

Irony in "Everything That Rises Must Converge"

The short story "Everything That Rises Must Converge" by Flannery O'Connor is about racial prejudices and the unwelcome assimilation of integration in the South in the 1960's. O'Connor focuses on the self-delusions of middle class white Americans in regards to the ideas of racial integration and their reception of the opposite race. Julian's mother is portrayed as a typical lower class white woman of the 1960's. She is descended from a rich and cultured slave owning family who used to live in a very large and luxurious mansion. Unfortunately she and her son Julian are not privy to the comforts of money and live in a shabby neighborhood and her poverty is made clear when she comments that she should return her hat because they could pay their gas bill with the money she spent.

Julian likes to pride himself with being more accepting of African Americans than the average white person because he believes that "[t]rue culture is in the mind, the *mind*" (438). Since he has a college education he believes that his views and ideas are more correct than his "foolish" mother's, who believes that culture comes from the heart "and in how you do things" (438). This clearly explains why Julian believes himself to be superior to his mother, and also why her intentions are always good. O'Connor uses various kinds of irony in "Everything That Rises Must Converge" to lampoon racial prejudices while humorously depicting Julian's fantasies of superiority and his mother's unwelcome good intentions.

Julian's spiteful feelings of superiority over his mother are what causes him to act so fraudulently in his stance toward African Americans and the dramatic irony enhances this. Julian truly believes he is superior to his mother because of his acceptance of African Americans, when truthfully he is equally, if not even more, racist than her. His mother believes that she has given up her entire life for Julian: working, having his teeth straightened and sending him to college. But Julian sees the latter not as a sacrifice on her part because he believes himself "too intelligent to be a success" and this is why he does not have a future ahead of him. Julian's comment that "in spite of her [his mother], he had turned out so well" (440) is so ironic because he has not really turned out that well. In fact, his spite towards his mother is what causes him to deceive himself so strongly.

O'Connor's use of situational irony to portray Julian's mental image of himself living in his family's old mansion strengthens the argument that Julian is deluding himself with false ideas of supremacy over others around him. Julian likes to picture himself living in the comforts of money and this includes a huge mansion. Ironically, the mansion he imagines is

the same one his mother describes to him as having been their family's home for many years before, and is now dilapidated and empty. "Clearly her vision determines his own, here as in other respects, despite his professing that he is 'not dominated by his mother.' his very being, in fact, seems little more than a reaction to his perception of hers" (Wyatt 4). The situational irony is that Julian makes no money, has a next to worthless college education, and lives with his mother whom he is financially dependent on. But when he "withdraw[s] into the inner compartment of his mind where he spen[ds] most of his time" (439) he looks out of his bubble and judges those around him with impunity. Thus, Julian believes himself to be better and to be above judgment from those he deems inferior, including his mother.

Julian's fabricated ideas of how much better he is than others are constantly shot down by O'Connor in various dramatically ironic incidents. Julian likes to picture himself living in his mother's family's old mansion, yet he maintains that he has grown away from her lifestyle. One of these incidents is evident when Julian tries to make professional African-American acquaintances on the bus. His first attempt at making contact with a "professional" turns out to be an undertaker and later, another man just gives him some lottery tickets as he leaves. Julian himself comments that he managed to receive a "first-rate education.. [i]n spite of going to only a third-rate college" which distinctly shows his inaccurate fantasy of himself being superior to most other people simply because he has a college education. The dramatic irony in this is that he actually has no job and no financial future ahead of him, but he still sees himself as above others and equal to potential "professionals" who turn out to not be professionals at all.

Julian's attitude after his mother's death clearly portrays his self-deceit as a man who is not racist and this is reinforced by situational irony. Julian thinks he is better than his mother, when, situational irony displays that, he gets his attitudes from her. When his mother is first attacked, he is happy that she finally got the lesson he feels she deserves. Julian has no outwardly sympathy for her and mocks her, saying "[s]he can wear the same hat as you, and to be sure," he added gratuitously (because he thought it was funny), 'it looked better on her than it did you'" (446). But when she collapses while walking a short time after, he changes his entire attitude towards her, even calling her "(d)arling, sweetheart" and crying relentlessly at her side. It is then that the reader becomes fully aware of how hard Julian has tried to act like he was different than his mother when they are actually very much the same.

Julian's mother is clearly prejudiced against African Americans, but she always seems to have good intentions in mind. This leads to Julian's mother trying to interact with the woman's son first by telling his mother that she thinks he is cute. She tries to be kind to the little black boy because she "lump[s] all children, black and white, into the common category, 'cute,' and she thought little Negroes were on the whole cuter than little white children" (443). When she tries to play peekaboo with the young black child, his mother reacts angrily by yelling at the child and telling him to "(q)uit yo' foolishness... before I

knock the living Jesus out of you.” The situational irony is that although Julian’s mother is trying to make an effort to be kind to the child, the black woman is not making an effort at all. Julian’s mother is racist against African Americans, she just wants to play with the young child and appears to have no negative thoughts or intentions towards him, which indicates her good intentions.

O'Connor uses situational irony to represent both Julian's conceited attitude and his mother's good intentions when the young black child sits next to Julian's mother. Julian, throughout the story, is looking for ways to teach his mother a lesson and when the black woman and her young child sit down near them, he believes this will infuriate his mother. Julian actually wants the woman to sit near his mother, but when she doesn't he is even more delighted when he realizes the “this was more objectionable to her than it was to him” (443). This shows just how shallow Julian really is: He is very happy at the prospect of his mother feeling uncomfortable about the seating arrangement, and yet he is a little peeved that she chose to sit next to him instead. The mother shows her good intentions by not changing seats like a previous lady had or really making any action at all when the woman sits down. The mother’s kind-heartedness further escalates when she realizes that the woman is wearing the same hat as her.

Situational irony is blindingly evident when the black woman sits across from Julian’s mother on the bus wearing the exact same ridiculous hat. When Julian’s mother notices that the black woman on the bus is wearing the same hat as her, Julian thinks that his mother will be angry beyond belief and he is very happy at this happenstance. Julian feels that this is a just punishment for the “crime” his mother has committed against African Americans due to her intolerance. When she bought the hat she told herself that she “won’t meet myself coming and going” (435) and yet she does. The situational irony is that she barely seems to care and actually seems to find the unlikely coincidence amusing.

The final touch of situational irony is established with the mother's death at the end. Julian’s mother had refused to ride the bus without him there to protect her from the undesirable African Americans. She tries to show some kindness to the young black child by giving him a shiny new penny, but Julian can sense that the black mother is not going to take well to this and tries to stop her. She gives him the penny anyway and is then met with the infuriated black mother’s fist. The shock of this assault ultimately leads to Julian’s mother having a stroke but when the incident first happens, Julian verbally assaults her as well about how he believes that she deserved it.

Julian's mother's lack of respect for people of African-American descent is what costs her her life. In the beginning of the story she had refused to ride the bus without Julian there to protect her, but when he tries to stop her from giving the little boy a penny, she does not listen. This act of kindness in her eyes infuriates the black mother and ultimately leads to Julian's mother's death. Julian's reaction to his mother's death shows the depth of his self-deceit about his superiority. “O'Connor has the reader’s prejudices and feelings of

superiority in her sights as she exposes her racist and classist characters” (Hardy 525) and she wants the reader to understand and see the irony in Julian’s actions. He tries to repent of his ways and take back every bad thought he has had about his mother in regards to her alleged intolerance, which shows his shallow way of thinking towards the idea of racial prejudices and overall compassion.

Works Cited

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