating “true piety in themselves and others.” But as early as World War I, the religious dimension of the Association was losing ground—a phenomenon noted with dismay by YWCA leaders, who nonetheless recognized that it was part of a nationwide move towards secularization: “The period extending from the day when Bible study was taken for granted as being all-important to the day when there might be no Bible study in the program of a local Association shows changes, not only in the Association, but in religion in general.” Those changes were reflected in the requirements for admission to membership in the YWCA. To join the nineteenth-century “Ladies’ Christian Association,” a woman had to prove herself a member “in good standing of an Evangelical church”; by 1926, church membership was no longer a requirement, and the declaration that “I desire to enter the Christian fellowship of the Association” was deemed adequate for membership. Small wonder that the gymnasium, a standard feature of even the earliest YWCA chapters since bodily health was seen as conducive to spiritual health, became divorced from its Christian context: for many Americans after mid-century, “the Y” is synonymous with “the gym.” Indeed, the secularization of the YWCA is conveyed dramatically by its nicknames. To its earliest members, the Young Women’s Christian Association was known informally as “the Association.” That emphasis on Christian sisterhood is obscured by the popular abbreviation “YWCA,” and it is completely lost by the Association’s slangy contemporary nickname, “the Y”—a term with an implied emphasis on youth. It is ironically appropriate, then, that a “working girl over fifty” in youth-minded

America would go to the Y for a reducing class, apparently oblivious to the Association's tradition of Christian living and racial understanding. For O'Connor, Julian's mother would be painfully typical of most mid-century Americans, who neither understand nor appreciate the meaning and purpose of the original Young Women's Christian Association. As such, Julian's mother's situation—like the degeneration of the YWCA into a gymnasium—is a gauge of the secularization of American life and the loss of the "old" values and standards.

Source: Alice Hall Petry, "O'Connor's 'Everything That Rises Must Converge,'" in *The Explicator*, Vol. 45, No. 3, Spring 1987, pp. 51–54.

The Penny and the Nickel in "Everything That Rises Must Converge"

In O'Connor's story, the violent climactic "convergence" of black and white races is precipitated by Julian's mother offering a coin to a little Negro boy. Her customary gift to black children is a nickel, but she has been able to find only a cent in her pocketbook. That the fateful coin is a penny, and that it is newly minted, are both emphasized by O'Connor through being twice mentioned. The author thereby hints the significance with regard to "Everything that Rises . . ." of the Lincoln cent and Jefferson nickel (the two coins current in 1961 when O'Connor's story was written). The designs of these pieces suggest a nexus of meanings relating to the social, racial and religious themes of "Everything that Rises . . ."

The obverse of the Lincoln cent bears the portrait of its namesake, to the left of which is the motto "LIBERTY." The chief feature of the reverse is a representation of the Lincoln Memorial. These three details have an obvious relevance to O'Connor's sympathetic concern with the "rise" of Southern blacks from slavery towards true freedom and socio-economic equality. Thus, the features of the Lincoln cent just mentioned suggest (1) the freeing of Negroes by the "Great Emancipator" and (2), by extension, the activity of the Federal Government in O'Connor's own day to ensure the rights of Southern blacks. Regarding the second, the Supreme Court decision of 1954 and its after-effects (including the sit-ins of 1960) constitute the immediate historical background for the action of "Everything that Rises . . ." The story suggests how the crumbling of the "Jim Crow" system was making possible a new "liberty" for Negroes in the South. Blacks have gained both a greater physical freedom in their world and increased opportunities for socioeconomic mobility. This twofold access of "liberty" is exemplified by the well-dressed Negro man with the briefcase who sits with the whites at the front of the bus. The new possibilities for betterment opening to blacks are intimated not only by the above-mentioned details of the Lincoln cent but also by its "bright," shiny freshness.

Julian's mother is unaware of the ways her "new penny" suggests the historical "rise" of Southern blacks, and would be dismayed if she recognized such implications. She represents the reactionary element among white Southerners who want to reverse history with respect to race relations. Julian's mother would like to return to the days of segregation ("They should rise, yes, but on their own side of the fence") and seemingly even to the era of slavery ("[Blacks] were better off when they were [slaves]"). The retrograde desire of Julian's mother to reduce Negroes to their antebellum servitude stands in ironic contrast to her penny as recalling Lincoln's emancipation of blacks. Furthermore, the date on the obverse of the "new" (presumably 1961) cent is exactly a century after the start of the Civil War, and almost a hundred years after the Emancipation Proclamation (1863). The 1961 date thus underlines just how antiquated are the racial views of Julian's mother.

As opposed to the Lincoln cent, the Jefferson nickel in part suggests the conservative and patrician outlook of Julian's mother, the quasi-mythical old South in which she psychologically dwells. In particular, Jefferson's life strikingly parallels that of the aristocratic grandfather whom Julian's mother so reveres. Both men were

slaveholding plantation owners, and both were governors of their home states. It is by virtue of such distinguished ancestry that Julian's mother identifies with the antebellum Southern aristocracy, to whom she romantically attributes a lofty preeminence balanced by "graciousness." That combination of qualities is suggested by the palladian architecture of Jefferson's "stately home" Monticello, depicted on the reverse of the nickel. Monticello further ties in with the Godhigh country mansion as a symbol of the aristocratic heritage and accompanying social pretensions of Julian's mother. Just as the somewhat Olympian Monticello suggests the superior position of the white aristocracy in a class and racially stratified order, so does the plan of the Godhigh house (the owners being elevated above the black cooks who work on the ground floor). It is from such an apparently secure social eminence that Julian's mother looks down on Negroes with a blend of snobbish condescension, "graciousness" and paternalistic benevolence. That set of attitudes is expressed by Julian's mother in bestowing small change upon black children. The Jefferson nickel is especially appropriate as the usual coin for such largesse because it implies the identification with the old Southern aristocracy that largely determines the racial views of Julian's mother.

However, the aforementioned connotations of the Jefferson nickel are in contrast with meanings implied by the motto "LIBERTY" on the obverse of the coin. The slogan brings to mind Jefferson's chief fame as a champion of democratic ideals. In relation to "Everything that Rises . . .," Jefferson's advocacy of "liberty" and equality is (1) basically antithetical to the cherished social assumptions and racial views of Julian's mother and (2) essentially in keeping with the movement towards freedom and equality for blacks implied by the Lincoln cent. Concerning the second point, Jefferson although a slaveholder himself found the South's "peculiar institution" morally repugnant. He accordingly devoted considerable effort to advocating the gradual emancipation of Negroes, and he likewise freed some of his own blacks at his death. Jefferson's enlightened attitudes towards slavery, which anticipate Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, are diametrically opposed to those of Julian's mother. Far from seeing slavery as morally repellent, she believes that blacks were "better off" in servitude, and is proud that an ancestor owned two hundred Negroes. Such sentiments are undercut through the Jefferson nickel by implicit contrast with the views of one of America's foremost political and social thinkers.

Another detail of both the Lincoln cent and Jefferson nickel which is relevant to "Everything that Rises . . ." is the motto "E PLURIBUS UNUM" ("Out of many, one"). While the slogan is intended to refer to the United States as a nation federated out of various states, it also suggests the American ideal of a unified society tolerantly encompassing racial and ethnic diversity. Both possible meanings of "E PLURIBUS UNUM" are germane to the racial situation that existed in the South in 1961. Since the main impetus towards desegregation came from the U.S. Federal Government, the resistance of Southern white reactionaries threatened to create strife not just between the races, but also between Dixie and the rest of the nation. The first of these potential conflicts is suggested in "Everything that Rises . . ." when the black woman assaults Julian's mother.

The second is implied by the Lincoln cent as recalling the Civil War. In opposition to both possible evils, the motto "E PLURIBUS UNUM" indicates how the South should accept the will of the Federal authorities and help create a society where the races can coexist in harmony. The motto "E PLURIBUS UNUM" also ties in with the theology of Teilhard de Chardin that influenced O'Connor when writing "Everything that Rises . . ." Teilhard maintains in *The Phenomenon of Man* that an eschatological evolution is moving the human race from "diversity to ultimate unity." Such a "convergence" will be completed at "Omega point" with the oneness of all men in Christ. In order for convergence to occur, individuals must surrender their "personal or racial egotism" and join with one another in love. Teilhard's convergence of mankind from "diversity to ultimate unity" is of course brought to mind by the motto "E PLURIBUS UNUM." The slogan would thus for O'Connor relate both to God's plan for unifying all men and to U.S. history, suggesting the two are connected. More specifically, O'Connor evidently saw the progress of race relations in the South since the Civil War as part of the convergence of all humanity towards Omega point. The segregationist views of Julian's mother and her like accordingly constitute a sinful resistance to God's

redemptive plan for mankind. That opposition is caused in the case of Julian's mother by a "personal . . . [and] racial egotism" arising from her pride of ancestry and class status. Such "egotism" is suggested by the name Godhigh borne by Julian's grandmother. The name stands in neat ironic antithesis to the motto "IN GOD WE TRUST" on the Lincoln cent and Jefferson nickel, a slogan which implies a humble self-surrender to the divine plan moving man towards convergence.

In "Everything that Rises . . .," the penny and the nickel thus relate the racial situation in the South of 1961 to a larger cultural, historical and spiritual context. On the one hand, the Lincoln cent suggests a century of political, social and economic progress elevating blacks towards a final Teihardian convergence with whites. On the other hand, the Jefferson nickel most obviously intimates a conservative, aristocratic mentality contributing to Southern white resistance to integration. The ultimate defeat of such reaction is implied when Julian's mother cannot find a nickel to give the little black boy. O'Connor is suggesting that the old South called to mind by the five cent piece is gone forever. The "new penny" Julian's mother does discover indicates the time has come for Southern whites to accept social change, abandon their obsolete racial views, and relate to Negroes in a radically different way. Instead, Julian's mother stubbornly clings to a quasi-mythical past and refuses to accept the realities of the present. This wrongheaded strategy is seen when she tries to use the coin suggesting a new order in a way appropriate to the old. The violent rejection of the "condescending" penny by the black woman is for Julian's mother an appropriate, if ultimately tragic, initiation into verities she so willfully denies.

Source: John Ower, "The Penny and the Nickel in 'Everything That Rises Must Converge,'" in *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. 23, No. 1, Winter 1986, pp. 107–10.

The Character of Julian in Detail

Flannery O'Connor's "Everything That Rises Must Converge" first appeared in *New World Writing Number 17*, in 1961, from which it was selected for inclusion in both *Best American Short Stories of 1962* and *Prize Stories of 1963: The O. Henry Awards*. It appeared posthumously, as the title story of the final collection of her fiction, in 1965. It has, in consequence, had special attention called to it over a period of years and has received critical, if sometimes puzzled, readings at a number of hands. Predictably, much (though not all) of that attention has centered upon the topical materials it uses, the "racial" problem which seems the focus of the conflict between the story's "Southern mother" and her liberal son. That sort of attention is one of the inevitable by-products of the turmoils that have engaged us since the story's initial publication, turmoils that fulfill Unamuno's prophecy that soon we would be dying in the streets of sentimentality. In the interest of getting beyond the topical materials of the story, to those qualities of it that will make it endure in our literature, I should like to examine it in some detail, starting, as seems most economical, with a particularly superficial evaluation of it which Miss O'Connor called to my attention.

When the story appeared as first prize winner of the 1963 *O. Henry Awards*, it was remarked in one of those primary sources of Miss O'Connor's raw material, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*:

. . . her basic plot line is provocative and witty: an old-guard Southern lady, afraid to ride the buses without her son since integration, parades out for an evening dressed in a new and expensive hat. On the bus she encounters a Negro woman in the same hat. Unfortunately the denouement of the story (the good Southern lady drops dead) is uncomfortable. It is pushed just too far.

An Olympian, anonymous evaluation, by one who has not even noticed that Julian is the protagonist. Almost two years later, when the posthumous collection appeared, there followed a praiseful review of the collection in which its author was called "the most gallant writer, male or female in our contemporary culture," in

which review Julian's mother is again specifically identified as the story's "protagonist."

One no longer expects to discover incisive reviews in newspapers, more's the pity, and these notices themselves are of little importance except that they show forth a good bit of the context from which Miss O'Connor drew the materials of her fiction. She had immediate access to her "Christ-haunted" figures through local radio programs; one need only canvass the location stations between 11:00 A.M. and 2:00 P.M. during the week and on Sunday mornings to hear the voices of her prophets, though not their substance, and to see what a true ear she had for that speaking voice. But she used as well the Atlanta daily papers (called by rural Georgians as often as not "them lying Atlanta papers"). In them, for instance, she could see every Saturday a fundamentalist column, run as a paid advertisement with the title "Why Do the Heathen Rage," the title she had given the novel she left unfinished. There was also on Saturday the famous Pickrick ads of Lester Maddox, with their outrageous turns of wit in the midst of absurdities. But these were only a part of what interested Miss O'Connor in the newspapers. There were also displays of the mind of her Julians and Sheppards and Raybers, in the editorial columns and on the book review page. As to what was constantly available to her, consider these excerpts from a regular column [by Ralph McGill in the *Atlanta Constitution*, September 23, 1965]. It is a Sheppard's or a Rayber's version of *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, underlining by contrast Miss O'Connor's sharpness in reading that particular "Southern" mind:

Sixteen-year-old Dixie Radcliff, daughter of an Amesville, Ohio, clergyman, is in jail, classified as an adult charged with being an accessory to murder. She is a tender-hearted child who doesn't like to see anyone hurt. Because of this feminine revulsion to seeing people hurt, she remained in the car while her friend and lover, young Donald Boggs, killed four men. Donald, she says, was considerate. He did not ask Dixie to do more than tie the victims' hands behind their backs. He then took them away from the car so that Dixie would not see the killing. . . . There is no particular moral to draw from this sordid, pitiful story. That Don is a dangerous criminal, with a compulsion to kill, and that he is uninhibited by any sense of fear or moral conviction is plain. That Dixie Radcliff is a retarded child is plain. . . .

Dixie will offend most those who say that children become delinquent today because of a lack of religious influence about the home. Dixie Radcliff grew up, apparently, with a religious influence about her like her clothes or skin. . . . She must have heard papa preach, pound the pulpit and flog the devil and his works a thousand times or more. . . .

. . . The psychiatrists who worked over Dixie found she knew quite well all that was going on and knew it was wrong and wicked.

Was the motivation of Don Boggs (and Dixie) something in their genes—or in their environment—or both? We never will know. So we will send them both to jail and forget about it.

That Miss O'Connor's Raburs and Sheppards are with us as decisively as our Misfits is, I think, sufficiently evidenced by these excerpts from a Pulitzer winner's remarks, remarks that are vaguely disturbed by an anticipation of the fundamentalist reaction and by society's lack of primary concern for Don and Dixie over their hapless victims. The statement that Dixie is clearly retarded does not fit with the assertions of the psychiatrists. Nor does it seem to reside in the columnist's awareness that he has in fact drawn a moral from the story: namely, that parents and environment are either or both responsible for the unhappy plight of Don and Dixie. The columnist's position is that of a determinist, and if the grandmother in Miss O'Connor's story faces her Misfit with the same excuses for evil, she is able to do so from what she has absorbed from the Raburs and Sheppards who have inherited from the priest position of authority in moral matters, with the media as effective pulpit. (Still she was reared with a sounder understanding of evil as she finally admits.)

It is easier of course to make gestures of compassion or brotherhood in the daily press than to deal directly with our Dixies or Dons whom Miss O'Connor translates as a Misfit or Rufus Johnson. What she shows in the inescapable confrontations is, first, the stock responses such as the grandmother's or the columnist's or Sheppard's. Then she presses those responses, through the presence of antagonists, to the point where the response proves inadequate. The modern innocent so confronted is forced to acknowledge the existence of evil and of an older innocence, as the first step toward recovery. This we see in the grandmother's development following her encounter with the Misfit, but the same procedure is used in "Everything That Rises Must Converge" with an important exception. Here the central character is not a country grandma moved to Atlanta, but an aspiring candidate for the intelligentsia. Also the confrontation and the stock response to the confrontation occur in the same character. That is, Julian is, in effect, two presences in the story, the Julian who assumes himself aloof and detached from the human condition by virtue of his superior intellect and the Julian who destroys his mother before our eyes. The climax of the story occurs at a point where he recognizes his participation in the catastrophe that has occurred. I think we may make the point clear by first looking at the point of view Miss O'Connor has chosen, a point of view which led the newspaper reviewers to mistake the mother as the central character.

From the first sentence of the story we have it established that this is Julian's story, though with a sufficient freedom in the related point of view to allow the author an occasional intrusion. "Her doctor had told Julian's mother that she must lose twenty pounds on account of her blood pressure, so on Wednesday nights Julian had to take her downtown on the bus for a reducing class at the Y." It is always Julian's mother; she is given no name. And we see her through Julian's eyes. The rest of the first paragraph, for instance, carries as if in Julian's sardonic mind, indirect reflections of his mother's words. Who else would speak of herself as one of "the working girls over fifty"? And there is a mimicry of his mother by Julian in such an indirect statement as this: ". . . because the reducing class was one of her few pleasures, necessary for her health, and free, she said Julian could at least put himself out to take her, considering all she did for him." The first paragraph concludes with a statement which is not quite neutral on the author's part, a statement we are to carry with us into the action: "Julian did not like to consider all she did for him, but every Wednesday night he braced himself and took her." The but indicates that on Wednesdays the consideration is inescapable, but also that Julian is capable of the minor sacrifice of venturing into the world from his generally safe withdrawal into "a kind of mental bubble." With the story so focused that we as readers are aware that we watch Julian watching his mother, the action is ready to proceed, with relatively few intrusions of the author from this point.

Our reading of Julian's mother, then, is made for us by him, so that one might very well see "the basic plot line" as dealing with "an old-guard Southern lady, afraid to ride the buses," as our anonymous reviewer put it. But our author gives a careful control of our reading, particularly in the imagery Julian chooses to describe his mother. Julian's distortions are those that a self-elected superior intellect is capable of making through self-deception; he is an intellect capable of surface distinctions but not those fundamental ones such as that between childish and child-like. In short, Julian takes himself to be liberated, older than his mother since he is more modern. He feels burdened by his retarded mother and so is free to enjoy the pleasure of his chosen martyrdom to her small desires. Still, there is no one available to him capable of appreciating him, and so no one to know, other than himself, the constancy of his sacrifice. While the mother doesn't hesitate to declare her sacrifices for him openly, he only acts out the pain of his own with expressions of pain and boredom. Standing slouched in the doorway, unwilling audience to her self-torture over paying \$7.50 for a hideous green and purple hat, he is "waiting like Saint Sebastian for the arrows." He sees himself "sacrificed to her pleasure," and a little later finds himself depressed "as if in the midst of martyrdom he had lost his faith." In the bus, which he hates to ride more than she, since it brings him close to people, he sits by a Negro "in reparation as it were for his mother's sins." The disparity between his reading of his situation and our seeing that situation for what it is, is sufficient to put us on our guard in evaluating the mother.

Nevertheless, she too is full of a language disproportionate to her position, as he points out with pleasure. She repeats the clichés on the general decay of her civilization, recalling the days when her family was substantial. Her arguments are inherited, rather than learned as are Julian's, for Julian has, in his view of the matter, gotten on his own a first-rate education from a third-rate college, with the result that he is free. That is, he is already "as disenchanted with [life] as a man of fifty." His mother, in his account of the matter, is living a hundred years in the past, ignoring the immediate circumstances of her existence. It is rather obvious from what has been so far said that Julian is not only the central character of the story, but in many respects a less spectacular version of the Misfit. Disillusioned with life, he wants to be no closer than three miles to his nearest neighbor, as he says. That failing, since his ancestral "mansion" is lost to him, the only pleasure he gets from life is meanness, specifically that of torturing his mother by reminding her of the new world she lives in. But unlike the Misfit, his meanness is paralysed force, gesture without motions. He cannot make a decisively destructive move, since that would require his own self-shattering involvement. Actually it is he who lives in the past, though only his own private past, for he can deal only in abstractions fed by reverie and memory. Through reverie he builds a fantasy version of the world as he would have it be, which is of course not the one he actually inhabits.

Thus it is that he sees his mother as childish. Her eyes, "sky blue, were as innocent and untouched by experience as they must have been when she was ten." Again, "she might have been a little girl that he had to take to town." He detaches accidents from essence, and mistakes them for essence. A pseudo-existentialist, he builds a fairyland, that "magnificent ersatz of the science of Phenomena" [Jacques] Maritain declares existentialism to be. For, unlike [Jean-Paul] Sartre's Orestes, Julian's destruction of his mother is not deliberate. He mistakes self-justification for self-affirmation. It is a relatively simple matter then to make the mother be what it is comfortable to him to suppose her. From being simply as innocent as when she was ten, she becomes eventually an obnoxious child whom "he could with pleasure have slapped." She becomes so through the exercise of his withdrawal, leading him finally to feel "completely detached from her."

But words, even when poorly used or deliberately distorted, have a way of redounding upon the user. It is thus with the terms Julian uses in his careless abstractions. In addition to the metaphors of his mother as child and himself as martyr, there is also the metaphor of evil that slowly worms its way into his language. At the bus stop, he finds in himself "an evil urge to break her spirit." Neither evil nor spirit here carries full meaning, for he intends only to express his impulse to embarrass her in public. He sets about that petty meanness out of a vanity which sees as his own most "miraculous" triumph that "instead of being blinded by love for her as she was for him, he had cut himself emotionally free of her and could see her with complete objectivity. He was not dominated by his mother." Love is at this point no more than an emotional attachment as seen with the intellectual freedom Julian professes; so too is evil. And so the possibility of catastrophe is remote indeed to his thinking as he sets about harassing his mother. Thus, when he gives the woman with protruding teeth and canvas sandals "a malevolent" look, he is practicing his revenge upon the mother at a level very close to June Starr's sticking out her tongue at Red Sammy's wife. He is more nearly naughty than malevolent. His childishness is fed by his satisfaction in seeing "injustice in daily operation," since that observance "confirmed his view that with few exceptions there was no one worth knowing within a radius of three hundred miles." It is this state of withdrawal that we must be aware of in seeing his actions on the bus. When he sits down by the Negro man, he stares across at his mother "making his eyes the eyes of a stranger." His tension lifts "as if he had openly declared war on her," which of course he has, thus making his withdrawal from the world possible. His only reaction to those about him is that of hate, but his expression of that hate is capable only of irritating, except in the case of that one person in his world who loves him, his mother.

It is in respect to that love that the story's title is to be read. For in the first instance convergence carries the sense [Thomas] Hardy gives it in "The Convergence of the Twain." It is only after the devastating collision Julian experiences that any rising may be said to occur. The collision is presented initially in the

comical exchange of sons, Julian for the small Negro boy, on the bus. One notices, as Julian sees the large Negro woman get on the bus, that she has a hat identical to that his mother wears.

But Julian, observing the accident of color, does not notice it. He can connect nothing with nothing. As in the grandmother's first encounter with the Misfit, Julian is aware only that there is something vaguely familiar about her, the huge woman waiting for tokens. When it finally dawns on him that it is the hat that is familiar, he thinks the problem solved. It is only begun. Feeling triumphant, he awaits his mother's recognition of the hat, for it seems the chance he has waited to teach her "a lesson that would last for awhile." But the real shocker is that he discovers his own likeness to the Negress, the ironic exchange of sons becoming ultimately more terrifying than he anticipated. We see this by observing the Negro mother in comparison to what we know of Julian, ours being an advantage scarcely available to Julian. Though he is very much annoyed by her physical presence as she crowds him in his seat, he doesn't look at her, preferring rather to visualize her as she stood waiting for tokens a few minutes earlier. His is a retreat into the memory such as he accuses his mother of, and in that retreat he realizes that it is the hat that is familiar. It is at this point of recognition that he sees his mother's eyes once more and interprets them. "The blue in them seemed to have turned a bruised purple. For a moment he had an uncomfortable sense of her innocence, but it lasted only a second before principle rescued him." Principle, as abstraction imposed upon the concrete circumstances, rather than derived from them, delays for the moment the threat of the abyss to Julian. He sees that his mother "would feel" the symbolic significance of the purple hat but not "realize" it, as he, Julian, is capable of doing.

His mother is to him just like the Negro woman in the world his mother refuses to acknowledge. But that is merely reverie's abstraction on Julian's part, for the Negro woman is very much unlike his mother. The facts of her size and color are accidental dissimilarities which Julian's sophistication removes, but there is an essential unlikeness to his mother that underlines the strange woman's kinship to Julian. She, like Julian, is unaware of the possibilities of love. The Negro child, Carver, acts toward Julian's mother to the discomfort of the Negro mother, but with an innocence that Julian can't claim for his childishness. When the mother has snatched the child back, he presently escapes back to "his love," Julian's mother. Afterward the Negro woman slaps the "obnoxious child" as Julian only imagines doing to his mother. When the game of Peek-a-boo starts between Julian's mother and Carver, Carver's mother threatens to "knock the living Jesus" out of the child. And later, we see her carry the child down the bus steps by its arm as if it were a thing and not a child. She then shakes Carver angrily for his conspiracy of love.

At this point we might reconsider Julian's mother as an "old-guard Southern lady." It is perfectly true that her words are such as to make her appear condescending to her "inferiors" when they are black. And she sees little difference between herself and such people as the white woman with the protruding teeth, a person with far fewer historical credentials than she, this last failure one which Julian is very much embarrassed by. But there is a more fundamental rightness about Julian's mother than her inherited manners and social clichés reveal. So long as Julian is allowed to deal with the surfaces—with her stock words and responses to the immediate social situation—he is safe to enjoy his pretended indignation within his mental bubble. He can make a surface response to surface existence. It is when he is forced to go deeper that horror intrudes, as when for a moment he glimpses a childlike innocence in his mother's blue eyes, from which horror "principle" rescues him back to his portrait of her as childish. Eventually, though, a "terrible intuition" gets the better of him as he realizes that his mother will give Carver a coin.

"The gesture would be as natural to her as breathing." He, rather than his mother, can feel now the symbolic significance of her act, though he is not yet ready to "realize it." For the world Julian insists upon as changed from the world he takes his mother to dwell in is the world of time untouched by that transcendent love that begins to threaten him. Julian's and the Negro woman's world is one in which a penny is hardly an acceptable substitute for a nickel, or any gift at all suitable since it represents an intrusion that can only seem condescension of the Haves to the Have-nots. Julian's is that world of history out of the eighteenth

century in which Progress and Change have removed the obstacle of "Original Sin" through an intellectual exercise. Julian's mother cannot make distinctions of minor significance, as her son is capable of doing with his college-trained mind. But being childlike, she can make major distinctions, even as Carver can. The mother's gesture of love with the penny has removed from it any concern for the worldly value of her gift. It is a bright coin, given with an affection misunderstood by both Julian and Carver's mother. In the world made by a George Washington Carver with synthetics on the one hand and by Sartre with synthetic existence on the other (the worlds pursued by the Negress and Julian respectively) things and actions have a value in respect to their surfaces. Action and thing precede essence and intrinsic value. In such a world, where the possibilities of love are ignored, things and actions are ultimately only mechanical. Thus it is to be expected that the Negro woman explodes "like a piece of machinery," striking Julian's mother with the lumpy pocket book. And Julian, a more subtle machine of his own making, is like a clock, capable of telling only the present confused moment. He is trapped by history, his mother's and his own. His mother lying on the ground before him, the Negro woman retreating with Carver "staring wide-eyed over her shoulder," Julian picks up his old theme. "That was your black double," he says. He reads the significance of the event to her: "The old manners are obsolete and your graciousness is not worth a damn." But for the first time he remembers bitterly "the house that was lost to him." In his earlier remembrance it has been a mansion as contrasted to his mother's word house. Now when he insists to her "You aren't who you think you are," the words begin immediately to redound upon him. For now his mother's blue and innocent eyes become "shadowed and confused." He does not try "to conceal his irritation," and so there is no sign of love in his face. That is why she looks at him "trying to determine his identity." He begins to abandon his separateness ("Are we walking [home].") Still, when she ignores him, he reads her the stock lesson of our moment of time. The Negro woman is "the whole colored race" rising up against such people as his mother. The mistake Julian is incapable of seeing is that the Negro woman is more than the colored race; she is the human race, to which he himself belongs through the burden of man's being a spiritual mulatto. The mother's earlier words, simple-minded in Julian's view, that she feels sorry for "the ones that are half white" since "They're tragic" take on theological symbolism still beyond his ken. In the presence of his mother dying, he sees her eyes, one moving as if "unmoored," the other fixing on him and finding "nothing." It is the final terrible mirror to his being which he has fleetingly seen reflected in the Negro woman on the bus. But now he cannot deny his own condition by any act of abstraction, by "principle," his old means of escaping his emptiness. His mother's return to her childhood at the moment of death, her acting "just like a child" a Julian says, leads her to call for "Grandpa" and then for her old nurse "Caroline." Only at this point does Julian realize her serious condition. But his reaction is in regard to his own safety rather than hers. Stunned, he is aware of "a tide of darkness" that seems to be "sweeping her from him." The word mother no longer suffices, and it is the beginning of a new Julian when he calls out his frightened "Mamma, Mamma!" The story, then, is one in which Julian discovers, though he does not understand it, the necessity of putting aside childishness to become a little child. It recalls those errors of our childhood in which we take pleasure in our superiority over those younger than we. That superiority we take, with pride, to be a measure of our intellectual station. But the shocking revelation comes as we realize that the pinnacle of this moment's superiority on which we rise is tomorrow's dark valley out of which it is difficult to see. Or in another figure also appropriate to our story we play childishly with our supposed inferiors, as Julian does: we hold up before a mirror a message only we can decipher in its backwardness since we were privy to its writing. Or we write the mirror image and hold it up to be reflected aright for others to read with awe and wonder at our cleverness. What is shattering to us is the larger mystery of our own life which includes childishness but which our intellect cannot comprehend. Thus Julian delights in the mirror reflection of his mother in the Negress, only to discover the dark woman a truer image of himself, the denier of love. Thus too those metaphors of love and hate play mirror tricks as they grow larger than their childish use by Julian, so that "true culture" appears no longer simply "in the mind" as he insists early. Perhaps it is "in the heart," as his mother insisted. Setting out with "the evil urge to break her spirit," he has finally succeeded in breaking his own. The convergence in the story then, at its most fundamental level, is not that of one person with another but of Julian with the world of guilt and sorrow, the world in which procedures have replaced manners, both of which are surface aspects of that world. For, while the spectacle of the convergence

of Julian's mother with the Negro mother is indeed a convergence in a "violent form," as one critic of the story [John J. Burke, S. J., in "Convergence of Flannery O'Connor and Chardin" in *Renascence*, 1966] puts it, the most violent collision is within Julian, with effects Aristotle declared necessary to complex tragedy. The tragedy is Julian's, in which he recognizes that he has destroyed that which he loved through his blindness. He has so carefully set himself off from his mother that, through the pretenses of intellect, he is as far removed from her as Oedipus from Jocasta. But the Christian implications of Julian's tragedy separate him from Oedipus. Guilt and sorrow come of knowing that one has spurned love. Already the possibilities of grace are present as he cries out to her with the voice of a child. Whether he will perform a more significant expiation on his own behalf than the childish gesture he pretends for his mother's sins—his sitting by the Negro man in the bus—is left suspended. What we do know is that, as if repeating an error of his namesake (St. Julian the Hospitaller of the Saints' legends), he has, through the childishness of intellectualism, made himself capable of a mistake of identity. And like Oedipus and St. Julian he has been an instrument in the destruction of his parent. As he goes crying to any person who might happen along in his dark night, the tide of darkness seems to sweep him back to his mother lying on the ground dead. But in his favor, he is opposing that tide of darkness which would postpone "from moment to moment his entry into the world of guilt and sorrow." He has at the least arrived, as Eliot would say, at the starting place, as Miss O'Connor's characters so often do, and has recognized it for the first time. He is now ready to profit from those words of Teilhard which give the story its title, but they are words which must not be read as Teilhard would have them in his evolutionary vision. For in Teilhard there is no place for guilt and sorrow since human existence has had removed from it that taint of original sin which this story certainly assumes as real. It is a Dantean reading of Teilhard's words that we are called upon to make:

Remain true to yourself, but move ever upward toward greater consciousness and greater love! At the summit you will find yourself united with all those who, from every direction, have made the same ascent. "For everything that rises must converge."

Source: Marion Montgomery, "On Flannery O'Connor's 'Everything That Rises Must Converge,'" in *Critique*, Vol. XIII, No. 2, 1971, pp. 15–29.

Julian's Experience of Convergence

Flannery O'Connor's fiction continues to provoke interest and critical analysis. The title story of her posthumous collection of short stories, "Everything That Rises Must Converge," has been among those stories that have received attention lately. But no one has yet examined the implications of the title. Robert Fitzgerald tells us [in his introduction to the collection] that Miss O'Connor got the idea for the title when she read Teilhard de Chardin's *The Phenomenon of Man* in 1961.

Typical of an O'Connor work, this story has meaning on several levels; especially, the allusion to Chardin's theory of "convergence" offers an enriching dimension to the story. Essentially, it describes an experience of a mother and son that changes the course of their lives. Measured against the background of Southern middle-class values, the mother-son relationship has social and also personal implications. But, on a larger scale, the story depicts the plight of all mankind. Furthermore, as one considers the allusion in the title, the universality of Miss O'Connor's message becomes even more evident—as does the intensity of her vision and her aesthetic.

The focus of the story is on the disparate values of Julian and his mother, epitomized by the bourgeois hat she chooses to wear on her weekly trip to an equally bourgeois event, a reducing class at the "Y." More provoked than usual because he considers the hat ugly, Julian sullenly accompanies her on the bus ride downtown. His mother, a descendent of an old Southern family, lives on past glories that give her a sense of self-importance. Thus as she goes to her reducing class, she tells Julian: "Most of them in it are not our kind

of people, . . . but I can be gracious to anybody. I know who I am.” In his retort Julian sums up the attitude of his generation: “They don’t give a damn for your graciousness. . . . Knowing who you are is good for one generation only. You haven’t the foggiest idea where you stand now or who you are.” His mother, however, is convinced of her ability to communicate amiably: when boarding the bus, she “entered with a little smile, as if she were going into a drawing room where everyone had been waiting for her.” In contrast, Julian maintains an icy reserve.

Integration emerges as the divisive issue. When Julian and his mother first board the bus, there are no Negro passengers. But when a Negro man enters shortly afterwards, the atmosphere becomes tense. As one might expect, Julian’s mother does not see any value in integration, whereas Julian favors it. He purports to be a liberal; yet he acts primarily out of retaliation against the old system rather than out of genuine concern for the Negro. We are told that “when he got on a bus by himself, he made it a point to sit down by a Negro in reparation as it were for his mother’s sins.” His sense of guilt proves to be a negative force; for although he has tried to make friends with Negroes, he has never succeeded. Even during the bus ride when he attempts to converse with a Negro, he is ignored, his ingenuousness apparently sensed by those he approaches.

Julian’s cynicism shuts him off from any human association. His chief asset, his intelligence, is misdirected: he freely scorns the limitations of others and assumes a superior stance. During the bus ride he indulges in his favorite pastime:

Behind the newspaper Julian was withdrawing into the inner compartment of his mind where he spent most of his time. This was a kind of mental bubble in which he established himself when he could not bear to be a part of what was going on around him. From it he could see out and judge but in it he was safe from any kind of penetration from without. It was the only place where he felt free of the general idiocy of his fellows.

Ironically, he had convinced himself that he was a success—even though with a college degree he held a menial job instead of becoming the writer he had once hoped to be.

The bus and its passengers form a microcosm, and the events that occur in the course of the ride comprise a kind of socio-drama. As Julian’s mother, bedecked in her new hat, chats with those around her, Julian remains distant and uninvolved. However, when a Negro woman and her son board the bus, the situation changes. Suddenly all eyes focus on the Negro woman, who happens to be wearing a hat identical to that of Julian’s mother. Both women are shocked at first, but Julian is delighted: “He could not believe that Fate had thrust upon his mother such a lesson. He gave a loud chuckle so that she would look at him and see that he saw.” But she recovers and is able to laugh, while the Negro woman remains visibly upset. When the two pairs of mothers and sons emerge from the bus at the same stop, Julian’s mother cannot resist the impulse to offer the Negro boy a coin—despite Julian’s protests. This act provokes such anger in the boy’s mother that she strikes Julian’s mother with her handbag. As Julian attempts to help his mother up from the pavement, he realizes that the shock of the experience has caused her to suffer a stroke—thus she actually becomes victim to the outdated code by which she has lived. The patronizing act of offering a coin is completely natural to her, yet offensive to the Negro. Her lack of touch with reality is dramatically exhibited after the stroke when she reverts to former times completely: “Tell Grandpa to come get me.” For Julian, however, the shock he experiences at his mother’s condition seems to open his eyes at long last to “the world of guilt and sorrow.”

Because Julian, unlike anyone else in the story, is distinguished by name, the story focuses on him and his development. Everyone else functions in relation to and for the sake of the learning experience that eventually becomes meaningful to him. On a larger scale, moreover, the story has mythic and universal proportions in terms of the treatment of how an individual faces reality and attains maturity. For Julian, maturity becomes a possibility only after his faulty vision is corrected. When he witnesses the assault on his mother and its

subsequent effect, he experiences a form of shock therapy that forces him out of the “mental bubble” of his own psyche.

Julian’s situation reflects the particular O’Connor combination of comedy and tragic irony. On the bus as he recalls experiences of trying to make friends with Negroes, his responses are genuinely funny. When he recounts his disillusionment in discovering that his distinguished looking Negro acquaintance is an undertaker, when he imagines his mother desperately ill and his being able to secure only a Negro doctor for her, when he dreams of bringing home a “suspiciously Negroid” fiancée—the comedy runs high.

But as one considers the bitter irony of the situation, the nature of the humor changes. The lesson that he had hoped his mother would learn turns out to be meant for him; the confrontation of the two women with identical hats is comical, but the comedy is quickly reversed. In a discussion of the author’s unique comedy, [Brainard] Cheney contends [in his essay “Miss O’Connor Creates Unusual Humor out of Ordinary Sin” in the *Sewanee Renew* Autumn, 1963] that this kind of humor might be called “metaphysical humor.” He describes the effect in this way: “She begins with familiar surfaces that seem secular at the outset and in a secular tone of satire or humor. Before you know it, the naturalistic situation has become metaphysical, and the action appropriate to it comes with a surprise, an unaccountability that is humorous, however shocking.” It is metaphysical in the sense that such humor calls into question the nature of being: man, the universe, and the relationship of the two. The hat, a symbol of the self-image, and the convergence of the two women with identical hats poses several questions: What is the significance of the individual’s self-image? What common qualities do all men share? How does one relate to the world and others in it?

The “convergence” of the hats and the personalities of the respective owners is a violent clash—unpredictable and shocking. Nevertheless, the timing and circumstances work together to produce a kind of epiphany for Julian. And this kind of epiphany seems to be conceived and produced by the author. The title of the story offers a key to a more complete understanding of the epiphany or convergence process in an O’Connor short story. From the structure of the story it becomes evident that the rising action culminates in a crisis, a convergence of opposing forces, causing a dramatic and decisive change.

In addition, an understanding of the origin of the title of the story reveals a link between content and form. In a commentary on *The Phenomenon of Man* [published in *The American Scholar* in fall, 1961], Miss O’Connor tells why the work is meaningful to her:

It is a search for human significance in the evolutionary process. Because Teilhard is both a man of science and a believer, the scientist and the theologian will require considerable time to sift and evaluate his thought, but the poet, whose sight is essentially prophetic, will at once recognize in Teilhard a kindred intelligence. His is a scientific expression of what the poet attempts to do: penetrate matter until spirit is revealed in it. Teilhard’s vision sweeps forward without detaching itself at any point from the earth.

Chardin’s vision seems to correspond with her own vision as she attempts to penetrate matter until spirit is reached and without detaching herself from the earth at any point. Penetration of matter occurs in an O’Connor story at the moment of crisis. Thus in the scene in which Julian witnesses the assault of his mother, the effect of physical violence produces a spiritual equivalent—Julian is forced to take stock of his soul. In fact, the theme of the story might be considered “a search for human significance in the evolutionary process.”

Chardin conceives of evolution as a constantly emerging spiral culminating at the center with God. In the tradition of the Christian humanist, he affirms the value of the individual by emphasizing his role as an intelligent being capable of cooperating with his Creator through grace—a term used for the communication of love between God and man. Chardin describes grace as “Christic energy,” an illuminating force operative

on the minds of men. The individual realizes his potential as a person through self-awareness, which is the ultimate effect of grace. In its entirety, Chardin's treatise is optimistic: he looks forward to the time when love will unite all individuals in the harmony of their humanity to produce a renewal of the natural order.

In contrast, Flannery O'Connor's view does not appear to be quite so optimistic: "Everything That Rises Must Converge" describes a bus ride in which there is no real communication between people, no understanding, and no harmony. How does this correspond with Chardin's prophecy of harmony between men at the point of convergence? The crux of the difference lies in perspectives: Chardin looks to the future; Miss O'Connor is concerned with the present and its consequences in the future. In other words, a mother and son boarding a bus in a Southern town at the present time are important individuals; the way they live their lives is also important. Why? Because, as Chardin would agree, each man has the potential to fulfill himself as a human being. In his introduction to *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, Fitzgerald says that Miss O'Connor uses the title "in full respect and with profound and necessary irony." The irony, however, is not directed at erring mankind or at Chardin's optimism; it is in the contrast between what man has the potential to become and what he actually achieves. For example, Julian deludes himself into thinking that no one means anything to him; he shuts himself off from his fellows and becomes the victim of his own egotism. In his immediate situation he is his own worst enemy and the cause of his own failure; but ultimately, he is less than a man—and, in this sense, his position is tragic. However, he does receive a revelation that may "redeem" him; that is, make him the man he could be.

The difference between the convergence described by Chardin and that which occurs in Miss O'Connor's story is ironic only in the contrast between the real and the ideal. Julian does experience a kind of convergence: his distorted vision is corrected (if not permanently, at least for a time): he does receive the opportunity to revamp his life. Consider how Julian arrives at his moment of truth: he does not seek it, nor does he achieve it himself through thoughtful deliberation. The means are external to him, gratuitous, though compelling. Chardin would call this a form of "Christic energy" or grace through which the individual is brought into closer communication with the source of truth. Miss O'Connor seems to be describing the same process, though in fictional terms. In discussing grace and its presentation in fiction [in "The Church and the Fiction Writer," *America*, *LCVI* (March 30, 1957)], she said, "Part of the complexity for the Catholic fiction writer will be the presence of grace as it appears in nature, and what matters for him here is that his faith not become detached from his dramatic sense and from his vision of what is." This statement explains her focus on the present; it also reveals the basis of her aesthetic.

In his study of Flannery O'Connor, [Stanley Edgar] Hyman contends that "any discussion of her theology can only be preliminary to, not a substitute for, aesthetic analysis and evaluation." Aesthetically, Miss O'Connor strived to produce a view of reality in the most direct and concrete terms. "Everything That Rises Must Converge" is a simple story told in almost stark language. But the combination of realism and the grotesque with simplicity and starkness effects a unique intensity. Consider, for example, the way realistic and grotesque elements form the imagery of the story. As mother and son begin their trip, "the sky was a dying violet and the houses stood out darkly against it, bulbous liver-colored monstrosities of a uniform ugliness, though no two were alike." Even the hat, which plays such a focal part in the conflict, is especially hideous: "A purple velvet flap came down on one side of it and stood up on the other; the rest of it was green and looked like a cushion with the stuffing out." Julian is hyper-sensitive: color and form possess an emotional equivalent for him. Thus when the Negro woman sits next to him on the bus, he is acutely aware of her: "He was conscious of a kind of bristling next to him, a muted growling like that of an angry cat. He could not see anything but the red pocketbook upright on the bulging green thighs." The correlation between color and emotion is also evident when he looks at his mother after she recognizes the hat on the other woman: "She turned her eyes on him slowly. The blue in them seemed to have turned a bruised purple. For a moment he had an uncomfortable sense of her innocence." But the ultimate horror awaits him after his mother has suffered the stroke: "Her face was fiercely distorted. One eye, large and staring, moved slightly to the left as if it had become unmoored. The other remained fixed on him, raked his face again, found nothing and

closed.” Miss O’Connor does not flood her work with details; she is highly selective—choosing only those aspects that are most revealing. She does not cringe at ugliness; in fact, she seems compelled to highlight it when it is essential to meaning.

Julian has the potential to fulfill himself as a person and to be of use to a society in need of reform. Until his mother’s stroke, he has no impetus to change his outlook; consequently, it takes a disaster to move him. The world in which he lives is grotesque, and perhaps the way in which he comes to his self-realization is appropriately grotesque. But the glimmer of hope shines only after he has been illuminated by the experience. Considering man’s “progress” in human development, Flannery O’Connor seems to be painting the most vivid picture possible to show mankind where his inadequacies lie and to open his eyes to some painful truth. Through her keen, selective way of compressing the most significant material into a clear and simple structure, the message comes across with power and shocking clarity.

Source: Patricia Dinneen Maida, “‘Convergence’ in Flannery O’Connor’s ‘Everything That Rises Must Converge,’” in *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. VII, No. 4, Fall 1970, pp. 549–55.

Everything That Rises Must Converge: Compare and Contrast

1960s: The Civil Rights movement becomes a viable and powerful movement. After the passage of a series of laws ordering the desegregation of schools, interstate transportation, and various other public accommodations, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 desegregates all public places.

Today: Affirmative action, which led to greater integration in schools and workplaces in the 1970s and 1980s, is challenged in a series of court cases as a form of reverse discrimination.

1960s: In 1966 the Supreme Court strikes down a Virginia law prohibiting interracial marriage; Virginia had been one of sixteen states still outlawing such marriages. In 1967 Secretary of State Dean Rusk’s daughter, who is white, makes headlines by marrying a black man. Rusk offers to resign from his post, but President Lyndon Johnson refuses to accept his resignation.

Today: Interracial marriage no longer makes headlines. There are a number of prominent interracial couples in public life. The number of interracial marriages has tripled since 1967 and there are over a million bi-racial families.

1960s: The oldest of the post-war “baby boomers” reach adolescence and young adulthood. Many of this generation differ from their parents in their desire to express their individuality and challenge prevailing social mores and assumptions. A generation gap emerges, with parents and children often having very different attitudes toward important issues.

Today: “Baby boomers” reach middle age, having raised their children in a less conflicted and more tolerant society.

1960s: Founded by wealthy philanthropists in 1906, the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) has declined from its former status as an important charitable organization and community center. Instead, it is primarily used as an inexpensive gymnasium and hotel. In 1960 its cafeteria becomes the first public dining facility in Atlanta to desegregate. By this time it has become a secular institution.

Today: There are still 326 YMCAs, at least one in every American state. The organization’s objectives include social justice and services for women, as well as physical fitness. No mention of religion is made in

the YWCA mission statement.

Everything That Rises Must Converge: Topics for Further Study

Do you think that O'Connor is too unsympathetic to her characters? Do they seem to you like grotesque distortions of humanity or more like regular people you've met? Support your opinion with specific passages from the text.

Many critics view O'Connor's use of irony as integral to her moral outlook. Discuss her use of irony in relation to one of the moral questions raised in the story.

O'Connor wrote from a Roman Catholic perspective. Do you think that one needs to be Catholic to fully understand "Everything That Rises Must Converge"? How do you think your own religious or spiritual beliefs (or the lack thereof) influence your response to the story?

Julian's mother derives many of her opinions from her heritage as part of the slave-holding aristocracy of the pre-Civil War South. Do some research about the conventions and belief systems regarding interactions between blacks and whites in the Old South. How does this information help you understand the interactions between the story's various characters?

Everything That Rises Must Converge: What Do I Read Next?

A Good Man Is Hard to Find (1955) is O'Connor's first collection of short stories. It shares the unique moral outlook of "Everything That Rises Must Converge."

O'Connor's novel *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960) concerns a young boy's resistance to his calling as a prophet.

The Collected Stories of William Faulkner (1995), edited by Erroll McDonald, gathers Faulkner's short fiction. These stories explore moral dramas against a Southern backdrop. O'Connor is most often compared to Faulkner.

A Curtain of Green and Other Stories (1941), a collection of stories by Eudora Welty, shares O'Connor's flare for local idiom, but takes a gentler approach to its eccentric characters.

The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter (1940), the first novel by Carson McCullers, describes the moral isolation of a deaf-mute girl in a small Southern town.

The Second Coming (1999), by Walker Percy, is a tragicomic novel chronicling a man's search for love and religious meaning.

Everything That Rises Must Converge: Bibliography and Further Reading

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Further Reading

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This extensive collection of resources on O'Connor is an excellent starting point for in-depth projects on the writer.

Magee, Rosemary M., ed., *Conversations with Flannery O'Connor*, Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 1987.

Interviews with O'Connor over the course of her career. The selections cover a broad range of topics and offer readers a sense of her frank and clever persona.

McFarland, Dorothy Tuck, *Flannery O'Connor*, New York: Fredrick Ungar, 1976.

This short book is a useful introduction to O'Connor's life, career, and the central concerns of her fiction. McFarland includes close analysis of O'Connor's short stories and novels.

O'Connor, Flannery, *Mysteries and Manners: Occasional Prose*, edited by Sally and Robert Fitzgerald. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969.

After O'Connor's death, the Fitzgeralds collected her nonfiction in this volume. Includes unpublished essays, lectures, and previously published articles.

Teilhard de Chardin, Pierre, *The Phenomenon of Man*, New York: HarperCollins, 1980.

This challenging work of theology, which is the source of the story's title and the inspiration for its message, sheds light on O'Connor's ideas about religion and morality.