Everything That Rises Must Converge

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF FLANNERY O'CONNOR

Flannery O'Connor was a celebrated fiction writer, most well known for short stories that presented a lively, and often bizarre and mysterious, commentary on the American South. O'Connor was the only child of a committed Catholic family, a rarity in largely-Protestant Georgia, and her religious devotion remained an important fixture in both her life and her fiction. She would go on to study social sciences at the Georgia State College for Women and eventually receive an MFA from the prestigious Iowa Writer's Workshop. Following her graduation, O'Connor stayed in the North, publishing a novel and a handful of short stories. However, in 1952 she was diagnosed with lupus, a debilitating autoimmune disease that took her father's life when she was a teenager. She returned to her family home in Milledgeville, Georgia to live with her mother and manage her health. There, O'Connor lived a largely isolated, homebound life, but continued write prodigiously, producing some of her most celebrated work. O'Connor lost her battle with lupus at only age 39, but she had already created an impressive body of work and had become a beloved fixture of American letters.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In the century following the Civil War, states in the American South passed laws enforcing racial segregation known as "Jim Crow laws," which sought to maintain social domination over black people. A ruling in the 1896 Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson* contended that segregated public facilities were legal, as long as they were operated at equal standards. In 1954, the decision *Brown v. Board of Education* overturned this precedent, arguing that segregated facilities were "inherently unequal." In the following years, the integration of public places across the South generated a cultural and social upheaval and often led to violence. Integration on public transportation—particularly on busses, most notably in the case of the Montgomery Bus Boycott—became a central cultural touchstone of the Civil Rights Movement. Published against this political backdrop, "Everything That Rises Must Converge" both challenges the history of the South and pessimistically speculates about the possibility of racial harmony. Particularly, O'Connor probes the psychology of her white characters, offering a provocative vision of which white people, both young and old, well intentioned and not, might be able to assimilate to cultural change.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

O'Connor is often grouped with other Southern writers for whom the culture and history of their region played a central role in their fiction. Particularly, she's associated with the Southern Gothic tradition, a style that blends Southern language, settings, and themes with grotesquerie, supernatural occurrences, and bizarre and eccentric characters. In this vain, the work of writers like William Faulkner, Carson McCullers, and Eudora Welty is commonly linked to O'Connor's. O'Connor was also a devout Catholic and her work contains many of the themes of Christian ethics, like grace and redemption. In this way, her work bears resemblance to that of Soren Kierkegaard or Simone Weil, other intensely philosophical writers whose religious devotion guided their secular thinking. Walker Percy, another celebrated Southern writer whose works are filled with regional color and religious themes, is similar to O'Connor in this way.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Everything That Rises Must Converge
- **When Written:** 1961
- **Where Written:** Milledgeville, Georgia
- **When Published:** 1961 in New World Writing
- **Literary Period:** Southern Gothic
- **Genre:** Southern Gothic/Christian Realism/Anti-Romanticism
- **Setting:** American South
- **Climax:** Carver's Mother strikes Julian's Mother
- **Antagonist:** Julian's Mother
- **Point of View:** Close/Limited Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

O. Henry Award. "Everything That Rises Must Converge" won the 1963 O. Henry Award, a prestigious American short story prize.

Religious Roots. The title of this story is inspired by the work of a philosopher and Jesuit Priest, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.

PLOT SUMMARY

Julian, a recent college graduate, has returned home to the South live with his mother while he attempts to launch a career as a writer. At the behest of her doctor, Julian's Mother attends a weekly exercise class to manage her blood pressure. Julian reluctantly agrees to accompany his mother to her classes, as she has been afraid to ride the bus alone at night since they

were racially integrated.

As the pair begins to embark on one such trip, Julian's Mother, after a round of debating, decides to wear an expensive purple **hat** she recently bought. While they walk to the bus stop, they discuss the social changes taking place in the South and their family's history. Julian and Julian's mother are descendants of an aristocratic family – Julian's great-grandfather was the governor of the state and owned a plantation with two hundred slaves. Julian's regal and sordid family history stands in sharp relief to his own life—he was raised by a single mother in a tough neighborhood.

Julian and his mother finally board the bus and she begins to strike up conversation with The Woman with the Protruding Teeth and The Woman with the Red and White Sandals, fellow white passengers, all lamenting integration and the death of their beloved Southern tradition. Julian's anger at his mother's racism begins to boil and he desires, with a degree of vindictiveness, to teach her a lesson. At the next stop, The Well-Dressed Black Man enters the bus. Julian leaves his mother to sit with him, hoping to show her that black and white people can enjoy each other's company. To Julian's dismay, The Well-Dressed Black Man, wanting to read his newspaper in peace, is annoyed by the overture. Nevertheless, Julian's Mother becomes visibly angry.

At the following stop, a dapper black boy and his mother, Carver and Carver's Mother, board the bus, taking seats next to Julian's Mother and Julian, respectively. Julian notices that Carver's Mother is wearing a hat identical to Julian's Mother's. Julian's Mother is delighted to sit with Carver, believing all children to be unbearably cute, regardless of race. As Carver begins to play with Julian's Mother, Carver's Mother scolds him, she too becoming increasing angered. As the bus stops and all four prepare to disembark, Julian has a fearful premonition. He knows that his mother is fond of giving coins to cute children and he worries how the gift will be perceived.

After exiting the bus, Julian's Mother reaches into her purse to find a nickel, but can only find a **penny**. When she gives Carver the penny, Carver's Mother strikes Julian's Mother with her purse and walks away. Julian approaches his fallen mother and begins to browbeat her for not understanding the new spirit of racial equality and how her gesture might be understood as condescending. Following Julian's rant, Julian's Mother starts to suffer an apparent stroke. Seeing this grotesque image of his mother, Julian cries for help, overcome with guilt.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Julian –A recent college graduate who has returned home to live with his Mother while trying to launch a career as a writer. He is an idealistic, self-professed intellectual whose liberal values are at odds with his mother's bigotry and the racist culture of his hometown. Julian's moral compass is admirable, especially compared to the bald-faced racism surrounding him, but his interactions with black people suggest that he, too, has a fundamental discomfort with them. Julian's struggle to balance his gratitude for his mother with his visceral resentment for her prejudiced ways and his desire to teach her a lesson animates the unfolding of the story.

Julian's Mother –A descendant of formerly slave-owning family that fell on hard times, she raised her son Julian by herself. Julian's Mother laments integration and the cultural change sweeping the South as the death of a regal tradition, both in her family and in her region. Her deeply bigoted attitudes annoy Julian to no end and cause him to fight with her often. The narrator describes her as childlike, almost feeble-minded. Julian's Mother values manners and appearances and loves cute children of all races so much that she has a habit of gifting them coins. But her gentility cannot hide her repugnant attitudes towards black people. Ultimately, her inability to internalize the surging cause of equality leads her to be struck by Carver's Mother and suffer a stroke.

Carver's Mother –A black woman who boards the bus Julian and Julian's Mother are riding. She wears a gaudy **hat** identical to Julian's Mother's and has a similarly antagonistic relationship with her son, commonalities striking enough to lead Julian to conclude that Carver's Mother is Julian's Mother's "black double." Like Julian's Mother, Carver's Mother is also immensely proud, so much so that when she perceives Julian's Mother's gift of a **penny** to Carver as condescending, she strikes Julian's Mother with her purse.

Carver – A rambunctious little boy who rides the bus with his mother. Carver is forced to sit with next to Julian's Mother while Julian sits next to Carver's Mother. Carver is playful and interacts with Julian's Mother, even against Carver's Mother's warnings. Despite the fact that he is black, Julian's Mother finds him, like all children, so cute that she wants to give him a **penny**.

The Well-Dressed Black Man – A fashionable black passenger on the bus with whom Julian sits to make a point to Julian's Mother. The Well Dressed Black Man represents to Julian his naïve ideal of the sort of bourgeois black person with whom he could interact. Julian bothers the Well-Dressed Black Man when he tries to make a show of their interaction to Julian's Mother—the Well-Dressed Black Man, it turns out, would rather read than talk superficially to Julian.

MINOR CHARACTERS

The Woman With The Protruding Teeth – A white passenger on the bus who talks with Julian's Mother about race and proper behavior. She, like Julian's Mother, is deeply invested in propriety and in acting in a fashion that's befitting to one's social standing.

The Woman with Red and White Sandals – Another white passenger on the bus who vocally shares Julian's Mother's opinions about integration. Her contribution suggests that, among the white population of the South, Julian's Mother is not alone in her bigotry.

THEMES

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

RACISM, SIMILARITY, AND DIFFERENCE

"Everything That Rises Must Converge" is set in the American South soon after racial integration has become the law of the land. As such, the story portrays a moment in which people of different races are encountering each other in new ways, even as racism and prejudice continue to impact every character's perceptions. More specifically, the story shows how characters of different races share fundamental similarities, but often cannot see those similarities because of racism's focus on difference. This makes it even more difficult to actually build connections.

O'Connor makes it very clear that Julian's Mother is racist. She refuses to take the bus alone after the busses are racially integrated, and when she is on the bus and no black people are present she comments aloud about how she prefers it that way. Further, she is a firm believer that black and white people are fundamentally different and that integration is unnatural. The story, however, suggests that black and white people are not fundamentally different, and that they can, in fact, be uncannily similar. This is most apparent in the similarities between Julian's Mother and Carver's Mother, a black woman on the bus who, like Julian's Mother, is an unnamed character known only through her son, is immensely proud, and wears the same "hideous" and eccentric **hat** as Julian's Mother. Julian certainly recognizes the similarly between the two women—at one point he describes the woman as his mother's "black double"—and he hopes his mother will recognize it also and take it as a lesson that her racism is ridiculous. However, Julian's Mother never recognizes any such similarity, and the story implies that her racist views make her incapable of recognizing it.

It's not just Julian's Mother, however, who cannot comprehend similarities and differences between themselves and others. Julian, for instance, spends most of the story disgusted with his mom's provincial attitudes, especially about race, seeing himself as being morally superior to her. However, in action, Julian is almost as patronizing to the black characters in the story as his mother is. The two of them share a tendency to treat black people as something other than human beings, since Julian treats black people as symbols or tools that further his moral argument. In other words, he interacts with black people only in order to prove to himself and others his moral superiority. The emptiness of Julian's beliefs about race is evident in his failure to actually create any connections with black people. Despite his ideals, Julian admits to himself that he's never actually been successful at making "Negro friends." His following thoughts on the subject betray him even more deeply: he's also only ever tried to befriend "some of the better types… ones that looked like professors or ministers or lawyers."

The story pushes even further though, showing how the pervasive racism that black people must constantly face creates a mistrust and anger that makes it impossible to have faith in the motives of white people. While Julian's Mother is racist, the story makes clear that her giving the **penny** to Carver is not, in fact, motivated by race—she is not giving a "hand out" to the boy to patronizingly "help" him, but rather because she gives coins to all cute children regardless of their race. However, Julian recognizes that Carver's Mother will certainly not understand this gesture in such friendly terms. She explodes in anger, hits Julian's Mother with her purse, and angrily refuses what she thinks is a hand out. The racist structure of society—a racist structure of which Julian's Mother is certainly a part—makes Julian's Mother's genuine act of connection impossible for other characters to straightforwardly accept.

The story's title comes from the work of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a Jesuit philosopher who developed the idea of the "Omega Point," the theological idea that everything in the universe trends toward a final point of spiritual unification. O'Connor's take on it, however, is darkly ironic, as her characters' forced "union" on the bus ends awfully. Julian's Mother's dialogue obliquely references the line by saying, "They should rise yes, but on their own side of the fence," framing de Chardin's idea in the separate-but-equal rhetoric of the segregated South. The story does end with one moment of true convergence: after Julian's Mother seems to suffer a stroke a few moments after getting hit by Carver's Mother, Julian feels suddenly sympathetic and connected to his mother, whom he has derided for so long. But even this is a soiled unity in which a "tide of darkness seemed to sweep him back to her," suggesting with its language of "darkness" that this moment will pull Julian's own ideas about race and difference more into alignment with his mother's. The story suggests that, in a society marred by racism, perhaps the belief that people recognize similarity and come together is unrealistic.

REALITY VS. PERCEPTION

Throughout "Everything That Rises Must Converge," the story contrasts the reality of the world with the characters' *perception* of that reality.

This contrast makes clear how biases, by warping a person's understanding of reality, create fraught social conditions like those in the mid-twentieth century American South.

The story's fundamental contrast between reality and perception comes in its very narration. The story is told by a "close" third person narrator that only has access to Julian's internal world, and whose tone of narration mirrors Julian's own way of thinking and speaking. When the narrator discusses Julian, then, it seems reasonable that the narrator is expressing Julian's own sense of himself. For instance, when the narrator says that Julian spends most of his time in the "inner compartment of his mind," which distances him from the "general idiocy of his fellows" and allows him to judge in a way that's "safe from any kind of penetration from without," this seems to express Julian's own view of himself. Yet, even as this description seems to show how Julian thinks of himself, it reveals more, as well. While Julian sees being in the "inner compartment of his mind" as something that makes him superior, it's also evident that this means that Julian—and the story the narrator is telling—are somewhat insulated from reality. In other words, the complexity of the world depicted by the story is deeper than the literal words of the story, or the perceptions of the characters. For instance, the narrator also claims that Julian's remove has allowed him to "cut himself emotionally free of [his mother] and [he] could see her with complete objectivity." Yet the story ends with Julian completely not understanding that Julian's Mother is suffering a breakdown. His sense of his mother and his sense of himself are revealed as being actually highly subjective. As a result, the story suggests that claims to objectivity are arrogant and delusional.

In fact, over and over again the story shows the conflict between the perceptions that different characters view to be objective, proving those perceptions to be subjective. This is notable in the realm of conflicting moral frameworks that differently define generosity or kindness. Julian's attempt to accept and interact with the black passengers on the bus is, in some sense, morally noble, but at the same time its presumptuousness, self-righteousness, and shallow execution increases tension and helps escalate to the fight between his mother and Carver's Mother. Meanwhile, Julian's Mother considers giving a **penny** to Carver to be a kind and generous action towards a cute child, but Carver's Mother finds it to be intensely condescending. This divergence in the two women's perceptions of reality leads to a physical confrontation.

Even as both Julian and his mother seem to believe that their own view of the world is objective, they are also constantly worried about how other people see them. They see their own view of themselves as being objective, and want to make sure that other people see that same objective view. Of course, their own views of themselves are subjective—even warped—but that's something neither Julian nor his mother can admit to themselves. Consequently, both Julian and his mother are obsessed with appearances. If they can project the proper appearance, they seem to believe, then others will see them as they want to be seen. Therefore, Julian's Mother, who is haunted by her family's fall from wealth and power in previous generations, wants to project that she raised a boy with the right appearances. She takes pride in the fact that Julian went to college, is good looking, and has straight teeth. Julian, meanwhile, believes that appearing to have relationships with black people will make clear his moral values. He fantasizes about getting married to a black woman and takes a seat next to a black man on the bus, all in order to make a point to his mother—and the world—about his open mindedness and moral superiority.

By creating this dynamic in two characters who are connected to the past and current history of the South, the story also more generally presents a vision of white Southern society in the midst of an identity crisis. The white South imagines for itself a coherent and objective history that, on closer examination, is in fact subjective and confusing. Further, the story suggests the white South is heavily invested in surface image as a way to insist (to itself and to the world) that the history it *wants* to be objective is, in fact, objective, even as the underlying reality of the situation suggests otherwise.

SOCIAL ORDER AND DISORDER

"Everything That Rises Must Converge" is, in large part, a story about the breaking of traditional social hierarchies and the tensions that such changes create. The aristocratic honor culture of the old, white South—built first on slavery, then on segregation—is giving way to a more pluralistic, integrated society, but this transition isn't harmonious.

In the old Southern culture, as embodied by Julian's Mother, there's an emphasis on knowing "who you are," which is to say understanding your place in the social order. There's a traditional belief that someone's place in the social order is a natural, innate quality they're born with and never lose. Julian's Mother argues that an individual's culture is made up of what's in their heart and how they "do things," both of which are natural results of "who you are." She also claims that knowing who she is is what allows her to be gracious and that Julian's inability to understand who he is—which she seems to believe is connected to his anger and refusal to agree with her racist worldview— makes her ashamed of him.

However, even as Julian's mother makes these sorts of claims, the story makes clear that they are ludicrous. Julian's Mother's sense of the proper order is based on her desire to cling to her family's bygone history: that they were once powerful and wealthy with a grand estate. But Julian's thoughts make it evident that the estate is now in ruins, no longer owned by the family. And the gothic world in which they do live in stands in

total contrast to that old "orderly" estate: Julian and his mother's neighborhood has a sky the color of "dying violet," with houses that are "liver-colored monstrosities of a uniform ugliness." The eerie and death-tinged depiction of this neighborhood, especially in comparison to the romantic remembrance of the family's plantation mansion, suggests the death of an old order.

After the fight between Julian's Mother and Carver's Mother, the peak moment of social disorder, the gothic grotesqueness of the neighborhood extends also to Julian's mother's face, which becomes distorted and gruesome as she suffers what seems to be a stroke. In this moment, Julian's mother's very body becomes "disordered," implying that her belief in the continuing power of the old order has been destroyed, and with it her ability to continue on. Julian's Mother's past order, of course, was built on the brutal reality of slavery, and so any belief that such an "order" could connote innate merit or graciousness is, at best, absurd.

In light of this, O'Connor never suggests that a newer or more beautiful order has risen to replace the old one—instead, she subverts the idea of order altogether by showing that there isn't much consistency or moral logic to the world. The Woman with The Protruding Teeth and Julian's Mother wring their hands over a story about wealthy white boys stealing tires and, as a result, betraying their social grooming. Furthermore, Julian, the proclaimed progressive and intellectual white man, actually holds some regressive beliefs. He, for instance, takes joy in seeing injustice to black people because it confirms his suspicions about the moral decay of white Southern society. Though highlighting the ludicrous behavior of Southern whites sets an expectation that O'Connor will portray sympathetic black characters or paint an optimistic vision of integration, O'Connor resists that simplistic moral order. When Carver's Mother lashes out at Julian's mother, the story descends further into disharmony and confusion, seeming to suggest that the possibility of shared order and morality is gone.

FAMILY CONFLICT AND GENERATIONAL STRUGGLE

While the physical confrontation between Carver's Mother and Julian's Mother is explosive, it is not the central conflict of *Everything That Rises Must Converge*. Instead, the conflict between Julian and Julian's Mother animates the action of the story, giving readers a lens through which to understand the complexity of generational differences between white Southerners.

The conflict between Julian and Julian's Mother can be seen as a microcosm of white Southern history. The trajectory of Julian's family – from state governors and prosperous slave owners to Julian's relatively difficult childhood in a crummy neighborhood – encapsulates the destruction of Southern aristocratic white society. After Julian's Mother lectures him about his noble family roots, he swings his arm around their neighborhood and implores her to "see where you are now." In this action, Julian is telling his mother that the past in which she still believes is no more—she is living a lie because her situation, and the South more broadly, has changed. Julian defines their interpersonal conflict, then, as one between his mother's inability to see the value of social change and his own progressive ideas, as well as between his mother's inability to recognize the sins of slavery and his own clear-eyed view of that history.

The fights between Julian and his mother suggest that the changes among Southern whites might be the inevitable result of generational difference, as Julian argues that, "knowing who you are is good for one generation only." Julian repeats this view after the confrontation with Carver's Mother, stating that "the old manners are obsolete and your graciousness is not worth a damn." This comment suggests that Julian sees generational change less as the arc of the moral universe bending toward justice, and more as an inevitable shifting of customs.

Though Julian posits his generational theory of change, O'Connor undermines the neatness of his explanation, suggesting that the changes happening in the white South cannot be reduced to moral young people and immoral old people, since the generations aren't as distinct as Julian would like to believe. For example, Julian's viciousness towards his mother seems at odds with his generational theory, as it indicates his insecurity at having inherited the mantle of white racism from his mother's generation, undermining the notion that racism could generationally disappear. If he truly believed that the beliefs of the older generation would naturally disappear, then he might merely dismiss her beliefs rather than actively despising her and trying to change her mind. Even as he recognizes how much his mother sacrificed for him to be able to go to college, Julian is cruel to her, all the while wishing that instead of sacrificing for him, his mother had been cruel to him so he would be more justified in his hatred of her. Julian doesn't just hate his mother, he *wants* to hate her. And in wanting to hate her, the story indicates how Julian feels the need to separate himself from the past—the racist past founded on slaveholding—that he and all white Southerners of his generation have inherited from their parents and ancestors.

And yet, at the same time, the family's old regal plantation house, which Julian only saw as a child, "appear[s] in his dreams regularly." One might argue that this piece of the family history is lodged into his subconscious. In light of his politics, it's surprising that when Julian thinks of that past, his bitterness is not only about the slaveholding legacy of his family—it's also about his own meager present situation. He seems to resent both the immoral foundations of his family's former wealth and the fact that his family lost that wealth—in fact, he concludes

that it's he, not his mother, who could have actually appreciated the elegance of the old estate. The story, then, presents family legacy as something that Julian both wants to escape and, at the same time, can't ever escape. He simultaneously hates it and yearns for it, and his cruelty toward his mother seems to be the product of the dissonance between his hatred for his legacy and his inescapable connection to it.

The siren song of the past becomes most visible at the very end of the story, after he browbeats his mother for her behavior toward Carver and Carver's Mother and she suffers what seems to be a stroke. At first Julian feels himself separated from her, but then he finds himself almost paralyzed as a "tide of darkness seemed to sweep him back to her." The past and family history, O'Conner seems to suggest, infect even those who earnestly try to start anew, casting doubt on the notion that the passage of generations alone can combat racism.

SYMBOLS

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

THE HAT

Both Julian's Mother and Carver's Mother wear identical hats that are eccentric and expensive, which represents the changing culture of the newly-integrated South. The identical hats point to several new convergences between races: both a white and black woman shop at the same store, can afford the same extravagant accessories, and have the same idiosyncratic taste. The hat's color, purple, is traditionally symbolic of royalty, relating the hat even more specifically to class and social status. In this sense, the hat suggests that both of the characters are trying to signal higher standing in the Southern social hierarchy. In spite of all these parallels between Julian's Mother and Carver's Mother, Julian's Mother's inability to recognize these similarities represents whites' unwillingness to recognize black people as equal. This misrecognition is ironically foreshadowed when Julian's Mother buys the hat, as the store clerk tells her "with that hat, you won't meet yourself coming and going."

THE PENNY

Traditional white Southern culture was simultaneously invested in propriety and manners and in a racist and immoral understanding of the value of human life. Julian's Mother's gift of the penny to Carver, a black child she meets on the bus, encapsulates the incongruity of these values. Julian's Mother hopes to act in a way that is befitting of high status—she has the habit of giving cute children coins because it is a noble obligation of the privileged. The fact that Julian's mother doesn't care whether she gives Carter a penny or a nickel suggests that she only cares about the symbolic act of giving. And, in considering any gift she could give to Carver to be sincerely kind, manners blind her from intuiting how Carver's Mother might perceive her gesture. Julian's Mother's blindness to the possible reception of such a meager gift becomes a powerful representation of the patronizing attitude of Southern whites towards blacks. When the penny causes Carver's Mother to strike Julian's Mother, it suggests that the new social order will no longer accept such an attitude. Old manners won't continue to cover up racism.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Farrar, Straus, and Giroux edition of *The Complete Stories* published in 1971.

Everything That Rises Must Converge Quotes

"… and she said, 'If you ask me, that hat does something for you and you do something for that hat, and besides,' she said, 'with that hat, you won't meet yourself coming and going.'"

Related Characters: Julian's Mother (speaker), Carver's Mother

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 407

Explanation and Analysis

While Julian and his Mother walk to the bus stop, she regales him with her hat-purchasing story. The phrase the sales clerk utters is an idiom, meaning that a piece of clothing is so unique that its owner is unlikely to see anyone else wearing it. However, Carver's Mother ends up wearing the exact same hat. The clerk's certainty that no one else would have such a hat suggests its uniqueness—and that Julian's Mother and Carver's mother must be quite similar to share such a particular fashion sense. Taken literally, the sales clerk's phrase has different relevance to the story. When Julian's Mother is eventually confronted with another person wearing the same hat, she not only doesn't see the person as being like herself—she is unable to even see her as human.

"You remain what you are," she said. "Your great-grandfather had a plantation and two hundred slaves."

"There are no more slaves," he said irritably.

"They were better off when they were," she said…"It's ridiculous. It's simply not realistic. They should rise, yes, but on their own side of the fence."

Related Characters: Julian, Julian's Mother (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 408

Explanation and Analysis

As Julian's Mother laments the collapse of slavery, she reveals a bigoted position, riddled with nonsensical contradictions. First, she believes a morally indefensible lie that any human would be "better off" as a slave. Yet, contradicting herself, she also invokes the doctrine of "separate but equal" touted by all conservative whites in the segregated South—thereby unintentionally revealing the truth that there is no equality in segregation. Like Julian's Mother does here, many Southern whites claimed to support the equality of black people, as long as black people stayed away from them. Even though the Supreme Court ruled that the separation of the races would inherently lead to unequal conditions, many Southerners, like Julian's Mother, continue to cling to the old notion, motivated by their racism, ignorance, and fear of the unknown.

It appeared in his dreams regularly. He would stand on the wide porch, listening to the rustle of oak leaves, then wander through the high-ceilinged hall in to the parlor that opened onto it and gaze at the worn rugs and faded draperies. It occurred to him that it was he, not she, who could have appreciated it. He preferred its threadbare elegance to anything he could name and it was because of it that all the neighborhoods they had lived in had been a torment to him – whereas she had hardly known the difference.

Related Characters: Julian's Mother, Julian

Related Themes:

Page Number: 408

Explanation and Analysis

Julian finds himself daydreaming about his family's old estate while his Mother talks about the family history. Julian has a complicated relationship to the old estate. While he despises his family's history and the Southern tradition it represents, he finds himself attracted to its elegance, especially compared to his relatively impoverished upbringing. Although Julian doesn't mourn the dissolution of slavery like his Mother does, he mourns the dissolution of his family's status and grandeur, failing to see the ways in which the two are interlinked, his family's wealth and power having been built on the institution of slavery. In this way, Julian falls victim to the same line of thinking of other with Southerners, attempting to pick and choose only parts of history to salvage and idealize.

He thrust his face toward her and hissed, "True culture is in the mind, the *mind*," he said, and tapped his head, "the mind."

"It's in the heart," she said, "and in how you do things and how you do things is because of who you *are*."

Related Characters: Julian's Mother, Julian (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 409

Explanation and Analysis

Still waiting for the bus, Julian and his Mother fight about what constitutes "true culture," or status, displaying divergent opinions. Julian believes that people have agency over their status and that one becomes a better person through educating oneself and believing the right things. Julian's Mother, on the other hand, believes people have no control over their status and that it's simply a quality one is born with, part of their constitution. Such positions are expressive of the characters' progressivism and conservatism. That is, Julian believes society can change because he believes people can change, while his mother believes it cannot because people cannot.

Behind the newspaper Julian was withdrawing into the inner compartment of his mind where he spend 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 is fellows. His mother had never entered it but from it he could see her with absolute clarity.

Related Characters: Julian's Mother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 411

Explanation and Analysis

Julian's Mother engages in racist conversation with some of the other white passengers on the bus, causing Julian to retreat into his own mind to block out his surroundings. Julian's response to frustrating situations—to hide within himself—helps to explain why he can seem removed from reality at times. While his intentions seem to be in the right place, Julian often uses his supposedly refined understanding of morality to feel superior to others. Julian's inclination to remove himself from reality doesn't allow him to see his society more clearly or engage with it more effectively, but rather simply enables him to judge others from a safer position.

> It gave him a certain satisfaction to see injustice in daily operation. It confirmed his view that with a few exceptions there was no one worth knowing within a radius of three hundred miles.

Related Characters: The Well-Dressed Black Man, Julian

Related Themes:

Page Number: 412

Explanation and Analysis

As the Well-Dressed Black Man boards the bus, the narrator observes something about Julian's psyche that flies in the face of his claims to moral superiority. Julian experiences a kind of gratification when he sees his fellow white passengers act cruelly towards The Well-Dressed Black Man. This creates the sense that Julian cares more about proving a moral point about Southerners and their racism than he does about actually seeing the lives of black people improve. His progressivism seems self-interested, centered on presenting the posture of a righteous person. Not only that, but it seems overly focused on proving a point to and distancing himself from his Mother and her ideas.

> She kept her eyes on the woman and an amused smile came over her face as if the woman were a monkey that had stolen her hat.

Related Characters: Carver's Mother, Julian's Mother

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 416

Explanation and Analysis

Once Julian's Mother recognizes that Carver's Mother is wearing an identical hat, it becomes clear that the potential for the hat to be taken as a sign of the women's basic similarity is lost on Julian's Mother. In the 1960s in the American South, Carver's Mother could not only shop at the same store as Julian's Mother, but she could also have enough money to afford the same expensive hat. The appearance of the identical hat could have served as a sign to Julian's Mother that she and Carver's Mother are quite similar, having both fallen in love with such a uniquely garish hat. However, this coincidence doesn't prompt Julian's Mother to reflect on the stranger's basic equality. In fact, it does the opposite, as Julian's Mother is only able to see Carver's Mother as something beneath her, like a monkey even.

> Then all at once she seemed to explode like a piece of machinery that had been given one ounce of pressure too much. Julian saw the black fist swing out with the red pocketbook. He shut his eyes and cringed as he heard the woman shout, "He don't take nobody's pennies!"

Related Characters: Julian, Carver's Mother

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 418

Explanation and Analysis

After Julian's Mother gives Carver the penny, all the tension built up in Carver's Mother explodes as she strikes Julian's Mother. O'Connor's use of simile, comparing Carver's Mother to a piece of machinery, is striking. It suggests that, for Carver's Mother, living in the racist South is like being a machine in which her daily operations are put at risk by mounting pressure. Each new expression of condescension from white people adds another ounce of pressure. Finally, such a visible act of condescension, encapsulated by the gift

of the penny, pushes the machinery past its pressure threshold and it has no choice but to explode.

"What all this means," he said, "is that the old world is gone. The old manners are obsolete and your graciousness is not worth a damn." He thought bitterly of the house that had been lost for him. "You aren't who you think you are," he said.

Related Characters: Julian (speaker), Julian's Mother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 419

Explanation and Analysis

While Julian's Mother is lying on the ground, recovering from Carver's Mother's blow, Julian takes the opportunity to finally teach her the lesson he's been waiting to impart. Julian's Mother's style of traditional Southern racism, which is shrouded in manners and niceties, will no longer be tolerated in this new era. Julian argues that black people are fed up with this sort of insincerity. Propriety can longer hide such profound and deep-seated bigotry. While Julian's Mother has always thought that who she is makes her good, Julian tells her this is all a delusion. Nevertheless, even in this moment, he can't help but feel bitter about the old family estate, once again failing to see the ways in which the wealth and grandeur of his family history and the house that was "lost for him" is directly connected to the legacy of slavery.

The tide of darkness seemed to sweep him back to her, postponing from moment to moment his entry into the world of guilt and sorrow.

Related Characters: Julian's Mother, Julian

Related Themes:

Page Number: 420

Explanation and Analysis

After Julian's Mother suffers from the stroke, he begins to feel a sinister force drawing him back towards her. This tide of darkness might be the insipid force that seems to attract Julian to his family's sordid legacy and the history of slavery in the South more generally. After spending the whole story attempting to distance himself from this dual history of racism, when everything goes awry, he is drawn towards it by a force outside him. The "guilt and sorrow" are left ambiguous, challenging the reader to determine what might be their source, and who might feel them. For instance, as he cries to his mother, he may feel guilt and sorrow for disrespecting his mother and his family tradition, but it seems just as likely that he feels guilt and sorrow for loving them. In any case, the picture of the South that O'Connor creates in *Everything That Rises Must Converge* is one filled with guilt and sorrow, in which clarity and compassion seem to be out of reach for even the most well-meaning of people.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

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

EVERYTHING THAT RISES MUST CONVERGE

Julian, a young man who has returned to his Southern hometown after graduating from college, is upset with his Mother. She has begun to attend a weekly exercise class at her doctor's orders, and Julian must accompany her on these weekly excursions because she doesn't like to ride the busses alone at night anymore now that they're racially integrated. Julian bemoans her racist motivations for needing company, but he travels with her out of a sense of familial obligation. Before they leave the house, Julian's mother debates whether or not to wear a new gaudy purple **hat** she bought. While he finds the hat hideous, Julian yells at her to wear it, wanting to begin and end their trip as soon as possible. While they walk through their eerie neighborhood toward the bus stop, Julian's Mother regales him with her story of purchasing the hat, in which the clerk told her "with that hat, you won't see yourself coming and going."

The opening scene establishes several threads central to this story, most importantly both Julian and his Mother's perspectives on race relations in the South and their relationship to each other. Julian's Mother loathes racial integration, while Julian believes that whites and blacks should coexist. Julian despises his Mother for her bigotry, but still feels loyal to her and agrees to chaperone her trips. In this way, Julian also represents a young white Southerner's fraught relationship to their cultural history. He believes in equality, but his family history connects him to a racist tradition. The abnormal description of the surroundings also creates an almost sinister, otherworldly tone, a trademark of Southern Gothic fiction. Finally Julian's Mother's fussing with the hat, an essential symbol in this story, demonstrates her investment in appearances.

Julian's Mother begins to lament the current state of society in the South. She believes that their family—as well as the South overall—was better off in the past, mentioning that Julian's great-grandfather was the governor of the state and that he owned two hundred slaves. She professes that it's ok if black people's status rises, only if it happens "on their side of the fence." Memories of her family's former mansion rush back to her, with its stately double stairway and her beloved black caretaker. Julian visited the mansion once when he was young and it was descending into a state of disrepair. He admits that it appears frequently in his dreams, noting that he "preferred its threadbare elegance to anything he could name," especially the neighborhoods in which he grew up.

Julian's Mother's longing for the past is representative of many white Southerners' relationship to their history. Her memory of the family home is wistful, focusing on its beauty and neglecting to connect the opulent home to her family history of slave-ownership. Thus, her view of history unjustly separates racism and exploitation from the regal parts of Southern tradition, demonstrating that she cares more about appearances than realities. This mentality is likewise reflected in her "separate but equal" rhetoric: she doesn't care if blacks increase their social standing, so long as she doesn't have to see it. Complicating his relationship to the family history, Julian, even in his progressivism, loves the elegance of the old estate. His dreams of the mansion show that even white Southerners who are trying to do right fall victim to the dark allures of a gruesome history.

As they get closer to boarding the bus, Julian continues to sicken listening to his Mother's vain and bigoted commentary. He begins to feel in himself "an evil urge to break her spirit," after which he removes his tie. Immediately, Julian's mother scolds him for looking less presentable. He returns the tie to his neck, but not without making a comment undermining the importance of appearances. "True culture is in the mind, the *mind*" he tells her, to which she counters, "It's in the heart and in how you do things and how you do things is because of who you *are*."

Julian's feelings toward his Mother do not stay static throughout the story, suggesting a dynamic relationship to his Southern heritage. His feeling of loyalty morphs into a more insipid desire to punish her. Their diverging opinions about the root of "true culture" encapsulate their different views on race and racism. Julian believes that people demonstrate their character through what they believe, and, thus, can change. His mother's view is much more rigid, and suggests that a person's identity and worth are fixed.

Julian and Julian's Mother board the bus and sit together next to a thin woman with protruding teeth. After some small talk about the weather, Julian's Mother remarks that everyone on the bus is white. Upon hearing this, a woman sitting across the aisle, The Woman with the Red and White Sandals, begins talking about how black people have been all over the busses recently. The three women chat about social training and propriety. The Woman with the Protruding Teeth says that she's been bothered by a news story about boys from "good families" stealing tires. She says that she warned her son about doing anything like that, telling him, "you might not be rich but you been raised right."

This scene suggests that Julian's Mother's racist attitudes are common amongst other Southern whites. Interestingly, the other women on the bus share a form of racism similar to Julian's Mother. They too believe deeply in manners and propriety while not believing in basic human equality. Their shared concern for acting in a fashion befitting one's social class displays, again, a stronger commitment to appearing *to be ethical than to actually treating people ethically.*

While the women talk around him, Julian begins to retreat into his own mind in an attempt to relieve his frustrations. The narrator says he spends most of his time in the inner compartment of his mind, protecting him from his hated surroundings and allowing him to see his mother with "absolute clarity." His Mother on the other hand, lives "according to the laws of her own fantasy world, outside of which he had never seen her set foot. Julian takes her to task for trying too hard to live up to their family legacy, for rewarding herself too heavily for making sacrifices for him, and for putting too much stock in the importance of appearances. He proclaims that he has "cut himself emotionally free of her and could see her with complete objectivity." He wishes she could do the same to him.

Julian, like his Mother and the other women, also has trouble dealing with the reality of his surroundings. Instead of directly confronting the white racists who anger him, Julian retreats into his thoughts, where he convinces himself that he understands objective realities more clearly than his Mother does. This also affords him the opportunity to morally grandstand over the other Southern whites instead of actively assessing the ways that he too might be contributing to misunderstanding between the races. The irony is that Julian looks down on his mother without recognizing the ways in which he, in his passivity, is complicit in her bigotry.

The bus makes another stop and a smartly-dressed black man boards. Julian watches his arrival with excitement, hoping to see this Well-Dressed Black Man faced with an injustice of some sort, as this would justify Julian's thoroughly negative opinion of white Southern culture. The Well-Dressed Black Man takes an open seat across the aisle from Julian and Julian's Mother, and as he sits down, the Woman with the Red and White Sandals leaves her seat next to him to move to the back of the bus. Julian's Mother shoots her an approving look.

This passage underscores the inconsistencies in Julian's image of himself. If he were the true progressive thinker he claims to be, Julian would not take satisfaction in The Well-Dressed Black Man's poor treatment. The fact that he morbidly enjoys it suggest that he maybe cares more about winning his argument with his Mother and feeling superior to other Southern whites than he may care about equality. In this way, his character is proof that well-meaning people can still be harmful to progressive causes and the people they think they are helping.

Julian can no longer handle the situation around him and he decides that he needs to prove a point to his mother. Julian crosses the aisle and watches his mother's face fill with rage as he takes the seat next to the Well-Dressed Black Man. The Well-Dressed Black Man, meanwhile, is unfazed by the gesture and continues to read his newspaper.

In his interaction with The Well-Dressed Black Man, Julian further indicates that he, in a different way than his Mother, treats black people as something other than completely human. Julian treats the Well-Dressed Black Man as a symbol, or a prop, in his ongoing moral argument with his mother.

Julian fantasizes about having a highbrow conversation with the Well-Dressed Black Man to teach everyone a lesson, but when he attempts to start such a conversation, the Well-Dressed Black Man becomes annoyed. Despite Julian's failure to engage the man, he succeeds in further angering his mother, whom he sees as childlike in her seat across the aisle. His spirits briefly drop as he remembers, "he had never been successful at making any Negro friends." Undeterred, however, Julian continues to dream of all the ways he could enrage his mother by consorting with black people—he could befriend a distinguished black professor or lawyer and bring them home, participate in a sit-in, secure a black doctor for her while she was ill, or even marry a black woman.

Here, it becomes evident that Julian's treatment of black people as symbols makes it difficult for him to make real connections. In fact, this impulse has prevented him from ever making friends with black people. As Julian admits these failures, his fantasies about connecting with black people only become more elaborate and untethered from reality. This demonstrates again that Julian might be more interested in the appearance of a liberal value system than he is in acting in a sincerely progressive manner. In this way, O'Connor suggests that Julian may not be so different from his mother after all, despite the different values they espouse.

Again, the bus stops and two more black passengers board: a large, colorfully-dressed woman with a look on her face that suggests "don't tamper with me," and her dapper little boy, Carver. Carver takes the seat next to Julian's Mother and Carver's Mother takes the seat next to Julian, a circumstance which appears to annoy both Julian's Mother and Carver's Mother. As he studies both women stewing in anger, Julian notices something about Carver's Mother: she's wearing the exact same **hat** as Julian's Mother. Julian is overcome with joy, thinking that the hat might be what finally teaches his mother the lesson he desires for her to receive. Julian's Mother stares at Carver's Mother as if "the woman were a monkey that had stolen her hat."

Carver's Mother's appearance on the bus presents Julian's Mother with an opportunity to recognize evidence of a basic equality between races. Carver's Mother wears an identical hat, travels alone with her son, and is also annoyed by having to sit with someone else's son. However, it does not *occur to Julian's Mother that she and Carver's Mother might be more similar than different. Rather, she sees Carver's Mother as something far less than equal: an animal who stole her hat. Such a reaction shows that racism is such a strong and dark force that it leads people to dehumanize and alienate each other in even the most banal circumstances.*

Carver's Mother orders Carver to leave his seat next to Julian's Mother to come stand by her. Despite her racist leanings, Julian's Mother finds children of all races incredibly cute, and, in fact, even finds black children to be cuter than white children. Carver runs back across the aisle to the seat next to Julian's Mother. Julian's Mother then says to Carver's Mother, "I think he likes me," and smiles at her with "the smile she used when she was being particularly gracious to an inferior." Carver's Mother snatches Carver back across the aisle and slaps him. Nevertheless, Carver begins to peek-a-boo with Julian's Mother, infuriating Carver's Mother even further.

Julian's Mother's interactions with Carver reveal the twisted brand of kindness exhibited by someone who is racist but who also believes in manners. Because Julian's Mother finds black people to be inferior, she goes out of her way to show, especially to children, a kind of condescending tenderness. This sort of tenderness is a product of a paradoxical Southern etiquette, in which cruelty is often disguised as gentility. Carver's Mother, surely accustomed to such condescension, see through the charade and scolds Carver for engaging with it.

Realizing that the four of them are all getting off the bus at the same time, Julian has a terrible premonition that, after they depart the bus together, his Mother will try to give Carver a nickel. As they exit the bus, Julian's Mother does, in fact, start to fish through her pocketbook for a nickel. However, she can't find anything but a new **penny**. Julian warns her not to gift the penny, but she doesn't heed his warning.

Like Carver's Mother, Julian knows the condescending tenderness all too well. He warns his Mother against giving Carver's Mother a penny because he knows that this will only further amplify her already condescending attitude. Here, Julian's premonition and subsequent warning to his mother demonstrate that he is painfully aware of how such a gesture would be perceived, again emphasizing his own preoccupation with appearances. The irony of this moment, of course, is that Julian implores his mother to treat the black bus-riders differently than she might treat others.

As Carver and his Mother are walking away, Julian's Mother calls out to Carver, runs after him, and offers him **the penny**, which shines bronze in the dim light. Carver's Mother's rage finally boils over at this gesture. She balls her fist and strikes Julian's Mother with her pocketbook while yelling, "He don't take nobody's pennies!" Carver's Mother walks away and Julian comes to his mother's side. He stands over her as she's splayed out on the ground and stares at her, gritting his teeth.

All the tension that has been building within Carver's Mother releases when she strikes Julian's Mother. The physical confrontation symbolizes the explosion of a much larger and deeper racial tension in the South, which has been building for more than a century. Carver's Mother violently asserts that her son won't take any pennies because she can't accept Julian's Mother's condescension any longer. She makes her indignation felt in the most direct way possible.

Julian's Mother lays motionless on the ground, a blank expression on her face. Julian manages to help her to her feet and notices that it seems as if she's unable to determine his identity. She decides to not carry on to the exercise class and begins walking home, a moment Julian decides to seize to teach her the lesson he's been eagerly waiting to teach. "That was the whole colored race," Julian tells her, "which will no longer take your condescending **pennies**. That was your black double…the old world is gone. The old manners are obsolete and your graciousness is not worth a damn." While Julian beats his moral message into her, Julian's Mother continues to walk towards home, not paying him any attention. Julian decries this reaction, claiming that he hates to see her acting like such a child.

In trying to teach his Mother a lesson after she has been hit, Julian also comes off as condescending. His lecture is an example of how well-meaning Southern whites can alienate racist white people by being opportunistic in their displays of moral superiority. He doesn't drive his Mother closer to understanding, but further from it. Julian's lesson to his mother also hinges upon a symbolic reading of the confrontation, against which O'Connor arguably takes a stance. O'Connor once famously said, "If it's a symbol, to hell with it." Perhaps reading life too symbolically also blurs people's perception of reality.

Julian goes to grab his Mother's arm, hoping to redirect her to a homebound bus, but as he does so, she turns to him and he sees "a face he had never seen before." Now, Julian's Mother does actually appear to fully descend into a delirious, childlike state, and she asks Julian to have her dead, slave-owning grandpa come get her. Then, she asks to have her black childhood nurse, Caroline, come get her.

After Julian's Mother's shocking experience, which is reflective of a new social order, she descends into a fantasy of the past. The reality of the present South, in which black people demand her respect—to the point of violently rebuking her for her lack of respect—traumatizes Julian's Mother so intensely that it's as if she can no longer live in the present. Thus, she begins to look unrecognizable and to insensibly call out for people from her past.

Julian begins to feel a "tide of darkness to be sweeping her from him." At once, his desire to break her spirit shifts to tenderness and he cries out "Mother! Darling, sweetheart, wait!" Julian's Mother crumples to the pavement and Julian runs to her side. He turns her over and her face has become grossly distorted, eyes moving in different directions, suffering apparently from a stroke. Julian begins to run towards lights he sees in the distance, calling out for help, but to no avail. At this point, he feels the same tide of darkness, but this time sweeping him back towards her, "postponing from moment to moment his entry into the world of guilt and sorrow."

Ultimately, Julian fails in his attempts to distance himself from his racist Mother and the monstrous cultural legacy she represents. As she begins to suffer a stroke, he feels drawn closer to her. In fact, it's as if he has no control over the dark tide that sweeps him back towards her. In being drawn back to his Mother, Julian is drawn back to a symbol of the old South—his mother, who is also literally the source of his life. His rough demeanor changes and he becomes almost infantilized. The story ends with both Julian and his Mother altered: he has regressed to a childlike state [BB1]and she has broken down completely in a classically Southern Gothic fashion.

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