Flannery O’Connor’s “Everything That Rises Must Converge”:
The Old South’s Death Converges with the Civil Rights Movement’s Birth

The title of Flannery O’Connor’s short story “Everything That Rises Must Converge,” written in 1961, alludes to the central theme of the work, the convergence of the decline of the segregationist white South with the rise of the civil rights movement. In this story, a middle-aged white woman, who sees herself as a member of respectable segregated society, and her son Julian, a misguided liberal who shows clear disdain for his mother’s values, take an integrated bus downtown, facing African American fellow-passengers with varying degrees of discomfort. Upon leaving the bus, the mother tries to give a penny to a young black boy; the black boy’s mother hits the white woman, who falls to the ground. She soon will die of what seems to be a stroke, leaving Julian grieving and finally realizing his love for his mother, but too late. The falling of the traditional white Southern viewpoint is shown by the reduced status of the once-great family to which Julian and his mother trace their lineage. This rise of the civil rights movement is illustrated through the physical outburst of the black woman in hitting Julian’s mother.

As Bryan N. Wyatt notes in “The Domestic Dynamics of Flannery O’Connor: ‘Everything That Rises Must Converge,’” the story is related through “a conspicuous paradox of rising descent, the rising and convergence of a suppressed group in a society . . .[where] the domestic arena becomes in effect a synecdoche of this transfiguration
while providing a resistance to it, a tension affording possibilities for desirable modes of human interaction” (2). O’Connor writes of a world where every character seems either sensitive to but disillusioned by theses changes, or simply unaware that these shifts are even occurring, though the tension between characters is palpable. When asked about integration changing Southern culture by Gerard E. Sherry during an interview for *The Critic*, O’Connor said that “[no] basic attitudes are being changed” (31). At the point of equilibrium in the story, in which both the black and the white women are wearing the same hat, an epiphany is avoided. The true point of convergence occurs with a violent outburst and with a death.

The white-is-right principle of the antebellum and Jim Crow eras is dying. The fall of this once-dominant viewpoint of white superiority is shown through Julian and his mother’s family’s own declining fortunes as members of the once-elite white gentry. At one time, their family were wealthy, upstanding citizens; Julian’s mother tells him that his “great-grandfather was a former governor” (407) and that his grandfather was a “prosperous” landowner (407). She reminds her son, who wants her to accept the poor circumstances they live in as real, that his “great-grandfather had a plantation and two hundred slaves” (408). Julian sets aside his family’s former precedence with a simple statement brimming with implication: “[there] are no more slaves” (408). His mother goes on to reminisce about her grandfather’s mansion with its double staircases and a separate floor for cooking. Julian remembers his great grandfather’s mansion at the time of his own childhood; the staircases “had rotted and been torn down,” and the mansion had “Negroes . . . living in it” (408). His mother, in an oblivion of childlike innocence, states that, “[you] remain what you are” (408). As Alice Hall Petry notes in “O’Connor’s
“Everything That Rises Must Converge,” “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 . . . does not own a car, and she lives in a poor neighborhood” (52). Julian’s mother is a single parent who has “struggled fiercely to feed and clothe” her son (406). Their home at present, unlike the family mansion of former years, is in a dingy neighborhood where every “house had a narrow collar of dirt around it” (406). Julian, making no attempt to conceal his contempt for his mother’s pride, takes off his tie as they walk down their unfashionable street towards the bus; at his mother’s indignation over his appearance, he states that if she refuses to acknowledge their true class, she “can at least learn where [his is]” (409). This once-great family of Southern gentry must now ride on an integrated bus to Julian’s mother’s aptly named “reducing class . . . designed for working girls” (405), which she attends because it is “free” (405). The reduced circumstances of Julian’s family mirror the fall of the former white aristocracy of the South to the pressures of integration and civil rights.

The rise of the civil rights movement is shown in the story through an African American woman’s physical outburst at Julian’s mother. At the time the story is written, the South was in a furor over civil rights and integration. “Everything That Rises Must Converge” is the story of a trip by a member of the former white aristocracy on a newly integrated bus. Julian’s mother gossips with the other white women on the bus about the sorry state of integration, stating that “[the] world is a mess everywhere” (410). Soon thereafter, a “large, gaily dressed . . . colored woman got on” (415) the bus. Her stature in the story reflects her significance as an example of the civil rights movement’s growth; she is described as “a giant of a woman” (415). Adjectives describing her looks are
“ponderous…solid…and haughty” (416). When the black woman leaves the bus, Julian’s mother chases after her to give the woman’s son a penny. As Julian tries in vain to deter his mother from this action, the “huge woman [turns]” (418) with her face “frozen with frustrated rage” (418) and hits Julian’s mother with her pocketbook, knocking the white woman to the ground. The woman’s retort to Julian’s mother’s offer sums up the civil rights anthem of African Americans being fed up with ignorant charity and withheld natural rights; she states that her son “don’t take nobody’s pennies!” (418). A chance at Julian’s mother understanding white and black equality is never reached; she reverts in her mind to a time of her youth, calling for her black, childhood nursemaid Caroline. However, although insight on the part of Julian’s mother is lacking, the convergence between both worlds occurs with the black woman’s violent outburst and with Julian’s mother’s subsequent death.

A point of equilibrium between the Southern traditionalist world and the civil rights world is reached when both Julian’s mother and the large black woman who later assaults her are riding on the same bus in the same hat. Julian makes note of the similarity of their appearances; “the two hats, identical” (416) should, in his mind, “thrust upon his mother . . . a lesson” (416) that her old thoughts on superiority are baseless in the modern age in which the story takes place. However, in seeing the black woman’s small son, Julian’s mother smiles a “smile she used when she was being particularly gracious to an inferior” (417). As Alice Walker notes in “Beyond the Peacock: The Reconstruction of Flannery O’Connor,” Julian’s mother “chooses to treat the incident of the identical hats as a case of monkey-see, monkey-do . . . [assuming] she is not the monkey, of course” (75). Her lesson in humility is lost; she is blind to the physical
similarities of their dress by the color of the woman and of the small black boy. Thus any epiphany that might come about non-violently is avoided. Only through the woman’s bodily assault on Julian’s mother does the point of convergence, that exact point where one side overtakes the other, occur. While the black woman drags her son down the street and continues on her journey to an unknown destination, Julian’s mother’s journey is ending. After falling onto the sidewalk, she sits “immobile” (418) before pulling herself up and standing for a short time, “swaying slightly as if the spots of light in the darkness were circling around her” (419). Confronted with the light of truth, she looks “confused” (419) as she begins walking blindly towards the only word she can muster, “home” (419), where her grandfather and nursemaid Caroline await her, at least in her disordered mind. As her son, with his standard contempt, lectures his mother on the rise of the black race and on her own stupidity, his mother begins to breathe heavily and finally falls over onto the sidewalk, apparently experiencing some kind of deadly seizure. Finally, Julian understands his love for his mother, but too late. He runs blindly, calling for help, but “his feet . . . [carry] him nowhere” (420). His epiphany, that his mother is in fact dearer to him than his pomposity, comes too late for them both; she is dying, and he is now a helpless orphan, with only “the world of guilt and sorrow” (420) to look forward to. The tides of black and white, of innocence and enlightenment, have turned; the white of the Old Guard are left dying and helpless as the civil rights movement plows obliquely onward towards its final, and unknown, destination.

The predominating problem of O’Connor’s era in the South is paid due regard in “Everything That Rises Must Converge.” The white South’s decay is properly shown by Julian and his mother’s meager subsistence, with due note being taken of their family’s
former prevalence in high society. The black woman’s physical assault on Julian’s mother is an action showing the nature of the rising civil rights movement; the woman knocks the breath out of Julian’s mother in the way that the civil rights movement and integration effectively knock the ‘breath’ out of the molds of typical white Southern society. Equilibrium between these two worlds is alluded to by the identical hats worn by the two women, and convergence occurs with Julian’s mother’s choice of death about enlightenment and the black woman’s continuing unscathed on her journey to some unseen destination. As O’Connor says in an interview with C. Ross Mullins, Jr. in Jubilee, however, “for the Southerner, whether he’s white or colored, [integration is] . . . only the beginning. The South has to evolve a way of life in which the two races can live together with mutual forebearance” (33). These groups will either live together, or fall aside and die, which is Julian’s mother’s choice. While integration may occur outwardly, the intrinsic difference and distance between black and white Southerners is inherent and will not be changed within either actual people or O’Connor’s characters, as shown by Julian’s mother’s choice of death over enlightenment. However, segregation is removed outwardly, and a revolution is occurring, in O’Connor’s own time, as the story’s violent content suggests. In essence, the old South is dead, and the civil rights movement is on its way to winning victory over its obstacles.
Works Cited


