

The Entanglement of Toxic Masculinity and Racism in “Everything that Rises Must Converge”

While the concept of individuality and independence are promised by the American Dream, achieving true individuality and independence is ultimately impossible. Whether through the forces of nurture, nature, or both, we are composed of a multitude of influences. After all, being ourselves is essentially the amalgamated product of everything we have been exposed to in our lives. In Flannery O’Connor’s short story “Everything that Rises Must Converge,” Julian is the son of a blatantly racist mother over whom he tries to assert his moral superiority by insisting on their opposing beliefs in regards to desegregation. Julian unknowingly perpetuates his mother’s racist ideals in an attempt to prove his masculinity to both himself and his mother.

Julian and his mother disagree on how to assess their identities—his mother defines herself by her lineage of being the proud daughter of a wealthy and generous plantation owner whereas Julian defines himself in opposition to his mother in which he insists that he is everything his mother is not. Julian holds that we have control over and can construct our identities while his mother argues that our identities are inherited and are determined by our ancestry: “‘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*’” (409-410). Julian rationalizes culture by situating it in the mind which opposes his mother’s belief that culture is in the heart, an organ often associated with irrationality. The mind is also generally gendered masculine while the heart’s entanglement with emotion makes it associated with femininity. To Julian, culture is something that can be determined by logic, but his mother believes that culture is more of a heritage—it is who you *are* and not who you *want* to be. It is difficult for Julian to accept this because throughout the story he tries to be something he is not by constructing an emotionally detached masculine persona.

Julian criticizes his mother throughout the story for her racist and narrowminded ideals that repulse him, but little does he realize that he too recedes into similar confines that he denounces. Just like his mother, Julian boxes himself in an impenetrable echo chamber that reinforces his beliefs, or at least the beliefs he claims to hold: “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... From it he could see out and judge but in it he was safe from any kind of penetration from without... His mother had never entered it but from it he could see her with absolute clarity” (411). Free indirect discourse allows readers to transition between the objective scene and the character’s subjective reality, yet here Julian claims to see through his one-sided bubble “with absolute clarity.” Julian confuses his subjectivity for objectivity and in doing so asserts his own reality as truth thereby silencing everyone else’s perceptions of reality. The fact that he puts himself in a position to judge without allowing himself to be judged is an indication not only of white supremacy but also of white male solipsism.

Julian feels the need to not only distinguish himself from his mother but to also infantilize her because his sense of manhood is compromised by his failure to become a writer and his financial dependence on her. On the surface Julian makes it sound like he is ashamed of his mother when he is in fact ashamed of himself and how much he has to rely on her for support: “Julian did not like to consider all she did for him... Were it not that she was a widow who had struggled fiercely to feed and clothe and put him through school and who was supporting him still ‘until he got on his feet,’ she might have been a little girl that he had to take to town... ‘Some day I’ll start making money,’ Julian said gloomily—he knew he never would” (405-406). Julian would rather think of his mother as a child he must take care of rather than a mother who takes care of him because it puts him in a position of power and control. If he never

makes money, then he will forever be dependent on his mother who in turn shames him by constantly reminding him and strangers of his shortcomings.

Julian grows obsessed with teaching his mother a “lesson” that he makes out to be one about the immorality of racism but is really a lesson about his “righteousness.” Julian fantasizes about all of the ways he could “break her spirit” (409) including having a black doctor help her when she is ill, dating a black girl, and “strik[ing] up an acquaintance on the bus with some of the better types, with ones that looked like professors or ministers or lawyers” (414). Julian objectifies black people and thinks of them as a tool to help serve his purpose, as a means to an end. In reality, the “lesson” Julian wants to teach his mother has nothing to do with his or his mother’s moral compass and everything to do with him *winning* by making her angry: “He could not forgive her that she had enjoyed the struggle and that she thought *she* had won” (411). Instead of seeking his mother’s approval, he seeks her anger and disappointment to emphasize his autonomy and the fact that “he was not dominated by his mother” despite being financially dependent on her (412). Upsetting his mother is Julian’s way of asserting his independence and dominance over her which reinforces his masculinity. Julian’s fantasies of using black people for his own gain is ultimately a fantasy about convincing both himself and his mother that he is a man. However, Julian’s rebelliousness only extends as far as his imagination, and he never takes serious action to petition his mother’s nurturement of him making him a weak character who is never liberated from his mother’s influence.

The story concludes with Julian becoming the child despite his juvenile descriptions of his mother. Instead of becoming her moralizing teacher, he falls to her aid after she offends the woman on the bus and is hit by her: “He dashed forward and fell at her side, crying, ‘Mamma, Mamma!’... 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” (420). This is the first time Julian addresses his mother as “Mamma,” which significantly contrasts his desire to look at his mother as a stranger throughout the story. Julian ultimately fails at being objective and teaching his mother a lesson—his mother is the one who teaches him a lesson in the end. Even though Julian fantasizes about physically hurting his mother throughout the story, once she is actually hurt his detached and unemotional façade crumbles and he becomes the child he always was but desperately tried to disguise.

Julian is an example of how we can internalize our parents’ beliefs even when we think we have rejected them. As much as Julian attempts to detach himself from his racist ancestral past, he is very much a product of it and cannot escape it. Complete and total independence and individuality is therefore just another one of Julian’s fantasies because we are significantly shaped by the people who raise us. He is so focused on constructing a convincing masculine persona that he is distracted from the fact that he is more like his mother than unlike her in their racist ideologies. Julian’s racist hypocrisy might be considered even more damaging than his mother’s blatant racism because he prides himself over being an anti-racist while unconsciously perpetuating racist norms and believing he is doing justice and being a moral, model citizen. This story emphasizes the fact that racism, much like gender, is a learned and socially constructed behavior that is not natural and is manifested in many different forms.